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Activities of the Don Cossack Choir and the Formation of Stereotypes of Pseudo-Russianness Among Foreign Listeners*

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Abstract. The article discusses the stereotypical representation of Russian culture abroad. For almost the entire 20th century (first due to limited technical capabilities, and then under the conditions of the “Iron Curtain”), the Western public did not have the opportunity to become properly acquainted with authentic Russian culture and its traditions. For this reason, today’s image of Russia in the Western mass consciousness is largely formed by the emigrants who left the country following the 1917 revolution. Paradoxically, but also quite naturally, the alternative point of view instilled by the emigrants in the minds of foreigners led to a kind of separate historical branch of the development of Russian culture outside Russia. Among such refugees was Sergei Zharov, a recent graduate of the Moscow Synodal School (who later became better known in the West as “Serge Jaroff”). A gifted musician and talented organiser, he created a group of exiles that would, without exaggeration, become one of the most famous “Russian” choirs abroad. One of the prominent members of this choir, who later made a brilliant solo career, was Ivan Rebroff (whose real name was Hans-Rolf Rippert). The article examines the activities of the Don Cossack Choir and Ivan Rebroff. An attempt is also made to analyse the genesis of the repertoire of the above-mentioned artists – in particular, the song “Kalinka”, which has become known as a “Russian folk song” in the mass consciousness.

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Деятельность «Хора донских казаков» и формирование стереотипов псевдорусскости у зарубежного слушателя

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена стереотипному представлению русской культуры за рубежом. На протяжении практически всего XX века (сначала из-за ограниченных технических возможностей, а затем уже в условиях «железного занавеса») у западной публики не было возможности открыто познакомиться с настоящей русской культурой и ее традициями. Современный образ России в западном массовом сознании во многом сформирован благодаря эмигрантам, покинувшим страну после революции 1917 года. Парадоксально, но и закономерно: эмигранты привили иностранцам альтернативную точку зрения, запустив своего рода обособленную историческую ветвь развития русской культуры вне России. В числе таких беженцев был недавний воспитанник Московского синодального училища Сергей Жаров. Даровитый музыкант и талантливый организатор уже в эмиграции создал коллектив, который без преувеличения стал одним из самых известных «русских» хоров за рубежом. Одним из хористов этого коллектива, впоследствии сделавших блистательную сольную карьеру, был Иван Ребров (настоящее имя — Ханс-Рольф Рипперт). В статье рассматривается деятельность «Хора донских казаков» и Ивана Реброва. Также предпринимается попытка анализа генезиса репертуара вышеназванных артистов, в частности песни «Калинка», прославившей «русской народной» в массовом сознании.

Ключевые слова: массовое сознание, стереотипы, Хор донских казаков, эмигранты, Сергей Жаров, Иван Ребров, Сол Юрок, *Deutsche Grammophon*, Петр Чайковский, Дмитрий Агренев-Славянский, Иван Ларионов, «Калинка», *Na sdorowje*

Introduction

The contemporary meaning of the word “stereotype” was first proposed in 1922 by the American writer, journalist and future two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Walter Lippmann in a book entitled *Public Opinion*. Lippmann gave the new term a rather negative meaning based on his belief that stereotypes do not provide a complete and objective understanding of the situation, but only partially reflect it, which can contribute to the manipulation of public opinion.¹

The mass perception of a country and its citizens is created under the influence of various factors, including cultural images (“cultural identification code”), which determine a predetermined attitude even before any personal acquaintance with the cultural products occurs. “A person is received according to their clothes, but seen off according to their mind” (Russian proverb). This folk wisdom, crystallised over the centuries, is equally characteristic of both Russian and Western European languages.² So, what “clothes” are worn when Russia and Russians are met today?

In the 20th century, with the beginning of the dominance of mass society in Europe and America, Russian musical culture was represented abroad by a galaxy of outstanding artists, from Diaghilev’s Russian Seasons in Paris to the popular tours of the Bolshoi and Kirov (now Mariinsky) theaters. However,

along with the names of David Oistrakh, Sviatoslav Richter, Feodor Chaliapin, Anna Pavlova, Galina Ulanova and many others, there was also another layer of Russian culture that linked the image of Russia in the West with all sorts of *Kalinka* and other pseudo-folk songs. In this context, the creators and promoters of stereotypical images of Russia abroad included the Don Cossack Choir and its soloist Ivan Rebrov.

