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THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN OPERA CANON AND THE SEARCH FOR THE ICONIC SOVIET OPERA IN THE 1930S

Irina Kotkina

Abstract

This paper is a part of a bigger text, to become a book in the future, which is dedicated to the processes which took place at the Soviet opera stage in the 1930s. My desire was to look at the development of the Soviet operatic culture against the background of the social, political and cultural processes, which influenced the USSR in this period. My perspective is broad, but the Bolshoi Theater remains the 'main character' of this article, not only because this stage had utmost political importance for the regime. It witnessed also all the processes unfolding on the operatic map of the USSR. My desire was to highlight these processes and to show the context and the final purpose that the cultural politics concerning opera had. The model of the romantic 19th century Russian national opera served as an example for all composers who created operas in the national opera houses. Soviet leaders saw the establishment of the classical opera enterprises as the best way to equate previously culturally 'underdeveloped' republics with the most culturally 'advanced' ones by establishing the socialist-realist canon in music and transmitting it to the whole territory of the Soviet Union. Stalin himself had some ideas of how the model contemporary opera should look like, to which he desired to listen in the Bolshoi Theater and all over the country. Once he said that "we need [to create] Soviet classic [operas which would be], like the nineteenth century classics, but better". Stalin listed their desirable basic characters – librettos with Socialist plots, a realistic musical language with the stress on national idioms, and positive protagonists embodying the new Socialist era. These criteria were submitted to a group of opera specialists at the meeting of 17 January 1936. But already on 26 January 1936, Stalin's highly cherished dream of a Soviet classical opera with a positive, contemporary hero was destroyed by "*Lady Macbeth*" by Dmitry Shostakovich, the Soviet Union's first composer. An article entitled 'Muddle Instead of Music' in *Pravda* and the resolution of the Party accused the composer of formalism after Stalin had visited this opera performed in the Bolshoi Theater. The last hope remained that in the republics, on the 'virgin musical soil' of Buriat-Mongolia or Kyrgyzstan, the Soviet canon of 'classic' opera could be developed. Basically, all the 'Dekady'

served the purpose of establishing this classical operatic canon, which Bolshoi Theater failed to do, and to transmit it to the territory of the whole Soviet Union. Not only was the Stalinist government unafraid of the manifestation of 'national character' in music, it supported it as long as it served the higher purpose of creating an opera art 'socialist in content'. Here lays the chief paradox of Stalinist cultural politics.

Keywords: opera, Stalinism, cultural politics, "Dekady project", Soviet opera project, Bolshoi Theater

In the Soviet Union, the period between 1930 and 1934 can be characterized as the period when the concept of "socialist realism" was born, which became crucial for all the arts. Nevertheless, music in the first decades of the Soviet government was somewhat behind literature as a propaganda tool.

The Union of Soviet Composers was founded in 1932 by party decree. The first to organize were city groups in Moscow and Leningrad, followed by republican unions in Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, and Armenia. Compared to the progress made in the field of literature, the organization of composers was somewhat slower; while Soviet writers were able to hold their first national congress in 1934, Soviet composers did not hold a nationwide conference until 1948, 16 years after the Union's founding.

In 1932, Soviet composers were in a state of tension because the model Soviet opera, the main task of Soviet musicians, had not yet been created. Attempts to switch to a "Soviet thematic" were considered unsatisfactory by party critics. In 1934, two major events set the tone for the musical development of the following decades. On 22 January 1934, a new opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* by the young Shostakovich was premiered in Leningrad to great acclaim. The enormous support given to *Lady Macbeth* from 1934 to 1936 shows the strength of the modernists, who made up a very significant proportion of Soviet musicians.

At the beginning of the 1930s, the whole structure of the official apparatus of cultural management changed: it became both branched and dependent on the central authorities. The system of the apparatus extended over the entire territory of the Union. From the 1930s, the republican administration was completely subordinated to the center,¹ and the interference of the state in cultural affairs became considerable.

Previously, local cultural affairs were solved and organized at the republican level. Thus, we see the tendency to centralize organizations dealing with culture, their expansion, their increased specialization and the expansion of their duties. There was created a complicated symbiosis of the Party, the state, and the social institutions managing culture. The functions of these institutions overlapped. This led to the replacement of institutional management by Party management. This system was highly hierarchical. The dominant method of cultural management became the bureaucratic command method,² when social institutions were subordinated to the Party. In the 1930s, this was accompanied by a tendency towards the militarization of culture, the dominance of military themes in many genres, which was one of the characteristic features of Soviet society before the Second World War. On the one hand, cultural products were distributed to the widest audience, and on the other hand, the sphere of culture was given over to ideology, which led to a decline in the quality of cultural production.³ The various branches of culture were now under much tighter, though not necessarily more thorough, control than in the early years of Soviet rule. The system of control over the arts was well-developed and well-considered, as the Party and the Leader not only controlled the creative process, but personally influenced it. In the operatic field the years between 1930 and 1941 were distinguished by the leader's demand for the creation of a Soviet classical opera, which would overshadow all outstanding compositions of the past.⁴

The artists felt completely dependent. The main operatic task was assigned to the theaters from above, and each of them had to fulfill it. The general cultural goal of the period was the application of Socialist Realism to opera: the stylistic, musical, and ideological elaboration of a model opera that would surpass the heritage of the 19th century. What the government demanded at that time was the creation of a "socialist realist" opera, but what exactly this meant was not formulated in words.

After 1932, most of the existing music magazines ceased publication. In 1933, the Union of Composers founded the journal *Sovetskaya Muzyka*. The first issue of *Sovetskaya Muzyka* contained an article by the critic Gorodinsky entitled "On the Problem of Socialist Realism in Music," which was a real problem, since it was by no means clear how to translate this literary term into the musical realm:

The main attention of the Soviet composer must be directed towards the victorious progressive principles of reality, towards all that is heroic,

bright, and beautiful. [...] Socialist Realism demands a pitiless struggle against folk-negating, modernistic directions that are typical of the decay of contemporary bourgeois art, and against subservience and servility towards modern bourgeois culture.⁵

Thus, in this article, Socialist Realism and Formalism became the two opposing concepts of the early 1930s.⁶

On 1 December 1934, the leader of the Communist Party in Leningrad, Sergei Kirov, was assassinated in his office.⁷ His successor was Andrei Zhdanov.⁸ After 1934, Soviet life saw a revival of traditional moral standards, the reintroduction of gym-like school uniforms, and the abandonment of many “progressive” innovations.⁹ The whole concept of Russian history was revised. The views of Mikhail Pokrovsky, the leading Soviet historian until his death in 1932, were condemned as a vulgarization of Marxism and a distortion of Russian history.¹⁰ There was a “great retreat” in cultural and social policy. From then on, the opera and the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow, as the first theater in the country, became the focus of attention of the authorities. The Bolshoi’s main task was to adapt its productions to the new aesthetic, which was not easy. The Party’s guidelines for opera were extremely vague and unclear. The artists had to guess what qualities the new production should have in order to satisfy the Politburo’s tastes. The other side of the problem was that the Bolshoi Theater in 1930 received full financial support for its productions. The staff of the Bolshoi Theatre felt supported and privileged, which naturally meant that the artistic policy of the theatre, which was to remain conservative and traditional, was confirmed rather than criticized. Moreover, the idea that the imperial traditions of the Bolshoi Theatre were so highly valued by the leaders of the Soviet government led to the conclusion that the producers should try to maintain and perfect these traditions, to make their performances greater and richer than they had been during the tsarist era.

