



20 NOVEMBER 2018

GLINKA'S *A LIFE FOR THE TSAR*

PROFESSOR MARINA FROLOVA-WALKER

In most accounts, Russian music begins in 1836, when Mikhail Glinka's first opera was premiered in St Petersburg. Perhaps you have never heard of it, since it only makes occasional appearances in the West, but Russians know it as a standard season-opener, and it remains one of the cornerstones of their national culture. Glinka's score is undoubtedly a large part of the attraction, but the plot also contributed to the opera's fame in Russia. It is a semi-fictionalised presentation of the events that formed the foundation myth of the Romanov dynasty, the last of the Russian royal dynasties, which lasted from 1613, when the action takes place, until the February Revolution of 1917. So, if we had to pick just one opera to represent the ethos of Imperial Russia, it would have to be *A Life for the Tsar*. Western opera-goers might be astonished to hear that such an opera was also stood as a pillar of Soviet culture, and its prestige remains undiminished today. I hope to show that this opera was not set in stone two centuries ago but has kept adapting to the times. It was a political work from the start, and each time Russia underwent political change, the opera changed too. Perhaps opera houses could not bear to part with Glinka's compelling music, perhaps it was the weight of tradition, or perhaps it was the political success of each new incarnation.

Glinka (1804-1857) was a Russian nobleman, a landowner, and so he had no need to earn a living from his music. If he was an amateur in the narrowest sense, he was the match of any professional in polish, ambitions and talent. He was paid no fee when *A Life* went into production this opera, but he *did* receive a very costly ring from Tsar Nicholas I, as well as a position at the Imperial Capella (the latter was an honour, but not especially to his liking).

Why did this young composer choose this episode of Russian history for his first opera instead of using some time-honoured libretto? The suggestion actually came from Vasily Zhukovsky, who was not only a major poet and dramatist of this period, but also a prominent courtier, who served as tutor to the heir to the throne, Tsesarevich Alexander. Zhukovsky even provided a small portion of the verse libretto himself, but there were other more pressing tasks at hand, and he enlisted the poet Yegor Fyodorovich Rosen to replace him. Since he was born Baron Karl Georg Wilhelm Rosen, German was his mother tongue, and this prompted critics to mock his libretto; in Soviet times, this became a pretext for the wholesale rewriting of the libretto (the motivation was political). But the criticism was undeserved, and outside the world of opera, Rosen was not only a significant poet, but also an important theorist of poetry, a publisher, and the author of several dramas on historical subjects. Nicholas I, for one, was an admirer of these dramas, and he appointed Rosen as Secretary to Tsesarevich Alexander.

To understand the development of *A Life for the Tsar*, I must introduce a third figure at the Imperial Court, Count Sergei Uvarov. This scholar of Classical Antiquity was also a statesman, and during the period when the opera was being written, he served as the Minister of Education ("Minister of Enlightenment" is the more literal translation sometimes used). Although he was not directly involved in the opera, he did much to create the necessary cultural context. His lasting claim to fame was his coinage of a political slogan in 1833, which was used until Nicolas II was deposed. The slogan is "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nation", clearly designed as a conservative counterpart to "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité". Uvarov said that these three concepts served as the foundation of the Russian state, jointly essential for its "prosperity, vigour and continued existence". Only eight years earlier, there had been an attempted liberal coup, the "Decembrist" uprising. In reaction, the Court realised that positive efforts were needed to forestall the revolutionary ferment that had affected most of Europe (and would continue to do so for another



century). Although Nicholas I decided that some liberal reforms should indeed be made, he saw that they had to be placed in the context of a counter-revolutionary culture that could attract widespread support.

While the Decembrist uprising of 1825 collapsed almost as soon as it began, there was a larger revolt that came much closer to success, even though it only threatened the Western fringe of the Russian Empire. This was the Polish uprising of 1830-31, which created a wave of Polish refugees that included the young Chopin. The particular historical episode chosen for Glinka's opera had suddenly become topical, since the Poles had also been a hostile force in 1613, in the chaotic interregnum prior to the establishment of the Romanov dynasty.

With this scene-setting in mind, we can now move on to a synopsis of the opera. The time is the spring of 1613, and the location is the village of Domnino, about 250 miles to the north-east of Moscow.

