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Sarah K. Moir

Illinois Wesleyan University, smoir@iwu.edu

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The People's Phenomenon: "Author's Song" in Khrushchev's Soviet Union

Abstract

A massive shift from the Socialist Realism that predominated under Joseph Stalin, the bard culture that arose during Nikita Khrushchev's "Thaw" was fostered by the illegal underground transmission of tapes known as "magnitizdat". Three well-known faces, with even better known voices, led this movement: Vladimir Vysotsky, Bulat Okudzhava, and Alexander Galich. In a way that was uniquely Soviet, the bard culture took root and transformed the everyday of the Soviet people.

Keywords

bard, Khrushchev, author's song, Vysotsky, Okudzhava, Galich, thaw, Stalin, music, poetry, Soviet Union

The People's Phenomenon: "Author's song" in Khrushchev's Soviet Union

Sarah Moir

Music and poetry are of special importance in Russian culture. Russia has a long history of engagement with those in the art of literature and music, including renowned authors and poets from the likes of Dostoevsky to Tolstoy, alongside musicians and composers such as Tchaikovsky and Rakhmaninov. During Soviet times, this history was expanded through the bard culture that emerged under Nikita Khrushchev during the late 1950s and early 1960s. A massive shift from the culture that predominated under Joseph Stalin, the bard culture that arose was fostered by the underground transmission of tapes known as *magnitizdat*. Three well-known faces, with even better known voices, led it: Vladimir Vysotsky, Bulat Okudzhava, and Alexander Galich. In a way that was uniquely Soviet, the bard culture took hold and transformed the everyday of the Soviet people.

"Author's Song": A Background and a Foundation

"Author's song," or *avtorskaia pesnia* in Russian, arose as a form of media in the 1950s.¹ The genre is referred to as "author's song," being sung by bards, because the songs themselves are seen more as poetry—the lyrics are of utmost importance. They are not merely songs; they are authored stories about people and their experiences in the Soviet Union. The history of the importance of poetry in Russia involves such greats as Alexander Pushkin; and beginning in the intelligentsia, the bard movement drew from this same history. Bulat Okudzhava and Alexander Galich were both members of the Writer's Union, and both worked as writers.² Vladimir Vysotsky worked as an actor, so he too understood the importance of the portrayal of the written word before an

¹ J. Martin Daughtry, "'Sonic Samizdat': Situating Unofficial Recording in the Post-Stalinist Soviet Union," *Poetics Today*: 28.

² *Ibid.*, 40.

audience.³ In addition to this common understanding, all three realized the value of putting words to music. Accompanying themselves on the traditional Russian guitar,⁴ the bards drew on the heritage of the Russian people and made the poetry of their lyrics more accessible through simple, easy to replicate melodies. Before these literary and musical accomplishments could be reached, however, the soon-to-be bards and the Soviet people had to suffer through the rule of Joseph Stalin.

After consolidating power after the death of Lenin, Joseph Stalin was leader of the Soviet Union until his death in 1953. He introduced the concept of Socialist Realism for the first time in 1932, “as the preferred artistic style at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in Moscow.”⁵ As historian Katherine Bliss Eaton notes in her book *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*, “Socialist Realism demanded a ‘realistic,’ easily understood, optimistic picture of Soviet life and the future of the Soviet Union.” In this way, “Socialist Realism was ... not so much an artistic style as it was a means of control.”⁶ Struggling with this restriction of artistic styles and expression, many writers, composers, and other artists began to self-censor themselves. Some ideas would never be produced due to this self-censorship, or they would be produced “for the drawer,”—not to be published or seen by anyone but the creator.⁷ Explicitly described in terms of music:

It should be ‘realistic’; glorify the achievements of the Soviet people; give a positive picture of the Soviet citizen in his relations with his fellow men under the Soviet regime; subscribe to a contemporary programme; be bright, optimistic, straightforward and comprehensible; above all, have a ‘mass’ basis and draw its inspiration from the people and their folk-music.⁸

³ Christopher Lazarski, “Vladimir Vysotsky and His Cult,” *Russian Review* 51 (1992): 60.

⁴ “Soviet Underground-Part 2,” <http://www.litkicks.com/SovietUnderground2>. Last modified April 1, 2002.