In the season of 1934–1935 the Bolshoi Theater presented three premieres: *Kitezh* and *Sadko* and, most importantly, Shostakovich’s *Lady Macbeth*. Along with the “new respectability” and the quest to reevaluate Russia’s past, Russian operas of the tsarist era came back into vogue. The reinstatement of *Kitezh* by Rimsky-Korsakov, which had been dropped from the repertoire in 1928, signified the relaxation of an atheist hardline. The *Kitezh* was premiered on 25 December 1934. The date is significant. It was Christmas. The conductor was Nikolai Golovanov, and the director

was Vladimir Nardov. The set was designed by Korovin and was drawn in 1916. The main problem of the producers was how to deal with the clearly religious representation of the last scene of the opera. Director Nardov discussed this and the official compromise position on the treatment of Rimsky-Korsakov's mystical opera in the Bolshoi Theater's newspaper, *Sovetsky Artist*:

Our task is to free this composition of genius from all religious-mystical connotations. We performed the opera as a fairy tale, a people's legend. [...] Thanks to the futile interpretation of the artist Korovin, the last scene of the opera represented Heaven, which became an unhealthy tradition. The main characters of the opera from the very beginning appeared as enlightened saints, immortal righteous men, candidates for Heaven, which they reach in the finale of the opera, surrounded by the inhabitants of Heaven with powdered faces and lighted candles. We will present the last scene in a different way. According to our idea, the tired Fevronia falls asleep in the forest and dreams that her bridegroom is alive, leads everyone to the invisible *Kitezh*, which sinks into the lake *Svetly Iar*.¹¹

Sadko was premiered on 25 April 1935 with great pomp. The conductor was A. Melik-Pashaev, the director V. Lossky,¹² and the stage designer F. Fedorovsky.¹³ For the last of them the enterprise turned into a most unpleasant and unexpected scandal. The newspaper of the Bolshoi Theatre was full of slogans describing the content of the work: "Create a powerful, grandiose production!"¹⁴ This slogan summed up what Fedorovsky wanted to create: a pure, realistic wonder on the stage. The production reports published in the theatre newspaper give an impression of what the production looked like. The head of the mechanical workshop addressed the stage designer in a short article entitled "Send Us the Fish, Comrade Fedorovsky!":

In our work on the opera *Sadko* we are delayed mostly by the production of swans. We have been working on the construction of the swans since November [the article was published in March – I.K.]. The task is very complicated. The swans have to flap their wings and move their heads. In short, they should look like they are alive. Of course, we are not discouraged by the complexity of the task; we will certainly accomplish it. But in addition to the swans, we must also produce fish. There are 12 kinds of fish, as comrade Fedorovsky told me. And, of course, they are all different! But so far we have received only one example. It is necessary to receive all the other sketches so that we can think, discuss and invent the machinery to make the fish almost alive.¹⁵

Not only the fish, but everything else was planned to be “almost alive” for this production. There was a phrase in Sadko’s song in the opera about “33 and one ships”. Naturally, all 34 of them appeared on stage in front of the amazed spectators. This was how the set designer understood the concept of socialist realism. Although they presented their work within the framework of Socialist Realism, the premieres of *Sadko* and *Kitezh* suggest the continuing strength of traditionalism and the traditionalist trend in Soviet music.

Initially, the production was well received. *Sovetsky Artist*, which reflected the official response of the production, devoted its entire issue to it, opening with the slogan: “The production of *Sadko* on time is the result of highly conscious work of the whole collective”.¹⁶ The articles were entitled: “Complicated, great work is successfully completed,” “The Work of the Workshops Deserves the Highest Praise”, “Our Chorus is the Best in the World”, “Beautiful Production”, “Bright, Strong Impression”, “The Set Leaves One Breathless”, “The Performance is Interesting”, and “The Opera is Easy to Listen to.”¹⁷

Then suddenly the attitude toward production changed drastically. The next issue of *Sovetsky Artist* published Stalin’s famous slogan, “All depends on the cadres!”¹⁸ This opened a new campaign of criticism of the Bolshoi Theatre. Immediately more articles appeared: “The Youth Does Not Work enough in the Bolshoi!”, “Theatre is not a Museum”, “Towards the Rebirth of Realistic Stage Design”, “Against Imperial Kitsch”, and so on.¹⁹ These articles accused *Sadko*’s set design of being too old-fashioned, too pompous, while Soviet art should be both realistic and simple. It emphasized that the young generation and the youthful approach to the productions should replace the old, tsarist hangovers. This short campaign culminated in September in the slogan: “Struggle for Repertoire Plan is the Task of the Entire Collective”, and in the article signed by the Bolshoi director Mutnyh, who revived the maxim: “Special Attention to Soviet Operas!”²⁰

Before the assassination of Kirov in December 1934, the Leningrad City and Province Party Committee had acquired the greatest influence it would ever have in its history. When Zhdanov, a loyal disciple and the Stalin’s right-hand man, was appointed to this post in 1934, the Leningrad City and Province Party Committee became completely subservient to Stalin. Another latent reason for supporting the Leningrad theater was Stalin’s usual game of “divide et impera”: in this way the Mariinsky Theater and the Bolshoi Theater were set against each other.

On 2 July 1935, the Politburo made a historic decision concerning the Leningrad Opera House. The Politburo decided:

“1) To fulfill the demand of the workers of the Leningrad State Theater of Opera and Ballet (Mariinsky) to name it after Kirov.

2) To equalize the salaries of the staff of the Kirov Opera with those of the Bolshoi Theater. Comrade Bubnov must submit the necessary subsidies to the SNK USSR in 1935.

3) For the coverage of the tour of Leningrad Kirov Opera to Moscow to provide to *Narkompros* RSFSR 176.000 rubles from the reserve fund of SNK USSR.”²¹

As a result of this measure, the Bolshoi Theater again lost its privileged position, and was put on a par with the Leningrad Kirov Opera.

December 1935 and January 1936 were decisive turning points in the opera policy. It was signaled by the transformation of the art sector into an independent body – the Committee for Artistic Affairs (hereinafter CAA) (*Komitet po delam iskusstv*), attached to the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR. Stalin was responsible for the creation of the CAA. On 16 December 1935, he presented his project for the CAA to the Politburo. The head of the CAA was Platon Kerzhentsev, who had very little background in cultural policy. From March 1933 to October 1936, he was the chief of the All-Union Commission of Radio Broadcasting at SNK USSR, and from 17 November 1936 he acted simultaneously as the chief of CAA. Kerzhentsev was bought by Stalin to run the CAA and to impose a new line in cultural policy. This meant ending the conflicts in music between the proletarian, modernist and traditionalist factions. The creation of CAA was the immediate background to Stalin's praise of Dzerzhinsky's *The Quiet Don* and the attack on Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth*. These were not accidental. It was part of a concerted and directed change of policy on the musical front.

On the evening of 17 January 1936, Stalin – accompanied by Molotov and Bubnov – attended a performance of an opera by a young composer, Ivan Dzerzhinsky, *The Quiet Don*, based on Sholokhov's novel. It was performed by the Leningrad State Academic Maly Opera Theatre (MALEGOT) on tour in Moscow. Stalin was very pleased.²² Here was a work that seemed to fulfill all the requirements of the “new” Soviet opera: it was simple, wholesome, socialist, and patriotic. On 21 January 1936, *Pravda* reported that Stalin was favorably impressed by *The Quiet*

Don. Apparently, it represented a kind of opera that should be officially patronized.

The Quiet Don had an eventful history. In 1932, the young composer – still a student at the Leningrad Conservatory – submitted the work to an opera competition jointly sponsored by the Bolshoi Theatre and the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. When the results were announced in 1934, *The Quiet Don* was not even mentioned. Nevertheless, Shostakovich liked the opera and offered Dzerzhinsky the opportunity to work with the conductor Samuil Samosud, who gave *The Quiet Don* its final form for a MALEGOT production. The version performed on 22 October 1935 was a significant improvement over the one rejected by the jury in the 1932–1934 competition.

The libretto, written by the composer's brother, was based on "motifs" taken from Sholokhov's still unfinished novel. The librettist had to invent his own positive ending. The last sentences of the opera were uttered by the old man Sashka, who – looking at the departing of the main heroes of the revolution – said: "Good people, new people, what a wonderful life they will build!" The final choruses led to the apotheosis of positive forces. Of course, this had nothing to do with Sholokhov's novel and its tragic ending.