SPRING 1613

Act I

Soldiers returning from battle report that Moscow has been saved from the Poles. Among them is Bogdan Sobinin, who wants to marry Antonida.

Antonida's father, the village elder Ivan Susanin, says that the wedding must wait until Russia has a legitimate Tsar. Sobinin says he has heard that a new Tsar will soon be elected, and that their local boyar, Mikhail Romanov, is a likely choice. Rejoicing in the village.

Act II (MOSTLY BALLET)

At a ball given by the of a Polish detachment's commander, a messenger reports that Mikhail Romanov has been elected. The Poles decide that they must capture him at his Domnino estate before the news reaches him.

Act III

Preparations for the wedding at Susanin's house are interrupted by the arrival of the Poles, who require a villager to lead them through the forest to Romanov's residence. Susanin volunteers, but his intention is to lead the Poles in the wrong direction, even though he knows that he will pay with his life.

Act IV

Susanin's adopted son reaches Romanov and his retinue, and warns them of the danger. In the forest, the Poles eventually realise what Susanin has done, and they kill him, but they are now hopelessly lost and face death by exposure.

Epilogue

The scene switches to Moscow, where there is a mass celebration in Red Square to mark Romanov's ascent to the throne. Susanin's family witnesses to the act of heroism that made the coronation possible. The celebrations continue.

To what extent is the opera based on real events? There is one contemporary document, issued by the Tsar's court, which declares that Susanin's family and descendent exempt from the payment of taxes in perpetuity. Later accounts fill in more details, but these vary. One Ivan Susanin did indeed sacrifice his life for the first of the Romanov tsars. Some accounts tell us that he was a simple peasant, others that he was a member of the Romanov household; some tell us that he led the Poles to their deaths in the forest, others that he took them into a bog. Glinka does therefore relate a true story of heroism, even if some of the non-essentials differed in reality.

The story was already very well-known and had already been used in 1815 as the plot for an opera, namely *Ivan Susanin*, by Catterino Cavos, a Venetian who worked Russia. This earlier opera was still popular when Glinka set pen to paper in 1834. Why, then, did he and his Court librettists think that there was any need for another opera about Susanin's sacrifice?

There were two substantial points in favour of the project. Firstly, the opera by Cavos was beginning to show its age: it was only a Singspiel, that is, a series of songs with spoken dialogue in between, like Broadway musicals of



the following century. Instead, Glinka wanted to write an opera in the full sense, a drama that was sung throughout. This was a project of much greater ambition and required Glinka to acquaint himself with the latest European approaches to large-scale historical opera. The second reason was that in October 1834, Nicholas I visited Kostroma, the town closest to the village of Domnino, and met with Susanin's descendants. The latest Romanov was therefore still eager to reinforce memories of the events surrounding the origins of his dynasty: the lives of the people belonged to the Tsar and any blood that had to be spilt for his sake would not be spilt in vain.

Glinka had reasons of his own for choosing to write a national opera. He could have settled for the national subject matter of the opera and supplied music in the Italian style that delighted Russian operagoers. The courtiers who took an interest in the project could hardly have expected anything else, since there was no such thing as a "Russian style" at the time. Glinka had, in fact, spent four years in Italy as a student of Italian opera, so he was well equipped for the task. While still abroad, he had also undertaken study of a more rigorous and systematic type under the distinguished music theorist, Siegfried Dehn, in Berlin. If the Italian operatic style was in various ways a reflection of Italian national traits, it should be possible to create a Russian counterpart. Italian opera, for example, had a characteristic vivacity that was present even in tragic situations. The Russians, on the other hand, were more contemplative and even melancholy, and so Russian opera should display the same character, rather than force Russian language and subject matter into the Procrustean bed of the Italian style (such, at any rate, was Glinka's thought process). These ideas had been promoted by the German philosophers Herder and Fichte, and spread throughout Europe, especially in reaction to Napoleon's attempts to universalise the French Revolution (or at least his more moderate version of it). Each nation had its own spirit, they argued, and should have its own corresponding culture, and if the culture of the national elites had lost contact with that spirit, then those elites had to turn to the lower strata of society, especially the peasantry, in order to renovate high culture. To be fair to Glinka's immediate predecessors, there were already pieces that exhibited Russian "local colour" through the use of devices drawn from folk music. But this was very piecemeal, and very modest in scope compared to Glinka's plan to write an entire opera that would sound Russian. Glinka had also inherited Dehn's systematic mentality, and he planned out a style that would be consistent, rather than just a patchwork quilt of folksy fabrics.

