

## Cultural Heritage in Historical Perspective

Original article

UDC 784.6

<https://doi.org/10.56620/RM.2025.2.023-030>

EDN NOJFXT



### The Soviet Song Heritage of World War II: From Inertia to Intention

Yaroslav V. Gloushakov

*Gnesin Russian Academy of Music,*

*Moscow, Russian Federation,*

*gloushakov@gnesin-academy.ru*<sup>✉</sup>, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0267-0599>

**Abstract.** The article is devoted to the song heritage of the Great Patriotic War. As the most accessible and democratic type of art, mass song became a particular form of remembrance of this historical period that is so tragic for Russia. An immense number of compositions was created by the song composers during the war and after its end. A number of works had appeared before 1941 (for example, Matvey Blanter's *Katyusha* and Jerzy Petersburgski's *Sinii platochek* [The Blue Kerchief], but still carry strong associations among the general public particularly with the Great Patriotic War. The details of the creation of songs in each of these periods differed strikingly from each other, which could not have been reflected in the genre of the mass song, as a whole. A breakthrough moment in the development of the genre turned out to be the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which happened in 1956, after which the broad process of deconstruction of the longstanding "song Staliniana" started. The article analyzes the conditions of the birth of mass songs in various years, and examines the works that are symbols of the Soviet Union (*Svyashchennaya voyna* [Holy War] and the National Anthem of the USSR by Alexander Alexandrov), as well as selected works from the Soviet cinematograph from the time period between the 1930s and the 1960s, where the song played an important meaning-generating role.

**Keywords:** mass song, World War II, Joseph Stalin, Alexander Alexandrov, *Holy War*, Anthem of the USSR, 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union

**For citation:** Gloushakov Ya. V. The Soviet Song Heritage of World War II: From Inertia to Intention. *Russian Musicology*. 2025. No. 2, pp. 23–30. <https://doi.org/10.56620/RM.2025.2.023-030>

---

Translated by Dr. Anton Rovner.

© Yaroslav V. Gloushakov, 2025

## Introduction

The inexhaustible subject of the Great Patriotic War exerted a strong influence, most likely, on all forms of art. It disclosed itself in a special way in the genre of the mass song as the most democratic and popular genre. The mass song became a particular form of commemorating of the tragedy which almost every Soviet family had encountered.

At the present time, the symbol of the struggle and the victory in that frightening bloodletting war is comprised by an entire array of works composed in various times, including: Matvey Blanter's *Katyusha* (1938), Jerzy Petersburgski's *Sinii platochek* [Blue Kerchief] (1940), Nikita Bogoslovsky's *Tyomnaya noch'* [Dark Night] (1943), Mark Fradkin's *Beryozy* [Birch Trees] (1959), Yan Frenkel's *Zhuravli* [The Cranes] (1969) and, of course, David Tukhmanov's *Den' Pobedy* [Victory Day] (1975) (for more detail about this, see: [1]).

Let us turn our attention to the fact that the compositions cited above were written before, during and after the war. How were the conditions for the creation of the songs changed? How was this reflected on the singing quality itself?

The global character of the historical event, which exerted and has continued to exert a great influence on the development not only of Russia, but also of the entire contemporary international community, testifies of a high level of relevance of the research of the artistic heritage of the Great Patriotic War. Let us also note that

the song material presenting this legacy assumes one of the crucial positions in all the convincing achievements of the mass song. On numerous occasions, it has become the object of various musicological research works, many of which have reflected the spirit of their time.

