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The Soviet opera project: Ivan Dzerzhinsky vs. *Ivan Susanin*

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Abstract: The subject of this article is the failure of the Stalinist Soviet opera project. Although similar proposals had appeared years before, the project was inaugurated in 1936, and its realisation was placed in the hands of the State Committee for Artistic Affairs. The archival materials discussed in the article (including transcripts of the Committee's meetings) demonstrate that even publicly acclaimed productions were seen as failures by these senior bureaucrats. On the one hand, there were demands for realism and contemporary topics, and on the other, for monumentality and elevated musical language; these demands proved to be in deep conflict with each other. In addition to this crippling problem, it soon became apparent that any treatment of a contemporary topic was bound to become unacceptable before long, given the ever-shifting political landscape. While novels and films were certainly under close scrutiny, many operas were subjected to so many demands for revision that they never saw production at all. The article's central claim is that the 1939 Soviet reworking of Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* as *Ivan Susanin* fulfilled the state's needs much better than any newly created Soviet opera could have, resulting in the effective curtailment of the project by 1946.

The Soviet Union under Stalin produced vast quantities of steel and grain, tanks and tractors. Historians have devoted much attention to this accelerated process of industrialisation, and to the ruthless means required to finance it and to control the millions who had to carry it out. Music historians in the West and their colleagues in post-Soviet Russia, however, have paid little attention to the accelerated production of operas during the same period under the hot-house conditions provided by the Stalinist state. I have dealt elsewhere with the 'national opera' phenomenon in the former Soviet republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia.[1] Here I turn my attention to its Russian counterpart, namely the 'Soviet opera' project that formed the centrepiece of music policy under Stalin. In particular I will seek to explain why an adaptation of an opera from the Tsarist era, *Ivan Susanin* – the Stalinist version of Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* – ultimately fulfilled the purposes of this project far better than any work by a Soviet composer. Finally I will discuss why the Soviet opera project was fundamentally flawed even on its own terms, and its products could never have matched the aspirations of the Soviet arts administrators who conceived and maintained the project.

The project of 'Soviet opera' was designed to generate a repertory of works that would glorify the Stalinist state with greater intensity and grandeur than any other art form could provide. These works were commissioned largely from Russian composers, under exacting criteria determined by the state, and created under the scrutiny of the state. The majority of operas by Soviet-Russian composers during the High Stalinist period belonged to this project; the remainder were national operas, provided for the outlying Republics as a 'fraternal' gesture, and as a model

[1] Marina Frolova-Walker, 'National in Form, Socialist in Content: Nation-Building in the Soviet Republics', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 51 (1998), 331–71.

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for local musicians. This meant that composers of operas could not escape one or other of the state's projects during these years: they could not simply decide, on their own initiative, to compose an opera on a fairy tale, or a plot from Shakespeare. Almost all Soviet operas had historical scenarios, either drawn from Russian revolutionary and Soviet history, or from earlier times that offered flattering types or allegories for Stalin and his state.[2] Moreover, as we shall see, the theatres and the state reduced the composer's control over the final product in many other ways.

The beginning of the Soviet opera project can be dated precisely to a series of meetings of the State Committee for Artistic Affairs (KDI) during 1936 at which the project was conceived (possibly at Stalin's behest), its desired characteristics determined, and arrangements initiated for such operas to be commissioned. The meetings were attended not only by the KDI members, but also by composers, writers, conductors, producers, theatre directors and critics invited for consultation. The 1936 project had effectively collapsed by 1945, when the KDI was forced to admit that it had become a liability; from then on it no longer served as the centrepiece of Soviet music policy, and productions were relegated to less prestigious venues. The debacle of 1948 was at least in part intended to revive the Soviet opera project, but in practice it brought about a drastic reduction in operatic output. The truth was that opera had now become a minefield that composers preferred to avoid; in its place the celebratory cantata became the most prestigious musical genre in the eyes of the state.[3]

Philip Ross Bullock has recently examined the Soviet opera project in this journal from the point of view of the public discourse that surrounded it in the media during the 1930s, especially in the pages of *Sovetskaya Muzïka*. My approach is different insofar as I also draw extensively from unpublished sources available in the Russian State Archive of Literature and the Arts (RGALI), which, I believe, can prove crucially important in reshaping our picture of musical life under Stalin. Bullock states that 'in the 1930s the public discourse of state-sponsored ideas forms, as it were, its own reality', and proposes the study of Stalinism 'as a linguistic simulacrum'.[4] Such an approach, while certainly yielding many interesting insights, can become rather misleading if presented as the whole story. As a former Soviet citizen, I can well remember *perestroika* literature that mockingly played with Stalinist

[2] Vasiliy Dekhteryov's *Knyazhna Meri* (1944) was one of the few exceptions – the plot was taken from a novel by Lermontov. Two factors probably led to its acceptance: first, the Lermontov centenary of 1941 had been marked as a major state occasion, with Lermontov celebrated as a hero of Russian national culture; second, Dekhteryov was also director of the theatre where his opera was to be performed.

[3] The Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of 10 February 1948 on Vano Muradeli's opera *The Great Friendship* had far-reaching consequences for the Soviet music community, including a major reshuffle at the top of the music bureaucracy and the banning of a number of 'formalist' works by Shostakovich, Prokofiev and others. The fear of being associated with anything that had been, or might be denounced as 'formalist' made concert organisations and music theatres steer clear of all but the blandest and most conservative works, creating a desert landscape in the music of the year or so following the Resolution.

[4] Philip Ross Bullock, 'Staging Stalinism: The Search for Soviet Opera', *this journal*, 18 (2006), 83–108.

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rhetoric and mythologies. The condition for this play, however, was the preceding torrent of publications exposing the lies and revealing the grim realities that lay behind them. I am not saying that the musical policies of the Stalinist state can be compared in any way to state-induced peasant famines, show trials or labour camps. But, lying behind the state's cultural window-dressing, there was still reality, and if this reality is left out of the picture, then the study of the window-dressing itself is impoverished. In his conclusion Bullock acknowledges this when he mentions 'the discontinuity between ambition and realisation'. With only the literature intended for public consumption at his disposal, however, his speculative assessment of the reasons for this disparity is curiously similar to an official Soviet report on 'shortcomings': he tells us that the Union of Soviet Composers took too long to form (presumably it was its duty to sort the mess out), the old ASM-RAPM factionalism was still present in the Union (a statement which in itself requires many qualifications, since almost all of the personnel was different), composers of 'song opera' were 'untested', and the genre of Soviet opera was in itself 'new and unproven' (as if nothing new and unproven was ever successful). The study of Stalinist public discourse as a self-contained world inevitably leads to the formation of judgements within the confines of that world, since there is no external viewpoint available.

Those who lived during the Stalin period could find piecemeal instances of the contradiction between image and reality in their own day-to-day experiences. Workers noticed when productivity statistics were blatantly at odds with their own observations. The teams of workers providing essential support to the individual Stakhanovite knew that the rhetoric extolling Stakhanovites was a lie. Crimean Tatars or Chechens transported to the East knew the Kremlin's actions belied their official policies on the nations. The same holds true for those working in the field of music. I would certainly not claim that my experiences in the Soviet Union decades later provide me with automatic insights into the experiences of those who lived under Stalin. Fortunately, however, unpublished archival sources offer a wealth of information about what was discussed behind closed doors in committee rooms, what was communicated to restricted audiences, and what was mentioned in letters sent to officials.

These sources raise a further question, however: why should they be any more trustworthy than the public discourse? Why should they claim to come closer to reality than the articles published in *Sovetskaya Muzïka*? I can offer several reasons for believing that this archival material allows a deeper insight into the workings of state institutions and their relationships with those involved directly in the production of Soviet operas. The transcripts of meetings show that private discussion was much more free-ranging and frank than public discourse. The transcripts were available only to a very narrow readership, and therefore did not require cleaning up for public consumption. The Soviet bureaucracy, including the arts establishment, needed private forums where matters could be discussed openly, without the need to worry about the public façade. They had to be able to say things that would have been unwise or even dangerous in public discourse. Of course there were deletions, usually requested by speakers at meetings who wished, for one reason or another,

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to withdraw a comment; even then, in many cases the transcripts present deleted material in a form that is still entirely legible. The problem is not the reliability of the documents, but rather the sheer volume that has to be waded through in order to obtain the necessary information for any given research project.

When we compare the transcripts to articles published in journals and newspapers of the period we also become aware of the contrast in style: bureaucratic language and attitudes are mixed with those of professionals, and the whole brew is peppered by informal outbursts from the floor and by gossip. It can still be difficult to form a coherent picture of events, not only because the transcripts are so numerous, but also because some of the relevant papers are stored elsewhere, there are gaps and omissions, or the speakers were prone to mistakes themselves. Yet they exert a peculiar fascination, allowing us to travel in time, to read words perhaps for the first time in over half a century, and sometimes to feel the tensions present in discussion. They also help to correct received and suspiciously 'othering' notions of how the Soviet intelligentsia conducted itself during the Stalin era: there is some genuine intellectual debate, some blatant sucking-up to the powerful, the usual dose of cronyism, and all the smart-alecks, eccentrics, windbags and idiots interacting in ways easily recognisable at other places and times in professional, administrative and managerial circles. In short, life under Stalin still followed recognisable, even common patterns.

This behind-the-scenes discourse (largely from RGALI) will form the base of my evidence on the development of Soviet opera, assisted by examination of published materials (especially from the early Stalin period) and some of the works in question. In order to contextualise my arguments, I will need to cover events from the broader period 1928–54. Rather than a year-by-year survey, however, I will concentrate on what I consider the crucial junctures in the Soviet state's evolving policies on opera, while at the same time avoiding unnecessary duplication of matters covered in Bullock's article.

Opera and the emergence of a unified cultural policy

The 1928 meeting and after

During the years of the New Economic Policy (NEP),[5] there were no attempts to impose cultural uniformity: leading Party members argued against any such policy, and the power of the market under NEP would soon have unravelled it in any case.[6]

[5] NEP was introduced in 1921 when the Whites and various foreign armies had largely been defeated. In these circumstances, peasants were no longer willing to tolerate the privations of war-time economic policies, when the cities had to be provided with food but were able to pay little or nothing in return. NEP accordingly permitted the re-emergence of small-scale capitalism in both the countryside and the towns. While NEP created a breathing-space, it proved unsustainable, and in the midst of economic crisis, Stalin replaced it with his first Five-Year Plan in 1928.

[6] I am not trying to ascribe any magical powers to the market in general. The multitude of small-scale enterprises that flourished in the short NEP period did indeed help foster diversity, whereas the monopoly powers of corporations in the present day have the opposite effect.

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It was only when NEP was clearly on the wane that the first meeting to explore a unified policy on music took place in March 1928. This meeting was held by the recently founded Glaviskusstvo, which was supposed to regulate artistic affairs under the aegis of the Narkompros ministry. Anatoly Lunacharsky, Head of Narkompros was absent (as a Soviet diplomat, he was abroad ratifying the Geneva Protocol), and the meeting had to be led by his deputy Pavel Novitsky. Novitsky began by lamenting the powerlessness of the state to guide artistic affairs and the absence of unity even at the top: 'There is no organ which would be able to issue a plan of action or ideological artistic directives. . . . There are several Arts Sections in Narkompros, and there can be more than one artistic policy'.[7]

As the meeting continued, music theatre became the main focus of attention, with pro- and anti-opera camps emerging. The most extreme anti-opera statement came from Nikolai Roslavets, who had been delegated by Glavrepertkom to deliver a position paper on 'estrada', or light music. Over the previous years Roslavets had cultivated an overheated polemical manner and attacked everything that was redolent of the complacent NEP-man. This time was no exception:

> Why indeed has this utterly pathological love for opera awoken in our society? We have entered a period of desperate reaction. . . . After the Civil War, a period of peaceful construction began, and an atmosphere of ordinary, habitual life is being created. And slowly and gradually a new philistine [*meshchanin*] is becoming sedimented, the Soviet or communist philistine. . . . Now this philistine is saying quite insolently: 'agitational art is dead'.

Roslavets pointed to one recent operatic production to underline his point: the great success of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh* at the Mariinsky was symptomatic of the debasement of artistic taste by the emerging NEP bourgeoisie and the reawakening of religious feeling. Opera was an art form that belonged to the past, Roslavets concluded, and the state should instead devote itself to the further development of revolutionary agitational art forms such as amateur dramatisations, 'live newspapers' (*zhivaya gazeta*) and displays of physical culture. Unfortunately for Roslavets, such revolutionary enthusiasms were becoming increasingly unwelcome, and the unstable NEP compromise that he reviled was about to give way to something much worse. By the time Stalin's new Soviet Union emerged from the first Five-Year Plan, Roslavets was a pariah, adrift in a conservative social and cultural environment.