But the decisive factor in the success of *The Quiet Don* was Stalin's personal approval. His comments were intended to stimulate the development of Soviet opera. The first press report was entitled "Conversation of Comrades Stalin and Molotov with the Authors of the Operatic Production *The Quiet Don*":

"[...] During the conversation, comrades Stalin and Molotov gave positive appraisals of the work of the theater (the visiting MALEGOT) in the field of the creation of Soviet opera, and remarked on the ideological and political value of the production *The Quiet Don*. At the conclusion of the talk, comrades Stalin and Molotov expressed the need to remedy certain shortcomings of the production and also expressed their best wishes for further success in the work on Soviet opera."²³

Dzerzhinsky and the conductor Samosud reported in their own words what had been said during the conversation, thus unconsciously formulating the main task of the Soviet opera theater for the next two decades:

"Comrade Stalin said that the time was ripe for the creation of a classical Soviet opera. He pointed out that such an opera should be emotionally inspiring, and that the melodic inflections of folk music should be widely used. The music should make use of all the latest devices of musical technique, but its idioms should be close to the masses, clear and accessible."²⁴

Stalin also told Samosud that while operatic classicism was needed, it was time to have "our own Soviet classicism," which should be the concern of all people active in Soviet music, and that the stage design of the opera "must help the performance, not disturb it." That same year, Samosud's career reached its peak: he was appointed to the highest musical post in the country, chief conductor of the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, where he had to reperform *The Quiet Don* and later *Virgin Soil Uplturned* by the same Ivan Dzerzhinsky, who was only 26 years old and had not yet finished his conservatory training, when his great success swept him off his feet. *The Quiet Don* became the prototype of a new Soviet genre, the "song opera."

The Leningrad Theater was praised, and positive comparisons were made with the Bolshoi Theater. It is possible to assume that Mutnyh was instructed by the new party leader Akulov that the Bolshoi Theater, in the light of the Leningrad tour, must strengthen its weak points, i.e. modernize its stage design techniques and include Soviet opera in its repertoire. Such an opera, the pride of the Leningrad Opera House, nationally and internationally highly acclaimed, was *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* by the best young Soviet composer Dmitry Shostakovich. It was performed at the Bolshoi in December 1935, long after its triumphant premiere in Leningrad.

Soviet critics in 1933 considered this opera "the result of the general success of socialist construction, of the correct policy of the Party."²⁵ Such an opera "could only have been written by a Soviet composer who had grown up in the best traditions of Soviet culture."²⁶ The conductor of the Leningrad premiere, S. Samosud, summarized the general feeling of in the following words:

"I declare *Lady Macbeth* to be a work of genius, and I am convinced that posterity will confirm this assessment. One cannot help feeling proud that an opera has been created in a Soviet musical theater that dwarfs all that can be achieved in the operatic art of the capitalist world. Here, too, our culture has not only overtaken the most advanced capitalist countries, it has completely surpassed them."²⁷

The opera attracted international interest. Stockholm, Prague, London, Ljubljana, Zurich, Copenhagen performed the work in 1935–1936. In Russia by 1936 there had been 83 performances in Leningrad and 97 in Moscow. The piano scores, with Russian and English texts, were published by MUZGIZ (Musical State Publishing House) in 1935. Inspired by the success of this opera, Shostakovich planned a trilogy about Russian women in the tsarist era.²⁸

On 27 January 1936 Stalin saw *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* in a Bolshoi production and found it disgusting. On 28 January, *Pravda* published an article *Muddle instead of Music*. It was followed, a week later, on 6 February, by a second article directed against the ballet *The Limpid Stream*. Both articles were unsigned, but they undoubtedly had the status of official policy statements. *Pravda's* attack on Shostakovich was two-pronged; the libretto was criticized for its coarseness and vulgarity, the ballet for its ideological “falsehood.” More important, however, was the criticism of the music, which condemned modernism and all “modernists”:

“From the first moment, the listener is shocked by a deliberately dissonant, confused stream of sound. Fragments of melody, embryonic phrases appear – only to disappear again in the din, the grinding and the screaming. [...] This music is built on the basis of the rejection of opera [...] which carries the most negative features of ‘Meyerkholdovshina’ into theater and music, infinitely multiplied. Here we have ‘leftist’ confusion instead of natural, human music. [The danger of this tendency for Soviet music is obvious. Leftist distortion in opera comes from the same source as leftist distortion in painting, poetry, teaching, and science. Petty-bourgeois innovations lead to a break with real art, real science and real literature. [All this is coarse, primitive and vulgar. The music quacks, grunts, growls, and suffocates itself in order to express the amorous scenes as naturalistically as possible. And ‘love’ is smeared all over the opera in the most vulgar way. The merchant’s double bed occupies the central position on the stage. All ‘problems’ are solved on it.”²⁹

The attack on Shostakovich was not made solely on the grounds of modernism. Indeed, nothing could be further from an idyllic concept of contemporary Soviet opera than Shostakovich’s erotic drama based on a story of murder, greed, and lust. With *Lady Macbeth*, Shostakovich, the Soviet Union’s first composer, destroyed the regime’s and Stalin’s cherished dream of a Soviet classical opera with a positive, contemporary hero. The ideologists were, of course, disturbed by the fact that Shostakovich’s

“immoral” and joyless opera had received unqualified praise from almost everyone in the music world, as well as from some of the political elite, such as the music lover Tukhachevsky, and from opera houses abroad.

Subsequent Politburo meetings show no similar concern for opera policy as in January 1936, when the Bolshoi Theater was under attack. We can assume that Stalin’s personal will played a major role in repertoire policy. Stalin certainly had his own ideas about contemporary Soviet opera. In his conversation with Samosud, Stalin listed its desirable basic characteristics: a libretto with a socialist theme, a realistic musical language with an emphasis on the national idiom, and a positive hero who typified the new socialist era.

The *Pravda* articles were interpreted by the entire musical community as a warning. Immediately, meetings were called in all sections of the Composers’ Union, discussions were initiated, statements were issued, and the future of Soviet music was mapped out. The minutes of the discussions in Leningrad and Moscow were published in *Sovetskaya Muzyka*.³⁰

The discussions took place everywhere, but they only reflected what had already been written in the main music magazine *Sovetskaya Muzyka*. In the Bolshoi Theater the spirit of the discussions was about the same: denunciation, repentance, and promises to show the best of Soviet opera in the future.

In conclusion, we can say that in the mid-1930s the regime tried to formulate its vision of the ideal opera. However, this vision was not coherent, but rather a vague set of requirements and conditions of what was considered good and bad. They assumed that the exemplary opera would have to retain the best features of 19th-century Russian opera and at the same time surpass the “old classics.” The latter statement is obviously too nebulous to serve as a core program for instructing contemporary composers, who in any case refrained from composing operas for fear of offending higher officials. Being so loosely formulated, the official expectations left ample room for the authorities to punish and reward artists as they tried to guess what this ideal opera was. It shows not only the fermentation of into the system of total control over artistic production, but also a profound shift in understanding the very role of art into a purely didactic task of forging the perfect and aesthetically subtle Soviet citizen, self-glorification of the Soviet people, its history, and, consequently, of the regime itself.

1936 was a complicated year for the Bolshoi Theater, dominated by the scandal of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. Its repertoire lost many titles.

In 1936, the CAA launched two other initiatives concerning the life of the opera: the introduction of a new system of artistic awards and a new practice of presenting national art in Moscow. As soon as the CAA was created, the attention of the cultural officials in the republics was focused on how to create systems of cultural life similar to those in Russia. For this reason, festivals of national art were organized in Moscow. The republics were expected to present both classical Russian operas and their own national compositions, which had to follow the universal model worked out by the center. Thus, the *Dekadas* (10-day presentations) of national art were introduced in Moscow. Opera and ballet productions were performed at the Bolshoi Theatre.

Each *Dekada* was dedicated to the arts of one of the Soviet republics: opera and ballet, art and folk music performances by orchestras, composers, and artists. Sometimes they were synchronized with exhibitions of painting and sculpture, dramatic performances, or readings of national literature. From 1936 to 1953, thirteen *Dekadas* were presented, showing the art of Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Georgia, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Leningrad, Belarus, Buryat Mongolia, Tajikistan – before the war, and Ukraine and Uzbekistan – from 1945 to 1953.³¹ Only some of these regions had old musical traditions, such as Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. But there were also regions where there was no written musical notation before the Soviet era, and the creation of a national operatic and musical culture depended on oral traditions. In such underdeveloped regions, the Soviet government implanted opera culture, built opera houses, and trained opera singers. Composers were sent from Moscow and Leningrad to help the national cadres write their national operas to be performed during the ‘decades’.

Dekadas served primarily political rather than artistic purposes. They were institutionalized to demonstrate Stalin’s thesis of the flourishing of the culture of different nationalities and to control its development. The very idea of the *Decades* fit very well into the Soviet concept of cultural geopolitics, which aimed to create a pan-Soviet culture and “new Soviet classics.” Thus, all the newly composed operas in the republics followed the line of the Russian romantic national opera model of the 19th century. It was a part of the Soviet cultural project to create, on the “virgin musical soil” of the sister republics, Soviet classical opera, which the Bolshoi Theater, with its traditions and high culture, had obviously failed to create, as the debacle of *Lady Macbeth* in 1936 demonstrated.