⁵ Katherine Bliss Eaton, *Daily Life in the Soviet Union* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004), 238.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 241.

⁸ Cecil Parrott, “Music in the Soviet Union,” *The Musical Times* 100 (1959): 14.

In this way, Socialist Realism demanded that the official music produced in the Soviet Union, therefore exclusively from the members of the Union of Soviet Composers, be produced with the masses in mind, simplistic, and heroic. Perhaps Socialist Realism would not have been so effective had it not been backed by the intense amount of terror perpetrated by Stalin. A fickle murderer of thousands and exiler of millions⁹, Stalin's rules were not ones to be disobeyed. For this reason, many intellectuals were silenced, opinions of the masses were quashed, and the habit of self-censoring spread to everyday interactions where one could never be sure if an informant would be listening. After seeing friends disappear, colleagues sent to labor camps, and family members murdered, most Soviet citizens were oppressively kept from deviating from the Socialist Realist norms of behavior and creation. Finally, after over twenty years of leadership and terror, Joseph Stalin died in March of 1953. After a brief power struggle, Nikita Khrushchev succeeded him in leading the Soviet Union.

At the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev delivered a so-called "secret speech," denouncing the personality cult of his predecessor Joseph Stalin.¹⁰ Signaling that his reign would bring a new atmosphere to the Soviet Union, one less predominated by an ever-present feeling of terror, Khrushchev also began the complicated process of releasing prisoners from the swollen Gulag labor camps of Stalinist times.¹¹ However, in releasing prisoners, Khrushchev's leadership found itself a new phenomenon—prison culture. People had been imprisoned in the camps for so long

⁹ "Joseph Stalin," http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/stalin_joseph.shtml. Last modified July 4, 2011.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Miriam Dobson, *Khrushchev's Cold Summer: Gulag Returnees, Crime, and the Fate of Reform after Stalin* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 109.

that a unique culture had formed, complete with songs and tattoos.¹² The songs, especially, were increasingly popular with the oppressed youth, stifled from the lack of dynamic creations from the artists still practicing Socialist Realism. In addition with Khrushchev's rejection of Stalinism, there began a gradual period of relaxation in the strict regime standards. Known today as the "Thaw" period, the Soviet people began to feel freer and more relaxed, and with Khrushchev's efforts in the 1960s to improve the housing situation, people also found more private locations to enjoy free time.¹³ The trend of communal spaces was waning, filled with small, but single-family, apartments for the Soviet citizens under Khrushchev.¹⁴

The importance of meal time in the Soviet Union, where having something filling to eat was the a result of a group effort—the product of hours spent spread out across the city waiting in lines for various items—meant that the kitchen took on a significant role in everyday Soviet life.¹⁵ The family would gather at meal times and often stay for hours. When friends visited, they would socialize in the kitchen; often in the small apartments available, there was no living room, only a kitchen, bathroom, and one or two bedrooms.¹⁶ Unique to the Soviet Union, these lifestyle features created an opening for the bards. After a hearty meal, they would sing in the kitchen for small groups of family and friends. These people sought refuge from their difficult lives by way of some well-crafted songs. Those lucky enough to own a reel-to-reel tape player, the cost of which was "roughly equivalent to an engineer's monthly salary,"¹⁷ began to record these

¹² Ibid., 121.

¹³ Carsten Goehrke, *Russischer Alltag: Eine Geschichte in neun Zeitbildern vom Frühmittelalter bis zur Gegenwart: Russischer Alltag II: Auf dem Weg in die Moderne* (Zürich: Chronos Verlag, 2003), 332.

¹⁴ Ibid., 333.

¹⁵ Lois Fisher-Ruge, *Alltag in Moskau* (Düsseldorf: Fischer-TB Verlag, 1993), 118.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Daughtry, "Sonic Samizdat," 36.

impromptu “concerts” among friends. With these recordings, the bard movement began to spread.