In contrast to Roslavets, Novitsky argued that the state should welcome and promote opera. But these two speakers did not represent equal and opposite forces, for Novitsky, among all those in attendance, was closest to being a spokesman for the state. It is perhaps not so surprising, therefore, that his ideas on opera became reality a few years later. He told the meeting, for example, that 'Opera is solemn, vivid, joyful and [at the same time] a mass art – these are the features which distinguish the artistic form of opera from all the other theatrical and musical

[7] *Stenogramma soveshchaniya pri Glaviskusstve po voprosam sovremennogo muzïkal'nogo teatra i estradï i perepiska v svyazi s yego organizatsiyey*, 17 December 1927 – 16 March 1928, RGALI, fund 645 (Glaviskusstvo), list 1, folder 332.

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forms'. 'Solemn', the first epithet in Novitsky's list, is crucial here. The agitational theatrical forms advocated by Roslavets probably had a better claim to the other epithets – 'vivid', 'joyful' and 'mass art' – but agitational theatre shunned solemnity as a matter of deep political principle. Opera, as the emerging Stalinist state saw it, was high art, reverent and loyal to those who wielded power, whereas agitational theatre was low art, irreverent and potentially subversive.

Some further anticipations of 1930s policy on opera were voiced by the critic Chemodanov, who complained about the weakness of the meeting, the lack of unity among its members and lack of a unified policy on opera. He broadened his criticisms to include the weakness of opera-house administrations, in particular at the Bolshoi. These were the first problems to be addressed in 1936, when a much stronger body, the Committee for Artistic Affairs, was convened for the first time. Chemodanov also took up the issue of repertory, calling for the creation of new 'monumental' operas and presenting the role of the state in bringing this repertory into being:

> Since competitions for revolutionary opera have proven fruitless, perhaps the desired results could be achieved by commissioning individuals. Of course, it is very hard [for us] to work along these lines, because our highly-qualified masters [i.e. master composers] have not yet been fired by the revolutionary flame to the extent that they could create revolutionary opera or revolutionary music. . . . It is painful to admit this, but we should not conceal it from ourselves. We need a great initiative here, supported by large-scale funding so that new operas can be created and old operas adapted.

At the time of the meeting Chemodanov's suggestions were not even under consideration as state policy, and other speakers paid little attention to them. But in 1936 Chemodanov's 'great initiative' and 'large-scale funding' finally appeared in the new project for Soviet opera. These examples also serve to remind us that Stalin has been too readily cast as an evil genius from whom everything flowed. The ideas that were taken up as state policy had sometimes been in circulation for years and originated with relatively lowly players, awaiting the day when a suitably powerful administrative apparatus was in a position to realise them. Only in retrospect did they become 'Stalin's policies'.

Lunacharsky's vision

In the wake of the 1928 meeting many critics and opera practitioners expressed their views on what Soviet opera should be like. Ivan Sollertinsky, for example, contended that opera lacked an internal motor of change, but instead depended on developments in spoken-word drama. Accordingly anyone seeking to create progressive Soviet opera should look towards the most successful innovators of Soviet theatre: Meyerhold on the professional stage, and TRAM (Theatre of Working Youth) among amateurs. Sollertinsky thought that this would entail the use of both song and speech, perhaps even *Sprechstimme*, and the rejection of the large operatic orchestra and indeed of the orchestra pit itself. He went so far as to praise Shostakovich's *Nose* as a 'first' and as a 'revolutionary' opera in many

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respects, but did not try to present it as a model for Soviet opera; the fantastic and grotesque plot had already been criticised for failing to reflect current realities (any possible unflattering parallels did not receive comment at the time).[8]

An alternative to this modernist vision of Soviet opera was provided by Sergei Radlov, a Leningrad opera producer, who put forward two necessary features for the future Soviet opera: its form should be 'monumental', and its content 'concrete' (Radlov opposed this quality to the ambiguities of Wagnerian and symbolist opera). He envisaged a new operatic genre that would be

> *heroic* in content, *realist* in its desire to reflect today's life, *concrete* in the clarity of its subject matter, *emotionally infectious*, and capable of providing artistic organisation to those elemental forces that the revolution has stirred. . . .
>
> I envisage man, shown in moments of the greatest tension of emotion and will; I envisage the mass of people in moments of uplift. Music enters in its full power, as a relief of this tension. The audience feels that music enters where one cannot do without it, where the orchestra cannot resist playing, the singer cannot resist singing. This is where the *music of revolution* emerges. '*Listen to it*', said Alexander Blok. '*Create it*', is the appeal of our time.[9]

Radlov's vision and language are very much in tune with those of Lunacharsky, who had been lecturing and writing in a similar vein throughout the 1920s, unable or unwilling to shed the legacy of Blok and the Symbolists (or, in Russian parlance, 'the Decadents').

A few years earlier, Lunacharsky had even written an article entitled 'The Great Sisters', where he piled up metaphors in the hope that these would establish the essential kinship between music and revolution.[10] Opera was Lunacharsky's hobby-horse, the subject of many of his critical articles and pre-performance lectures. Opera was also famously 'saved' by him when, during the hardest days of the Civil War, keeping former imperial theatres open seemed a luxury (especially when the audience was still largely wealthy), and argued successfully against Lenin's proposals to have them closed. It would therefore seem only natural that Lunacharsky's views would decisively shape Soviet policy on opera at this juncture. Yet Lunacharsky's position as Head of Narkompros was deliberately being undermined at that time; if the state being forged by Stalin was to play a central ideological role in shaping the arts, then Lunacharsky was a relic of the past, wholly unsuited to this task, given to speeches full of rambling, poetic abstractions. He was sent off on harmless diplomatic missions while serious discussion could be conducted back in the Soviet Union. The March 1928 meeting was one such occasion. The proletarianist groups were encouraged by the state to harry all who were out of step with the new turn, and even Lunacharsky was subjected to their criticisms.

And yet Lunacharsky, perhaps fortuitously, still had ideas of potential worth to the new Stalinist state. Even after he was manoeuvred out of his ministerial post, *Proletarian Musician* published Lunacharsky's lengthy essay 'New Paths for Opera and

[8] Ivan Sollertinskiy, 'Vozmozhnïye printsipï sovetskoy operï', *Zhizn' iskusstva*, no. 32 (11 August 1929), 3.
[9] Sergey Radlov, 'K sovetskoy opere', *Zhizn' iskusstva*, no. 1 (1 January 1929), 6.
[10] Anatoliy Lunacharskiy, 'Velikiye sestrï', *Muzïka i revolyutsya*, no. 1 (1926), 14–19.

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Ballet'.[11] Although its immediate practical impact was negligible, Lunacharsky's vision proved to be crucially important for Soviet opera from the mid-1930s onwards.

Since opera as an art form still had to be defended, Lunacharsky argued that it had a unique impact for several reasons: opera portrayed life in an elevated way, in vivid colours; the mastery displayed by its performers could be appreciated by workers; and it achieved a synthesis of the arts lacking in spoken theatre. Lunacharsky even stressed the importance of the 'luxurious theatres of the bourgeoisie', which the proletariat enjoys using for its celebrations, and which must form part of a spectacle that 'satisfies the eye'. Opera, for Lunacharsky, was the 'fortified wine' that would provide a 'noble intoxication' for workers. This seems to suggest an aesthetic of grand opera transposed to the Soviet Union. When Lunacharsky discussed what he hoped to see on the operatic stage, however, it is easy to imagine that Scriabin had lived on to become the leading artist of the Revolution:

> We could portray . . . some mighty conflict and end it with a solemn apotheosis in victory, decked in the colours of life and man triumphant, and this last act would end on such an extreme of thunderously harmonious sound, to such an extreme brightness of light and colour, to such an extreme of elemental song and dance on stage that the whole audience would rise up, swept along by the whirlwind of this magnificent collective mood. Then the theatre would enable people to lose their sense of separation in the midst of an organised collective experience that can never be forgotten – an experience almost as strong as an attack, when through bayonets, to the sounds of a military march, they go forward to their death or to victory – an experience which would leave an imprint on their souls for the rest of their lives.[12]

This was the ultimate purpose – to transform consciousness through opera, with the greatest burden placed on the final apotheosis. The transformation would take place through a moment of collective joy, a moment that looked ahead to the sustained collective joy Lunacharsky expected of the future. This fleeting experience would remain embedded in the memory of the spectators, so that they could carry it with them through the hardships and dreariness of everyday life, knowing that it was all worthwhile. In his writings Lunacharsky constantly returned to the celebrations of the French Revolution, which shaped his idea of mass celebration (*prazdnik*) as the principal form for 'organising the emotions' of the workers. But he had seen for himself that such mass celebrations could easily descend into mere drunken revelry; opera, in contrast, offered a more civilised and controllable form of celebration, leading to a 'noble' intoxication that arose from mental engagement rather than from chemical stimulus.[13]

[11] Anatoliy Lunacharskiy, 'Novïye puti operï i baleta', *Proletarskiy muzïkant*, no. 6 (1930), 8. Lunacharsky resigned his post as Commissar for Education and the Arts in September 1929; he was appointed head of the State Scholarly Council and continued to be entrusted with diplomatic missions up to his death in 1933.

[12] Anatoliy Lunacharskiy, 'Novïye puti operï i baleta', *Proletarskiy muzïkant*, no. 6 (1930), 8.

[13] See Anatoliy Lunacharskiy, 'O narodnïkh prazdnestvakh', first published in *Vestnik teatra*, no. 62 (27 April–2 May 1920), reproduced in Anatoliy Lunacharskiy, *O muzïke i muzïkal'nom teatre: stat'yi, rechi, dokladï, pis'ma, dokumentï*, vol. 1 (Moscow, 1981), 247–9.

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But what kind of opera could achieve such a goal? Wagnerian myth-making was out of the question, given the demands for realism that had already been made of other arts (hence Radlov's appeal for the 'concrete'). Yet the impact of Wagner's music-dramas was clearly on Lunacharsky's mind, and the potential conflict between the desired poetry of elevated heroism and the required prose of the everyday are evident in the following passage:

> When we approach the question of how we should reform the content of opera, we may be confronted with the demand to choose contemporary plots, as close as possible to reality – something more in keeping with the ordinary mass hero rather than the superficially heroic. But we cannot follow the path of *verismo*. . . . The whole of revolution is loaded with great elevated emotion [*pafos*], and it is difficult for the theatre to catch up with life, because life is so glowing and bright. . . . It has to be saturated with the same emotion and enthusiasm that we are fired by, and this enthusiasm needs to be concentrated in plastic images – condensed and turned into hard, sparkling crystals. *Verismo* is not going to take us very far in this direction. This does not mean that we should not have scenes chronicling our Civil War, causing the spectator to say: 'This is just how it was in our division', but we have to portray the Civil War in such a way that the whole ocean of passion, torment, hope, the threat of defeat and the joy of victory that people experienced would be poured into these few hours. . . .
>
> This is why our realist opera cannot by any means be the *verismo* realist opera. It has to follow the path of great syntheses, saturated by elevated musical emotion [*pafos*]. When a realist opera is constructed, the musician has the role of primary importance.[14]

Here Lunacharsky anticipated the problem that always troubled Soviet opera. The demand for Soviet subject matter and realism meant the portrayal of the everyday and familiar, in words, costume, sets and even in the use of popular songs. But achieving a sense of the elevated became very difficult, if not impossible, in the midst of these prosaic surroundings: the minor characters partook of the everyday, while the leading roles and especially the choruses were distanced from their surroundings by a forced grandeur, draining them of life and credibility (as Soviet critics often complained).

Despite its publication in *Proletarian Musician*, Lunacharsky's 1930 essay cannot be regarded as an expression of state policy at that moment. After all, Lunacharsky had been forced to accept demotion, and was accused of reviving the errors of his pre-revolutionary 'God-building' ideas (which had led to his temporary estrangement from the Bolsheviks two decades earlier). Nevertheless, Lunacharsky's views on opera lingered on and in the mid-1930s resurfaced in the speeches of Kerzhentsev and Khrapchenko, who were, effectively, his successors in overseeing state policy on the arts.

First practical steps

The need to create a genuine Soviet opera was reiterated at the First Conference of Music Workers in June 1929. These appeals were made not only by Lunacharsky,

[14] Lunacharskiy, 'Novïye puti operï i baleta', 5.

