Vuks on Hansen and Rogatchevski and Steinholt and Wickström, 'A War of Songs: Popular Music and Recent Russia-Ukraine Relations'

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Arve Hansen, Andrei Rogatchevski, Yngvar Bordewich Steinholt, David-Emil Wickström. A War of Songs: Popular Music and Recent Russia-Ukraine Relations. Stuttgart: ibidem Press, 2019. 250 pp. $40.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-8382-1173-2.

Reviewed by Yan Vuks (University of North Texas) Published on H-War (November, 2022) Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

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The conflict between Ukraine and Russia, which began in the early 2000s, has been fought on many fronts, including propaganda and popular culture. The collection War of Songs. Popular Music and Recent Russia-Ukraine Relations, written by four European scholars of Russian studies, offers a unique perspective on the struggle between Ukraine and Russia by examining the popular culture accompanying the conflict. Three scholars, Arve Hansen, a doctoral student of Russian, Andrei Rogatchevski, a professor of Russian literature and culture, and Yngvar Steinholt, an associate professor of Russian, are from the Arctic University of Norway, whereas the fourth author, David-Emil Wickström, a professor of popular music history, is from the Popakademie Baden-Württemberg.

Artemy Troitsky, a prominent Russian music critic, sets the tone for the book in the foreword. Troitsky recollects his conversations with Russian rock musicians who attended a special meeting with the Kremlin main ideologist, Vladislav Surkov. The Russian government was greatly impressed by the role played by Ukrainian rock musicians during the events of the Orange Revolution in Kyiv. These musicians were instrumental in persuading voters to support the pro-Western candidate, Viktor Iushchenko. Surkov wanted to ensure the loyalty of Russian rock musicians and called for a meeting in which he told them that the Russian government would look after them in return for their allegiance. Troitsky’s story clearly demonstrates the importance of popular music in modern politics and how often various politicians try to manipulate musicians in order to achieve their political goals.

The first chapter, by Hansen, examines the music of the Maidan Revolution in Kyiv during the winter of 2013-14. Hansen, who lived in Kyiv during the Maidan, had firsthand experience of the upheaval against the Ukrainian president, Victor Ianukovich, who refused to sign a political association and free trade agreement with the European Union. This refusal provoked pro-European and nationalist Ukrainians into launching a protest campaign against the government. Ianukovich’s heavy-handed attempt to deal with the crisis only led to escalation, with clashes and an eventual shootout between the protesters and riot police in which more than a hundred protesters and police officers were killed. Many Ukrainian pop and rock musicians performed their songs live in Independence Square to support the protesters. Hansen examines the role that music played during the Maidan, identifies five periods in the development of the protests, and traces the changes in the music during those five
The music changed in mood from calls to action to grief and lamentation as the bloody clashes erupted. This music played an important role during the Maidan, motivating and unifying the protesters.

The second chapter, by Rogatchevski, analyzes the answer songs that emerged after the Maidan Revolution and the Russian takeover of the Crimea in 2014. The answer song refers to a genre of songs that were created as a polemical reply to earlier songs by other songwriters. This genre has existed for centuries, but Rogatchevski focuses on the Russo-Ukrainian answer songs appearing after the Maidan. A good example is the song of the Ukrainian nationalist poet Anastasiia Dmytruk. It was called “We Will Never Be Brothers” and contrasts the freedom-loving Ukrainian nation with the supposedly envious and unfree Russians, who are riddled with imperial complexes. An answer to this song was the song “We Will Never Be Brothers (Reply to a Ukrainian woman)”, written by the Russian duo of Leonid and Gleb Kornilov. The Kornilovs depict Dmytruk as a frightened and confused woman who fell under corrupting Western influence, just as Ukraine itself did, and who needs Russian brotherly protection. These and other Russo-Ukrainian answer songs serve as a means of dialogue between the different political values existing in Ukrainian and Russian societies.

The third chapter, written by Steinholt, explores the musical parodies of the Russian national anthem made by Russian and Ukrainian performers since the adoption of the current anthem in 2000. The author demonstrates how the parodies criticize the perceived faults of the Russian state. He also reveals differences in the perception of these problems between Russians and Ukrainians. Russian performers, such as NOM or the EzhoFF Band, target in their parodies specific problematic areas of the Russian state, such as the economy or corruption, whereas Ukrainian performers, such as Orest Liutyi, condemn the perceived Russian imperialism.

The last chapter, by Wickström, explores the geopolitical dimension of the Eurovision song contest. The author compares the lyrics of the songs performed by Russian, Ukrainian, and Georgian singers in this contest since the early 2000s in order to understand their hidden political message. According to Wickström, these singers use the Eurovision stage as a cultural battleground to emphasize their political orientation. Ukrainian and Georgian performers, such as Ruslana, Jamala, and Stephane & 3G, use the song contest to define their countries as a part of Europe and distance themselves from Russia. Russian performers, such as Sergei Lazarev and Polina Gagarina, praise in their songs the nostalgic unity of the people of the post-Soviet countries within the Russian/Soviet sphere.

Having a great academic value of examining the Russo-Ukrainian conflict from an unusual angle, the book would have benefited from a clearly articulated methodology. Unfortunately, the authors did not attempt to evaluate the overall impact of nationalist and pro-Western music on the development of modern Ukrainian identity, especially among the generation born after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Some Ukrainian mass media claim that Ukrainian youth prefer to listen to Russian pop and rock music, which raises the question of the strength of the appeal of pro-Western and nationalist Ukrainian music in modern Ukrainian society.[1] It would have been beneficial to examine the division in Ukraine across the lines formed by pro-Russian and pro-Western values expressed in popular music. However, despite these lost opportunities, the book is highly recommended to scholars of Russo-Ukrainian relations and to anybody interested in the impact of popular culture on the post-Soviet societies of eastern Europe.

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Note

[1]. Олеся Медведева, “Москва и Киев слушают одну музыку. Почему украинизация не работает |#1106,” Страна.ua, April 28, 2021, YouTube video, 6:31, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXDQs43Xfzw.

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