The first *Dekada* was Ukrainian. It took place in the Bolshoi Theater and was attended by Stalin and other members of the government. On 8 February 1936 by the decision of TsIK and SNK USSR the Ukrainian Administration of Artistic Affairs of *Sovnarkom* of UkrSSR was created. In March, the Kiev Opera brought its best productions to Moscow. Stalin attended the performance of the national opera by the Ukrainian composer Lysenko, *Natalka-Poltavka*. Elena Bulgakova, wife of Mikhail Bulgakov, noted in her diary:

At the beginning of the second act, in the government box – just across from ours, Stalin, Molotov, and Ordzhonikidze appeared. After the ended of the performance, all the actors gathered on the avant-scene and gave an ovation in honor of Stalin, which the whole theater then joined. Stalin greeted the actors with a wave of his hand and applauded.³²

The newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* published an article dedicated to the Ukrainian *Dekada*:

“[...] For ten days the guests of the beautiful capital of the Union were the singers and dancers from Ukraine. [...] The compositions were understandable for everyone, they spoke that clear, lively, truthful language that characterizes the arts with national roots. [...] Listening to the performances of Ukrainian opera, everyone was **proud** of a profoundly close native Ukrainian art, as if it was **his art**. [...] Unwillingly, one remembers those mean and despicable beliefs, which were used by all kinds of nationalists. Didn't Ukrainian nationalists cry that national culture would die in the Soviet Union? But Ukrainian culture is rising and flourishing in the Soviet Ukraine and its creators are welcomed in **MOSCOW** as brothers. The leader of the people, Comrade Stalin, and the leaders of the Party and the Government of the USSR speak to Ukrainian artists with extraordinary cordiality and take care of the future growth and prosperity of the arts. The Soviet Government awards prizes to Ukrainian artists for their outstanding achievements. Ukrainian art now belongs to **all** the peoples of our country. [...] Lenin's internationalism, which found its greatest manifestation in the friendship of the peoples of the USSR, created the most favorable conditions for the flourishing of national cultures – national in form, socialist in content. [...] That is why the presence of the Ukrainian guests in the heart of the Union – in beautiful Moscow – turned into a wonderful all-Union festival, the celebration of Ukrainian art [...]”³³

The above article gives a broad overview of the tasks of Stalin's cultural policy. The reference to the "friendship of the peoples of the USSR" is extremely important in the development of ideas about the Soviet state. In the 1920s, the emphasis was on the rights of the Union republics, reversing the Russification policies of the tsarist era and raising these republics to the level of the most advanced. The emphasis on the "friendship of the peoples" in the USSR, asserted that the relationship between the peoples in the USSR was based on friendship – not exploitation or domination – with the Russians as the most developed people who provided aid and assistance to their less developed brothers. The emphasis on this theme points to a real fear of the Soviet leadership: the fear that the country might fragment or be dismembered by foreign powers. This should also be seen against the attack on bourgeois nationalism and the Great Terror of 1937–1938. Central to the Great Terror was the campaign against alleged internal enemies who were working in league with foreign enemies, and this influenced all aspects of politics, including cultural policies.

If we pay attention to the words printed in bold in the above article, we will immediately understand that even on a visual level, the position of "beautiful Moscow" as the artistic capital of the whole country,³⁴ takes on a symbolic, spiritual significance for all the peoples of the Soviet Union. Presenting their art to the Muscovites, and even more importantly, to Comrade Stalin, became an almost sacred experience. It did not mean that the art shown in Moscow was controlled by government officials. On the contrary, touring Moscow was a high privilege reserved for all the provincials who did not want to be submerged in "national backwardness." The Soviet government was a completely hierarchical, almost fabulous structure. There is a "beautiful Moscow", in the heart of which there is the Bolshoi Theater. In the heart of the Bolshoi Theatre there is the government box, where, surrounded by his colleagues, the Leader, Comrade Stalin, sits and praises the art before him, "national in form, socialist in content." More importantly, the article contains the maxims of what contemporary classical opera demanded of composers. It should follow folk examples, be simple, comprehensible, and truthful, because true art with national roots is always like this.

Significantly, Stalin's name never appeared in the newspapers when a production was criticized. But if the discourse was positive, Stalin's name appeared as the main judge and the main rewarder. In this way, Stalin created a very positive image for himself in relation to the arts.

A whole system of awards was created in 1936. By the decree of the *TsIK* of 6 September 1936, a special honorary title "People's Artist of the USSR" was established. Before that there were only People's Artists of the RSFSR, so the system of control and distribution of became more centralized, vast but also more unified. The Decree of the *TsIK* declared:

1) To confer the honorary title of People's Artist of the USSR on the most important Soviet artists who excel in the development of Soviet theater, music and cinema. 2. The title "People's Artist of the USSR" is awarded by decree of the *TsIK* USSR on the recommendation of the CAA *SNK*.³⁵

The first to be named People's Artists of the USSR were Stanislavsky, Nemirovich-Danchenko, and the Ukrainian artists Litvinenko-Volgemut and Saksagansky. From 1936 the system of honorary degrees became more elaborate. Before there was only one honorary degree, now there were four: Meritorious Artist of the Republic, then People's Artist of the Republic, then Meritorious Artist of the USSR, and finally People's Artist of the USSR. The highest degree could be obtained by those who either performed on the tour in Moscow, or whose performance was transferred to one of the Moscow theaters. The system of awards developed in parallel with the system of cultural administration. Through the award system, the Soviet government affirmed the most desirable art forms, artists, and productions.

In addition, a procedure was established to reward the theaters by awarding Orders of Lenin. Subsequently, cash prizes and honorary degrees were awarded to the theater's actors.

The first theater to receive the Order of Lenin was the Kiev Opera. In March 1936, *Izvestia* published an editorial entitled "The Meeting of the Masters of Ukrainian Art with the Moscow Artists", and then, in the subtitle: "At the meeting were present comrades Stalin, Molotov, Voroshilov, Kalinin, and other government members." The press release of this meeting presents an account both of an important event and the typical exclusive concert given for Soviet leaders, so popular during Stalin's time. The following passage shows the typical pompous procedure of the awards ceremony:

On 22 March, in the evening, in the Great Kremlin Palace the meeting of the masters of Ukrainian art, who performed in Moscow, with the Moscow art professionals took place. The meeting was organized by the All-Union CAA. The direction and the soloists of the Kiev opera, the artists of the

chapel *Dumka*, the chapel of the bandores, the ensemble of the Ukrainian folk dances, the female choir, the most outstanding actors of the Moscow theaters, dramatists, composers, professionals of the cinema, artists, and architects took part in this meeting. Comrades **Stalin, Molotov, Voroshilov, Ordzhonikidze, Kaganovich, Kalinin, Mikoian, Chubar, Liubchenko, Khrushchev, Mezhlauk, Antipov, Budenny and Kerzhentsev**, members of the government, party officials and social workers. The atmosphere of the meeting was extremely cordial. The meeting greeted the leaders of the party and the government with ecstatic ovations, shouts of "Hurrah Stalin!", "Hurrah great Stalin!", "Hurrah comrades Molotov and Voroshilov!" The boisterous applause and shouts of greeting rang out for a very long time. The speech of the chairman of the All-Union CAA, comrade Kerzhentsev, opened the meeting. The speeches of the representatives of Ukrainian art – the People's Artist of the Republic M. Litvinenko-Volgemut and the soloist of the Kiev Opera O. Petrusenko expressed joy and deep gratitude for the warm attitude, which the Ukrainian artists found in Moscow. [...] The People's Commissar of Defense, Marshal of the USSR Voroshilov appeared with a closing speech of the *TsIK* Party and Sovnarkom. His speech was greeted with wild and long applause. After the speeches the concert took place: the choir of bandores and *dumka*, the women's choir, the ensemble of Ukrainian folk dances, the soloists of the Kiev Opera: Litvinenko-Volgemut, Patorzhinsky, Petrusenko, Chasty, the Moscow soloists: Barsova, Maksakova, Reizen, Lepeshinskaia and Carman, Vasilieva and Gusev, and the Red Banner Song and Dance Ensemble of the Red Army of the USSR, which performed some Ukrainian songs and dances. The meeting lasted for several hours. Comrade Stalin, the leaders of the party and the government talked with the Ukrainian artists, writers and folk-dancers.³⁶