During the Soviet period, researchers in our country were attracted by the historical and ideological context of the creation of the genre. [2; 3]<sup>1</sup> The situation changed in the first post-Soviet years: the interest in the genre of mass song not only waned, but even aroused a negative response from a portion of public opinion. In particular, criticism was bestowed on the National Anthem of the Soviet Union and the song *Svyashchennaya voina* [Holy War] by Alexander Alexandrov as compositions that were symbols of a state that had ceased to exist.<sup>2</sup> In the publications of recent years, researchers have examined the phenomenon of the mass song of the time period from the 1920s to the 1940s in the mirror of the epoch, [4] have attempted to reveal the specific features of its image, [5] and also analyze the theme of labor in the songs from the 1930s. [6]

Along with the perfection of informational technologies, at the present time, a new view of the development of this genre emerged: from the point of view of the evolution of mass media. This kind of approach turned out to be fruitful for defining the genre of the mass song and supplemented the already accumulated knowledge about its development during the Great Patriotic War. As the result

<sup>1</sup> Soviet musicologist Arnold Sokhor in his fundamental monograph *Russkaya sovetskaya pesnya* [The Russian Soviet Song] [2] used, in his words, the principle of historicism when examining the development of the mass song. When analyzing its genre-related features, he based himself on its content. Subsequently, the scholar came to another perspective, presuming that the genre-related features depend on the living conditions. [3]

<sup>2</sup> Thus, the composer was accused of plagiarism, and his music was revoked as the state national anthem. Subsequently, already in the beginning of the 21st century, the attitude towards the music changed again, and it was chosen once again as the national anthem of already present-day Russia, with a renewed text by Sergei Mikhalkov.

of analysis of such a phenomenon, so unique in the history of the country, as the wartime radio marathon of “letters from the battle front and addressed to the battle front,” it became possible to understand the nature of the genre of the wartime songs. Notwithstanding the directorial control over the creation of the predominating mass of mobilization songs (to use Arnold Sokhor’s term), it was particularly the *lyricism* as the reflection of the separation between the population divided into two parts (the battle front vs. the army rear) that became an integral part of Soviet mass consciousness.<sup>3</sup>

### The Prewar and the Wartime Period in the History of the Genre of the Mass Song

There is a significant fact about the creation in the creation of one of the symbols of the Great Patriotic War during its first few days. On June 24, 1941 in the newspapers *Izvestiya* and *Krasnaya Zvezda* Vasily Lebedev-Kumach’s poem *Svyashchennaya voina* [Holy War] was published. Two days later, on June 26, at the Belorussian Railway Station in Moscow, the same literary text set to music by Alexander Alexandrov was performed by the Krasnoznamennyi [Red Insignia] Ensemble of

the Red Army Song and Dance of the USSR (presently, the A. V. Alexandrov Ensemble of Song and Dance of the Russian Army) before the departing soldiers. On June 27, a variant of this song, but with the music of Matvey Blanter was approved for publication.

Such a swift reaction on the part of the poets and composers, upon first glance, arouses obvious questions: how was it that they turned out to be ready to evaluate so swiftly the calamity that came upon the country? Could this material have been plagiarized?<sup>4</sup>

However, the ability of the poets and composers to react instantly to the occurring events had more prosaic reasons: the theme of struggle with an enemy (an external or an internal one) had matured within the context of the mass song long before 1941. Even in the comedy movie *The Circus* (1936), the *Song about the Homeland* by composer Isaak Dunayevsky and Vasily Lebedev-Kumach begins with a military march, in a minor key, performed by a male chorus, ready, “fiercely frowning,” to give battle to the enemy. This indicated tendency was present everywhere, during that period: numerous works about military events and army commanders were created during that time, which made it possible to single them out into a separate genre — namely, that of “songs

<sup>3</sup> At the same time, a German specialist in Russian studies, Eberhard Dickman specified that “in Germany during the war not a single lyrical song connected to the war was sung; there were only military marches and ‘everyday’ songs, in no way connected with the war” (Cit. ex: [7, p. 150]).