“Don Cossack Choir” under the Direction of Sergei Zharov: A Roaring Success Story

The Don Cossack Choir³ was created in 1921 in Turkey⁴ by Sergei Alekseevich Zharov⁵ (1896–1985), a Russian emigrant and recent graduate of the Moscow Synodal School. After some time, the artists moved first to Bulgaria and then to Germany. The main feature of this group was its phenomenal capacity for work and creative longevity. With a concert repertoire that included Russian spiritual chants and folk songs (including *Evening Bell*, *The Twelve Robbers*, *Stenka Razin* and *Kalinka*), the choir successfully toured Austria, England, Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Czechoslovakia and Switzerland. In her dissertation research *History of Russian Artistic Emigration in the Slavic Countries, 1918–1939: Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria* researcher Olga Marar writes: “...the Cossacks gave the 50th anniversary concert in January

¹ For more details see: Lippmann W. *Public Opinion*. 2nd printing. New Brunswick; London. 1998. 427 p. URL: https://monoskop.org/images/b/bf/Lippman_Walter_Public_Opinion.pdf (accessed: 22.06.2025).

² In German, the proverb is identical to the Russian one not only semantically, but also lexically: “Man empfängt den Mann nach dem Gewand und entläßt ihn nach dem Verstand.” Its closest English equivalent is: “Never judge a book by its cover.”

³ Better known as “Don Cossack Choir” or “Der Don Kosaken Chor” (English and German respectively).

⁴ According to information published on the official website of the choir, which is now led by Zharov’s successor, Wanja Hlibka. URL: <https://don-kosaken-chor.de> (accessed: 01.06.2025).

⁵ Translator’s Note: Although the legendary band leader was better known in the Western world as “Serge Jaroff,” we will retain the more conventional transliteration of his Russian name in this text.

1929 in the largest concert hall of the Berlin Philharmonic with 1,200 seats, and it could not accommodate everyone who wanted to attend. <...> And already in 1935, the choir's three-thousandth concert took place, which was written about in all the New York newspapers." [1, p. 161] With the outbreak of World War II, all members of the choir moved to the United States and soon received American citizenship. After their move, the group went on to perform in the USA, as well as in Cuba, Mexico, South and Central America, and even starred in several Hollywood films. In 1945, the choir resumed concerts in Germany, performing for American troops. In total, during the existence of the group under Zharov's leadership from 1921 to 1979, about ten thousand concerts were given on different continents.

One of the reasons for the band's popularity and great success was the colourful, charismatic figure of its leader, Sergei Zharov, and his inimitable performing style. "Constantly working on the professional level of performance," notes Marar, "Zharov achieved vocal cohesion and enormous sonority of the choir, delighting listeners with his skill. Even the composer Rachmaninoff⁶ highly appreciated the innovative style in the development of choral art that was introduced by Zharov. In order to expand the range, the young conductor introduces falsetto and, in search of new means [of expression. — *Ya.G.*], resorts to imitating the sounds of musical instruments, which the public really liked." [Ibid.] Here it should be noted that

the innovative style of Zharov the interpreter, which was to Rachmaninoff's taste, is in strong contradiction with the traditions of Russian choral culture.⁷

Another important factor in the phenomenal success story: "The Don Cossack Choir" under the direction of Sergei Zharov collaborated with one of the greatest American impresarios of the 20th century, Sol Hurok (birth name — Solomon Izrailevich Gurkov),⁸ who represented the interests of a whole galaxy of outstanding (including Soviet) artists with world-famous names: Marian Anderson, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Galina Vishnevskaya, Emil Gilels, Van Cliburn, Leonid Kogan, Valentina Levko, David Oistrakh, Anna Pavlova, Jean Peerce, Mstislav Rostropovich, Arthur Rubinstein, Feodor Chaliapin and others. It was Hurok who organised tours of the Bolshoi and Kirov theaters, as well as the Igor Moiseyev and *Berezka* dance ensembles in the USA. Undoubtedly their collaboration with such an outstanding impresario contributed to the expansion of the group's touring activities, as well as its popularisation in the international arena.

The phenomenal success of the Cossack choir is evidenced by the millions of copies of records sold. In 1965, Sergei Zharov received the specially organised Golden Gramophone Award from the company *Deutsche Grammophon* "in recognition of his continuing and outstanding service to the cause throughout the world," as reported by the authoritative American music publication

⁶ Translator's Note: The well-known expatriate Russian composer is also better known in the west under this unorthodox transliteration of his Russian name.

⁷ In addition to the fact that Zharov's group performed works designed for a mixed choir by a male cast (and this was achieved by introducing falsetto into the choral score as a full-fledged singing voice to replace the soprano and alto parts), it was also not typical for the Russian choral tradition for a male cast to perform the gender-oriented female romance *The Red Sarafan* (music by Alexander Varlamov, lyrics by Nikolai Tsyganov). URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Ao_H71llogg (accessed: 01.06.2025).