The result of this meeting was the decision of the *TsIK*, signed by Kalinin and Ushkuf, which stated that for the extraordinary achievements in the field of Ukrainian theatrical culture, folk songs and dances the UKRAINIAN State Kiev Opera House should be honored with the Order of Lenin.³⁷ *TsIK* also published the list of awards to Ukrainian artists. The Order of the Red Banner of Labor was awarded to 1) A. Hvylya – Chief of the Art Administration of the SNK UkrSSR 2) M. Litvinenko-Volgemut – People's Artist of the USSR 3) M. Donec – People's Artist of UkrSSR 4) I. Patorzhinsky – Meritorious Artist of UkrSSR. The Order of Merit (*Znak pocheta*) was awarded to 1) O. Petrusenko – soloist of opera. 2) V. Iorish – merit artist of UkrSSR, opera conductor. 3) N. Gorodovenko – Merit artist UkrSSR, chief of the chapel *Dumka*. 4) V. Verhovnitsa – the head of the

women's choir. 6) V. Manzia – meritorious artist of the USSR, director of the Kiev opera [...].³⁸

The *SNK* also published its decree, signed by Molotov, by which:

“1) A new block of flats is to be built in 1936 for the artists of the Kiev Opera. The cost was 3 million rubles.

2) 700,000 rubles were allocated for the renovation of the building of the Kiev Opera.”³⁹

The artists of the Kiev Opera could not have been dissatisfied at the end of the *Dekada*. But there was another theater that was reminded of its mistake in staging the wrong opera. This theater, of course, was the Bolshoi. It had lost its top position to the Leningrad Opera. Now things became even worse. The Bolshoi Theater was relegated to the third opera theater in the USSR, after Kiev and Leningrad. The Bolshoi would have to take extraordinary steps to regain its reputation.

The Bolshoi tried to repeat the unexpected success of its last contemporary production, *The Quiet Don*. Dzerzhinsky's next opera, *Virgin Soil Upturned*, again based on a Sholokhov novel, was premiered at the Bolshoi under Samosud on 23 October 1937, the 20th anniversary of the October Revolution. The composer's limited technique proved to be an obstacle:⁴⁰ he was unable to write ensembles. Nevertheless, he proclaimed this to be an advantage, saying: “In general, I have a negative attitude toward musical ensembles in opera. When five people start singing at the same time – one smiling, one frowning, each speaking their own words — you cannot make any sense of it.”⁴¹

The main Soviet newspaper *Pravda* reacted in the most positive way to the Bolshoi Theater's enterprise. The review was signed by the critic Georgy Hubov⁴² and stated:

The high task set by Stalin – to create our own **Soviet** opera classics, great musical-dramatic compositions full of the ideological essence of our great epoch – this task found a lively response among Soviet composers. [...] The composer Dzerzhinsky should be congratulated on his new and serious success. Not only the composer, but the whole collective of performers has grown creatively while working on ‘*Virgin Soil*’. The creative victory that the Bolshoi Theater has once again won shows that all our opera theaters should participate in the creation of Soviet opera classics. This particular work proves that future creative successes lie ahead.

Intuitively, Dzerzhinsky had anticipated the official criteria, which were actually rather simplistic. Nevertheless, Dzerzhinsky's statement expresses the drawbacks of the new operatic trend – the deliberate simplification of the musical idiom, the primitive professional approach, and the neglect of established traditions. In discussing this impoverishment of Soviet opera in the late 1930s, Asafiev criticized "primitivism,"⁴³ but this criticism did not share the expectations of the regime for the elaboration of a new Soviet opera, comprehensible to the common people. What interests us most here is the stereotype of Soviet opera that was decided upon by the officials, understood by the musicians, criticized by Asafiev, but never actually achieved.

The best of the Soviet classical opera should have the following features: it should be comprehensive and clear in musical language; it should have a clear conflict, i.e. it should be patriotic and use folk melodies; it should have a heroic theme and an epic character; it should be traditional, i.e. it should incorporate the techniques of the "Mighty Five"; better still it should have a militaristic flavor; it should be based on a historical event or present contemporary reality in a historical perspective (reflecting the new Soviet attitude to the Russian past); and it should have a final apotheosis. In 1937, the classical contemporary Soviet opera was still lacking.

The years 1937–1938 marked the climax of the Stalinist terror. According to official figures, 680,000 people were executed. This had a profound effect on society as a whole.

In 1937, the Bolshoi Theatre was forgiven for its mistake in performing *Lady Macbeth*. It was honored with the Award of the Order of Lenin. At the same time, the Kiev Opera was punished for performing an "anti-people's opera," *Taras Bulba* by Lysenko, which, like *The Virgin Earth*, was dedicated to the 20th anniversary of the October Revolution. The critic G. Hubov published an article in *Pravda* in October 1937, entitled *Anti-People's Performance. Affairs of the Kiev Opera*. The article said:

"The management of the Kiev Opera has promised a lot. If you believe their words, everything 'in general' is satisfactory: the complications are overcome, the achievements in creating a new Ukrainian opera with a Soviet plot are close [...]. But in reality the management of the Kiev Opera did not organize the work of this very season. The preparation of the performance of the heroic opera of the Ukrainian people dedicated to the XX anniversary of the Socialist Revolution failed due to the complete indifference of the management of the Kiev Opera to the most important activity – the development of national opera classics of Soviet Ukraine,

and also due to its inability to complete the united creative work with the composers. They, probably, decided that a Soviet Ukrainian opera would be created by the 'care' of CAA [...] The atmosphere of the Kiev Opera is full of reactionary bourgeois-nationalist tendencies. In this respect, the so-called 'new version' of the opera by Lysenko *Taras Bulba* is very spectacular. [...] In the authentic opera by Lysenko after Andriy's death scene the Cossacks attack the fortress Dubno. This is the finale of the opera. The director Lapitsky has invented a new finale of the opera – as if based on Gogol. But the real meaning of this finale is the single-minded, cynical glorification of the Polish invaders. [...] This is how Lapitsky 'interprets' Gogol's novel, this tremendous poem of the heroic struggle of the Ukrainian peoples against the Polish invaders. **This production contradicts Gogol, Lysenko, historical truth and artistic sense!**"⁴⁴

Of course, the Kiev Opera did not lose the Order of Lenin. But the appearance of this article, published in the same season that the Bolshoi Theatre received the Order of Lenin, clarified the policy of the government, which had the right to punish as well as to praise. Stalin's cultural policy, whose capricious logic was always difficult to comprehend, left no room for opposition, but only a mixture of fear and gratitude. This complicated feeling could be felt while reading the press description of the meeting that took place at the Bolshoi Theater after the awarding of the Order of Lenin:

Yesterday at the Bolshoi Theater there was a meeting devoted to the decree of the Party and the government on the awarding of the theater and its soloists. Comrade Kerzhentsev, the head of the CAA, made the opening speech: These are the greatest awards, which mean that the Bolshoi Theatre remains the leading theatre of opera and ballet in the Soviet Union. The award creates obligations: you need to achieve further creative successes.' [...] The last to speak was the artistic director of the theater, double order holder and People's Artist of the USSR, S. Samosud. Samosud: 'We feel great anxiety and joy. Now we have to work. We must create a Soviet classical production that will be superior to all classical operas of genius.'⁴⁵

The Bolshoi Theater was awarded the order in November 1937. But in April the director of the Bolshoi Theater, V. Mutnyh, was arrested and executed. This action was completely in line with Stalin's "fatal" cultural policy. He praised the theater, but killed its director. The season of the great purges had begun.