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the lame-duck Commissar for Education and the Arts,[15] but also – and probably more importantly – by Pavel Kerzhentsev, then Deputy Head of the Agitprop Department of the Central Committee, but rising rapidly through the hierarchy until he had overall control of arts policy by the mid-1930s. The Conference marked a turning point in the history of Soviet music: music had been the last of the arts to escape ideological scrutiny from the state, but it was now reined in, and work on a unified music policy began in earnest. Even in the immediate aftermath of the Conference there were two changes that no composer or opera producer could overlook: first, the proletarianists of RAPM were now given official blessing to serve as the attack dogs of the state; and second, Western models were no longer considered appropriate for Soviet music.

As a corollary of the latter, new works from the West soon disappeared from concert programmes. This made sense on its own terms: if Soviet composers had nothing to learn from Western music, and Soviet audiences could draw nothing edifying from it, then why have it performed at all? During the conference, which was held in Leningrad, delegates had received tickets for a production of *Jonny spielt auf*, but less than a month later Boris Asafyev told Alban Berg how much the situation had changed: '[In the Soviet Union,] the victory has been won by other trends that look towards the music of the past and to epigonism, and because of this neither I nor many other friends of *Wozzeck* will be able to hear it for a long time!'[16] Shortly after Asafyev wrote these words, all projected productions of new Western operas were cancelled, and even a production of Shostakovich's *Nose* planned for the Bolshoi had to be abandoned. We should be careful, however, to distinguish such restrictions from the imposition of Socialist Realism in the mid-1930s – the boundaries were now redrawn to exclude certain 'decadent' and 'formalist' excesses, but this still left a wide range of possibilities open to composers; in the West the arts also generally took a conservative turn away from high modernism and the avant-garde during this period, and therefore some comparisons can be drawn. Socialist Realism would be quite another matter.

Official institutions now took steps to foster the production of suitable libretti for Soviet opera: in Leningrad a competition was announced, while in Moscow there were private negotiations between theatres and writers.[17] The first commissioned Soviet opera to emerge from this drive was Vladimir Deshevov's *Ice and Steel*, set in the Civil War; the established playwright Boris Lavrenyov was the librettist. The opera was staged at the former Mariinsky (now GOTOB) in 1930 and at the Stanislavsky studio in 1931. In spite of some positive reviews, the modernism of Deshevov's music was more than RAPM could tolerate and the work was shelved. Another commission, Mosolov's *Dam*, with a libretto by the established novelist Lidiya Seyfullina, raised high hopes because it boldly tackled the theme of

[15] In his speech at the Conference Lunacharsky revealed his out-of-date 'idealist' views when he claimed that there were 'neutral areas' in music, free from ideology.

[16] Boris Asafyev's letter to Alban Berg of 8 July 1929, RGALI, fund 2658 (Asafyev), list 1, folder 454.

[17] Viktor Belyayev, 'K voprosu o sovetskom opernom libretto', *Zhizn' iskusstva*, no. 5 (27 January 1929), 2–3.

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industrialisation, but Mosolov's modernism was still more uncompromising and the opera was abandoned without a single rehearsal taking place. The Conference's decisions were not simply a RAPM wish-list, however: as mentioned above, RAPM had previously opposed opera of any kind, but now its members not only had to support the new initiative, but had to begin producing operas themselves. The first to emerge from their camp was Davidenko's *Pod otkos* (*The Derailment*).

New operas on Soviet subject matter now began to appear regularly and, although they offered a wide range of possible solutions to the problem, each in turn was written off as a failure. In Pototsky's *Breakthrough* (*Proriv*), for example, a flimsy agit-prop plot was set to 'epigonist' music with unsatisfying results; Knipper's *Wind From the North* (*Severniy veter*) featured sung telephone conversations – to the consternation of the critics; the music of Yavorsky's *Vishka Oktyabrya* was considered too delicate and refined. In January 1932 Narkompros organised another meeting to see if anything could be done to improve the prospects for Soviet opera. Once again, major changes were in progress: attendance was by invitation only, and now the composers of RAPM found themselves frozen out, while 'fellow travellers' like Shostakovich, Myaskovsky and Shebalin were now earnestly consulted for their opinions on how musical policy could be improved. RAPM, having served its purpose, was about to be discarded by the state.

To put matters into perspective, the issue of Soviet opera was not at the centre of musical discourse during the period of RAPM's ascendancy (1929–31). Instead, the notorious 'struggle against the foxtrot' was much more prominent in speeches and essays; the campaign was an attempt to wean workers off the popular music that RAPM considered unhealthy and corrupting, mirroring the moral panics over the behaviour of the working masses that shock and titillate the middle class from time to time in our own society (think of 'gangsta rap', for example) – and the RAPMovtsï were indeed now part of the Soviet middle class, in spite of their proletarianist posturing. When set alongside the evil effects of popular music, opera, even in its unreformed state, was a much lesser worry for RAPM, particularly because its influence on working-class morals was negligible.

The April Resolution of 1932 finally swept away the puritanical proletarianists by disbanding all non-state organisations in the arts – just as the proletarianists themselves had intimidated other organisations into disbanding over the previous four years. Although the material result of the Resolution for the arts was to concentrate all decision-making powers in the hands of the state, the effective result for music at least was an interlude of relative freedom. The attention of the officials was focused on preparations for the First Congress of Writers and the formulation of Socialist Realist doctrines. Socialist Realism gradually worked its way through the other arts, and it was not until January 1936 that opera was brought to heel.

The Committee for Artistic Affairs at work

In January 1936 Stalin, in his first-ever public comment on music, endorsed *Quiet Flows the Don*, a new Soviet opera by Ivan Dzerzhinsky. This endorsement was reported in *Pravda* in a manner normally reserved for bare statements of fact in the

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newspapers: a concise TASS item on Stalin's conversation with the composer and the production team after the performance, no more contestable than the announcement of a senior official's death, or the victory of the Soviet chess team. Two weeks after the news item on *Quiet Flows the Don*, Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* was harshly attacked in a *Pravda* editorial – this, strictly speaking, made the criticisms a matter of opinion rather than fact, but a *Pravda* editorial had similar weight to an official pronouncement.

As these events were unfolding, a Committee for Artistic Affairs (hereafter KDI) was created specifically to ensure that the arts were much more tightly controlled than before; although the KDI appeared to be subordinate to the Arts Ministry, it was effectively answerable only to Stalin himself.[18] It was only natural that the KDI would begin its activities by addressing the state of Soviet opera, since Stalin had clearly made it his concern. Opera now became a matter of prestige and consequence in the Stalinist hierarchy of artistic genres; composers could therefore no longer expect to negotiate solely with librettists, singers and theatre management as had been the case in the 1920s and early 1930s – the state now played an important role in the development of an opera. As mentioned above, an important aspect of Stalin's policies on opera consisted in the cultivation of 'national opera' in the non-Russian republics of the Soviet Union, building opera houses and setting up conservatories where necessary.[19] In spite of the resources and attention lavished on this project, however, Stalin was still more concerned to see that Russian Soviet opera duly developed. To this end, he had staked out the territory by providing composers with a model in *Quiet Flows the Don* and a warning in *Lady Macbeth*.

The KDI, under the chairmanship of Pavel Kerzhentsev, took responsibility for realising Stalin's vision of Soviet opera. They saw it as a problem that could be solved primarily by administrative means; therefore the first meetings involved theatre directors rather than composers. The most important early result of these deliberations was the transfer of the conductor Samuil Samosud from the Leningrad Small Opera House (abbreviated in Russian to 'MALEGOT') to the Bolshoi.[20] Samosud had brought *Quiet Flows the Don* to the stage, and his promotion marked the attempt to bring Soviet opera into the mainstream, as a genre to which the state attached great prestige (it is telling that Samosud's earlier association with *Lady Macbeth* was conveniently forgotten).

Let us examine some of the details of these discussions. On 10 March 1936 the KDI met to discuss specifically the business of Soviet opera.[21] Directors of opera houses were invited to report on Soviet operas 'in progress'. The preferred approach was now to foster smooth collaboration between composer and theatre:

[18] More on KDI and its Head Platon Kerzhentsev in Leonid Maximenkov, *Sumbur vmesto muzïki: Stalinskaya kul'turnaya revolyutsiya, 1936–38* (Moscow, 1997).

[19] See Frolova-Walker, 'National in Form, Socialist in Content'.

[20] The reasons for and implications of this transfer are discussed in detail in Bullock, 'Staging Stalinism'.

[21] The following summary is based on the transcript of the meeting, *Stenogramma soveshchaniya Komiteta po delam iskusstv o sovetskoy opere, 10 March 1936*, held in RGALI, fund 962 (Komitet po delam iskusstv pri Sovete Narodnïkh Komissarov), list 3, folder 70.

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composers were not expected to submit a polished and complete full score to the theatres, but to open discussions at an earlier stage, at most with a draft in vocal score, at least with as little as some preliminary sketches for a projected opera. Once a theatre had agreed in principle to produce the opera, the rest could be done 'in the theatre', with the continuous advice from the opera house staff (whether producers, conductors, set designers or management). This was the approach taken by MALEGOT in the case of *Quiet Flows the Don*, and, after Stalin's endorsement of that opera, it was treated as a formula that should guarantee similar successes in the future.

Dzerzhinsky himself, the composer of Q*uiet Flows the Don*, became a celebrity, and the major opera houses had to compete for the honour of producing his work. First they wanted to stage *Quiet Flows the Don*, of course, but a temporary restriction was placed on further productions (probably for reasons of prestige and mystique); then they hoped to share in the almost guaranteed success of his next commission, the opera *Virgin Soil Upturned*. There was some confusion at first: MALEGOT proudly reported that the text of the two first scenes of *Virgin Soil* was already completed, and promised exceptional political topicality, while the Bolshoi claimed that work on *Virgin Soil* was now given priority. In the end, the première was staged at the latter, since the new opera had to follow the all-important producer, Samosud, when he was promoted from MALEGOT to the Bolshoi.

The other work in the pipeline was Shaporin's *Decembrists*. The composer had allegedly written too much music for the opera, and therefore, in order to expedite its completion, an ad hoc team of musicians was convened, including the musicologist Asafyev and the conductor Melik-Pashayev (who was eventually to première the opera much later, in 1954).[22] *The Decembrists* was courted both by the Bolshoi and by the former Mariinsky, and an argument flared at the meeting, some claiming that too much money had already been wasted on the opera, others that the composer had been underpaid for his efforts. Prominent among the various composers for whom several theatres competed were Khachaturyan and, perhaps unexpectedly, Shostakovich. Less than two months after the *Lady Macbeth* affair, the Bolshoi claimed to be working with Shostakovich on an unspecified project, MALEGOT said that it had found 'a very significant theme' for him and even a librettist (Osip Brik), and the former Mariinsky boasted of its 'friendly relations' with Shostakovich – the 'affair' had already been consigned to history.

If Shostakovich's prospects were far better than superficial accounts of the 'affair' would suggest, Dzerzhinsky's position was by no means as strong as one might imagine, even while the praise for *Quiet Flows the Don* was still ringing. Dzerzhinsky's new-found (over-)confidence and arrogant posturing was often met with attempts to put him in his place, or even humiliate him. At a meeting of the KDI on 10 March Dzerzhinsky was the only composer whose presence is recorded; he spoke loftily about his work 'in the theatre' and took pride in the fact that he was not a conservatory graduate. The autobiographical narrative that he constructed for

[22] *The Decembrists* was an expansion of a short, two-scene work, *Paulina Goebbel*, already staged in 1925.

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himself was shrewd in its way, since it followed the same pattern as the plots of many popular novels and films from this period: the Party places its trust in a young passionate hero of raw talents who initially lacks 'consciousness' and makes mistakes, but who is able to mature rapidly into a man of greatness, thanks to the judicious advice of a wise mentor who was always a 'commissar' or other experienced Party figure. Even in the Civil War years, Stalin had rebelled against the use of military and technical experts from the old middle and ruling classes, and after his late 1920s campaign against 'saboteurs', official rhetoric (for a time) placed a high value on practical learning in the factory, the battlefield, or indeed the theatre, all of which could equal or exceed the value of a university degree. Dzerzhinsky's words would therefore have struck the right note in many situations. His audience on this occasion, however, was not so credulous or indulgent. Osip Brik gave a more deflating account of the composer's ascent to fame, saying that the music Dzerzhinsky had originally presented to Samosud contained little promise; he referred dismissively to Dzerzhinsky's vocal score as a 'little notebook', and argued that without his mentor Samosud there would simply have been no opera. Kerzhentsev, in his concluding speech, also chose to attack the opera, expressing dissatisfaction with the final scene where he saw 'a decrease of dramaturgical intensity and social significance'.