<sup>4</sup> In 1991, the journal *Stolitsa* [The Capital City] and in 1998 the *Nezavisimaya gazeta* presented publications of materials by Andrei Malgin (Malgin A. V. Samyi sovetskii iz poetov [The Most Soviet of All the Poets]. *Stolitsa*. 1991. No. 6, pp. 34–37; p. 40) and Vladimir Shevchenko (Shevchenko V. A. *Svyashchennaya voina — ekho dvukh epokh* [Holy War — an Echo of Two Epochs]. *Nezavisimaya gazeta*. 1998. May 8. No. 81 (1652)), calling into question the authorship of the poet and the composer. On July 5, 2000, the *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, after a court decision, published a refutation and stated that “the information expounded in the article of the free-lance correspondent Vladimir Shevchenko “*Svyashchennaya voina — ekho dvukh epokh*” [Holy War — an Echo of Two Epochs] (*Nezavisimaya gazeta* from May 8, 1998), about poet and songwriter Vasily Lebedev-Kumach were acknowledged not to correspond to reality and to disgrace the honor, dignity and business reputation of the creator of the song *Svyashchennaya voina* [Holy War], Vasily Lebedev-Kumach” (*Nezavisimaya gazeta*. 2000. July 5. No. 122 (2184)).

of defense.” [2, p. 201] Its culmination was the “dress rehearsal” to the war as the cinematization of the “battle film based on documentary materials”<sup>5</sup> *Esli zavtra voina* [If There is a War Tomorrow] (1938).<sup>6</sup> In this context, the song material of the period of the Great Patriotic War stems from the genre of “defensive songs” and virtually presents its continuation. However, it was not only the ideological policy of the government in the prewar period, fortified by the directive management of the creation of the genre (the creators of the songs were “directed,” “encouraged,” and “punished”), that determined the readiness to set to composing virtually instantly the most capacious massif of song material in history.<sup>7</sup> By itself, the nature of the mass song carries in itself a store of mobilizing qualities, endowing it with that magical, visceral force that determines the essence of the genre. This is precisely what determines the choice of a collective action song as the model.

In order to see distinctly the genres of collective action as the basis for the mass song, it is necessary to return to the sources, when in Russia in the late 19th century mass culture started to form, and two directions of the mass

song began to emerge. On the one hand, it was the industry of gramophone recording with the predominating runs of the gypsy romance and performances by Dmitri Agrenev-Slavyansky’s cappella with the song *Kalinka* [White Hazel Tree] and other “folk” songs, and on the other hand — the emerged marches-anthems, massively promulgated by the workers’ press and by proclamations. In this opposition of recreational, contemplative genres with the mobilizing genres, the historical trend of the country’s development predetermined the victory of the latter.

The mobilization core, which is the very essence of the mass song, made it possible for an assembly of Soviet composers, poets, playwrights and cinema producers, hitherto unprecedented by its scale and creative potential, to create a unique epos of songs during the brief span of the four years of the Great Patriotic War (for more detail about this, see: [8]).

### The Period After the War: A Change of Paradigms

It is noteworthy that after the end of the war, up to the late 1950s, there was a pause in the development of wartime subject matter

<sup>5</sup> Information from the titles of the film.

<sup>6</sup> The history of the forthcoming war of our people with German Nazism is schematically shown during the course of one hour and during the course of one minute; its scenario reflects the military doctrine expressed by Lebedev-Kumach: “...and on the enemy’s land. We shall inflict a defeat on the enemy / With little blood, with a mighty thrust!” The composers of the picture Dmitri and Daniil Pokrass vary the main musical theme. It sounds at times as a victorious cavalry song, at other times as a funeral march, accompanying film shots of the enemy perishing on alien territory, and at times with an Uzbek color, symbolizing the peoples of the USSR arising for battle against the enemy. The film ends with a traditional command “Be prepared today for the campaign!” fortified by a vivacious footstep of the Pokrass’ song.

<sup>7</sup> In the Anthology *Slavim pobedu Oktyabrya* [We Glorify the Victory of the October] published in three issues, the songs of the time period of the years 1941–1945 comprise half of the content of the second issue of the period of the years 1945–1957. Even more obvious is the following: the first issue spans the interval of the years 1918–1940, while the third, concluding issue, addresses the years 1958–1986. See: *Slavim pobedu Oktyabrya* [We Glorify the Victory of the October]. Issue 1. 1918–1940. Moscow: Muzyka Publ., 1987. 302 p.; *Slavim pobedu Oktyabrya* [We Glorify the Victory of the October]. Issue 2. 1941–1957. Moscow: Muzyka Publ., 1987. 414 p.; *Slavim pobedu Oktyabrya* [We Glorify the Victory of the October]. Issue 3. 1958–1986. Moscow: Muzyka Publ., 1987. 591 p.



