

“An Unbreakable Russian Tsardom”
A Comparison of the National Anthem of the Pre and Post Soviet Revolution Russia

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The search for collective exclusiveness or identity has a long history. Even before the founding of modern states, people have used images and sounds to represent the distinctive features of their groups. The reason behind this universal behavior, Maria Isabel Mayo-Harp argues, is that mass violence has long “dominated political history” and therefore the existence of collective identity can best protect a member of a group from the unknown danger.¹ From the utilization of coat of arms in the medieval times to national anthems since the 1900s, there is always a tendency to create certain instruments to represent the unique characteristics of one group while creating a sense of “otherness”. Nowadays, national anthems are being used in such a variety of contexts, from sports events to national ceremonies to internet parodies. Commonly, people associate national anthems with a patriotic composition that embraces the history, traditions, and the story of the people of that specific nation. However, this is not the case in the world of academia; scholars debate on the functions and origins of national anthems. While some scholars agree that the primary goal of any national anthem is to serve as an “authentic expression of popular identity”, some question whether elites, who in a lot of the cases created the national anthems, have used them to achieve self interests.² Maria Isabel Mayo-Harp argues that “national [anthems] have shown a very important double quality: they identify both political leadership and common values/ideas of “all” members of the nation”.³ She believes the creation of the national anthem is a balance between the political interests of “founding fathers” and the popular interests. Therefore, it is dismissive to view national anthems only from the common perception.

¹ Maria Isabel Mayo-Harp, “National Anthems and Identities: The Role of National Anthems in the Formation Process of National Identities” (M.A., Canada, Simon Fraser University (Canada), 2001), 2.

² Mayo-Harp, “National Anthems and Identities”, 4.

³ Mayo-Harp, “National Anthems and Identities”, 5.

Russia underwent extreme changes in almost all aspects of its society after the Soviet Revolution of 1917. Among those changes was the abolishment of the previous national anthem “God Save the Tsar” and the adoption of “Internationale” initially and “An Unbreakable Union” in 1943 as the official national anthem of the Soviet Union. Although the common perception is that the changes from Tsar Russia to Soviet are drastic in every way, the underlying purpose of and the political goal reflected through the national anthems remains fundamentally the same, that is the country is ruled by a small group of elites or even one person who only claim to represent the will of the people. Both anthems, effectively, choose to focus on glorifying the ruling class over the concept of ethnic Russianness that they claim. In this sense, the Soviet Revolution is not a complete one. It is merely the establishment of a new regime on the political structure of the old one.

When talking about Russian national anthems, J. Martin Daughtry concurs with Mayo Harp’s theory by stating that the national anthem is not a "static reflection of a monolithic identity" but rather a negotiation between different power groups.”⁴ This statement applies to both “God Save the Tsar” and “An Unbreakable Union”, for the creation of both contains necessary political leverages that both regimes desperately need to stabilize their rule.

Since the 19th century, the consumption and appreciation of the music culture allowed individuals and social groups to define their cultural identities and to pursue their social aspirations. Russian nineteenth-century Romantic elites who, influenced by the work of German writer Johann Gottfried von Herders, began “collecting folklore and incorporating it into art music settings in order to express a distilled musical sense of ‘Russianness’”.⁵ According to

⁴ J. Martin Daughtry, “Russia’s New Anthem and the Negotiation of National Identity,” *Ethnomusicology* 47, no. 1 (2003): 42–67, 45.

⁵ Daughtry, “Russia’s New Anthem, 44.

Lynn Mary Sargeant, the success of Royal Music Society (RMO), a professional music education institution, was instrumental in creating the cultural infrastructure that supported the extraordinary musical creativity of the late imperial Russia.⁶ By the early 19th century, a group of young Russian intelligentsias such as Uvarov, Vasilii Andreevich Zhukovskii, and Dmitri Bludov, greatly influenced by the “autocratic apologetics” of the great Russian poet Nikolai Karamzin, decided to produce a national anthem glorifying the Russian autocracy, who Karamzin believed to be “Russia’s one and only ‘Palladium’”.⁷ Just as Mayo-Harp argues, this small group of elites thought they were able to represent the entire population by praising the minority ruling class. The mindset of the trio is quickly adopted by Tsar Nicholas I, especially after the failed uprising of 1825, during which about 3,000 officers and soldiers refused to swear allegiance to Tsar Nicholas I, encouraged by the late Tsar Alexander’s liberal reformation. As a result, Tsar Nicholas needed a “precise conception of the national way of life” in the spirit of “reverence before the sanctity of sovereign power” to strengthen his new regime.⁸ Therefore, the anthem produced by the trio, ‘God Save the Tsar’ became the official national anthem of the Russian Empire in 1833. Scholar Soboleva views “God Save Tsar” as the epitome of classical European music; it is based on orchestral and choral music, emulating after the ceremonial music elsewhere in Europe.