Even within two months of Stalin's endorsement of *Quiet Flows The Don* and *Pravda*'s condemnation of *Lady Macbeth*, this meeting demonstrated that there was no simple acceptance that the former was good and the latter evil, even at the highest levels of the Soviet arts hierarchy. Dzerzhinsky still enjoyed celebrity status, but his feet of clay were showing. Shostakovich was still in the game, and that meant that music of a much more sophisticated variety than Dzerzhinsky's had not been ruled out. There was no suggestion at the meeting, explicit or implicit, that *Quiet Flows The Don* was now the only acceptable model for Soviet opera, and variety was considered desirable. Kerzhentsev even stated that comic opera was still needed, although he conceded that this might prove a stiff challenge. The meeting also signalled the belated arrival of Socialist Realist doctrines in the musical arena. Operatic composers were now expected to meet 'stricter requirements': 'ideological saturation', 'realism', 'accessibility', 'historical truth' (in the case of historical operas) and 'narodnost' (the evocation of the national classical and folk legacies). Composers were also cautioned against wandering from the straight path, into 'Formalism' on the one side, and 'coarse naturalism' on the other.

The other main consequence of the meeting was the steep increase in the control that the KDI exercised over operatic production: the KDI now wanted to see a work at every stage, from the first drafts of the libretto, through the emergence of individual scenes and acts in vocal score, up to the last finishing touches of the producer and set designer. 'Censorship' is not an adequate term to cover these activities: the state now wished to become a participant in the act of artistic creation. Accordingly, this participation came not merely in the form of prohibitions: the KDI could employ composers and other artists as appropriate to ensure that scrutiny and advice was competent and thorough (KDI members themselves brought their own experiences in the arts to the task). Over the following months,

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the KDI took up the task of auditioning prospective Soviet operas at various stages of readiness. Some of these operas were already in progress in the 'creative workshops' of the opera houses; some composers simply tried their luck with operas that had failed in the past, or had been rejected before they ever reached the production stage. The post-audition discussions available to us in transcript demonstrate how tortuous the evolution of a Soviet opera had now become.

On 22 February 1937 Kabalevsky's *Colas Breugnon* was given its second audition before the KDI (the first audition, three months earlier, had led to the introduction of a new character).[23] The music was found pleasing, but the lack of an optimistic ending proved worrisome. The critics and officials present considered all manner of solutions: perhaps another act should be added, or maybe an epilogue would suffice, or, more ingeniously, a prologue could place the tragedy within a wider, more optimistic context. There were suggestions that the opera should be brought closer to the spirit of the Romain Rolland novel on which it was based, to which the rather weary librettist replied that the opera had indeed been closer to Rolland back in 1934, but had been rejected by the MALEGOT for its 'philosophical ruminations', and further departures had been prompted by the very suggestions the KDI had made during the first audition. Over the next decade and a half this perpetual tug-of-war became a familiar routine for every Soviet opera composer. Kabalevsky's *Colas* emerged from the process in surprisingly good shape, and later became one of the few Soviet operas to find a place in the repertory. His next opera, *V Ogne* (*In the Fire*), was less fortunate, and by all accounts the KDI's deliberations left it severely weakened. The most extreme case was, of course, Prokofiev's *War and Peace*, which finally emerged as a work that bore little resemblance to Prokofiev's original conception (although, as in the case of *Colas*, we can hardly say that the KDI destroyed it, however frustrating the experience for Prokofiev). For Shostakovich, the solution was simply to abandon opera altogether during this period.

Dzerzhinsky's *Virgin Soil* was planned from the outset to be a product of collective, 'workshop' creativity, but this time with the involvement not only of the theatre, but also of the KDI. It was decided that this opera would serve as the main musical offering for the twentieth anniversary of the October Revolution, so the greatest care had to be taken over the details. Shortly before the first KDI audition for the entire opera (2 March 1937) Kerzhentsev received a report on various problems from one of the state censorship bodies (GURK, the State Department of Repertory Control).[24] The list of political gaffes and oversights was lengthy. The role of the Party was not given adequate coverage. The main Communist character, Davïdov, was dramatically passive and less sharply characterised in music than the more ambiguous Nagul'nov, whose vacillations were central to the drama. The

[23] The following summary is based on the transcript of the meeting, *Stenogramma obsuzhdeniya operi 'Kola Brun'yon' kompozitora Kabalevskogo*, 22 February 1937, RGALI, fund 962 (Komitet po delam iskusstv), list 3, folder 261.

[24] The letter from I. Makhlin (acting director of GURK) to Kerzhentsev and the transcript of the discussion are held together in *Stenogramma obsuzhdeniya operi 'Podnyataya tselina' Dzerzhinskogo i libretto operi*, RGALI, fund 962 (Komitet po delam iskusstv), list 3, folder 262.

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crucial scene in which Stalin's article is read and discussed was easily amenable to an anti-Party interpretation (through carelessness rather than subversive intent). The fictional District Party Committee is presented as being in error over its exclusion of Nagul'nov; and so on for several paragraphs.

The language of the libretto was also found wanting: on the one hand, the word 'Party' was jarringly repeated too many times; on the other hand, the comic scenes involving old Shchukar' were found too naturalistic and coarse. The KDI discussion considered such matters, but the main focus was on the music, which many in attendance found simply 'banal'. Since there was not much anyone could do to remedy Dzerzhinsky's defects in the little time available, the meeting desperately entered into a debate over banality in Soviet opera: was it simply undesirable, or could it possibly have certain virtues? Was this banality really the embodiment of the accessibility that was required of all Socialist Realist art? And so the discussion rolled miserably on. For Dzerzhinsky the meeting was a humiliation, especially when Samosud patronisingly recounted how he had made Dzerzhinsky rewrite whole scenes repeatedly until he was handed a satisfactory result. Dzerzhinsky – one can imagine the tears welling up – petulantly retorted that if this were the case, then in the event of Samosud's sudden death he would have no option but to commit suicide on his mentor's grave. The transcript of the discussion and the letter from GURK to Kerzhentsev demonstrate that while libretti could be dealt with satisfactorily by the existing arrangements, the music of an opera was much harder to control. Experienced musicians with Samosud's expertise could certainly help with the details of the score, but the overall character and effect of the music eluded administrative supervision.

No matter how disappointed the KDI was, however, *Virgin Soil* had to be produced – there was no time to explore any alternative. What is more, given the prestige that had surrounded the project from the beginning, the critics were obliged to offer up their praises. It was, however, a different story behind the scenes. At a KDI meeting on 22 November 1937 both the senior members present used the opportunity to criticise *Virgin Soil*.[25] Viktor Gorodinsky, who was at the time the editor of the KDI newspaper *Muzïka*, reflected on the appalling quality of the libretti penned by Dzerzhinsky's brother (whom he mockingly called 'Modést Dzerzhinsky' in ironic contrast to Modest Tchaikovsky, the librettist brother of Peter Tchaikovsky). Gorodinsky's main objection was frequently levelled at Soviet opera: 'Music does not tolerate colloquialisms, which are very hard to sing, and a libretto overflowing with them is not a good thing'. (To be fair, of course, this problem was largely created by the demand for realism.)

Gorodinsky's profound dissatisfaction with *Virgin Soil* led him to cast doubt on the very idea that the creation of an opera in the theatre was a recipe for success, and he tetchily presented a hypothetical case:

> It turns out that the [hypothetical] work is not yet completed, [or] that the work doesn't exist as yet, but the theatre has already accepted it for production. What difference does it make

[25] *Stenogramma soveshchaniya u tov. Kerzhentseva s kompozitorami o razvitii sovetskoy muzïki*, 22 November 1937, RGALI, fund 962 (Komitet po delam iskusstv), list 3, folder 310.

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then if [the composer] goes away, to return a year later [to a work] he can't recognise? . . . Is this process desirable? I know the example of Ivan Dzerzhinsky played a major role, because Dzerzhinsky had written his opera in the theatre. But I doubt whether he should do it a third time.

Voice from the floor: Selling the grain while it is still growing.

Gorodinsky: This wasn't even growing yet, it was germinating.

Kerzhentsev, in his concluding speech, also subjected *Virgin Soil* to harsh criticism, suggesting that its failure should be acknowledged and analysed (at least within the Union of Composers):

Dzerzhinsky was over-praised. *Virgin Soil* does have its virtues, because it is the first opera that shows class struggle – in this lies his greatest courage and his merit, but the opera suffers from an immense number of shortcomings. The first is that the characterisation of the Bolshevik [Davïdov] is weak, and a whole number of Davïdov's arias are clichéd, false, and untruthful. . . . The Union of Composers did not discuss *Virgin Soil*. Dzerzhinsky has told me that everyone praises him to his face, although he knows that many composers have a very negative attitude [to the opera] – but they won't say this to his face. . . . Another shortcoming is that the opera is filled with all manner of terrors. . . . The opera depresses the audience. People are shocked by the intensity of the tragic moments, which are provided with no relief.

This was an official admission (albeit before a restricted audience) that both *Virgin Soil* and the entire Dzerzhinsky-inspired project were failures. The success of *Quiet Flows The Don* proved unrepeatable, and even the prestige of that opera was damaged by association. In retrospect, it was noticed that Dzerzhinsky's art lacked all grandeur and monumentality, but above all it was simply not good enough – the composer's technical incompetence was too glaring to be ignored any longer. But the same November meeting featured an important new positive contribution: Kerzhentsev presented new ideas for Soviet opera, ideas that were highly reminiscent of Lunacharsky's vision, adapted to the demands of high Stalinism.

Kerzhentsev appealed to librettists, composers and producers 'to elevate the subject matter, and elevate the musical form to great heights'. The most prestigious subject-matter by 1937 was the idea of the great leader, which meant above all the mythologised Lenin and the Stalin of the rising Stalin cult; an opera without references to either, direct or oblique, now seemed to lack the necessary grandeur. Kerzhentsev (and Gorodinsky earlier in the meeting) complained that there was still 'no song about Stalin'. He could not have meant this literally, since there were now dozens of these songs; what he wanted to see was a song not merely about the Great Leader, but also artistically adequate for its subject. Gorodinsky had suggested that such a song might take all of a year to compose, but that would still be a year well spent. But this was likely to push composers into the same impossible position as the audience members caught in the interminable applause after one of Stalin's speeches: When to stop? Have my neighbours stopped yet? What could justify stopping?

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Kerzhentsev did not go so far as to suggest that Stalin should be introduced as a character on the operatic stage; Stalin, as he knew, exercised strict control over his image, since the leadership cult depended on it.[26] But Kerzhentsev thought that Lenin might legitimately appear in opera, although only in a non-singing role: 'Of course I don't suggest that someone should have an operatic image of Lenin say, as a tenor. Operatic theatre is not the same as dramatic theatre. This task will only be possible for opera on a different historical stage [i.e. many years hence], when Lenin's image will become more distant and when perceptions will be different'. Although Lenin featured in speaking roles on the dramatic stage, Kerzhentsev thought that in opera Lenin might be most effective simply standing in silence:

> If we take the final scene [of the play currently being shown] in the Vakhtangov Theatre, we see Lenin making a speech before a gathering of Red Guards near the Smolny, while Stalin stands [silently] alongside him. [At each performance,] the ovation that rings out on the stage and then moves to the audience, which stands for ten minutes, everyone applauding and no one trying to leave. Just imagine if Lenin appeared without speaking [on the operatic stage], can you imagine the enthusiasm of the crowd?[27]

Furthermore, Kerzhentsev argued that opera had its own unique means for representing mass scenes such as the storming of the Winter Palace or the battle on the Perekop heights.

> Scenes like that, which can only be represented very sketchily on the dramatic stage, would take on an exceptional grandeur in the opera house, with the symphony orchestra, choir, and all the stage effects.
>
> Let us take a simpler subject, a demonstration on Red Square, for example. Lenin is delivering [an official] greeting, say on the first of May 1920 or 21. What medium would be able to present this? Cinema, of course, but second to this the opera house, because dramatic theatre cannot convey the feelings of the masses [*zvuchaniye takoy massi*], it cannot provide such a heroic uplift. There is a whole number of themes on the grand scale, heroic and epic, which music can provide.