— composers became infatuated, according to Sokhor's keen observation, by waltz mania and the theme of "flourishing."<sup>8</sup>

In the middle of the 1950s, after Stalin's death, the country began to be subjected by changes, which affected the entire sum-total of contextual conditions of the development of the genre. First of all, immediately, after the leader's death, at the plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, in July 1953, the attempt was made of repealing "the previously existing practice of the cult of personality, and it was officially declared of a shift in priorities in the propaganda on the party as the new collective leader." [9, p. 115] The process of the reevaluation also affected the main state musical symbol: on December 7, 1955 the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union by its decree forms a commission for the creation of a new state national anthem.<sup>9</sup> "However, the project remained unfinished, even though the first two stages had been successfully completed." [Ibid., p. 134] As a result, the national anthem of the USSR, which was sounded out for the first time on January 1, 1944 and became firmly ingrained into the mass consciousness as a symbol of the victory over Nazism, for many years lacked a literary text. Second, on the conducted closed session of the 20th Congress on February 25, 1956, Nikita Khrushchev read his report "About the Cult of Personality and its Consequences," in which, besides a listing of the facts of violation of socialist legality, the attempt was made to deride Stalin's personal qualities, and a negative evaluation was

given to the cultural activists (among them, the creators of the song *Staliniana*, which included Alexandrov, Dunayevsky and Shostakovich). In Khrushchev's opinion, they were "blinded" and "hypnotized" by the cult of personality. [10, p. 161] Such a political "pirouette" exerted a deep impact on the creative elite, which not too long ago had suffered the effects of the Decree of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party regarding Vano Muradeli's opera *The Great Friendship* from February 10, 1948. With an absence of a coherent and concise ideological direction on the part of the political leadership, which did not renounce the practice of the cult of personality, but merely replaced the cult of Stalin with the cult of Lenin, the entire numerous cohort of the creators of the Soviet mass song turned out to lack their usual basis. A solution was found in the turning to the subject of the Great Patriotic War as the sole element capable of unifying the divided and disoriented social consciousness. In 1959, the films *Dobrovol'tsy* [The Volunteer Fighters] and *Pervyi den' mira* [The First Day of Peace] with the songs *Beryozy* [The Birch Trees] and *Komsomol'skaya pesnya* [The Communist Youth League] by Mark Fradkin set to texts by Evgeny Dolmatovsky and Vladimir Lazarev came out into the country's cinemas. Similar to the release in 1932 of the film *Vstrechnyi* [The Oncoming] with Shostakovich's music, which opened up the genre with films with songs, in which the mass song played the most important meaning-bearing and mobilizing role, these two films launched the beginning of a new stage of the evolution of the genre:

<sup>8</sup> As Sokhor writes: "The poets started bringing into almost every lyrical song of the postwar years apple trees and pears, or black cherries, ... 'under the ashberry' and 'over the river' the heroes of countless lyrical songs are walking with other subtitles." [2, p. 417]

<sup>9</sup> See: Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RSASPH). Fund 82. V. M. Molotov. List 2. Portfolio 279. Sheet 185. P. 130.

the emergence of songs of reminiscence about the Great Patriotic War. Their significance, according to the conceptions of the creators of the film, was supposed to be pivotal. However, even though their subject matter does develop according to the genre of song film and penetrates through the entire dramaturgy of the plotline, they still do not become the crucial, meaning-bearing elements. The reasons for this are due to the indeterminacy of genre of the march used as a matrix for the songs, which is softened by the lyrical character of the literary texts and also the addition into the soundtrack of several popular melodies, in the context of which was the main theme becomes dissolved. In addition to this, yet another factor is the fragmentariness of the musical tracks and a great significance of the material not connected intonationally with the theme of the song. And, most important: Dolmatovsky's philosophical conception inherent in the film *Dobrovoltsy* [The Volunteer Fighters], the epic sweep of the narration, the sensation of *time* as the chief personage, the presence of several vivid mass songs — all of this is perceived by the audiences as a historical song retrospective, and the film — as a reflection, an attempt of comprehension of its historical experience. At the same time, the mass song acquires a different quality, becoming a song *not meant for mass singing*, but a song *about mass singing*. At the same time, contemplativeness, inherent to comprehension, goes against the main principle of song film formed between the 1930s and the 1950s.