Though now seen as severely outdated technology, reel-to-reel tape players were the primary source of listening to and recording one’s favorite music in the 1950s and 1960s. The ability to own one privately, in addition to the extra advantage of being able to record something on tape, meant that the reel-to-reel players created a movement that would come to be known as *magnitizdat*. *Magnitizdat* is a play off the word *samizdat*, which means the manual copying of unsanctioned texts by those with typewriters or illegally possessed, or illegally used, state-controlled printing materials. The idea of *samizdat*, combined with the word for tape recorder, or *magnitofon* in Russian,¹⁸ led this underground tape copying circuit to be called *magnitizdat*. *Magnitizdat* was the primary source of the immense popularity of the bards during Khrushchev’s leadership, and extended further under Brezhnev as well. Unlike the printing presses used at times in *samizdat*, the possession of reel-to-reel tape players was not restricted by the government; and for this reason, the tapes produced in recordings were quite easy to create and disseminate.¹⁹ A recording of an impromptu kitchen concert among friends in Moscow by Vladimir Vysotsky could, in effect “go viral,” and within a relatively short period of time be heard in far away provinces. These changes in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev led to the rise of the bard movement and the popularity of “author’s song” as a genre.

“Author’s Song” as Genre: A Soviet Experience

¹⁸ Ibid., 34.

¹⁹ Ibid.

This extraordinary combination of factors in Khrushchev's Soviet Union created an atmosphere where people had more freedom, yet still lived under an oppressive government of which they wished to be distracted, if not released, from. The bards began being inspired by the songs the recently released Gulag prisoners would sing. Songs about criminal life, stealing, or tattoos—all facets associated with Gulag culture—predominated at first.²⁰ Gradually, as the criminal-themed songs began to gain popularity, the bards began to sing about other themes as well. Singing about the typical day of a certain kind of worker could be seen as a typically Soviet theme and perchance even subscribing to Socialist Realism norms. But when that worker is a criminal, the song no longer subscribes to these norms. These bard songs, however, involved one main deviation: they did not attempt to group the Soviet people, their audience, into a mass group of “workers,” nor attempt to rally them around the triumphant story of the “ultimate hero.” Rather, they sang about the tragic tale of author Boris Pasternak, as Alexander Galich did in his song, “In Memory of B.L. Pasternak”; or they sang about a street in Moscow, as Bulat Okudzhava did in his song, “Song of the Arbat.” Such a deviation from the typical Soviet music, the songs of the bards gained popularity quickly. There was no grand fanfare to be found in the poetry of the bards, only authenticity.

Commonly sung with an atypical voice that bordered on speaking, the music of the bards was not traditionally music oriented. Indeed, the bards were seen as amateurs by the Soviet government, and thus denied the typical access to the music industry that other musicians in the Soviet Union gained.²¹ Self-accompanied by an out-of-tune Russian guitar, that is, one featuring seven strings rather than the typically Western six,

²⁰ G.I. Cherniavskiy, “Politics in the Poetry of the Great Bards: Vladimir Vysotsky,” *Russian Studies in Literature* 41, no. 1 (2004-5): 63.

²¹ Daughtry, “Sonic Samizdat,” 33.

the heritage of the Russian people was an integral part of the sound of the “author’s song” genre.²² Despite these musical shortcomings, the bards created a sound all their own and used it to write powerful and popular songs that were easy for others to learn.

The method of acquiring the music was also a unique aspect of the Soviet experience. Stifled and shunned by the government controlled music industry, the bards made do with the ultimate word-of-mouth, in the form of *magnitizdat*. Playing their music at small get-togethers in the kitchens of friends, or showcasing their talents at select unsanctioned Moscow clubs, their fans would record the songs on their fervently clutched reel-to-reel tape players; and in the following weeks, the songs would be played over and over again until the quality of the copies would diminish to the point where they were filled with the scratches and hisses of the magnetic tape, almost more than the sound of the bard’s music.²³ But these tapes were cherished nevertheless, with one devotee of Okudzhava going so far as to include his entire collection when he immigrated to the United States.²⁴ However, the government, as the gross popularity of the bards came to their attention, took more steps to control the spread of *magnitizdat*. They cracked down on owners of tapes by more dissident bards, such as the songs of Alexander Galich. When the Okudzhava devotee emigrated from the USSR, they brought his treasured collection of recordings in contact with a strong magnet, effectively destroying the unique original recordings that he had acquired.²⁵ The value of *intonatsia*, or the intonation and performance quality, is second only to the lyrics in importance in the

²² “Soviet Underground”

²³ Daughtry, “Sonic Samizdat,” 35.

²⁴ Ibid., 28.