Thus Kerzhentsev saw opera primarily as a vehicle for creating a unique 'heroic uplift', and in this respect he placed it second only to film, which had been regarded since the early 1920s as 'the most important of all the arts'. This is clearly lifted from Lunacharsky's vision of Soviet opera, but transposed to high Stalinism, which Lunacharsky could not have envisaged and which he never lived to see.

Kerzhentsev's ideas certainly exerted their influence on Soviet opera of the following years, but Kerzhentsev himself was less durable: it seems that he had begun to show too much independence, and several errors of judgement resulted in his dismissal early in 1938. Even these errors could still have their effect after he had left the KDI, as the first appearance of Lenin on the operatic stage demonstrated.

[26] Leonid Maximenkov discusses this issue in detail, suggesting even that Kerzhentsev's permission to let the character of Stalin appear on stage in a production of the Vakhtangov theatre (it was Nikolai Pogodin's play *A Man with a Rifle*) was one of the probable reasons for his downfall. See Maksimenkov, *Sumbur vmesto muziki*, 294–7.

[27] The production in question is of *A Man with a Rifle* (see n. 26), which opened less than ten days earlier, on 13 November.

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Samosud, following Kerzhentsev's recommendations, had persuaded Khrennikov to include a non-singing role in his opera *V buryu* (*Into the Storm*, 1939). They decided that instead of remaining silent the character should deliver a spoken part over an unobtrusive accompaniment. His appearance on stage is brief, and serves only to place the local drama of the main characters within a wider historical drama. The ensuing criticisms brought Khrennikov much grief: at the KDI discussion of the opera, no one found the Lenin scene justifiable.[28] There were complaints that the musical context undermined the significance of Lenin's words. Khrennikov was accused of using the image of Lenin opportunistically, and even of committing a clumsy political blunder ('a conversation about Lenin is accompanied by ballet music'). The opera mainly depicted the everyday lives of ordinary people, and the Lenin device, far from elevating the drama, as Kerzhentsev had hoped, had only introduced a cluster of problems in the eyes of the critics.

This case serves to remind us that imposition of Socialist Realism often worked through a system of precedents, forcing everyone from librettists up to senior administrators to proceed by trial and error; but even following successful precedents did not guarantee that the result would be regarded as correct, since a shift in policy could suddenly change the rules again. The lesson was learnt from the failure of the first operatic Lenin. In Muradeli's *Velikaya druzhba* (*Great Friendship*) we find a much less risky method for using Lenin to elevate the drama: a Commissar solemnly tells a group of Georgian mountain folk about 'a man, who sees from afar all the grief of the earth, who . . . lives in Moscow, in the very heart of the world'. 'Tell us his name!' say the mountaineers. 'His name is Lenin', says the Commissar, and the chorus in wonderment echoes 'Lenin! Lenin!' This episode is a turning point in the drama: serving in effect as a magical invocation, it brings the central character Murtaz to the side of the Bolsheviks, and all of Georgia follows him. Khrennikov's opera gave us a lofty but human Lenin, while Muradeli's, a decade later, gives us a divinity whose very name can work miracles – an accurate picture of how the Lenin (and Stalin) cult had changed during the intervening years. Stalin had killed off all of the leading Bolsheviks, ending with the assassination of Trotsky in 1940, and any real history of the Revolution would have been subversive; what better way to avoid these problems than by turning the Revolution and Civil War into a hazy mythology of good vs. evil, and replacing the historical Lenin with a remote but benign divinity? There was no question of an actor or singer representing *this* Lenin on stage, not because it would be politically fraught, but because it would be sacrilegious.

Let us return to late 1937. As the KDI was mulling over recent disappointments and errors, the show trials were underway. The heroic landscape of the Revolution and Civil War was now severely depopulated, rendering this period problematic as a source for opera and dramatic theatre (Muradeli's opera, mentioned above, was only a fable arbitrarily placed in the Civil War period). With the external threat of fascism sweeping across Europe, Soviet ideologues replaced revolutionary history

[28] *Stenogramma soveshchaniya u Predsedatelya Komiteta po obsuzhdeniyu operï kompozitora Khrennikova 'V buryu'*, 22 October 1939; RGALI, fund 962 (Komitet po delam iskusstv), list 3, folder 602.

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and revolutionary ideas with a full-blooded revival of Russian nationalism. Whereas pre-revolutionary Russian history had been an opportunity for merciless debunking in the 1920s, a single decree in late 1936 reversed this entirely, and made the Tsarist past a source of edifying topics for the arts, especially where heroic battles and the defence of the motherland could be depicted.[29] Now the kind of heroic uplift so desired by Kerzhentsev (possibly acting as Stalin's mouthpiece) could be conveyed much more safely and effectively through tales of heroism from the more distant past. It was in these circumstances that the Bolshoi Theatre was entrusted with the task of creating a suitable adaptation of Glinka's first opera; by the end of 1937 the project was already underway, and during the course of 1938 it assumed national significance.

From *A Life for the Tsar* to *Ivan Susanin*

During the first years after the Revolution Glinka enjoyed no special favours. The nineteenth-century Russian classics were still performed regularly, and *Ruslan and Lyudmila* retained its position in the repertory. *A Life for the Tsar*, however, posed a particular problem: its relentless glorification of the monarchy made the opera quite unusable after February 1917. Or so it must have seemed during the revolutionary years.

Under the New Economic Policy, in the mid-1920s, theatres and opera houses were expected to raise much of their income from ticket sales rather than from the state, and in this laissez-faire atmosphere, the return of *A Life* to the stage became a possibility (not as an expression of monarchist nostalgia, but as a sound commercial proposition). At the former Mariinsky the proposal under discussion was the performance of the original in an unaltered form (ultimately nothing came of this),[30] but two provincial companies were faster off the mark with altered, non-monarchist versions. The first of these adaptations, produced in Odessa in 1926 under the title *Hammer and Sickle*, moved the action to Civil War period. The other adaptation, produced in Baku in 1927 under the title *Minin*, with a libretto by Nikolai Krasheninnikov, left the action in the original historical period, but replaced all references to the Tsar with references to the eponymous Minin, who had led the Russian army to victory in the original story. Although Krasheninnikov's libretto was originally derided in Moscow as 'illiterate in every sense',[31] his adaptation was given serious consideration for a much more prestigious production at the Bolshoi Theatre, planned for the 1927/28 season under the title *The Time of Troubles* (*Smutnoye vremya*).[32] At the same time, the journal *Music and Revolution* published an article by Yevgeniy Vilkovir warmly praising Glinka and singling out *A Life* (under the name

[29] See David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931–1956* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002).
[30] Sadko, 'Pered operno-baletnïm sezonom', *Zhizn' iskusstva*, no. 28 (14 July 1925), 3.
[31] 'Omolozheniye operï i baleta', *Zhizn' iskusstva*, no. 6 (9 February 1926), 8–9.
[32] Viktor Belyayev, 'GABT – v preddverii sezona', *Zhizn' iskusstva*, no. 41 (11 October 1927), 9–10, here 10.

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Ivan Susanin) for its 'progressive nationalism'.[33] It must have seemed that Glinka was about to recover all his former prestige, but the Bolshoi aborted the project, probably because of contemporary historical debunking of Minin, who was now seen not so much as a patriotic hero, but rather as the financier behind a gang of mercenaries that installed the dictatorship of the Romanovs (Krasheninnikov, the author of the adaptation, suggested that this was the principal reason for the rejection). When NEP gave way to Stalin's first Five-Year Plan and the arts came under increasing state scrutiny, the opportunity for a revival had passed. In 1929 Gorodinsky advised that '*A Life for the Tsar* cannot be staged in any sauce'.[34] As late as 1934 Soviet critics were still obliged to lump the opera together with the Tsarist national anthem as an example of the 'sugary-patriotic'.[35]

In the very different climate of 1937, however, when Stalin was carefully cultivating a new Russian nationalism, a revival of *A Life* was perfectly suited to the new post-revolutionary state that was taking shape. The Committee for Artistic Affairs instructed the Bolshoi to prepare a new production under the title of *Ivan Susanin* and to convoke a team that would ably supervise the project. Boris Mordvinov was chosen as director, Samuil Samosud as conductor, and Sergei Gorodetsky was to write the new libretto in consultation with Samosud. When Krasheninnikov heard of this project, he complained that Gorodetsky was plagiarising his idea. Gorodetsky had assisted Krasheninnikov at the time of the earlier, failed bid to mount a production at the Bolshoi, so he had clearly been familiar with Krasheninnikov's work. In a desperate gesture, Krasheninnikov even offered to produce a rival version for Leningrad, but this only showed how little he appreciated the situation. The Bolshoi's forthcoming *Susanin* was being presented as the true and authentic *Susanin*, as somehow closer to Glinka's intentions than the version of 1836 (Stalin's Glinka was a man of the people who had to compromise his vision because of Tsarist censorship). There was therefore no possibility that a rival version could be allowed to challenge the *Susanin* sanctioned by the highest authorities – what was unexceptionable in the late 1920s was unthinkable a decade later.

According to the new official account of the opera's history, Glinka's original conception of the opera had been 'brutally distorted' by the original librettist, Baron Rosen; the new version was effectively a reconstruction of that original conception. There was hardly a shred of evidence to back this claim up: for example, the report written by the director, Mordvinov, could only point to the fact that in Glinka's original plan for the opera's choral introduction the Tsar is not mentioned, while in

[33] Yevgeniy Vilkovir, 'M.I. Glinka: k 70-letiyu so dnya smerti', *Muzïka i revolyutsiya*, no. 2 (1927), 3–8, here 6.

[34] Viktor Gorodinskiy, 'O muzïkal'nom teatre', *Zhizn' iskusstva*, no. 27 (7 July 1929), 6–7.

[35] See Lev Kaltat and Daniil Rabinovich, 'U istokov russkoy narodnoy muzïkal'noy shkolï', *Sovetskaya muzïka* , 3 (1934), 27–47. The Soviet authorities insisted on neutralising Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, replacing the Tsarist national anthem wherever it occurred with the melody of *Slav'sya*, which was the second national song in the same period. Ironically, *Slav'sya* was itself an item from the finale of *A Life for the Tsar*. Evidently the authorities could dissociate the *Slav'sya* melody from its words more easily than they could in the case of the Tsarist national anthem.

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Rosen's libretto the people celebrate the Tsar's return from captivity in Poland. But this could only appear significant to someone who knew nothing else about the opera, since the drama in all three acts revolves around Mikhail Romanov: the news of his election to the throne is the most important dramatic point of Act I, and the rest of the plot is built on this event; the only dramatic event of Act II is the hatching of the Polish conspiracy to capture the new Tsar; while in Act III the Poles attempt to execute their plan. Whether Glinka intended the first reference to the Tsar to appear at the beginning of Act I or a little later is therefore of little consequence – even if Glinka's original conception of the opening chorus had been retained, the opera's strident monarchism would scarcely have been diminished.

In fact, the design of the plot was sufficiently tight to deter any superficial changes. Gorodetsky's first suggestion was simply a return – unacknowledged, of course – to Krasheninnikov's version of 1927, with Minin replacing the Tsar. There was now no objection to Minin, since the debunking of nationalist myths that had marked 1920s historiography was now determinedly forgotten. This time the suggestion was rejected on the grounds that Minin would provide nothing comparable to the symbolic power of Mikhail Romanov in pre-1917 productions. It was certainly not acceptable to produce a version of the opera that exuded less grandeur than the Tsarist version – this would defeat the purpose of the exercise. The character of Susanin was accordingly given the role of saving the entire city of Moscow (and, by implication, all of Russia). This gave him a suitably grand purpose, but made nonsense of the original scenario, so that more drastic alterations were now needed. The Poles had originally been searching for the Tsar in the Kostroma district two hundred miles to the east of Moscow, but this was entirely incompatible with the new scenario. Susanin's village of Domnino had to be relocated to the outskirts of Moscow, and all references to the swamp that supposedly swallowed up the Poles was removed, since the dacha-strewn environs of Moscow are not normally associated with lethal swamps. The date of the story was also changed: the original libretto was based on events that took place in the first half of 1613, hence the spring symbolism in several numbers of Act I; the historically more vague Stalinist version is set in the autumn and combines events that took place in late 1611 and late 1612.[36]

[36] The rough chronology of the period is as follows: the Poles occupied Moscow in 1610, and the treacherous boyars pledged loyalty to Wladyslaw, son of the Polish King, Sigismund. Sigismund, however, preferred to procrastinate, since he was wary of sending his son to Moscow so soon after the previous two claimants had met with violent deaths (the original libretto refers to this episode in Act II). In the autumn of 1611 Minin began to draw together an army in Nizhny Novgorod (this is mentioned in Act I of the Soviet libretto), and under the leadership of Prince Pozharsky the army fought a series of battles in 1612 leading to the liberation of Moscow in October of that year (again mentioned in Act I of the Soviet libretto). Sigismund tried to retake Moscow in December 1612 but without success (it is the Russian triumph on this occasion that is referred to as a victory in the original Act I). In early 1613 the Electoral Assembly (*Zemskiy sobor*) gathered in Russia to elect the new tsar. After lengthy discussions a preliminary decision to elect sixteen-year-old Mikhail Romanov was made on 7/17 February, but the proclamation was postponed for two weeks – this is why in the original Act I Sobinin can only present the news as a rumour. The coronation of Mikhail eventually took place in April 1613.