He devised a three-pronged attack on the problem. The first way was a *via negativa*, an austere avoidance of all the stylistic clichés that would immediately remind the listener of the Italian style. I will give two examples here. First, Italian operatic numbers often luxuriate in indulgent endings, with much repetition and a heightening of excitement, all inviting the audience to burst into applause. While Glinka enjoyed hearing the audience's appreciation as much as most musicians, he was quite prepared to reduce the occasions for applause rather than sound Italian, and so he cultivated abrupt endings. The next number would have begun before the audience could muster any applause. Another example lies in the various standard formulas of Italian recitative, which reflect the rhythms and intonational patterns of Italian speech. Composers working in languages other than Italian had not created new kinds of recitative, but merely sidestepped the problem by using spoken dialogue between numbers. Glinka was too ambitious to accept this solution, but he gave his singers melodious arioso material rather than rethinking recitative in entirely Russian terms (this task was left to the following generation). We might add that Glinka's own expertise in the Italian style was a great help in allowing him to see exactly how he could sound *un-Italian*.

Even so, it would be an exaggeration to say that there was nothing left at all of the Italian style in *A Life for the Tsar*. While Glinka wanted to rid himself of concrete Italianisms, he was prepared to keep elements of the Italian style at a more abstract level. Accordingly, some numbers display an Italian approach in the form and general temperament, progress through the stages of a normal operatic form through to a vivacious closing cabaletta. This is particularly noticeable in the more virtuosic numbers.

The second prong of Glinka's attack was bold innovation. In his second opera, *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, he even went so far as to invent a new scale for the uncanny elements of his drama: although he called it his "chemical scale", it became known simply as the "whole-tone scale", which many a Western listener would attribute to Debussy seventy years later. In *A Life for the Tsar*, the most striking innovation is the vigorous five-beat metre of the Wedding Chorus. Glinka is, in fact, setting five-syllable words in this chorus; although this in no way forces a composer to resort to a five-beat metre, it was able to inspire a composer who was already on the lookout for new



musical ideas. Glinka was also interested in musical complexity for its own sake, again drawing from his rigorous studies with Dehn in Berlin. These are not innovations in an intrinsic sense, but they sound startling when imported into an opera, and he coyly referred to them as his “wicked tricks”. He could cast a peasant chorus in a fully-fledged sonata form, or even as a fugue.

I have deliberately kept Glinka’s other approach to the end, because it might otherwise have drawn all the attention away from the other two. Instead of abstractly negating the Italian style, or proving his own inventiveness as an individual, this approach takes materials and devices that had already accrued an association with Russianness through their collective use by Glinka’s recent predecessors, and their familiarity for his audience. Although the obvious step, from our vantage point, would be to make direct use of folk music, this was actually marginal to Glinka’s strategy in *A Life*. He needed more time to ruminate over this possibility before it bore fruit in his next opera, and in a couple of orchestral pieces, creating the form known “Glinka variations”, which we will explore next time, in connection with Musorgsky. Although Glinka tells us that he had transcribed a melody sung by a coachman, and worked this into Susanin’s part, it would be rather difficult to guess that it is a folk song, a claim to authenticity that remains beneath the surface, known to biographers and musicologists rather than normal opera-goers.