An even more vivid example of turning to the subject matter of the past war for comprehending the present is expressed in a film adaptation of Yuri Bondarev's film with the same title *Tishina* [Silence] (1964), in which Veniamin Basner and Mikhail Matusovsky have endowed their songs with functions of emotional refuge for

the protagonists of the film. In remembrance of the war, even if they do not find answers to the posed tortuous questions, they draw ethical power for overcoming the difficulties of life.

In addition to the songs used in films, the following songs from the 1960s also present a sublimation of the mass consciousness by means of turning to the subject of war: *Bukhenval'dskii nabat* [The Buchenwald Alarm Bell] (music by Vano Muradeli, text by Alexander Sobolev), *Ballada o soldate* [The Ballad about a Soldier] (music by Vasily Solovyov-Sedoy, text by Mikhail Matusovsky), *Ballada o russkikh mal'chishkakh* [The Ballad about Russian Boys] (music by Anatoly Novikov, text by Lev Oshanin), *Khotyat li russkie voiny?* [Do the Russians Want War?] (music by Eduard Kolmanovsky, text by Evgeny Yevtushenko), *Zhen'ka* [Eugene] (music by Evgeny Zharkovsky, text by Konstantin Vanshenkin), *Syn Rossii* [Son of Russia] (music by Serafim Tulikov, text by Vladimir Kharitonov), *Soldaty — geroi moi* [Soldiers are My Heroes] (music by Valentin Levashov, text by Vladimir Kharitonov), *Ubiitsy khodyat po zemle* [Murderers are Walking on the Earth] (music by Eduard Kolmanovsky, text by Evgeny Yevtushenko), and *Ne stareyut dushoi veterany* [Veterans do not Age in their Souls] (music by Serafim Tulikov, words by Yakov Belinsky). They all possess the same features: they are written in the genres of marches, in minor keys, with the characteristic dotted rhythms, in 4/4 meters (an exception to this is formed by the 3/4 meter in the song *Soldaty — geroi moi* [The Soldiers are My Heroes]). Another common characteristic quality is the monumental quality of the form, extending the framework of a song for mass performance and gravitating towards a concert genre. The arioso features of the vocal parts, which require for the performance of such works as, for example, *Ballada o soldate* [The Ballad about a Soldier] or *Syn Rossii* [Son of Russia],

massive, textural, particularly *operatic* voices. At the same time, the immense scale of the apocalyptic films of death camps, or the frightening episodes of the war displayed by poets in their literary texts, compelled composers to use a broad dynamic range and for the sake of sounding out the texture of performers to involve a large choral ensemble.

Thereby, the evolution of the genre of mass song in the 1960 is of a twofold character: on the one hand, it involves textural diversity, the enlargement and complicacy of musical form, the increased role of the element of timbre, ruling out any replacement of any performer, enriched the genre; on the other hand — the inherent contemplativeness has deprived the mass song of its chief quality — its mobilizing character. From that time an unswerving demise of this genre begins

and its departure from the historical scene towards the late 1980s.<sup>10</sup>

### Conclusion

The theme of the heroic feat of the Soviet people during the Great Patriotic War, the self-sacrifice, the steadfastness and the ability to overcome all difficulties in various forms of artistic manifestation, whether it be in the form of the penetrant waltzes and tangos of the wartime period, or the monumental ballads composed subsequently, corresponds to the chief genre features of the mass songs. This enables it not only to form a part of the cultural legacy of our people and its historical memory, but also to remain socially significant and relevant for all times. Particularly in it does the listener (and, not infrequently, the performer himself) always seek consolation and hope that are so scarce in difficult times.