⁸ Sol Hurok. *Electronic Jewish Encyclopaedia*. URL: <https://eleven.co.il/jews-in-world/fine-art/15167/> (accessed: 01.06.2025).

Billboard.⁹ In 1981, the conductor, who had by then been the permanent leader of the ensemble for an extraordinary 60 years, was inducted into the Russian-American Chamber of Fame.¹⁰

In the article *The Don Cossack Chorus under S. A. Zharov's Conduct: Appraisal of Emigrant and Foreign Press*, researchers Alexander Khudoborodov and Irina Fisher reviewed foreign periodicals about Zharov's choir and confirmed the choir's success with audiences. [2, p. 197]¹¹ Amazing fact: Zharov's group won worldwide recognition, but was completely unknown in the USSR. In contemporary Russia, in recent years, there has been increased scholarly interest in it as evidenced by articles of Nikolai Kurkov *Don Cossack Choir of S. A. Zharov in the USA: The 1930s (Cultural and Historical Context of the Russian 20th Century)* [3] and Tatyana Rudichenko *Military Traditions in the Activities of the Don Cossack Choir of S. Zharov*. [4] We should also note the interest albeit low level of study of the phenomenon of Zharov's collective abroad. [5]

Ivan Rebhoff and His "Russian" Songs

After Zharov's death, a new chapter begins in the history of the choir. Over time, its composition was updated to accept non-Russians as its participants. One of these choristers, who later had a brilliant solo career, was the German singer Ivan Rebrov¹² (real name Hans-Rolf Rippert,¹³ 1931–2008). The discography of this artist, widely known and popular abroad (and almost completely unknown in the USSR and Russia), includes the album *Na Sdarowje*, released in 1968, with the title song of the same name. According to our assumptions, it was this song that firmly introduced this supposedly "Russian" toast into the Western lexicon.¹⁴

The words of the song, like the music, belong to Rebroff himself. The text is a compilation of German and Russian, the latter of which is given only three phrases. Let us cite them: "Proshchai, i na zdorov'e! (Farewell, and to your health!) / Raz, dva, tri, my vyp'em vodochku, / Davai my vyp'em eshchy raz sto gramm. (One, two, three, we'll drink some vodka, / Let's drink another hundred grams.)"¹⁵

⁹ DGG award to Jaroff, choir. *Billboard*. Two sections, section 1. October 23, 1965. Seventy-first year. P. 41.

¹⁰ Mantulin V. The creative path of Sergei Zharov. *Russian American*. Review issue 1979–1982. P. 32.

¹¹ The only exceptions were political factors, "for example, in the Baltics, which influenced the assessment of the choir's performances during tours in the 1920s." [2, p. 197]

¹² There are several variants of transcription of his pseudonym in both Latin and Cyrillic. In various sources we find both Ivan Rebhoff and Ivan Rebrov.

¹³ A short biography of Ivan Rebroff appears in the obituary of the British newspaper *The Guardian*. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2008/apr/18/obituaries.culture> (accessed: 01.06.2025). It is noteworthy that the singer was the brother of Luftwaffe pilot Horst Rippert. URL: <https://www.rg.ru/2008/03/17/ekzuperi.html> (accessed: 01.06.2025).

¹⁴ Its English version "nastrovia" can be found in dictionaries of urban slang, for example: <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Nostrovia>; the popularity of this phrase is so high that even the reference book *Russian for Dummies* warns of its incorrectness (for more details, see: Kaufman A., Gettys S., Wieda N. *Russian for Dummies*. Wiley Publishing, Inc. 2006. P. 322).

¹⁵ It is obvious that the meaning of the above Russian text suffers from a lack of cause and effect relationships. The phrase "na zdorov'e" ("to your health") in Russian has a literal semantic meaning and is used in response to an expression of gratitude. In the given context, it even has a somewhat sarcastic meaning. According to tradition, toasts in Russia are said not "na" ("to"), but "za" ("for") someone or something: "for you!", "for friendship!", "for love!", "for health!", etc.

The annotation to the record says that *Na Sdarowje* is “a strong *typically Russian* song about vodka and its treachery [mine italics. — Ya. G.]”¹⁶ However, the musical language of the song is also extremely far from authentic Russian folk art and is a fusion of German, Gypsy and Jewish folklore with elements of operetta. Perhaps the only Russian national element in this entire international “vinaigrette” is the sound of balalaikas in the arrangement of the composition.¹⁷

Rebroff’s work shows how the image of Russia was formed abroad through musical clichés that were often far removed from folk traditions and reflected the Western audience’s interest in the exoticism and romantic image of Eastern Europe. In this sense, the artist’s works should be interpreted not only as musical experiments or personal initiatives, but also as part of a broader cultural phenomenon — the process of forming the image of Russia abroad.

