

Rock, Roots, Relativity, and ‘Russianness’: Dissecting an Onion

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–“But,” maintains the research interviewer, “What, beyond the lyrics, are the *Russian* qualities of *russkiy rok*?”
–“Dunno,” replies the Russian rock legend, “Bad drumming?”

Twenty years ago, the research question concerning ‘Russian’ musical features in my study of Leningrad rock of the mid 1980s (2005) was left unanswered. In hindsight, perhaps that was the best possible outcome. In any case, nothing had shown up in the qualitative interviews or musical analyses conducted. Perhaps the selected research material was from too early a stage of musical development to show up any potential national musical traits? Granted, to non-Russian respondents, the songs sounded different from their respective Western subgenres, but was this mere codal interference, or did they in any small way reflect an identifiable Russian rock sound?

The Russian respondents interviewed²²⁹ –musicians, band managers, sound producers, and music journalists of the era– stuck stubbornly to a simple binary: words and topics were Russian, the music Western (or global). How could there be any musical ‘Russianness’, argued former Akvarium bass player Mikhail Feinshtein-Vasiliev (1953-2013), when Russia never had any folk music to deliver it? Soviet pseudo-folklore destroyed the last possibilities for any authentic Russian folk music. Russian pop or ‘restaurant music’, he stated, were instead derivatives of Jewish and Roma music and made for drinking and dancing. Rock producer Andrei Tropillo (1951-2024), a profound influence on the sound and aesthetics of early Leningrad rock, wholeheartedly agreed. Of course, he admitted, the topics of Russian rock songs might be different. Akvarium’s Boris Grebeshchikov sang about hanging on to his roots in order to remain standing, but his music suggested those roots connected to Celtic or Buddhist traditions more than any Russian one. Certain technicalities, Tropillo agreed, such as lead vocals mixed up-front and given priority over rhythm instruments, are audible, but beyond that – nothing. Other respondents tied ‘Russianness’ to provincial restaurant music in a similar manner. In contrast, rock was seen as an urban, intellectually-aspiring genre, fuelled musically by a global aesthetics.

Only when the conversation moved on from *russkiy rok* of the 1980s to punk in the 1990s and 2000s, did respondents actively apply notions of ‘Russianness’, albeit on the level of performer and audience attitudes, not music as such. Composer and musician Sergei Kurëkhin (1954-96) famously declared only two things distinguish any European form of culture from its corresponding Russian form: foulness and madness. Tropillo maintained in our interview that Russian rock indulged in the spirit of punk to 99%.

²²⁹ In 2001-2002, in addition to Vasilev and Tropillo, qualitative research interviews were conducted with: Andrei Burlaka (b. 1955), Mikhail Borzykin (b. 1962), Marianna Tsui (1959-2005), Nikolai Vasin (1945-2018), Aleksandr Startsev (1958-2006), Andrei Kagadeev (b. 1961) and Nikolai Kopeikin (b. 1966), Andrei ‘Villi’ Usov (b. 1950).

Notably, as demonstrated in our study of punk in Russia (Pilkington et al, 2013): it is not first and foremost the generic conventions of punk rock music, but its tendencies towards celebratory self-debasement that appear to resonate with Russian musicians and audiences. In that study, we were again left with very few objectively ‘Russian’ musical traits, but plenty of subjective cases identifying foulness, madness, jesting, uselessness, moronicness, drinking, and dancing as markers of ‘Russianness’.

Could we, if only for the sake of stubbornness, press on and make a case for musical ‘Russianness’ by hand-picking artists commonly celebrated as the most profoundly ‘Russian’? Again, we are immediately faced with the (written) word as the main signifier of national cultural identity. In the case of Aleksandr Bashlachev (1960-88), his musical influences from bard song –the vigorous rhythmic use of a seven-string guitar– are perhaps better described as delinquent ‘Sovietness’. In the case of Dmitriy Reviakin (b. 1964), his poetic pseudo-archaisms are influenced by faux-shamanism and secondary indigenous derivatives to such an extent, that even his lyrics –despite their author’s extreme nationalist sympathies– challenge the dominant concepts of ‘Russianness’ themselves. From all this, the most solid finding that emerges is that cultural ‘Russianness’ is very much an onion: It consists of layer upon layer of alluring assumptions, but has no core.