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The dramatic integrity of the original opera was doubtless damaged by these expedients. The simple and elegant intrigue of the original libretto was based on the connection between the two *venchaniya* (a term that covers both 'coronation' and 'wedding'): until the lawful Tsar was wedded to his country, the two young lovers, Sobinin and Antonida, could not marry – such was the arbitrary ruling of Susanin, Antonida's father.[37] The rumour of the Tsar's election changes Susanin's mind, but the wedding celebrations are brutally interrupted by the appearance of the Poles, who take Susanin captive. The two desired outcomes can only take place after Susanin's self-sacrifice: then the Tsar is crowned and the newly wedded couple joins the large public celebrations. These close parallels between the public and the private were destroyed by the plot changes of the Soviet version.

On a smaller scale, the greatest casualty was the dramatic coherence of Act I. In the original, Sobinin delivers two items of news. The first item, the victory of a Russian division in battle, is certain, but the second is only a rumour: the election of Romanov as Tsar. Sobinin is hesitant to reveal the latter, in case it turns out to be untrue, but once the words are out everyone celebrates and Susanin declares that the wedding can proceed. In Gorodetsky's version Sobinin also delivers two pieces of news: first the Russian victory, as in the original, followed by the news that Russian armies have laid siege to Polish-occupied Moscow. But now the two items are related, the first making the second possible, so there is no longer any reason for Sobinin's reluctance to divulge the second item (although this expression of reluctance remains in Gorodetsky's version). The moment of revelation thus loses its power, for both before and after it Susanin, Sobinin and the choir are given bland incantations on Russia's final victory. The Introduction to Act I was already static, more oratorio than opera, but the Stalinist version pushes this section over the brink into tedium. Act II in the original depended for its impact on the staging and choreography of a series of dances at the Polish court, a tableau between the more dramatic outer acts. But since Gorodetsky's version undermined the drama in Act I, there is no significant drama to be found in the opera until the second half of Act III. Even then Gorodetsky was ambiguous: it is not clear whether the Polish division simply wanted Susanin to show them the way to Moscow, so that they could liberate their besieged compatriots, or to show them the way to Minin's camp some distance from the capital, in order to demoralise the Russian forces by capturing or killing one of their leaders.

Emptied of its dramatic momentum, the opera was now filled with the new Stalinist patriotism of the late 1930s through constant references to Motherland, Moscow and the Kremlin; admittedly this had a parallel in the original's constant and obsequious invocations to the Tsar, but these were minor blots on the landscape, rather than a wholesale substitute for drama. Interestingly, the new libretto tilted the opera towards the Soviet oratorio genre of the 1930s, of which Prokofiev's *Alexander Nevsky* is the most celebrated example.

For the officials Glinka's music was the essential core of the opera and the guarantor of authenticity for the new version of *Susanin*, whatever drastic changes

[37] I owe this observation to Professor Yevgeniy Levashev.

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had been wrought upon the libretto and scenario. Music itself, according to Stalin-era aesthetics, had a definite content (or 'image', to use the Russian parlance) that could be paraphrased, and it was argued that Rosen's libretto was not a true reflection of the music. Basing their argument on the contention that Glinka composed much of the music before he had a libretto, the Soviet team claimed that it was a crude, distorting *podtekstovka* – the term means 'words written under existing music', but it implies a slapdash approach. 'For a century', they wrote, 'this *podtekstovka* has deprived the people of a work of genius by Glinka'. Thus Gorodetsky's job as the new librettist was, as he himself put it, 'to guess at and to convey through words what is expressed in the sounds [of Glinka's music]', and to bring about an 'emotional and stylistic equivalence between the words and the music'.[38]

Here is an example of Gorodetsky's reasoning:

> For example, Rosen's false words that 'the people have earned their Tsar' ['*zasluzhili mï tsarya*'] through their victory over the enemy, was accompanied in Glinka's score by a mighty allegro in an ancient mode (which begins the Finale of Act I) – this does not correspond to the content of these words.
>
> In this allegro, which has the remark 'deciso', I read other words:
>
> Soon our Ivan the Great
> Will ring its bells
> Soon the savage enemy will perish!
> Russia has gone into battle.[39]

Gorodetsky is being disingenuous here. It was not for him alone to determine which words would best reflect Glinka's music.

According to the transcripts Pavel Kerzhentsev, Chair of the Committee for Artistic Affairs, took part in the discussions over the libretto; since Kerzhentsev reported directly to Stalin, it is possible, although not confirmable, that the latter also contributed to the outcome. The archive materials testify to the enormous amount of work that went into the new text. This work occupied more than a year, and in the space of that year Gorodetsky submitted four (!) complete versions of the whole text. The evolution of the libretto moved from a relatively light revision of the existing text to a freer and more literary rendition; since this was too colourful by Socialist Realist standards, the final version was blander and historically more vague. Especially impressive is the record of Gorodetsky's work on the final hymn, *Slav'sya*; the many versions of this short chorus occupy no less than 98 pages of manuscript.[40] To show briefly how much the libretto changed during this period, let us compare one of Gorodetsky's earlier versions of the *Slav'sya* chorus with the version that was finally accepted.

[38] RGALI, fund 1220, list 1, folder 31.

[39] 'Skoro nash Ivan Velikiy / Zazvonit v kolokola, / Skoro sginet vorog dikiy! / Rus' na boy poshla'; S. Gorodetskiy, 'Libretto *Ivana Susanina*', *Sovetskoye iskusstvo*, no. 41 (5 September 1937), 3.

[40] These can be found in RGALI, fund 1220 (S. Gorodetskiy), list 1, folder 28; the following examples are also taken from this source.

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Early version
Raduysya, Rus' moya, sile svoyey
Raduysya, Rodina bogatïrey
Grozu li podnimut vragi nad toboy,
Grozna I svetla, vïydesh' smelo tï v boy.

Reki vo gneve zapenyat volnu,
Ropot lesov sokrushit tishinu,
I drognet tvoya neob' yatnaya shir',
I vïydet iz serdtsa zemli bogatïr'.

Vzorom besstrashnïm vokrug povedyot,
V grud' svoyu dushu narodu vdokhnyot,
I radostno brositsya v yarostnïy boy,
Pobedu v tovarishchi vzyavshi s soboy.

[Rejoice, my Russia, in your strength / Rejoice, Motherland of the *bogatïr*s [legendary epic warriors] / And if the enemies brew up a storm / You will go into battle, terrible but full of light. // Your rivers will foam their waves in their wrath / The grumbling of the forests will smash the silence / And your unbounded breadth will tremble / And from the heart of the earth a Bogatïr' will appear. // He will look around himself without fear / He will breathe his soul into the breast of the people / And he will joyfully rush into raging battle / Taking victory as his comrade-in-arms.]

Final version
Slav'sya tï, slav'sya tï, Rus' moya!
Slav'sya, rodnaya moya zemlya!
Da budet voveki vekov sil'na
Lyubimaya nasha rodnaya strana!

Slav'sya, russkiy velikiy narod!
Slav'sya voveki iz roda v rod!
Vragov, posyagnuvshikh na kray rodnoy
Razi besposhchadnoy moguchey rukoy!

Slava, slava rodnïm boytsam!
Nashey Otchiznï otvazhnïm snam!
Kto krov' za otchiznu svoyu prol'yot,
Togo nikogda ne zabudet narod!

[Glory, glory to you, my Russia! / Glory to you, my native land! / Let our beloved native country / Be strong for all time! // Glory to the great Russian people! / Glory to you for all time, from generation to generation! / Strike down with your merciless mighty hand / The enemies who encroach upon the native land. // Glory, glory to our dear warriors / To the brave sons of our Motherland! / Who spills blood for his Fatherland, / Will never be forgotten by the people!]

The earlier version is colourful and rather mysterious, harking back to Gorodetsky's earlier work as a symbolist in the pre-revolutionary period. The final version, by contrast, is utterly bland and forgettable, and therefore an ideal Socialist Realist text.

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The lines that follow the Chorus underline this aspect: they are deliberately anachronistic, and draw the scene into the Socialist Realist present:

Vot on, nash Kreml'!
S nim vsya Rus'!
S nim ves' mir!
Poy, ves' mir!
Veselis', russkiy lyud!
Pesni poy!
Svetlïy den', vesyolïy den' dlya nas nastal!

[Here is our Kremlin! / All Russia is with it! / The whole world is with it! / Sing, world! / Be merry, you Russian people! / Sing your songs! / A bright day, a joyful day has come for us!]

Even after the final version was accepted in principle, there were further changes, and Stalin's involvement was publicly acknowledged. The early production history of the new *Susanin* was strange. There was an initial première in late February 1939; this was soon followed by a private showing for various dignitaries including Kalinin, Voroshilov and Litvinov, but not Stalin himself. After this showing the production was suspended, only to reappear two months later with changes affecting the Introduction and Epilogue. The number of superlatives the critics showered on this 'second première' already indicated that they were aware of Stalin's involvement, and eventually this was discussed openly in one of the published accounts of the production.[41] These final changes set the seal on the Socialist Realist character of the new *Susanin*, establishing it as the ideal Soviet opera. In the Epilogue the more modest and generalised set 'At the Kremlin Gates' was now replaced with a very imposing and realistic set showing Red Square, with St Basil's on the left and the Spasskiye Gates on the right. From the gates the leaders of the Russian army, Minin and Pozharsky rode out on horseback – these two characters had only existed off stage in all previous productions. The heroic appearance of these two figures, rather than a single Tsar, may seem strange today, but Soviet audiences would have been aware of the iconographical references here, since they were surrounded by paired portraits, whether of Stalin and Lenin, Stalin and Marshal Voroshilov, or Marx and Engels.[42]

The Epilogue was now akin to a Soviet military parade, but this change entailed the sacrifice of a passage that had strengthened the scene both musically and dramatically, namely the lament for Susanin, sung by his family between the two renditions of *Slav'sya*. Susanin's sacrifice is no longer remembered, but Stalin had in any case placed himself at the centre of the Epilogue, in a masterful theatrical gesture. Here is the account of Elena Bulgakova, who attended the April première:

[41] *Mikhail Ivanovich Glinka: Kalendar' k stopyadesyatiletiyu so dnya rozhdeniya* (Leningrad, 1954), 83.
[42] It appears that Stalin wanted to be seen on horseback as he reviewed parades, but his equestrian skills fell short of his ambitions. The closest he came was in 1945, when he fell off his horse while rehearsing his entry. As a result, the parade was greeted by two Marshals, Zhukov on a white horse and Rokossovsky on a black one. Stalin, of course, was always able to ensure that he had the last laugh: Zhukov was demoted for 'immodest behaviour'.

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Before the Epilogue, the Government [including Stalin] moved from its usual box into the large central box formerly reserved for the Tsar, and watched the rest of the opera from there. When the audience noticed this, they began to clap, and continued clapping throughout the musical interlude that precedes the epilogue. When the curtain [calls began], and particularly at the end when Minin and Pozharsky appeared on horseback, [the applause] grew ever louder until it became a tumultuous ovation. The Government was applauding the cast, the cast was applauding the Government, and the audience was applauding both.[43]

The power of opera as a propaganda vehicle for Stalin here surpassed even that of film. The rousing parades, historical and Soviet, would become a stock feature of Stalin-era cinematography, but the public never saw a film in the presence of Stalin, since his viewings were conducted in private. Only the opera house, with its ceremony, its palatial interiors and hierarchical layout, offered Stalin sufficient grandeur to warrant a public appearance.

The production inevitably received the Stalin Prize, and the opera was restored to its pre-revolutionary role of season-opener. By 1954 it had been seen not only in all the major cities of Russia, but also across all the other Soviet republics and all the member states of the Warsaw Pact (the Prague production of 1949, for example, was given in honour of Stalin's birthday).