But even before 1937, the most talented man in Soviet musicology and the brightest writer tried to solve the great unsolved problem. They almost met on how to create a "Soviet classical opera, which will be superior to all classical operas of genius." These two men were Boris Asafiev and Mikhail Bulgakov. The opera they started to work on in 1936 was called *Minin and Pozharsky*. Its theme was the popular uprising against the Polish invaders led by the citizen Minin and the prince Pozharsky. The events of Bulgakov's libretto were reminiscent of Glinka's opera *A Life for the Tsar*, dedicated to the heroism of the peasant Susanin, who saved the life of Mikhail Romanov by leading a Polish military detachment into the depths of the forest instead of to the place where the first Romanov tsar was hiding. The opera, one of the most faithful in all of operatic literature, once so deeply loved by the ruling dynasty, was not performed in Russia in 1936, one hundred years after its composition and 12 years after its last performance. An attempt to provide Glinka's score with a completely new libretto (under the title *Hammer and Sickle*) in 1924 had been a complete failure. In 1936, it was impossible to even think of reviving an opera with such a pro-monarchist theme. But it was a brilliant idea to create something very similar, but based on a completely new ideology, which would be loyal to the new regime, so instead of Susanin, Stalin found himself with new heroes: Minin and Pozharsky. The planned opera would have exactly the characteristics that the regime demanded from classical Soviet composition. It would be clear in musical language, use folk melodies; it would have direct conflict, i.e. positive heroes – Minin and Pozharsky –, and enemies: the Poles; it would be patriotic and traditional, it would have a militaristic flavor, and the final apotheosis would be in Moscow's Kremlin.

The Manuscripts Department of the Russian State Library (formerly Lenin's) preserves the typewritten copies of the libretto that Bulgakov produced in 1936 and continued to work on in 1937 and 1938. The story of this unfinished opera is told in the correspondence between Bulgakov and Asafiev, and in the *diary* of Elena Bulgakova.

On 17 October 1936, Asafiev sent a telegram to Bulgakov saying that he had finished the opera. On 19 November, Iakov Leontiev told the Bulgakovs about Kerzhentsev's visit to the Bolshoi Theatre and his words of approval about *Minin*. However, the delivery of the promised music was delayed by Asafiev. Bulgakov and Alexander Melik-Pashaev, the proposed conductor of the premiere, received the scores from Leningrad only at the end of 1936. They began to make changes in the text in order

to improve it. Vladimir Dmitriev, the set designer, was already involved in the project and started to make the sketches. The opera was sent to the CAA. On 7 February 1937, E. Bulgakova wrote in her diary: "In accordance with the Committee's request, Bulgakov composed two more scenes for *Minin* and sent them both to Asafiev and to the Bolshoi".⁴⁶

At that time, the Bolshoi was working on the production of *Virgin Soil Upturned* and Glinka's *Ruslan and Liudmila*. Bulgakov's *Minin* was to follow. However, Bulgakov's position in general was very uncertain. On 7 April, E. Bulgakova wrote in her diary:

Call from *TsIK*. Angarov asks Bulgakov to come. [...] Speaking of *Minin*, he asked Bulgakov: 'Why don't you like the Russian peoples?' and added that the Poles in his libretto were too beautiful. The most important thing in this conversation was not mentioned at all. This is the fact that Bulgakov sees his situation as hopeless, that he is crushed, that they want to make him write in a way he doesn't want. About all this, probably, we will have to write to *TsIK*. Something should be done. This is a *cul de sac*.⁴⁷

On 19 April, the director of the Bolshoi Theater, Mutnyh, was arrested. Naturally, this was a turbulent time for the theater and for the Bulgakovs. The newspapers were full of public denunciations of playwrights and men of letters: Kirshon, Afinogenov, Litovsky and Kriuchkov.

It was at this time that the decision was made to mount *A Life for the Tsar* (new title *Ivan Susanin*) with a new text. It is not known who made this decision, but it is clear that it could not have been made without Stalin's personal approval. It is also possible that the decision was actually organized by Stalin himself, as we know that this was one of his favorite operas. Bulgakov was asked to write the new libretto for the opera. "This was after he had composed *Minin*!!!" – E. Bulgakova wrote in her diary.⁴⁸ Having learned that *Ivan Susanin* was to be performed on the Bolshoi stage, that the libretto was to be rewritten by the poet S. Gorodetsky, E. Bulgakova noted on 29 June 1937: "*Minin* is done for. It is obvious."⁴⁹

The opera *Minin* was buried for good. The Bolshoi Theater continued to work on *Ivan Susanin*. Bulgakov continued to write his novel *Master and Margarita*. Asafiev continued to write his brilliant critical articles and his mediocre music.

The revival of Glinka's opera on the Bolshoi stage took the form of a broad public campaign. At first the team of producers consisted of the director L. Baratov, the set designer F. Fedorovsky and the conductor

S. Samosud. In March 1938 F. Fedorovsky gave an interview about his work on the set:

For many months I collected materials belonging to the 17th century. I carefully studied the material culture of that epoch – homespun clothes, shoes, dishes, costumes, and also the way of life of the Russian people at the beginning of the 17th century. I made about 20 sketches of the stage design for *Ivan Susanin*, and also working models of the scenes of the opera. [...] Now the workshops of the Bolshoi Theater are beginning to paint the set designs in life-size. As an artist I am very interested in historical questions, especially now, when the new history of our country is being created. [...] I have been working for the Bolshoi Theatre for about 20 years. I made decorations for all solemn sessions and party meetings which took place in the Bolshoi Theatre and in which Lenin and Stalin participated. [...].⁵⁰

In his interview Fedorovsky mentioned the creation of the “new” Russian history. Of course, he meant the reinterpretation of history. The Russian operas of the 19th century were to play a decisive role in reshaping Russia’s historical past, rehabilitating the tsars and glorifying the Russian people. The stage designers of these operas created a positive image of Russia’s historical past: golden cupolas and rich, bright clothes instead of poor, suffering beggars in the gray landscape so popular in the 1920s (as in the 1927 production of *Boris Godunov*: “coffins, everyone on their knees”, etc.). Fedorovsky was one of the main figures of this imagery. But his time was yet to come. In 1938, the person who decorated the solemn meetings, but spoiled his reputation with the outwardly pompous *Sadko*, was an unreliable candidate. The designer of the great project must combine in his art simplicity and lyricism with veiled grandeur. Thus Fedorovsky⁵¹ was replaced by P. Viliams, who commented on his work:

The set designer of the production had a very complicated task – to create an opera set that would truthfully, realistically depict Russia at the end of the XVI – beginning of the 17th century. In my set I tried to express, without any theatrical exaggeration, all the beauty, lyricism, majesty of Russian nature, and also the architecture of that epoch²⁷

Obviously, Viliams’ reference to theatrical exaggeration was aimed at Fedorovsky, who always preferred amplification to pure lyricism. And, of course, in the case of *Ivan Susanin* he was successful, the set designer of the production would become the chief designer of the Bolshoi Theater.

The chief director of the Bolshoi Theatre, B. Mordvinov, a former student of Nemirovich-Danchenko, also understood the responsibility that was placed upon him. He declared:

The problems we faced while working on *Ivan Susanin* were so complicated and vital that we had to search for new methods of direction. For example, the stage design sketches were checked in advance on a specially built model of the Bolshoi stage. This huge model, about three meters in height, completely reproduces the real stage of the Bolshoi Theater with all its machinery, wings and electrics. This model helped us before the rehearsals to find the exact *mise-en-scene*. Besides, the novelty in the opera theater was the creation of the 'scenic scores', i.e. the exact photo of each *scene*. This allows us to keep the production 'fresh' for years to come, and helps new performers get started.⁵²

The director clearly understood how important the performance of this opera was, and realized that this production would be performed for years, if not forever. The unprecedented creation of "scenic scores" was aimed at preserving and maintaining this production as a pillar of the "classical repertoire" of the Bolshoi Theatre. Classics exist forever, the Soviet classics were created for time without end, the Soviet Union would be endless – this was the message that Stalin's regime sent out and which shone through the opera productions of the Bolshoi Theatre.

However, the main complication was the creation and appropriateness of the new poetic text of the opera in relation to the scenic action. The story of Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* was ambivalent, and Stasov, the main ideologist of the "Mighty Five," had condemned the political conservatism of the opera. The Soviet producers had to do something about it, as Stasov's negative reference was widely known and published in the Soviet Union at the time. Stasov mentioned:

Probably no one disgraced our people more than Glinka. Through his musical genius, he made a hero out of the ignoble serf Ivan Susanin, as devoted as a dog, as narrow-minded as an owl or a wood grouse. Susanin sacrifices himself for the salvation of a boy who has no qualities to love, who should not be saved at all, and whom he has probably never even seen. This is the apotheosis of the Russian beast of the Moscow type and the Moscow epoch.⁵³

The task of making the apotheosis of Soviet art out of the “apotheosis of the Russian beast” was indeed a complicated one.