²⁵ Ibid.

music of the bards.²⁶ Thus, the loss of these recordings is even more devastating, aside from the loss of an important historical record of this movement. However, in comparison to other methods of Soviet oppression during this time and earlier, the interference of the government was relatively low. With a unique sound, and *magnitizdat* lending strength to the movement, three bards arose as the best known.

“Author’s Song”: The Pioneers and Revolutionaries of a Genre

The three most important bards in the “author’s song” genre are Vladimir Vysotsky, Bulat Okudzhava, and Alexander Galich. The first, the most famous; the second, one of the pioneers; the third, the leader of the dissidents, these three men led the genre.

Vladimir Vysotsky was born in 1938, and went to study engineering in 1955, but dropped out after only a semester.²⁷ Shortly thereafter he began to study acting, and went on to become a successful actor.²⁸ In 1961 he wrote his first song, “Tattoo.”²⁹ With a raspy voice and a sharply out of tune Russian guitar, Vysotsky was more performer than true musician, but the themes of his songs mattered more to his audience than his musical talent. In his early years as a bard, he sang mostly “street songs” about the street and criminal culture that was new and intriguing after prisoners from the Gulag began to be released.³⁰ In the mid-sixties, however, he shifted his focus towards themes such as war, or the everyday, but with a satirical bite.³¹ A particular song of Vysotsky’s, roughly translated as “The Common Graves,” concerns itself with heroes from World War II: a

²⁶ Ibid., 30.

²⁷ Christopher Lazarski, “Vladimir Vysotsky and His Cult,” *Russian Review* 51 (1992): 59.

²⁸ Lazarski, “Vladimir Vysotsky,” 60.

²⁹ Cherniavskiy, “Politics in Poetry,” 63.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ “Soviet Underground.”

typical Soviet theme, but in a new light. He criticizes the fact that in these common graves, “Here there is no personal fate/All fates are mixed into one.”³² First person characterization was prominent in his thematic style. In fact, in many of his songs featuring this style, for example in “The Thief,” rumors began to spread among his fans that he had had those experiences.³³ On the contrary, he had merely chosen the most relatable form of communication—first person. Due to his very public presence as an actor, coupled with the *magnitizdat* spread of his songs performed for friends or in a few Moscow clubs, Vysotsky became one of the most well-known, if not the best known, bard of the “author’s song” genre. At the time of his death in 1980, likely from a drug overdose, Moscow was hosting the Olympics; but in total disregard for the Soviet’s carefully constructed image, thousands of fans abandoned the Olympic Games to attend Vysotsky’s funeral.³⁴ A true testament to the power of the *magnitizdat*-influenced spread of his songs, a musician who had rarely been publicly acknowledged as such, was mourned en masse during the Olympics. A friend who spoke at his funeral was also a famous bard by the name of Bulat Okudzhava.

Bulat Okudzhava was born in Georgia in 1924 and very early in life he came to know the horrors of Stalin’s terror.³⁵ His father, a member of the political elite, was murdered by order of Stalin, and his mother spent many years imprisoned in the Gulag.³⁶ Okudzhava voluntarily took part in World War II, and was very much influenced by his experience in the war.³⁷ In spite of the hardships incurred by his family in the Soviet

³² Ibid.

³³ Lazarski, “Vladimir Vysotsky,” 62.

³⁴ Ibid., 67.

³⁵ Emily Glentworth, “The Singer of the Arbat,” *Russian Life* 42, no. 1 (1998): 39.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

dictatorship, and in addition to what he witnessed at war, Okudzhava was not primarily a dissent-focused bard—rather, he preferred songs that romanticized his adopted hometown of Moscow. One of his most famous songs, “Song of my Arbat,” focuses on the street he grew up on, which he viewed to be the locus of Moscow.³⁸ He saw his street as an embodiment of the spirit of Moscow, and it recalls the history of the Russian people.³⁹ However, another one of his songs sharply criticized Stalin’s regime. “The Black Cat,” a song that most certainly references Stalin, uses arresting language and veiled metaphor, with stanzas such as, “He hides his smiles with whiskers/darkness is like a shield to him./All the cats are singing and crying/but this black cat is quiet.”⁴⁰ A veiled metaphor for an already criticized dictator is the closest Okudzhava would come to a dissident song. For the most part, he sang about life in the Soviet Union. Speaking more for the intelligentsia circles in the USSR, Okudzhava also worked as a writer and was a member of the writer’s union. Another member of the writer’s union, also a popular bard, had his membership revoked due to his controversial songs.⁴¹