After *Susanin*

The momentous success of *Susanin* could not leave Soviet opera unaffected. It seems that it was unanimously taken as a new yardstick, although it could hardly serve as a model in all its aspects. In any case, *Quiet Flows the Don* had been displaced as the benchmark for Soviet opera. Soviet composers now faced comparison with Glinka rather than with Dzerzhinsky – undeniably a more exacting test of abilities.

The first major Soviet opera to be premièred after *Ivan Susanin* was Khrennikov's *In the Storm*. The KDI discussion of the opera, on 22 October 1939, began with a pointedly mocking presentation by the musicologist Semyon Shlifshteyn, who attempted to humiliate Khrennikov by playing a series of examples on the piano, demonstrating how very similar passages were attached to diverse characters and situations in the opera.[44] This paper split the meeting in two – interestingly, the division could not simply be characterised as pro- or anti-Khrennikov. On one side were those who believed that in general the right way forward was the Dzerzhinsky/Khrennikov 'democratic opera' (or what we now refer to as 'song opera'), and restricted their criticisms to various aspects of *In the Storm*. On the other side were those who argued that the main problem lay precisely in Khrennikov's adoption of the song-opera format, which had proven too restrictive an environment for the

[43] English translation quoted from Anatoly Smelyansky, *Is Comrade Bulgakov Dead? Mikhail Bulgakov at the Moscow Art Theatre*, trans. Arch Tait (London, 1993), 304–5.

[44] *Stenogramma soveshchaniya u Predsedatelya Komiteta po obsuzhdeniyu operi kompozitora Khrennikova 'V buryu', 22 October 1939*, RGALI, fund 962 (Komitet po delam iskusstv), list 3, folder 602. Shlifshteyn's paper was not transcribed, but much evidence of its content and tone can be gleaned from the discussion.

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development of his talents (Khrennikov, unlike Dzerzhinsky, was generally recognised as at least technically competent). This camp held that the more traditional format was now the way ahead, and that 'democratic opera' could not achieve the necessary grandeur. Even the two senior officials found themselves on different sides of the debates: Khrapchenko, who had replaced Kerzhentsev as Chairman of KDI, was largely in favour of the opera and certainly supported the trend it represented, while Gorodinsky, now editor of the newspaper *Sovetskoye iskusstvo*, came out in opposition to both.

The only point of agreement between the two camps was the superiority of the new *Susanin* to any Soviet operas of comparable ambition. The following exchange is typical:

Dzerzhinsky:
When I was listening to *Ivan Susanin*, I said to myself: 'Here is a true Soviet composer!' I was sitting there and thinking: how could Glinka, a landowner, who circulated in the salons – how could he allow himself the license of speaking in a language that would have been understood by those very peasants, had they only been granted the opportunity of visiting the opera house . . . Khrennikov, to some degree, is Glinka's heir.

Rabinovich:
If we compare *Ivan Susanin* with Khrennikov's opera, I would say that the difference is not in individual melodic turns of phrase or arias; the issue is that there we see richness, here poverty; there we see variety, here monotony.

Extended from the specific case of Khrennikov to Soviet opera in general, this judgement by the musicologist Rabinovich was widely shared, not just among critics or singers, but also by the public, whose lack of interest was reflected in their reluctance to attend performances of Soviet opera (the authorities had to arrange for factory or school parties to attend in order to conceal this embarrassing reality). The brilliant success of *Susanin* made the failure of Soviet opera all the more glaring, and there was no way to prevent Stalin from hearing of this.

At the beginning of next year, 1940, Khrapchenko had to file a report to Stalin on the state of the Bolshoi Theatre in response to the leader's query.[45] He squirmed to avoid the problem: 'During the last two to three years the Bolshoi Theatre enjoyed some substantial successes. A number of Soviet operas have been staged: *Quiet Flows the Don*, *Virgin Soil Upturned*, *The Battleship Potemkin*. . . . The productions of *Ivan Susanin*, . . . *Abesalom and Eteri*, *Khovanshchina* . . . have received a positive response from the press and the audiences'.[46] By implication, the Soviet operas did *not* 'receive a positive response from the press and audiences' – they were failures. Among the successes was a single work from the Soviet period, the 'national opera' *Abesalom and Eteri* by the Georgian Zakhary Paliashvili, a student of Taneyev; the work was first performed in 1919, when Georgia's status was still under dispute, so Khrapchenko lists it as a classic, rather than as a Soviet opera.

[45] Mikhail Khrapchenko's letter to Stalin of 9 January 1940, RGALI, fund 962 (Komitet po delam iskusstv), list 3, folder 1122.
[46] Only ballets have been omitted from the lists.

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The rest of the letter is devoted to a separate matter, a disparaging account of Samosud's activities at the Bolshoi. Khrapchenko begins by telling Stalin what he already must have known: Samosud, as the new principal conductor, was on bad terms with the Bolshoi establishment (a very common state of affairs anywhere in the world). He saw no reason to abandon the innovative methods of MALEGOT, but since this meant that he preferred to work with younger, more malleable and slimmer singers, he was soon in conflict with the Bolshoi's star system, and more mature and indeed corpulent singers now found themselves without roles in spite of their celebrity (among them the sopranos Derzhinskaya and Katulskaya, and the mezzo Obukhova). There were other squabbles that were hardly Samosud's responsibility, but Khrapchenko throws them in for good measure. The two famous basses Pirogov and Reyzen both demanded the role of Susanin – they were all too aware of the benefits that would accrue from playing a leading role in an event of national prestige, watched by Stalin and other senior government figures. A compromise was offered: the singers would share the role in the first two performances, but Reyzen was not prepared to accept this, and resigned from the theatre.

This was enough to ensure that Samosud would lose his prestigious position at the Bolshoi, and with it any decisive role in shaping Soviet opera. It is well known from various memoirs that Stalin liked to befriend star singers, and he frequently had them invited to Kremlin banquets, both as entertainers and guests. It is also known that Russian classical opera was one of Stalin's pleasures, and this was the repertory that had made the reputations of the Bolshoi's stars. Stalin was therefore predisposed to favour the star singers and the conservative Bolshoi establishment over Samosud and his MALEGOT experiments. Still, with the outbreak of war in Europe and the eventual invasion of the Soviet Union, there were more pressing matters to attend to, and it was not until late 1943 that the Politbureau finally decided to sack Samosud. He was sent back to MALEGOT and replaced by Ariy Pazovskiy, the principal conductor of the former Mariinsky, who had played no part in shaping Soviet opera.

Official enthusiasm for the Soviet-opera project was therefore on the wane from 1940 onwards. The number of newly commissioned operas was significantly reduced: as noted at a KDI meeting in January 1945, there were only eight commissions in the period 1943–5, as against twenty during the shorter period 1938–9; of those eight recent commissions, two were still unfinished at the time of the meeting, and the other six were either undergoing revision or remained on the shelf.[47] Given these statistics, it is hardly surprising that not a single Soviet opera was produced at the Bolshoi the following year; the same was true even at the Bolshoi's *filial*, a smaller stage whose purpose was to house less lavish or experimental productions. Of the other two Moscow theatres where opera was performed, the Stanislavsky/Nemirovich-Danchenko Theatre had no Soviet operas

[47] This information comes from the transcript of Surin's paper presented before the Committee for Artistic Affairs on 24 January 1945, *Stenogramma zasedaniya Komiteta: o tvorcheskoy rabote po sozdaniyu novïkh sovestkikh oper*, RGALI, fund 962 (Komitet po delam iskusstv), list 3, folder 1379.

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running that year, while the Stanislavsky Opera and Drama Theatre had only one: Dekhterev's *Countess Mary*, which had survived from the Lermontov anniversary celebrations of 1941. Leningrad was a little better disposed to the genre: the former Mariinsky produced Prokofiev's *Duenna*, while MALEGOT presented the first part of his *War and Peace*. Thus 1946 saw only three Soviet opera productions in the two metropolitan centres of the Soviet Union, and even these were not mainstream examples of the genre, since they lacked plots based on Soviet subject matter.[48]

At the same meeting in 1945 Khrapchenko's deputy, Vasiliy Surin, presented a paper in which many of the earlier policies were openly reversed. Some of the rhetoric immediately betrayed the change in outlook since the 1930s: 'Our people now demand the embodiment of great and exciting events and feelings in the form of high art. Our people know and love the highest examples of the Russian and Western operatic classics, and they demand high artistry in the works of Soviet composers'. The appearance of the word 'high' three times in the course of two short sentences is symptomatic of the changes that had occurred during the previous decade; the KDI's discussion, in 1937, on the appropriateness of 'banal' music, was now utterly unimaginable. The goal in the post-war period had shifted to the creation of new 'Soviet musical classics', and the Russian classics of the nineteenth century were now to be taken directly as models. Whatever else we might think of this, the craft of musical composition was now taken very seriously, and the KDI wanted to see no more Dzerzhinskys.

Surin continued:

> Many composers approach opera too lightly, treating it as a genre that does not require much musical training. They allow the form to be improvised, stemming not from the laws of musical logic, but from the development of the action. Composers [today] set out to write their first operas without worrying about their lack of experience. [You ask,] 'Why should they be worried?' If the composer cannot orchestrate, the theatre will invite an orchestrator [to do the work] for him, and perhaps even [summon] a whole brigade to ensure that his work sounds good. In this way certain complex matters (including voice-leading, the invention of countermelodies, and counterpoint) now fall outside the composer's remit. What remains for him to do is only to compose two or three mass songs for choir or solo, and create some melodramatic improvisations on the piano, which will serve as the basis for musical characterisation of the main players and the main events of the opera.[49]

Surin, of course, was holding such practices up to derision rather than endorsing them, and could now count on his listeners' understanding and agreement. He also complained that most Soviet operas were not based on the composer's dramatic conception, but were unshaped chronicles of revolutionary events. He denounced the practice of approving libretti for production without consulting the composer, or sometimes before a composer had even been selected. In closing, he emphasised his guiding principle: 'It is music that embodies the dramatic conception in opera'. For the first time since Lunacharsky's 1930 essay we hear that music should have

[48] These statistics come from *Informatsionnaya spravka o sostoyanii repertuara, o planakh na 1947 god i rabote nad sozdaniyem novikh proizvedeniy na sovremenniye sovetskiye temi v soyuznikh i stolichnikh teatrakh operi i baleta*, RGALI, fund 962 (Komitet po delam iskusstv), list 3, folder 1564.

[49] RGALI, fund 962 (Komitet po delam iskusstv), list 3, folder 1379.

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a leading role in opera. For the first time since 1928 officials widened the scope of their interests beyond their previous near-exclusive focus on the libretto.

The official view had now veered away from the 1930s ideal of the collective theatre workshop, to cast the composer as the primary locus of artistic responsibility. There was a large rubbish heap of operas which would never see the stage, and many more whose first season was also their last; this unavoidable record of failure forced the KDI to look for the sources of the problem, and they were now prepared to concede that production-line methods and the endless demands for revision were at fault. Kabalevsky's *In the Fire* had gone into production when only one act was ready; Koval's *Yemel'yan Pugachov* was only a vocal score when it received the go-ahead, and a brigade of orchestrators had to be hired so that the full score was available for rehearsal.

One of the respondents to Surin's paper was Shostakovich, who suggested that the interference of theatres (and by implication of official committees) should cease altogether. He also pointed out that it was not uncommon for three different opera houses to run three different versions of the same opera during the same season. Among other things, this ran contrary to Socialist Realist demands that an opera should provide a single, non-ambiguous interpretation of its literary source.[50] Political interference was itself producing a political problem – to move beyond the polite euphemisms of the meeting, the differing versions were drawing attention to the fact that the ideological window-dressing for the Stalinist state was undergoing frequent change (sometimes under the pressure of external circumstances, sometimes because the state felt strong enough to increase its demands). Shostakovich, with unusual directness, also pointed to the lack of financial incentive: the rules governing opera commissions stipulated that the composer received 25 per cent of the fee on submission, and 75 per cent on production. Given the interminable revisions imposed on composers, the 75 per cent was postponed indefinitely to a hazy and uncertain future. As a result, composers had turned instead to film scores, which were incomparably more lucrative, and could generally reach completion quickly and efficiently.