The “Russianness” that Glinka’s audiences perceived in *A Life* came not from folk music, but from urban song genres, both lowbrow and middlebrow. He did not quote any particular song but distilled various characteristic melodic elements into a style that sounded familiar and distinctly Russian to his audience. This, unfortunately, is too subtle for Western audiences to detect, since the song repertoires in question would not have sounded at all alien in Paris or Berlin (assuming the Russian lyric had been translated). But as a native Russian, I can guarantee that Glinka succeeded, not for any mysterious reason, but because the same repertoires were still current earlier in my life, and they still emerge from time to time at parties in Russia. Sobinin’s interjections in Act I are one prominent example, from the more popular end of the spectrum. There are also examples of the more artistically self-conscious Russian parlour song, known as “romances”. When Antonida sings a mournful song to her friends about Susanin’s departure with the Poles, and his certain doom, she remains within the limits of the romance genre. This was a matter of characterisation, rather than any limitation in Glinka’s imagination or technique, as we see soon afterwards when Susanin is also given romance-like material in the grand aria where he prepares himself for death. Here, Glinka expertly stretches the material to an intensity beyond the limits of this domestic genre, even though the listener will be too engrossed to notice what has been done. This was perhaps the one place in the opera where Glinka could have indulged himself in the elevated tragic manner that Italian opera could rise to. Instead, he made the scene more difficult for himself by using material that was simpler and less virtuosic, but for all that, it was more touching and, of course, it was Russian – this was strikingly new, and the first audiences appreciated the achievement, among them the critic, novelist and scholar Odoyevsky, who famously stated that Glinka (as we have just seen) succeeded in elevating Russian song to the level of tragedy.

This brings us to the core of Glinka’s ambitions in constructing a Russian style, and not only for him, but also for his successors in the next generation. Glinka could have satisfied himself with a few song and dance numbers that would add a dash of local colour to an essentially Italian operatic structure. Instead, he sought to expand the resources of the style until it was a suitable vehicle for all kinds of expression, and Susanin’s final aria in particular demonstrated that this goal was within Glinka’s reach. Glinka’s powers of abstraction enabled him to find a path to a generalised Russian style. Instead of taking the surface features of Russian folk music, he analysed it for structural principles that could be transferred to Russian art music. For example, Glinka noticed that the phrases of Russian folk melodies could come to rest on various notes of the scale, instead of focusing on one pole of attraction. In *A Life*, some scenes are based on an extrapolation from this principle: the various resting points were not mere notes in a melody, but different keys. He had to use the logic of Western harmony to effect these changes of key, but as a structuring principle, it still produces results that sound novel and rather strange.

But although this emerging Russian style was flexible, it could not be universal. His chosen story required him to portray the Polish enemy, after all, and he could hardly give them Russian music. How does Glinka represent the Poles, then? He took dance genres of Polish provenance, the polonaise and mazurka, and projected them over all the Polish scenes. In effect, Glinka’s Poland is a dancing nation, while his Russians are a singing nation. The



Polish dances are largely in triple metre, while the Russian use duple metres. Glinka even expanded the scope of the mazurka; not only do the Poles dance it at the grand ball, but they also trudge through the deep snows of the forest to the strains of a faltering and enfeebled version.

Finally, I would like to present the two significant numbers that advertise their Russianness most openly. One is at the beginning (if we leave aside the overture), while the other is at the very end. The Introduction begins with a tenor solo followed by a choral response, a pattern that itself can be found in Russian folk songs (although the music here is Glinka's own). The chorus is laid out in the standard soprano-alto-tenor-bass format, but the textures are remote from Western choral writing of the period, which used the four sections, obviously enough, to create four-part chord progressions. Glinka's voices keep converging and diverging, coalescing sometimes into two parts, expanding into three or four parts, and often ending on a unison or octave. The harmony, itself has nothing to do with Russian folk song, and is completely Western. But the oddity of voice-leading suggests that Glinka was to some extent aware of Russian folk heterophony, the characteristic texture in which the voices diverge and converge freely.

Turning now to the closing scene, on Red Square, we have the final chorus, *Slavsya* (Glory). Glinka described this number as a "hymn-march". We hear a combination of military orchestration with the sound of Orthodox bells – a perfect representation of Autocracy and Orthodoxy. Is "Nation" absent? No, for beyond the Russianness of the bell-ringing (which differs unmistakably from Western bell-ringing) there are further "Russian" traits. Again, the voice-leading is non-Western, but this time, it is not folk heterophony but the parallel movement of the voices in Russian liturgical singing. In his notebooks, Glinka once notated a Russian Resurrection hymn, remarking that this was the harmony sung by the deacons and the people. By the standards of his sophisticated Western training, the liturgical harmony was full of "solecisms", and he wrote in a "corrected" version. However, he decided that these "solecisms" were exactly what the Glory chorus needed, to underline the "Nation" component of the slogan.