Moreover, the volume of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* published in 1930 presented Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* as a secondary, outdated opera, much inferior in quality to *Ruslan and Liudmila*, and Glinka himself as a “loyal subject” and opportunist. The article implied that *A Life for the Tsar* was viewed by liberal, democratic and radical opinion as representing the most reactionary, pro-monarchist views of any 19th-century opera. It said:

The music of *A Life for the Tsar* is, of course, of a lower quality than in *Ruslan and Liudmila*. Except for a few dramatic moments, the ‘Polish Act’ and the finale [...] the opera is dated. [...] Glinka's musical-nationalist slogans were converted by the court into provincial patriotism; by his first opera Glinka brought down his reputation forever to St. Petersburg. The musical qualities of this opera responded to the nationalistic moods of the Russian court, and it liked Glinka's patriotism. Thus, Glinka became a ‘loyal subject’ and was praised for this. He got the position of conductor of the court choir.⁵⁴

Now critics had to remind themselves that Glinka's original name for his opera was *Ivan Susanin*; the change to *A Life for the Tsar* was made on the orders of Tsar Nicholas I before the premiere in 1836. In 1937, the libretto was completely revised and reworked to emphasize Susanin's love of his homeland while minimizing his monarchical allegiance. Many articles were published in the newspapers lambasting Baron Rosen, the librettist of *A Life for the Tsar*. One article noted: “Rosen did not know Russian well. Glinka had to struggle with him all the time. [For the composer, Ivan Susanin was not a serf of the Romanovs, but a son of the Russian people. He sacrificed himself not for the tsar, but for the salvation of his Motherland, to free it from invaders”.⁵⁵

The strengths of the opera were made clear to the public. They were patriotism, heroism and nationalism. The newspapers portrayed the whole issue of Glinka's opera as not a distortion of the authentic text, but, on the contrary, as a restoration of the composer's original intentions:

The content of Glinka's opera was the poetry of the people's patriotism. [...] A motif – “I am not afraid of fear” expresses the fearlessness and selfless heroism of Susanin as the embodiment of the whole Russian nation. The second motif – which carries the final idea of the opera – is the glorification of the Motherland and its manly-heroic sons, one of whom is Susanin. [*Ivan*

Susanin is the first Russian folk music drama. With this opera, Russian music was filtered and finally realized the wish of, first expressed by Pushkin, by truly realistic depiction of the people's life and history [...]. In Glinka's *Ivan Susanin*, Russian music for the first time spoke in the language of real people, on a par with Russian literature after Pushkin.⁵⁶

Everything was distorted and ideologized in the article quoted above. First of all Glinka learned his compositional skills in Italy, and *Susanin* recalls the Italian opera of the time with its breathtaking *coloratura* passages, wonderful ensembles, ballet scenes, etc. Second, Glinka was not the creator of Russian opera music, as there were many composers before him. But the "new" history of Russia had to start somewhere, and the mythologizing of Glinka provided a very convenient and even well thought out origin myth, very similar to the myth of Monteverdi in Italy. In fact, the resurrection of *Ivan Susanin* was a "Glinka renaissance," one of the musical "renaissances" that took place in all the authoritarian states of the period.

This opera had another advantage. It emphasized historical continuity while implicitly stating the inevitability of Stalin's rule. In a special issue of *Sovetskaya Muzyka*, director Mordvinov explained how he reimagined the scenes of the opera:

The main theme of the opera of the genius Glinka – is the heroic struggle of the Russian peoples with the Polish invaders. The main feature of Glinka's style is realism. *Ivan Susanin* is a national heroic drama about boundless love for the motherland. [...] *Susanin* in our interpretation is the collective image of the Russian patriot, modest, masculine, truthful, a hero of the people. The prologue of the opera [...] is performed against a symbolic background – the Kremlin walls. Hidden from the spectator the choir sings about the Russian land, about the heroic struggle of the Russian nation with its enemies: [...] Death awaits every unworthy enemy. This solemn chorus glorifies the invincible strength of the Russian people. [The epilogue of the opera becomes a heroic requiem. Together with the prologue, the epilogue frames the entire opera, showing in the scope of a vast symphonic illustration the strength of the united country and saved by the power of the people's land, the triumph of its liberation, its hopes and its faith in the bright future.]⁵⁷

In 1939, the USSR faced the prospect of war. The threat of war had been very real since 1936; the Spanish Civil War and the major battles with the

Japanese in the Far East – Khalkin Gol’ and Lake Khasan – influenced the thinking of Soviet leaders. In this situation, the militarization of society was inevitable. Even the newspaper of the Bolshoi Theater in those pre-war years was full of announcements about how the ballerinas and opera soloists were being trained in rifle shooting, becoming honorable “Voroshilov’s riflemen.” *Ivan Susanin*, with his patriotic accent, appeared just in time:

In our days, when the theme of patriotism and love of the Motherland assumes a very special importance, greater than in the past, the collective of the Bolshoi Theater decided to stage *Ivan Susanin* again, to revive this opera in all the grandeur of the authentic plan of its genius composer.⁵⁸

The paragraph quoted above was written by the soloist M. Reizen, the performer of the title role, and was published in the Kharkov newspaper, for which he was interviewed. This shows that *Susanin*’s campaign had an all-Union character, and the reviews and interviews appeared in all central Soviet newspapers.

Mordvinov created the typical spectacle of the time: the frontal masses of the choir, standing in front of the orchestra pit, glorifying the power of the country. The same apotheosis, but with humorous accents, concludes Alexandrov’s famous movie musical “Volga-Volga”, shown in 1938. But on the opera stage, such a pathetic monumental force, enriched with orchestral accompaniment, could serve as a clear manifestation of power. From a professional point of view, the frontal disposition of the chorus looks lifeless and banal. The metaphor seemed flat even to the officials, who on the whole praised Mordvinov’s production. Only the epilogue was changed in 1940. It was transformed into a more realistic apotheosis of patriotism, cutting the music to fit the new concept: Masses of people, horses on the stage, warriors and priests in splendid armor and robes, the gleaming white walls of the Kremlin surmounted by the golden domes of the churches, not just the dark Kremlin walls and the frontal chorus.

With *Ivan Susanin*’s production, the Bolshoi Theater acquired a positive hero, a heroic subject, revised Russian history, and established the model of what Soviet opera should look like. *Susanin*, with its final apotheosis, became a clear example of the authoritarian operatic style. Probably no other production could achieve the same stylistic purity, clarity and unity of ideological tasks and achievements.

Endnotes

- ¹ On the problems of the institutional history of Stalin's USSR see: Geoffrey A. Hosking, *The First Socialist Society: a History of the Soviet Union from within*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1985; Robert C. Tucker, *Political Culture and Leadership in Soviet Russia: From Lenin to Gorbachev*, Norton, New York, 1987; Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from above, 1928–1941*, Norton, New York, 1990; Alexander Dallin; G. M. Hamburg, *Articles on Russian and Soviet history 1500–1991*, Garland, New York, London, 1992.
- ² On the bureaucratic-command method of Soviet management, see Alexander J. Groth, Stuart Britton, "Gorbachev and Lenin: Psychological Walls of the Soviet 'Garrison State'," *Political Psychology* 14.4 (1993): pp. 627–650. Although it is rather dated, this article still gives some useful particularities of how the Soviet political system functioned.
- ³ See Boris Yanislav Wolfson, *Staging the Soviet Self: Literature, Theater, and Stalinist Culture, 1929–1939*. PhD Thesis in Slavic Languages and Literatures. University of California, Berkeley, Fall 2004; E. A. Dobrenko, Eric Naiman, *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2003; Hans Günther, *The Culture of the Stalin Period*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1990.
- ⁴ See Lubov Keefer, "Opera in the Soviet," *Notes* 2nd Ser. 2.2 (1945): pp. 110–118; Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Culture and Politics under Stalin: A Reappraisal," *Slavic Review* 35.2 (1976): pp. 211–231; Joseph A. Borome, "The Bolshoi Theater and Opera," *Russian Review* 24.1 (1965): pp. 52–64; Kevin V. Mulcahy, "Official Culture and Cultural Repression: The Case of Dmitri Shostakovich," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 18.3 (1984): pp. 69–83.
- ⁵ From the "Statutes of the Composers' Union", quoted in *Entsiklopedicheskii Muzykalnyi Slovar*, M., 1966, article "Sotsialisticheskii Realism," translation from Boris Schwartz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia 1917–1970*, Barrie & Jenkins, London, 1972, p. 223.
- ⁶ See Gary Saul Morson, "Socialist Realism and Literary Theory," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 38.2 (1979): 121–133; Victor Terras, "Phenomenological Observations on the Aesthetics of Socialist Realism," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 23.4 (1979): pp. 445–457; Barbara Makanowitzky, "Music to Serve the State," *Russian Review* 24.3 (1965): pp. 266–277.
- ⁷ See Robert Conquest, *Stalin and the Kirov Murder*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1989; Amy W. Knight, *Who killed Kirov?: The Kremlin's Greatest Mystery*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1999; Adam Bruno Ulam, *The Kirov Affair*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, San Diego, 1988.
- ⁸ See Kees Boterbloem, *The Life and Times of Andrei Zhdanov, 1896–1948*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montréal, Ithaca, 2004. Boris Schwarz also