Let us now turn to another work from the singer’s repertoire — *Kalinka*.¹⁸ This song became a symbol of Russian folklore abroad and was actively used to form a stereotypical image of Russia. However, the origin of this Russian “folk” song is a composition by an amateur songwriter.

The Most “Russian Folk” Song Abroad

On November 26, 1999, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* published an article entitled *Pechat' neizmerimoi samobytnos*¹⁹ which explained that *Kalinka* is not a Russian folk song, but a song written by the Saratov publicist and amateur composer Ivan Petrovich Larionov (1830–1889). The authorship of the “folk” song was established thanks to the book by Larionov’s contemporary, the chronicler Nikolai Fedorovich Khovansky, *Essays on the History of the City of Saratov and the Saratov Province*, which was published in 1884.²⁰

According to the biographical article about Larionov from the above-mentioned book by Khovansky, *Kalinka* was written in 1860 and was first performed in an amateur performance, for which Larionov wrote the music. The song became popular in the city, and the founder and director of the Slavic Chapel, Dmitry Aleksandrovich Agrenev-Slavyansky (1835–1908), who was touring in Saratov, became interested in it. *Kalinka* began its first world tour — it entered the choir’s repertoire, whose concerts, according to eyewitnesses, enjoyed great success in the USA, Europe, Africa and Russia.²¹ Ivan Larionov’s work *Kalinka* is

¹⁶ A photo of the record cover, including the full text of the annotation, can be seen on the website of the online store. URL: https://vinylpark.ru/catalog/vinyl/ivan_rebroff_na_sdarowje_iwan_rebroff_singt_weisen_von_wodka_und_wein_1968_13139/ (accessed: 01.06.2025).

¹⁷ Song *Na Sdarowje* performed by Ivan Rebrov. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pzq5EJjZoM> (accessed: 01.06.2025).

¹⁸ Song *Kalinka* performed by Ivan Rebrov. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uG476e4P6q0> (accessed: 01.06.2025).

¹⁹ Stamp of immeasurable originality. (Печать неизмеримой самобытности). *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. 1999. 26 November. URL: https://www.ng.ru/culture/1999-11-26/7_stamp.html (accessed: 01.06.2025).

²⁰ Khovansky N.F. Essays on the history of the city of Saratov and the Saratov province. Issue 1. (Хованский Н.Ф. Очерки по истории г. Саратова и Саратовской губернии. Вып. I). Saratov: Ishchenko and Co. Printing House, 1884. 237 p.

²¹ Agrenev-Slavyansky. In: Orthodox Encyclopedia edited by Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus' Kirill. (Агреньевы-Славянские. В: Православная энциклопедия под редакцией Патриарха Московского и всея Руси Кирилла). 02.04.2008. URL: <https://www.pravenc.ru/text/63370.html> (accessed: 01.06.2025).

a striking example of stylisation of a folk song with elements of theatricalisation.

Due to the lack of audio and video recordings of the performances of the Slavic Chapel, today an idea of this group and its leader can be formed based only on articles, essays and memoirs of contemporaries. And here we come across two absolutely polar opinions about this choir: on the one hand, numerous enthusiastic reviews from eyewitnesses,²² and on the other hand, criticism from no less authoritative a figure than Pyotr Tchaikovsky, who spoke on behalf of the musical community and did not mince his words at all. According to Tchaikovsky, Agrenev-Slavyansky greatly distorted folk songs by holding “supposedly Russian” concerts: “There is a huge number of vulgar, supposedly Russian, tunes that have become popular, and to distinguish them from truly folk melodies, one needs both a subtle musical feeling and a true love for Russian song creativity. But what does Mr. Slavyansky care about all this!” [6, p. 139] At the same time, Tchaikovsky writes that Agrenev-Slavyansky enjoyed wild popularity among the “crowd,” and complains that in Moscow 99% of the population “do not even know the name of Glinka.” [Ibid., p. 289] As one can see, the composer’s criticism reflects not only professional disagreements, but also the social contradiction between the elite’s perception of folk music and the mass interest in pseudo-Russian stylisation, which had already begun to take shape in the 19th century.