In short, the first chorus represents the people, with their unruly voice-leading, while the last represents the autocratic state, with its systematic but non-Western voice-leading. There is a musically pivotal moment at the dramatic heart of the opera, when Susanin meets the Poles and gives them two important replies. The first of these replies foreshadows the music of the Glory chorus, and Susanin speaks of the greatness and holiness of the Tsar's dynasty. The second reply, by contrast, harks back to the first, folk-like chorus, and before singing it Susanin rips his shirt to bare his chest. This is symbolic of the heroic sacrifice, a sacrifice on the part of a man who represents the ordinary people. Glinka clearly planned out his musical symbolism with great care.

And so, Glinka created the perfect nationalist opera for the Romanov House. Which means that by the 1860s, when the cultural elite shifted to the left, some the opera unpalatable. Vladimir Stasov, a famous art- and music-critic, was among the most vociferous:

Perhaps no one dishonoured our people so much as Glinka, who, through his music of genius, put forward the base serf Susanin as a Russian hero; that Susanin, who is loyal as a dog, as narrow-minded as an owl or a deaf grouse, a man who sacrifices his life in order to save a youngster who ought not to be saved at all, and whom he, it seems, had never even met.¹

Still, even Stasov had to recognize that Glinka had supplied "music of genius". While the opera seemed ideologically backward, it remained musically progressive and an inspiration for the "Mighty Handful", the new generation of composers that came to maturity in the 1860s. They were able to separate cultural nationalism as a progressive force from monarchist nationalist ideology.

The liberal views of Stasov and his like were contested by the Slavophiles, who saw Russia as a leading nation, not through imitation of the West, but through its faithfulness to a separate path of development. Glinka's opera also caught their attention; here is Alexei Khomyakov, a founder of the Slavophile movement, writing in 1844, just after seeing the opera:

¹ Stasov's letter to Balakirev of 21 March 1861, transl. in Marina Frolova-Walker, *Russian music and Nationalism from Glinka to Stalin* (Yale University Press, 2007), 60.



It was a time of troubles for Russia. There was no state, for there was no sovereign to be the expression of the state. There was no state, but family and community remained – they saved Russia. [. . .] The vote of the people elected the tsar by the Zemsky sobor; the great community closed its ranks and became a state again. [. . .] Centuries have passed. The Russian state has become stronger, but the new invasion from the West requires new resistance. This invasion is not of the sword and of power, but of learning and thought [. . .] Now the danger is not to the state, but to the community and the family. Family and community once saved Russia: shall we be able to save family and community now?²

You can see how Khomyakov shifts the accent from the state, which at that point seems secure, to the family and community, which are now endangered by the influence of Western ideas. And this quote gives us also a new perspective on the opera itself which is, after all, about a family, and around them a community that represents the Russian people in general. The ensembles and the choruses at the beginning and at the end are representations of these collective entities. The Tsar himself is not only silent but invisible; this was not an artistic decision, but simply obedience to the official prohibition against stage representations of any Romanov Tsar. But Rosen's text ties the fortunes of the family to the Tsar: the wedding cannot take place until the state enjoys security under a new ruler.

Now let us fast forward to 1917. All monarchist literature, imagery and symbolism is banned by the Bolsheviks. Glinka's opera can no longer be performed. But since the score itself is not a problem, it is revived in a new guise under the title *Hammer and Sickle* in 1926, in Odessa. The story is drawn from the recent Civil War. This was not an isolated aberration, since political opera (particularly in mid-19th century Italy) often had to be rewritten with a change of plot and characters but without any demand for changes in the music. In the Soviet Union, Meyerbeer's *Huguenots*, for example, appeared as *The Guelfs and the Ghibbelines* – a different time, different nations, and the removal of religious strife, which was not an acceptable topic.