The adoption of “An Unbreakable Union” was a slightly different yet analogous story. The Soviet Union initially adopted “Internationale”, the international anthem of the socialist movement, as its national anthem. However, in 1943, in light of World War II, Joseph Stalin

⁶ Lynn Mary Sargeant, “Middle Class Culture: Music and Identity in Late Imperial Russia” (Ph.D., United States -- Indiana, Indiana University, 2001), 25.

⁷ N. A. Soboleva, “The Composition of State Anthems of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union,” *Russian Social Science Review* 50, no. 2 (April 3, 2009): 69.

⁸ Soboleva, “The Composition of State Anthems”, 69.

decided to compose a new national anthem in place of the “Internationale” to “inspire and invigorate the war-weary country and, presumably, to celebrate the pivotal Soviet victories at Stalingrad”.⁹ The Soviet state newspaper *Pravda* explained that “Because the content of the Internationale...does not reflect the radical changes that have occurred in our country as a result of the victory of the Soviet system and does not express the socialist essence of the Soviet state, the USSR Council of People’s Commissars has resolved to replace the text of the state anthem with a new text with content appropriate to the spirit and essence of the Soviet system”.¹⁰ The key here is that the Soviet regime believed that “Internationale” is not Russian enough. The new anthem “An Unbreakable Union”, composed by A.V. Aleksandrov, combined Russian patriotism with praises of socialism so ingeniously that Soboleva argues that it played an important role in improving the morale of the entire Soviet Union in the most difficult times during the war. However, even though the goal that the Soviet claims is to inspire patriotism, similar to the old Russian national anthem, the Soviet national anthem is composed by the ruling elites who impose their political view as representational of the Russian people. The difference is only that they chose to glorify the communist party and Stalin instead of the aristocrats and the Tsar.

Structurally, “God Save the Tsar” and “An Unbreakable Union” are two entirely different pieces. Though both pieces are written in 4/4 beats, the overall tempo of ‘An Unbreakable Union’ is a lot quicker than “God Save the Tsar”, for the former has less of a break between each line of the lyrics than the latter. This significant difference attributes to the different genre in which the two different pieces belong. “God Save the Tsar” is written in a traditional European classical style. Like many of the other national anthems in Europe such as “God Save the

⁹ Soboleva, “The Composition of State Anthems”, 82.

¹⁰ Soboleva, “The Composition of State Anthems”, 83.

King/Queen” in England, “God Save the Tsar” intentionally has short sentences of lyrics and a distinguished pause in between in order to highlight the royalness of the subject it is celebrating. In comparison, “An Unbreakable Union” is written similar to the style of a military march. It has a very short break between each line of the lyrics and has a strong drum beat, emphasizing the vitality and power of the socialist movement. Moreover, the instruments designed for the two pieces are quite different as well. Organ is the instrument that “God Save the Tsar” is written to play in, which suggests that the piece is designated to play mostly in the context of religious ceremonies. Meanwhile, “An Unbreakable Union” is designed to be played by a whole orchestra that includes instruments such as trumpet, saxophone, clarinet, etc., therefore broadening the use of the national anthem to more mundane events. It is fascinating how two anthems that are such structurally different serve such a similar political goal.

Lyrically, the subjects of the two pieces are vastly different as well. The lyrics of “God Save the Tsar” are highly repetitive and keep reemphasizing one theme, that is a prayer to God to the Tsar’s reign over Russia. It only has eight lines of lyrics and the phrase “God Save the Tsar” appears two times, while the other lines are composed of the praise of the Tsar’s reign as “strong and sovereign”.¹¹ Though the aristocracy class is not directly mentioned in the lyrics, it is indirectly glorified since the Tsar is the figurehead of the aristocratic government who rules Russia. On the other hand, “An Unbreakable Union” has much longer lyrics which dabble on a variety of topics. The overall theme is to praise the “great” Soviet Revolution and might of the Soviet Union. Although the Russian people are briefly mentioned in the lyrics, “An Unbreakable Union” focuses on glorifying the Soviet regime more than anything else. It claims that the

¹¹ “Russmus: Anthems - Боже Царя Храни / Bozhe Tsarya Khrani / God Save the Tsar Lyrics and Translations.” Accessed May 2, 2020.