Most tellingly, the suitability of the major theatres as venues for Soviet opera was openly questioned. As Stalinist culture had became ever more conservative, and the leadership cult more extreme, a ponderous dignity was attached to the Bolshoi and Kirov theatres, which were now supposed to provide only the most lavish spectacles. The stage of the Bolshoi was the same stage from which Stalin read his speeches, and the entertainments staged there had to be commensurate with this function. As Surin put it, 'the Bolshoi and the Kirov cannot be occupied by experiments'. Khrapchenko agreed: 'the Bolshoi cannot immediately put on just any opera'. The fact that the Bolshoi could receive Stalin one night and an embarrassing Soviet opera the next was proving too great a strain on official *gravitas*. From the failure of *Virgin Soil* a decade earlier, it had gradually became clear that no tampering

[50] On the relationship between literary sources and libretti in Soviet operas, see Bullock, 'Staging Stalinism', 96–104.

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with the details could save Soviet opera; the project was fundamentally misconceived and could not be allowed to drag down other cultural institutions. A compromise suggestion was supported by several speakers at the meeting: if Soviet opera was no longer deemed appropriate for the more prestigious theatres, would it not be possible to establish a special 'Experimental Theatre' dedicated to new works in the genre? Khrapchenko declared that even this must be rejected, since the public simply would not attend performances at a theatre whose repertory consisted of nothing but Soviet operas.

Conclusion: Why Stalin needed the classics

It took only a decade for the great hopes invested in Soviet opera to founder, and for the Soviet arts establishment to make a frank admission – at least behind closed doors – that the project was an irremediable failure. The story I have told is not merely a story of composers and their works, but the story of a grand project initiated and sustained by the state. The rejection of that project by the same state brings the story to a close. The debacle of 1948 had far-reaching (if temporary) effects, but stands outside the remit of this article. Suffice it to say that while these effects lasted, the use of Soviet subject matter was effectively closed to opera composers (or indeed dramatists) – every conceivable historical episode since the Revolution was now fraught with potential dangers. There are two operas, however, that merit some discussion even though they were first performed after the period covered by this article.

Shaporin's *Decembrists* was premièred in 1954, after a gestation period of an astonishing three decades, during which various intermediate revisions responded to the changes in the KDI's thinking. Although the final product was shaped after the Soviet opera project had lost its driving force, and indeed after Stalin's death, the political and cultural environment had not undergone any radical change, and the Khrushchev 'Thaw' was still several years away. *The Decembrists*, in its final version, matched the KDI's later thinking on Soviet opera with an impressive degree of inventiveness and skill: almost every passage had a ring of familiarity, as the score invoked Tchaikovsky, Musorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Glazunov, Rakhmaninov, Scriabin and several others. There was much singable music and there was ballet; a handful of recurring themes held the musical fabric together and imprinted themselves on the listener's memory. There was even a harrowing climax – the execution of the liberal rebels – and an apotheosis, invoking a brighter future. And the music, for a change, was of high quality, expertly assembled and even enjoyable for the listener. There is a certain fascination in seeing how much a composer can do when originality is ruled out. And after so many layers of revision over the years, the libretto had acquired the kind of blandness that made *Susanin* so attractive to the authorities.

This was the first true grand opera to emerge from the Soviet Union, and a second soon followed in the posthumous version of Prokofiev's *War and Peace* (part of which had been already been performed during the 1940s). Both works employed historical typology: Shaporin's Decembrist uprising prefigures 1917, while

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Prokofiev's Marshal Kutuzov prefigures Stalin. Even without direct reference to Soviet history, however, both operas were subjected to endless demands for revision. In both cases it seems that Stalin's death was needed before the KDI felt it was safe to settle on a final version and allow the works to appear on stage.

After the performance of these two left-overs from the Soviet opera project, there were certainly further works that could be assigned to the same genre, but only on the understanding that this was a matter of choice for the composers and librettists concerned. The state, under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, never again threw its weight behind a revival of the project, and such operas had to co-exist with many other varieties that owed little or nothing to Stalinist culture.

In conclusion, I would like to consider a number of advantages the Russian classics held over the new Soviet operas for the aggrandisement of the Stalinist state. Let us deal first with the scenario and its source. Soviet opera had to be based at least to some degree on historical events, ranging chronologically from the Spartacus slave revolt through to the Great Patriotic War (i.e. the decisive Eastern Front of World War II). The task did not seem so difficult at first, since the approved account of a chosen historical event could easily be gleaned from the new history textbooks Stalin had commissioned. The problems only emerged when such accounts were fleshed out, since operatic librettos had to be filled with dialogue and details of characterisation; the textbooks were of no assistance here, and, given the number of individuals typically involved in overseeing a Soviet opera, the result was generally a crippling lack of consensus. This applied not only to recent events like the Russian Civil War, but also to the more distant past – hence the years of rewriting before Prokofiev's *War and Peace* reached an acceptable form. The Russian classics, by contrast, were spared such attention, not least because their composers and librettists were long dead. Alterations were reserved only for the most blatantly monarchistic or religious excesses, such as the prophecy of the Holy Fool at the end of *Boris Godunov*. Their status as classics exempted them from more exacting scrutiny. The extensive revisions undergone by *Susanin* might seem to indicate otherwise, but, as we have seen, this was largely the result of an apparently simple alteration creating unforeseen problems.

Second, in those cases where the subject matter was drawn from Soviet history (initially the preferred option), composers and librettists faced restrictions over who could be represented on stage, and what manner of representation was suitably dignified. Lenin, for example, could be represented on the operatic stage, but only on condition that he was not given a singing role. Stalin, on the other hand, could not appear on stage at all, whether in the opera house or the theatre, because this would result in an unacceptable loss of control over his carefully cultivated public image (only a few cinematic appearances by a handful of favoured actors were permitted, under the closest official supervision). The tacit rule was established after Stalin's first and last appearance as a stage character in 1937, mentioned above; even Kerzhentsev fell from his powerful position the next year, and this faux pas was considered to be the main cause. Certain words were considered intrinsically unsuited to opera, such as 'partiya' (the Party), 'partbilet' (Party membership card) and 'raykom' (district committee) – perhaps it was feared that some might snigger

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on hearing official and bureaucratic terms sung; but this made it extremely difficult to represent Soviet history on the operatic stage. The use of colloquialisms and other naturalistic forms of speech also met with disapproval, not simply because this was thought to compromise the dignity or grandeur of the spectacle, but also because it was strongly associated with modernist opera (again, *War and Peace* had to be purged of the naturalistic speech that Prokofiev enjoyed setting).

Third, Soviet opera was forced to eschew virtuosity in the vocal writing. While virtuosity was quite normal in Soviet instrumental music, so long as it was harnessed to some higher purpose, vocal virtuosity was considered a separate case, because it violently distorted normal speech patterns, and was therefore inappropriate for the representation of robust and healthy Soviet characters. Even when an opera's scenario was not drawn from Soviet history, demands for accessibility directed composers towards folksong and popular styles – the ideal melody could be remembered and sung by the opera-goer, or by radio audiences. Unsurprisingly, professional opera singers found these constraints tedious and unflattering, and celebrity singers were able to use their influence to ensure that they would never have to appear in Soviet operas. And yet, from the memoirs of the political elite, we find that the voices of the Bolshoi's star singers were the main attraction for them. This meant that those formulating such cultural policies would themselves have found Soviet operas tedious, or certainly much less attractive than operatic classics, undermining their motivation to ensure that Soviet composers produced more of the same.

Fourth, classic operas provided a respectable setting for religious spectacle, such as the stirring sound of Orthodox church bells in the epilogue of *Susanin*, now effectively glorifying Stalin instead of monarchy and Orthodoxy. This is not to suggest that Soviet citizens were secretly devoted to the Orthodox Church – they were free to attend services at the price of abandoning aspirations to the more comfortable walks of life available in Stalinist society. Without being believers, however, many would have found a nostalgic attraction in sounds and scenes they remembered from childhood or youth. Moreover, there were prurient pleasures to be gained from the spectacle of experiences that had to be shunned in everyday life because of official disapproval. Living composers and librettists would never gain approval for similar treatment of religious themes, even when the historical subject matter might have justified them. Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible*, for example, drew official criticism for its apparent revelling in church symbolism – even though no one believed that Eisenstein's aim was to promote Christianity while enjoying the privileged lifestyle of an artist salaried by the Soviet state.

Finally, performances of the Russian classics were enhanced by the cachet of unassailable high art. The grand Bolshoi productions not only served to glorify Stalin or the Soviet state, but also the composer and his masterpiece. Such glorification was considered most improper for a Soviet composer, and those who were raised high, like Shostakovich or even Dzerzhinsky for a while, were kept earthbound by later humiliations. The lavish productions expected for the classics could misfire when transferred to the works of Soviet composers, no matter how good their official standing. The Georgian composer Muradeli was known to be

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favoured by Stalin, but if the opera-house administration thought that this would guarantee the success of an expensive and elaborate production of this composer's work, they soon discovered to their cost that this was not so. After Stalin attended Muradeli's *The Great Friendship* in 1948, the composer not only faced criticism, but the whole administrative hierarchy of the opera house fell, and some higher bureaucrats may also have fallen for the same reason. A production of another Russian classic posed no such risks, and even a poor critical reception carried no graver consequences.

In the case of *Susanin* we have seen a remarkable and unexpected realisation of Lunacharsky's vision of opera as *prazdnik* ('celebration, festivity'), crowned by a majestic, breathtaking apotheosis. The opening night of *Susanin* also managed to realise Kerzhentsev's contribution to this vision – *prazdnik* elevated by the Great Leader, but without the risk of representing him on stage. The well-timed appearance of Stalin at the première not only created the feeling of perfect 'collective happiness' for that particular moment, but also fixed *Susanin* as a work with a direct contemporary relevance, one that was somehow contemporary and Soviet – 'our' work, and not merely a relic of former times. In its later modification of 1945 (conducted by Pazovsky), the production became even grander, the tempi slower, the Polish scene ever more spectacular. The liturgical longueurs of Act I were balanced by the hedonistic pleasures of Act II. Those present at the KDI discussion of this modified production were convinced that *Susanin* was an epic opera (now that it was emptied of all drama), and spoke earnestly of the 'magnificent slowness of Glinka'. 'We are used to hearing this opera as a mass', one composer confessed – hence the objections that were raised over the appearance of everyday objects such as a bucket of water on stage.[51] Nothing should be allowed to compromise *Susanin*'s grandeur.

At the time of writing, a production that follows the 1939 version in all its essentials is enjoying a long and highly successful run at the Bolshoi. During the 1990s, under Yeltsin, it seemed clear that the original *Life for the Tsar* had displaced *Susanin*, and all the Soviet accretions had been removed in order to return to Glinka's pristine monarchism. But *Susanin* has now made its return in a bizarre combination of Rosen's original libretto with the Stalinist production, including the lavish sets. The audience can now see the same spectacle that Stalin enjoyed, give or take the occasional sprinkling of post-Soviet religious fervour – never mind that the libretto's paean to the beauty of spring is sung under a gorgeous canopy of autumnal gold and crimson. This revival of the Stalinist *Susanin* is matched by the return of the Stalin-era national-anthem melody (again without the associated text). This is not to insinuate that Putin intends a return to the reality of Stalinism beyond these trappings (short of major conflagrations, revolution, and the complete destruction of industry, it is hard to know what this journalistic cliché could possibly mean). There is no need even to rehabilitate Stalin (Nicholas II was granted that favour instead). The reappearance of these cultural tokens is occurring because high

[51] *Stenogramma po obsuzhdeniyu spektaklya 'Ivan Susanin' v Bol'shom Akademicheskom Teatre*, 3 January 1945, RGALI, fund 962 (Komitet po delam iskusstv), list 3, delo 1378.

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Stalinism provides the most easily assimilable model for Russian nationalism today: it is less remote than its nineteenth-century counterpart, and still within living memory of many aging Russian voters.

The society constructed under Stalin was characterised by extreme inequality and by a ruling class capable of all manner of cruelty in order to achieve industrialisation. The rhetoric of a highly mythologised Russian Revolution was used at first to mask this reality: when credibility was stretched too far, Stalin shrewdly turned instead to nationalism. Russia again became one of the world's most unequal societies during the 1990s, and remains so today. Under Yeltsin Russian industries were sold off or allowed to collapse; under Putin this trend is being reversed. There is no chance of invoking the Revolution today in order to enlist support for the state; but Stalin's second option of nationalism is available and put to effective use. The eclectic and confident nationalism of the new *Susanin* contains the appropriate message for those Russian citizens wealthy enough to attend the Bolshoi today, and also for the foreigners who always make up a significant portion of the audience, whether they are businessmen, diplomats or tourists.

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