Comparing two diametrically opposed views on the creative activity of Agrenev-Slavyansky and bearing in mind that from the middle of the 19th century in Europe and the USA, and a little later in Russia, a mass-culture society was beginning to form, we can conclude that Agrenev-Slavyansky was a controversial figure in musical circles, who knew how to take advantage of the emerging music market.

The earliest publication of *Kalinka*, which is archived in the Russian State Library, dates back to 1882: the work was included in a collection of folk songs from the repertoire of the Slavic Chapel, whose publication was carried out by the director’s wife, Olga Khristoforovna Agreneva-Slavyanskaya.²³ It is noteworthy that the collection does not indicate Larionov’s authorship — the work is designated as “a cheerful conversational song of *the Tambov province*” [not Saratov. — *Ya.G.*]. Today it is difficult to say what determined the composer’s century-long oblivion: whether it was the lack of indication of the author of *Kalinka* in the concert programs of the “Slavic Chapel,” or the inattention or dishonesty of the publisher...

Returning to the above-mentioned popular abroad “Russian” songs from the repertoire of the Don Cossack Choir, let us briefly consider another one — *Sten'ka Razin*. This song was widely used to form a stereotypical image of Russia, especially in the image of the “Russian rebel” (“bear”), which corresponded to the concept of pseudo-Russianness.

²² Yurkevich M.V. D.A. Slavyansky in his quarter-century of artistic and political activity. (Юркевич М.В. Д.А. Славянский в его четвертьвековой художественной и политической деятельности). Moscow, 1889, pp. 7–8.

²³ Russian songs and songs of the southern and western Slavs. Collected by D.A. Slavyansky and arranged for one voice and choir by O.Kh. Slavyanskaya. Issue 3. (Русские песни и песни южных и западных славян. Собранные Д.А. Славянским и переложенные для одного голоса и хора О.Х. Славянской. Вып. 3). Moscow: V. Greiner Publishing House, 1882. 55 p.

The melody of *Sten'ka Razin* with the text “Durch des Huywalds düstre Gründe” can be found in German songbooks — “liederbuch.”²⁴ The popularity of this melody is such that it was borrowed as the basis for the Wehrmacht paratrooper song *Abgeschmiert aus 100 Metern*.²⁵ The only difference is that the melody in the German version is written in 4/4 time.

Conclusion

The presented analysis of the activities of the Don Cossack Choir traces how the commercialisation and stylisation of Russian culture contributed to the formation of a certain image of Russia abroad. If, under the conditions of Soviet social reality, Russian choral groups developed within the framework of state support and ideological control (which preserved a certain degree of authenticity and cultural originality), then in emigration, Zharov's choral group was forced to rely only on its own strength and earn money in the music market, taking into account its situation and the demands of the audience. To achieve commercial success, he used show elements in his programmes and in so doing was obliged to take into account the audience's stereotypes about Russia.²⁶

The economic model of the “Russian” choir turned out to be so successful that, according to various sources, many of its “clones” started to appear in Europe during the 1990s, whose performers were mainly Poles and Bulgarians.²⁷ The name *Don Kosaken Chor* today acts as a brand that brings profit to its owners.

Belonging to a mass culture to which the attitude of critics and researchers remains ambiguous, [7, p. 142] Serge Jaroff and Hans-Rolf Rippert created their own image of “Russian culture” in the European and American mass consciousness over the course of decades. Their “Russian” songs became widely known abroad due to the genuine interest in Russia and Russian culture that continues to be exercised among the general public.

Thus, our research shows that the commercialisation of cultural forms and the stylisation of national traditions can play a dual role: on the one hand, they can promote the popularisation of culture, while on the other hand, they can reinforce simplified stereotypes, forming an image of “national” culture that often does not correspond to its true complexity, richness and depth.

²⁴ Buchner G. *Mein Liederbuch*. München; Wien; Hollywood / Florida: Franz Schneider Verlag GmbH & Co, 1982. 79 p.

²⁵ The recording is available at the link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EkOj_Zg_RLU (accessed: 01.06.2025).

²⁶ Researcher Hélène Menegaldo from the University of Poitiers [Université de Poitiers] (France) concludes that Russians who emigrated to France after 1917 actively used stereotypes that had already been established in French literature, especially in the entertainment industry involving “Russian” taverns and restaurants in Paris. Cit. ex: Milchina V. Emigrants, refugees, non-returnees... (Мильчина В. Эмигранты, беженцы, невозвращенцы...). *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*. 2010, no. 102.

²⁷ Article *Don kosaken choere* in the publication: Wieprecht V., Skuppin R. *Das Lexikon der verschwundenen Dinge*. Rowohlt Verlag GmbH, 2009. Digitalbuch. (In German.)

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