“banner of the Soviets” is the “banner of the people” and yet it emphasizes that the people are “raised by Stalin” and “illuminated” by Lenin.¹²

One of the most important concepts that scholars of the national anthem often talk about is music nationalism, which can be briefly defined as “the use of musical ideas or motifs that are identified with a specific country, region”.¹³ Anthem is a bridge that associates music to the specific characteristics of a nation and creates a sense of national identity. In most of the cases nations choose to depoliticize their national anthems and celebrate the traditions or the history of a nation in order to include all the citizens no matter what their political stand might be. Examples of a depoliticized national anthems include “Star Spangled Banner”, which celebrates history of American people fighting for their independence from the British Empire, and the Chinese national anthem “The March of the Volunteers”, which reflects the history of the pyrrhic resistance war China fought against Japan. The Russian Empire and the successive Soviet Union, choose to politicize their national anthems and glorify only the temporary leaders or ideologies of the current regime instead of the timeless “Russianness”. The result of this move is that everytime when there’s a change of regime, the new regime has to recompose a brand new national anthem in an attempt to erase the marks of the previous one. In the late 1990s, the Russian people were unsatisfied with the new national anthem after the collapse of the Soviet Union and demanded for the old “An Unbreakable Union”. However, due to the “inappropriate” lyrics, President Putin had to order new lyrics to be written to match the melody of the previous national anthem.

¹² “Russmus: Anthems - ГИМН СССР / Gimn SSSR / Anthem of the Soviet Union Lyrics and Translations.” Accessed May 2, 2020.

¹³ Daughtry, “Russia’s New Anthem”, 44.

The common stereotype of the Soviet Revolution is that it eradicates all characteristics of the Tsar Russia. However, the fact that both anthems choose to focus on glorifying the ruling class as to the concept of ethnic “Russianness” symbolizes there’s no fundamental change in the political structure of Russia. There is merely the change of personnels in the ruling class but the majority of Russia is still ruled by the few elites. During the era of imperial Russia, the country is ruled under a system of Tsarist autocracy. The Tsar is at the center of this system because he owns the rights of state power. The Tsar has legal control of all the power and wealth of the Russian Empire, which he then distributes the power to persons or institutions. These intermediary level of administrators “act in [Tsar’s] name” and “follow his orders”.¹⁴ A popular metaphor during imperial Russia, “Tsar-dear father” vividly illustrates the father-subject relationship between the Tsar and his people.¹⁵ The political structure of the Soviet Union is a bit more complicated, since it is technically a republic. According to the Soviet constitution, the highest state authority is supposed to be the Soviet Congress, the members of which are elected from the different constituencies.¹⁶ However, since the 1930s, under the premiership of Molotov, the executive branch of the government starts to monopolize power and the premier, or the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, effectively becomes the dictator of the Soviet Union. The situation becomes especially worse when Joseph Stalin takes the office. Because Stalin has, in effect, unchecked power and the support of the Red Army, he is able to run a campaign of political repression in order to decimate his political enemies and ethnic minorities, known historically as the “Great Purge”. Comparing the Russian political structure before and

¹⁴ Stephen J. Lee *Russia and the USSR, 1855–1991: Autocracy and Dictatorship*, Routledge, 2006. Google Print, 1.

¹⁵ Lee, *Russia and the USSR*. 2

¹⁶ Article #14 of the 1936 constitution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) of 5 December 1936 *Article 14*. .

after the Soviet Revolution, the power is still if not more centralized. This centralized power is manipulated by a small group of elites and later by a single dictator, which has no fundamental difference as to Tsar Russia. Constitutionally, the Soviet Union has a direct election system which is supposed to run a democratic government. However, the application only proves that the dictatorship under the Soviet Union is just as strict, if not worse, than pre-Revolution Russia. The two national anthems clearly reflect a similar mindset between the regimes of Soviet Union and Tsar Russia, which is the hope to stabilize their somewhat illegitimate reign of the elites, or one person. The political ideology might have changed but what remains the same is a highly similar centralizing political structure controlled by the elites standing on the top of the pyramid.

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