- finds those events the most significant for the development of the music in the following decades in the USSR: *Music and Musical Life*, p. 119.
- ⁹ See Nikolai S. Timasheff, *The Great Retreat; The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia*, E.P. Dutton & Co., New York, 1946.
- ¹⁰ See Harvey Asher, "The Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of M. N. Pokrovsky," *Russian Review* 31.1 (1972): pp. 49–63; Anatole G. Mazour, "Modern Russian Historiography," *The Journal of Modern History* 9.2 (1937): pp. 169–202; D. L. Brandenberger, A. M. Dubrovsky, "'The People Need a Tsar': The Emergence of National Bolshevism as Stalinist Ideology, 1931–1941," *Europe-Asia Studies* 50.5 (1998): pp. 873–892; Robert F. Byrnes, "Creating the Soviet Historical Profession, 1917–1934," *Slavic Review* 50.2 (1991): pp. 297–308.
- ¹¹ V. Nardov, "K vozobnovleniu Kitezha," *Sovetskii Artist* 1 (20) (6 January 1935): p. 2.
- ¹² Vladimir Lossky (1874–1946) was a soloist of the Bolshoi Theater in 1906–1918, 1920–1928; the manager of the opera troupe (1917–1918, 1920–1928), and the chief director (1920–1928). He was kicked out of the theater in 1928 as the routine, traditional, grandeur director sympathetic with the "old golovanovshina group", but called back in 1934, when the grandeur style was again in demand.
- ¹³ Fedor Fedorovsky (1883–1955) stage designer, started at Zimin private opera and also worked for Dyaghilev. His career at the Bolshoi Theater was full of sackings, transfers to Leningrad Opera House and returns. He was the stage designer at Bolshoi in 1907–1917, 1921–1925, 1926–1929, 1930–1936, and 1944–1953. He was the chief designer of Bolshoi in 1927–1929, and 1947–1953.
- ¹⁴ *Sovetskii Artist* 8 (27) (5 March 1935): p. 2.
- ¹⁵ Kmoev, "Send Us the Fishes, Comrade Fedorovsky!" *Sovetskii Artist* 10 (29) (23 March 1935): p. 4.
- ¹⁶ *Sovetskii Artist* 14 (33) (15 May 1935): p. 3.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ *Sovetskii Artist* 15 (34) (21 May 1935), p. 1.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ *Sovetskii Artist* 26 (45) (30 September 1935), p. 1.
- ²¹ RGASPI, f. 74, op.1, delo 967, Politburo meeting, 2 July 1935.
- ²² Governmental file from the Museum Archive of the Bolshoi Theater, p. 4.
- ²³ *Pravda*, 21 January 1936, cited in Shwarz, *Music and Musical Life*, pp 142–143.
- ²⁴ *Leningradskaya Pravda*, 24 January 1936.
- ²⁵ "Opera Shostakovicha," *Sovetskaya Muzyka* 6 (1933): p. 104.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Interview by Nikolai Slonimsky in *Musical Quarterly* 28 (1935): p. 4.

- 28 The plan was dropped after the failure of *Lady Macbeth*.
 29 *Pravda*, 29 January 1936.
 30 *Sovetskaya Muzyka*, 1936. The Moscow discussion is published in the March
 issue, the Leningrad one in the May issue.
 31 March 1936 – Ukraine, May 1936 – Kazakhstan, January 1937 – Georgia,
 May 1937 – Uzbekistan, April 1938 – Azerbaijan, May-June 1939 –
 Kyrgyzstan, October 1939 – Armenia, May 1940 – Leningrad, June 1940
 – Belarus, October 1940 – Buryat-Mongolia, April 1941 – Tajikistan. After a
 ten-year interruption owing to war and postwar conditions, the *Dekadas* were
 resumed in 1951, June 1951 – Ukraine, and November 1951 – Uzbekistan.
 32 E.S. Bulgakova, *Dnevnik*, Moscow, 1988, p. 141.
 33 “Torzhestvo sovetskoi kultury”, *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, 24 March 1936:
 p. 1.
 34 In the text Moscow is called “red”, which in old Russian meant “beautiful”,
 but in this text could have the double meaning – beautiful and Communist.
 35 RGASPI, f. 74, op. 1, d. 406, 6 September 1936.
 36 *Izvestia*, 23 March 1936, p. 1.
 37 Published in the *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, 24 March 1936.
 38 Ibid.
 39 Ibid.
 40 Dzerzhinsky composed ten operas overall and lived until 1978, but in the
 1960s his jealous colleagues, who could not forgive him his success under
 Stalin, criticized him for lack of professionalism, willful simplification and
 carelessness.
 41 *History of Russian Soviet Music*, 5 vols., Moscow, 1956–1963, vol. 2, p. 226.
 42 Georgy Hubov (1902–1981) was a Soviet functionary and musical critic from
 1930. In 1932–1939 he was deputy chief editor of *Sovetskaia Muzyka*, and
 in 1952–1957 its chief editor. In 1941–1945 he was the chief editor of the
 musical All-Union radio broadcasting. In 1946–1952 he was the consultant
 on the problems of artistic broadcasting in the Central Committee of the
 Party. In his views Hubov was much more orthodox than Asafiev and always
 expressed the official point of view.
 43 B. Asafiev, *Complete Set of Works*, vol. 5, *Musyka*, Moscow, 1951, p. 71.
 44 G. Hubov, “Antinarodnyi spektakl’. Dela Kievskoi opery,” *Pravda*, 28
 October 1937.
 45 “Opravdaem doverie partii i pravitelstva,” *Izvestia*, 7 November 1937.
 46 Elena Bulgakova, *Dnevnik Eleny Bulgakovoi*, Izdatelstvo Knizhnaia Palata,
 Moscow, 1990, p. 136.
 47 Ibid., p.138.
 48 Ibid., p. 144.
 49 Ibid., p. 157.

- 50 F. Fedorovsky, "Nad chem rabotaiut hudozhniki," *Dekada moskovskih zrelish*, 3 March 1938.
- 51 Fedorovsky did not waste his time. He and the director Baratov were moved to Leningrad to stage *Ivan Susanin* there. They accomplished their task while another team was appointed in Moscow.
- 52 B. Mordvinov, "Ivan Susanin na scene Bolshogo Teatra," *Pravda*, Moscow, 7 February 1939.
- 53 Published in the article G. Polianovskiy, "M. Glinka i ego opera *Ivan Susanin*," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 10 February 1938.
- 54 Article on Glinka in the *Big Soviet Encyclopedia*, vol. 17, Akcionernoe obshchestvo "Sovetskaia enciklopedia", Moscow, 1930, pp. 224–225.
- 55 N. Davydov, "Ivan Susanin," *Izvestia*, 22 September 1937.
- 56 S. Shlifshtein, "Narodnaia geroicheskaia opera," *Trud*, 27 November 1939.
- 57 B. Mordvinov, "Kak sozdavalsia spektakl *Ivan Susanin*," *Sovetskaya Muszyka* 2 (1939): pp. 37–42.
- 58 M. Reisen, "Ivan Susanin v Bolshom Teatre," *Krasnoie znamia*, Kharkov, 24 February 1939.

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