Looking for national traits in a musical form may at first glance seem innocent enough, but clearly, the concept of ‘Russianness’ represents a deviation far from the innocent. It proposes that subjects of the largest land empire on the planet, formed by seven centuries of almost continuous military expansion, and counting more than a hundred colonised peoples, can somehow be united by a single set of narrow characteristics flavoured by Greater Muscovy. How could serious humanistic research rely on a concept so obviously false? And yet, fuelled by the elder Dostoevsky and other Russian proponents of mystical Slavophile pseudo-philosophy, Slavonic studies have been rehearsing and repeating this exercise for so many decades, we have long since stopped asking ourselves what the emperor is wearing. Virtually everyone active in the field of Western Slavonic studies since before the turn of the millennium have at some point or other –more or less actively or openly– applied or adhered to clichéd concepts from ‘the Russian soul,’ via ‘the Russian idea,’ to ‘the great and mighty Russian language’. One need not proceed as far as to ‘Russia’s historic mission’ to be engulfed and absorbed by the propagandist agenda of *The Russian World*. Even since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, such Slavonic study parroting of Kremlin propaganda has been surprisingly prominent, its echoing at international conferences and seminars only slowly beginning to fade at the time of writing.²³⁰ Critical voices were never absent, but customarily ignored (if not drowned-out by their opponents). Outside Ukraine, a most timely and encouraging example of sense is the

²³⁰ Two examples: At Oslo University, 1-2 June 2023 (Trauma, Memory, and Counter-Culture: Borders and Border Transgressions in [Post-]Communist Europe), Ukrainian presenters were reprimanded by the opening key-note speaker for being un-cooperative and unconstructive when it came to protecting Russian language and culture on Ukrainian soil. Ukrainian presenters (who had yet to speak) were also marginalised in the programme, where Russian nationals enjoyed considerably more space and more prominent times for their contributions. At Manchester University 30 June - 1 July 2025 (Culture, Media, and Resistance in a Polarising World), a delegate confronted a main panelist for not mentioning a ‘Georgian scenario’ (i.e. the re-instating of a Moscow-friendly government in Kyiv) as a ‘possible peaceful resolution’ of the Ukrainian conflict.

small publication by Allik et al (2011), which –as a beginning– falsifies the existence of a ‘Russian soul’ as successfully as scientifically.

Honestly, do we really need to ask what constitutes the ‘Russian’ in Russian culture? Perhaps our current times of polarisation, isolationism and extremist Kremlin narratives of an essentialist ‘Russianness’ can, despite themselves, help us finally deconstruct and abolish some die-hard thought patterns. For this purpose, a concept of culture as a singular element with local variations will be more fruitful than a ‘whateverness’ notion of co-existing and competing ‘cultures’ in the plural. Temperature, depth, local marine fauna and flora vary greatly with your location, but the ocean remains the ocean. Although human in origin, culture with its many complex currents, ebbs and flows are, much like the sea, not subject to human control, and attempts at its manipulation are likely to produce unforeseen, sometimes dramatic, consequences.

Let us stick with our blatantly unoriginal ocean metaphor for another moment. If anything, it illustrates why those in power at any time, in any nation, can only temporarily construct and impose rudimentary definitions of one nationally specific culture. This goes for small nations as well as empires, yet the former are perhaps more likely to accept having been shaped by (rather than shaping) larger cultural currents. Granted, cultural surplus sometimes fuelled the expansion of empires, but the Russian Federation offers no such case. Modern Russia’s humble origins, Muscovy, on the North-Eastern outskirts of Kyivan Rus, received mere trickles from global cultural currents. Contrary to Kremlin narratives of Russian greatness, Russia’s expansion into the largest area nation state on the planet was not driven by cultural strength or ‘Russian ideas.’ Instead, as the empire’s spatial expansion followed the logic of Dugin’s square –arrows pointing outwards in all directions– cultural development arguably followed an under-communicated side of the same logic: expansion in all direction creates at its center a deficit, a vacuum into which flows anything that may help restore normal pressure. As natural a development as the elementary physics, this only becomes a problem when the center of power begins proudly proclaiming that cultural superiority facilitated (and rectified) its geographical expansion. Cultural currents that have been flowing into the empire for centuries from the outside and periphery, from neighbours and from colonised peoples, must now either be converted into aspects of an all-encompassing ‘Russianness’ that flows from Moscow at its the center, be dismissed altogether, or –as most recently demonstrated– be bombed to extinction like countless Ukrainian museums and cultural institutions. In the Russian Federation’s *Russian World* any ‘cultural minority’ (be it Buryat, Chuvash, Dagestani, Jewish, Mari, or any of a hundred others) is Russian only to the extent that it is owned by Moscow and subordinated its rigid cultural canon. Resisting this regime and insisting on cultural equality is ‘Nazism’ in current Kremlin parlance.

If this demonstrates more than the exhaustion of our ocean metaphor, it suggests an answer to Gogol’s question –much quoted for all the wrong reasons– to the mad Russian troika in his novel *Dead Souls*, to questions of the ‘Russian idea’, and to what constitutes Russia’s ‘mythical path’. In mathematical terms, it suggests the answer is 0 or, perhaps more fittingly: \emptyset . In cultural terms, this implies that notions of ‘Russianness’ should be treated much like notions of authenticity, or like notions of God: there is no denying that the idea exists, but that proves nothing beyond the idea itself. Authenticity forms an

integral part of how humans make sense of the world, value things and actions, yet it is chronically unable to prove the existence of anything objectively authentic. So, perhaps in the end this is how the question of cultural 'Russianness' is best approached as well: As a concept that proves nothing beyond its indeterminable conceptuality.

References

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