There were other, less radical adaptations, but Glinka's opera had to wait until the era of Stalin's new nationalism before it could make a proper comeback. For almost twenty years, public discourse had been dominated by revolutionary rhetoric, but in the mid-30s, this vanished. Stalin's Constitution of 1936 told citizens that the need for class struggle was now past. Communist internationalism also faded as revolutions around the world failed, one after another culminating in Spain. The outbreak of international war across Europe was beginning to look ever more likely by the end of the 30s. In these very changed circumstances, nationalism made much better sense than revolution as a Soviet ideology, and suddenly the great sweep of Russian history prior to 1917 re-entered public discourse, and many heroic figures were rediscovered and officially promoted. Glinka was acknowledged as one of the great figures of Russian culture, and it was time that his first opera was restored to its full grandeur on the Soviet stage. A prestigious team was gathered together to recreate the opera under the new, more demotic title of *Ivan Susanin*. The poet Sergei Gorodetsky was commissioned to write a new text that would be neither monarchist nor communist. Still, the sacrifice for the new Tsar was central to the plot of the original, so was it really possible to redesign *A life for the Tsar* without so much as a passing reference to the Tsar?

As it turned out, it *was* possible, and the resulting Soviet classic survived from High Stalinism through to the Perestroika period. I can witness to this, since I grew up with this production in the late Soviet period. At the planning stage, the simplest alternative was to replace the Tsar with some other important figure present in the Kostroma region: Susanin might save commander Minin, for example. But it was decided that this was too weak compared to the symbolic weight of the Tsar for the original audience. In the end, nothing was grand enough for Susanin's sacrifice except the entire city of Moscow (and as the capital, this stood for the whole of Russia). In itself, this was fine, but it had implications that threatened to unravel other parts of the plot. The geographical location had to change, since it was hardly credible that the Poles were searching for Moscow in the vicinity of a village 250 miles beyond. As a solution, the village of Domnino was transferred to the Moscow region. The time period was also changed, from the spring of 1613 (the text contains some spring symbolism) to a less defined period of time that combined events originally spread out over 1611 and 1612. This loose approach to history was

² A. S. Khomyakov, "Opera Glinki 'Zhizn' za tsarya'", *Moskvityanin*, no. 5, part 3 (1844), transl. in Frolova-Walker, 60-61.



hardly unique in the operatic world, and at least it ensured that the central actions of the Poles and Susanin retained some degree of plausibility.

Unfortunately, this solution came at the cost of substantial damage to the opera's dramatic integrity. The simple and elegant intrigue of the original libretto was based on the connection between the two kinds of *venchaniya* (a word that covers both coronations and weddings): until the lawful tsar was wedded to his country, the two young lovers, Sobinin and Antonida, could not marry. This neat device simply disappeared in the new version, since no counterpart could be found within the new plot. The tension of the original Act I is dissipated in the new version, where Susanin relents and allows the young couple to marry at the news that Russian troops were laying siege to Polish-occupied Moscow (in the original, permission was given after news of the Tsar's election). The connection is now arbitrary, the wordplay and symbolism of the original replaced by a wholly arbitrary connection. Since the Polish Act II contributed to the drama neither in the original nor in the new version, there is now no significant drama to be found until the middle of Act III. As a result, the opera threatens to lapse into tedium, but for the grandeur of the spectacle.

But what do the Poles now want of Susanin? Gorodetsky was ambiguous. Perhaps he meant that the Polish division simply wanted Susanin to show them the way to Moscow, so that they could liberate their besieged compatriots. Or perhaps he meant that Susanin was to show them the way to Commander Minin's camp, which was some distance from the capital, in order to demoralize the Russian forces by capturing or killing one of their leaders. It is all rather vague. 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 often repeated invocations to the tsar, but these were incidental touches in a genuine drama rather than a *substitute* for drama. In the end, *Ivan Susanin* became a kind of staged oratorio.

Despite all these unsatisfactory changes, the Soviet remake was justified – incredibly – on grounds of authenticity. Basing their argument on the contention that Glinka had already composed much of the music before the libretto was written, the Soviet team claimed that the original was a crude *podtekstovka*, implying that the words were carelessly shoe-horned in under the existing music. “For a century”, they wrote, “this has deprived the people of Glinka's work of genius”. And so Gorodetsky's job as the new librettist was, as he himself put it, “to guess at and to convey through words what is expressed through the sounds [of Glinka's music]”, and to find “an emotional and stylistic equivalence between words and music”.