### References

1. Gloushakov Ya. V. The History of One Song: Concerning Study of the Musical Heritage of the Soviet Period. *Problemy muzykal'noi nauki / Music Scholarship*. 2023. No. 1, pp. 106–114. <https://doi.org/10.56620/2782-3598.2023.1.106-114>
2. Sokhor A. N. *Russkaya sovetskaya pesnya* [Russian Soviet Song]. Leningrad: Sovetskii kompozitor Publ., 1959. 506 p.
3. Sokhor A. N. *Esteticheskaya priroda zhanra v muzyke* [The Aesthetic Nature of the Genre in Music]. Moscow: Muzyka Publ., 1968. 103 p.
4. Starodubtseva I. F., Khait G. A., Bashkeeva K. S. Soviet Mass Song of the 1920s–1940s in the Mirror of the Epoch. *Izvestiya Yugo-Zapadnogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Seriya: Istoriya i pravo* [Proceedings of Southwest State University. Series: History and Law]. 2022. Vol. 12, No. 6, pp. 224–232. (In Russ.) <https://doi.org/10.21869/2223-1501-2022-12-6-224-232>

---

<sup>10</sup> The tendency to make use of mass songs about the Great Patriotic War as sublimation can be traced during the 1970s and 1980s, as well. However, this period requires separate examination, since in it the conditions of the creation and existence of the genre are cardinally changed. Radio broadcast, cinema and gramophone records are replaced with television; at the same time, a special role is acquired by televised films and serial movies, in which the mass song fulfills a role different from its previous one.

5. Strashnov S. Traektoriya i oblik massovoi sovetskoi pesni [The Trajectory and Appearance of a Mass Soviet Song]. *Novyi mir* [New World]. 2021. No. 2. URL: <https://nm1925.ru/articles/2021/02-2021/traektoriya-i-oblik-massovoy-sovetskoy-pesni/> (accessed: 21.02.2025).
6. Burmatov M. A. Tema truda v sovetskoi massovoi pesne 1930-kh gg. [The Theme of Labor in the Soviet Mass Song of the 1930s]. *PHILHARMONICA. International Music Journal*. 2021. No. 6, pp. 9–19. (In Russ.) <https://doi.org/10.7256/2453-613X.2021.6.36655>
7. Kozhinov V. V. *Rossiya. Vek XX (1939–1964): opyt bespristrastnogo issledovaniya* [Russia. 20th Century (1939–1964): The Experience of Unbiased Research]. Moscow: Algoritm Publ., 1999. 396 p.
8. Gloushakov Ya. V. *Massovaya pesnya v otechestvennoi kul'ture pervoi poloviny XX veka: diss. ... kand. iskusstvovedeniya* [The Mass Song in the Russian Culture of the First Half of the 20th Century: Dissertation for the Degree of Cand.Sci. (Arts)]. Moscow, 2016. 191 p.
9. Kuropatkin A. P. *Transformatsiya gosudarstvennoi ideologicheskoi propagandy v SSSR: 1953–1956 gg.: dis. ... kand. istoricheskikh nauk* [The Transformation of State Ideological Propaganda in the USSR: Dissertation for the Degree of Cand.Sci (History)]. Moscow, 2012. 222 p.
10. O kul'te lichnosti i ego posledstviyakh. Doklad Pervogo sekretarya TsK KPSS N. S. Khrushcheva XX s"ezdu KPSS 25 fevralya 1956 goda [About the Cult of Personality and its Consequences. The Report of the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU N. S. Khrushchev to the 20th Congress of the CPSU. February 25, 1956]. *Izvestiya TsK KPSS* [Bulletin of the Central Committee of the CPSU]. 1989. No. 3, pp. 128–170.

*Information about the author:*

**Yaroslav V. Gloushakov** — Cand.Sci. (Arts), Senior Lecturer at the Department of Theory of Music, Gnesin Russian Academy of Music, Moscow, Russian Federation.

Received: 14.03.2025

Revised: 20.03.2025

Accepted: 05.05.2025