Alexander Galich, the oldest of the three bards profiled here, was born in what is now Ukraine in 1918 as Alexander Ginzburg. In an attempt to disguise his Jewish identity, he changed his name to Alexander Galich.⁴² He was also the most dissident of the bards. Perhaps due to his age, being raised during the time after the Soviet Union’s great triumph—the Bolshevik Revolution—and then seeing these dreams and ideals being transformed into an everyday oppression and terror, Galich was more inspired to

³⁸ Sophie Schudel, “Das Moskau der Barden: Ein Blick auf Gassen, Hinterhöfe, und Anti-Helden,” *Moskau: Menschen, Mythen, Orte*, ed. Monica Rüthers et al. (Köln: Böhlau Verlag GmbH, 2003), 191.

³⁹ Schudel, “Das Moskau der Barden,” 192.

⁴⁰ “Soviet Underground”

⁴¹ Gene Sosin, “Alexander Galich: Russian Poet of Dissent,” *Midstream* 20, no. 4 (1974): 30.

⁴² *Ibid.*

speak out against the government once Khrushchev's "Thaw" took hold. In 1968 he performed at a government sanctioned "author's song" festival, proceeding to perform controversial songs, one of which in particular, "In Memory of B.L. Pasternak," led almost directly to his banishment from performing publicly.⁴³ This song directly confronts the Soviet leadership. With lines such as "His neck didn't soap the noose in Yelabuga,/He didn't lose his mind in Suchan!"⁴⁴ Galich directly references Gulag camps that fellow writers were imprisoned in during Stalin's dictatorship. He goes further to attack the controversy surrounding Pasternak's works, most famously the novel *Dr. Zhivago*, above all remaining thankful that his friend died a peaceful death "in his own bed."⁴⁵ In 1974, Galich was forced to emigrate, ultimately settling in Paris where in 1977 he met an untimely end due to electrocution while plugging in stereo equipment.⁴⁶ One of the more legendary bards, he was less popular among the everyday Soviet citizen. Like Okudzhava, he appealed more to the intellectual class.

"Author's song": A Window into Soviet Everyday

"Author's song" as a genre offered a unique opportunity for the Soviet citizens to engage in something of their own. A movement that spoke to the masses through individual personalities, rather than the bland, heroic worker of the Socialist Realism, Soviet citizens were able to identify with each other and their differences. With similar experiences due to life in the USSR, but still unique people, the bards gave each facet of life a voice; and through the *magnitizdat* phenomenon, the people appropriated those voices without the influence or interruption of the state. A movement such as this could

⁴³ "Soviet Underground"

⁴⁴ "Galich on Pasternak, my translation," <http://plotkills.blogspot.com/2010/06/galich-on-pasternak-my-translation.html>. Last modified June 11, 2010,

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ "The Cost of Conscience," *Russian Life* 46, no. 5 (2003): 16.

only have arisen with the extraordinary circumstances at the time. A relaxation of the strictness that predominated during Stalin's rule, accompanied by the release of thousands of Gulag prisoners, in addition to the culture encouraged by the building of more private apartments, not to mention the mass production of reel-to-reel tape players, the policies of Nikita Khrushchev had a direct effect on the rise of the bard movement. However, the people of the USSR took the freedoms these policies allowed them and transformed them into their own musical and poetic movement. Some scholars say that the immense popularity of the bards and their thematic foci contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union more than twenty years later. The daringness with which the Soviet citizens recorded impromptu concerts and diligently copied the tapes, repeating them over and over until the songs were hardly discernible, combined with the fact that the government did little to combat these actions, lends credence to this view. Above all, the bards were among the first to remind the Soviet people that they were not a collective of people with the same heroic goals—they were, in fact, individuals with unique life experiences, and different strengths and hopes for the future. Bards such as Vladimir Vysotsky, Bulat Okudzhava, and Alexander Galich gave a voice to the citizens of the Soviet Union through their songs about tattoos, thieves, war, beloved streets, and cherished authors. Through their songs and their art, the bards reinvoked self-confidence and hope in the Soviet people.

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