The highest ministerial committee oversaw Gorodetsky's work, and it is likely the Stalin was personally involved. The poet submitted no fewer than four complete versions of the libretto, and in the archives, I found 98 (!) versions of the text of the closing chorus. The final version of the libretto is utterly bland and forgettable, although this seems to have been a virtue in many Socialist Realist texts. The lines which follow the chorus underline this: they are deliberately anachronistic, and draw the scene into the Socialist Realist present:

Here is our Kremlin!	Вот он, наш Кремль!
All Russia is with it!	С ним вся Русь!
The whole world is with it!	С ним весь мир!
Sing out across the world!	Пой, весь мир!
Rejoice, O Russian people!	Веселись, русский люд!
Sing your songs!	Песни пой!
A bright and joyful day now	Светлый день, весёлый день
greet us!	Для нас настал!

After an initial private showing of the complete remake, a few further modifications were made, according some accounts, in compliance with Stalin's own wishes. The final scene now became still grander, now a full-scale parade with two commanders on horseback. Because of this celebratory grandeur, the trio in memory of Susanin was scrapped, since this the new scene could no longer accommodate such intimacy. But at the public premiere, the



spectacle on stage was overshadowed by an event in the auditorium. As Elena Bulgakova recalls:

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.³

The opera might have lost some of its dramatic power and much of its original meaning, but it gained in pageantry and contemporary relevance. The Soviet Union itself only just outlasted this production. Under Perestroika, there was no further objection to the opera's original scenario and libretto, and the Stalinist version was pushed to the sidelines. The restored production (which is the one we have seen on video) was strikingly different, replete with the religious imagery of icons and candles.

I still remember my shock at seeing the return of the Stalinist *Ivan Susanin* in 1997, almost as startling as the return of the old Soviet national anthem in 2000. The reemergence of *Susanin* was most probably an independent choice by the new Bolshoi administration, while that of the national anthem was undoubtedly a government decision. But the two go hand in hand as the most prominent musical symbols of a return to Soviet cultural iconography. As with all such revivals of the Soviet past, however, the new context prompted some complications. The national anthem received new words, since citizens of the Russian Federation could hardly sing the praises of a state that no longer existed. As for *Susanin*, the musical and dramatic framework and the sets of the 1945 Soviet production were retained, but the old, monarchist passages in the libretto were restored, as was the appearance of the young Romanov at the end. This resulted in an awkward hybrid. For example, the songs glorifying spring at the beginning are sung in the midst of the glorious autumnal landscape of the Soviet sets. The most astonishing for me was the loss of the Trio in the finale (where Susanin's family tell of his sacrifice and grieve for him). Just like the simplified Soviet version, this new hybrid *Susanin* of 1997 left the Glory chorus undisturbed by any reminders of mortality and suffering.

Today, in Putin's Russia, *A Life for the Tsar* has received a new boost from the state. In search of a holiday to replace the former Revolutionary celebrations of 7 November, a Day of National Unity was to be held on 4 November, commemorating the retaking of Moscow from the Poles in 1612. Nostalgia for the monarchy is popular, and *Susanin* is once again a hero presented to schoolchildren. One odd, but well-known cultural figure, Alexander Dugin, has made a television programme about the opera, celebrating it once again as the embodiment of Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nation. Today, Dugin claims, these three concepts became relevant once again (although he is a pagan, and there is no prospect of a Romanov restoration). Dugin finishes his presentation emphatically:

Do not be afraid of ideology - because our ideology is brilliantly expressed in the closing words of Glinka's opera: Glory, glory to our Russian Tsar! Glory, glory to Holy Russia! And then: Celebrate the solemn day of the Tsar! Rejoice and be merry: your Tsar is coming! The people are greeting the Sovereign Tsar!⁴

The programme was first broadcast in 2016, on the "Tsar City" Channel, which Dugin owns. Baron Rosen's words ring out solemnly, even though the music is not heard at all. Does this mean that the original meaning of Glinka's opera has now been fully restored? Or is the cultural and political context too remote from the 1830s for this to make sense?

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³ From Bulgakova's Diary, Ye. S. Bulgakova, *Dnevnik Yeleni Bulgakovoy* (Moscow, Knizhnaya palata, 1990), 100. English translation quoted from Anatoly Smelyansky, *Is Comrade Bulgakov Dead? Mikhail Bulgakov at the Moscow Art Theatre*, trans. Arch Tait (London: Methuen, 1993), 304–5.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=geXIG1S7gBk>, accessed 18 November 2018, translation mine.