"Songs and Laughter Were Heard": Frontline Songs and Poems in the Folklore of The Great Patriotic War

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Abstract

During the Great Patriotic War, performances of music and songs were an important part of soldiers' lives in the Red Army. This study examines how these songs functioned in unofficial aspects of the lives of frontline soldiers. There was a "cult of folklore" in the Soviet Union in the 1930s and 1940s, which meant that the depiction of folklore in film and literature was an official policy. However, the fact that such performances featured in officially sanctioned artistic works raises the question of how much was propaganda and how much reflected actual practices. To answer this question, I looked at all the references to the performances of songs in over seventy Russian-language diaries and volumes of letters written by members of the Soviet military. I did not use journalism to avoid propaganda, nor memoirs to avoid the problem of the transformation of memories over the years; instead, I used sources written during the war itself that reflected the everyday lives of soldiers.

Introduction

Music has always had an important role in military life across the world. It has traditionally been a part of key moments of the military experience, from campaigns to maneuvers and parades. It has served as signals, cadences, and marches performed by military bands. Moreover, it has expressed the emotions of individual soldiers. Not only professional soldiers but also folk musicians in the ranks have resorted to song to depict heroic sacrifices, spiritual values, and the joy of victories.

In literature and films depicting the Great Patriotic War but made after the war, there are often scenes that show soldiers performing traditional folk or contemporary music. A very famous, well-loved example is the 1973 movie *В бой идут одни "старики"* [Only the "Old Men" are Going into Battle]. In the film, directed by Leonid Bykov, an air force squadron has its own folk orchestra that performs such songs as "Смуглянка" [Swarthy Girl]. (1) By 1944, "Swarthy Girl" was already being performed by the Red Banner Ensemble as well as playing on the radio [Ament 2018: 30].

Many films made during the Great Patriotic War also have scenes of these performances. The precedent was set by the series of *Боевые Киносборники* [Battle Film Anthologies], made in 1941–42, before the evacuated Soviet film industry had the ability to create full-length feature films. These films were clearly

intended to raise public morale. In *Battle Film Anthology Number 4* (released on 9 September 1941), there is a noteworthy scene towards the end of the frame narrative where soldiers in a camp perform the "Донская Казачья" [Don Cossack] folksong. (2) The actress Liubov' Orlova, playing a village postmistress and reprising a role that she played in the 1938 blockbuster *Волга, Волга* [Volga, Volga], dances in a recognizably folk manner with one of the soldiers. While this is clearly a staged performance, the performers are not supposed to be part of a frontline entertainment unit, but rather they are ordinary soldiers with no special training who sing spontaneously as if singing folksongs were a routine activity.

In fact, *Battle Film Anthology Number 4*, like several of the other film anthologies and later feature films made during the war, e.g., the 1943 film *Два бойца* [Two Fighters], depicts performances of unofficial songs and dances by ordinary soldiers as everyday behaviors and as continuations of authentic Russian and, in some cases, Ukrainian folk traditions. However, the fact that the performances occur in films that were released at least in part for propaganda purposes raises a question: To what extent was the depiction of folk music performed on the front a reflection of actual practice rather than just art? The same question can be asked of nostalgic depictions of folk performances in post-war films like *Only the "Old Men" are Going into Battle* and even of discussions of folklore in post-war memoirs. The issue of authenticity is important because, as Frank J. Miller [1989: ix] notes in his study, *Folklore for Stalin*, there was a state-sponsored "cult of folklore"— particularly of Russian folklore—in the USSR that began in the 1930s: "This cult of folklore was sufficiently hegemonic that for much of the Stalin era no film could be made without a folklore episode." (3)

This article has two main goals. The first is to answer these questions empirically, by drawing on primary sources that were written during the Great Patriotic War by active-duty members of the Soviet military, rather than written as propaganda, state-controlled literature and film, or post-war memoirs and recollections. This research shows that performances of folksongs were not merely artistic conventions but actually occurred in the lives of soldiers in the Soviet Army. Not only was art imitating life in film and literature, but life could imitate art in a process that has been called folklorization [Rothstein 1995: 82], in which works originating in elite or mass culture acquire the typical characteristics of folklore, including circulation in multiple variants, anonymity of authorship, and interpersonal performance.

The second goal of this article is to examine what functions folksongs had in their original performance contexts in the lives of Red Army soldiers as recorded in primary sources. Clearly, there was usually, if not always, an element of entertainment in these performances, but folklore performances are characteristically anchored in specific events, especially ones perceived as specially marked out from "ordinary" life [see Ben-Amos 1971]. This article considers who performed the songs and when, where, and why they were performed.

To answer these research questions, I looked at references to the performance of folksongs—despite whether they can be classified as genuine

folklore—in over fifty Russian-language diaries and volumes of letters written by members of the Red Army during the Great Patriotic War. I did not use memoirs written after the war to the avoid the potential distortions involved in memory and memorialization; I restricted myself to sources written during the war itself that reflected the everyday life of ordinary soldiers. (4) For the same reason, I did not use the diaries of generals, who would have had limited contact with ordinary camp life. Though I did use diaries and letters written by *voenkory* [war correspondents embedded with troops], I excluded their published articles because they were written under the control of state censorship and were created partially for propagandistic purposes. That wartime journalism was written in a large part for propagandistic purposes was not unique to the Soviet Union; all combatant countries controlled what journalists could publish, and war correspondents were under military supervision.

In this work, I emphasize the performance of songs by soldiers themselves, not by professional entertainers. During the Great Patriotic War, Soviet officials made it a priority to provide artistic entertainment to frontline troops. For example, they created Концертные фронтовые бригады [frontline concert brigades], which were magnificent vehicles to entertain troops. In these brigades, one could find almost all the performing arts. Among these performances were shows that dated to prerevolutionary times, live performances, stage concerts, classical music performances, and performances that were directly ordered by the Kremlin. The staff of the brigades, both men and women, came from various artistic backgrounds, including in theaters, concert halls, conservatories, the film industry, etc. [Stites 1995: 126–27]. Staff consisted of both volunteers and mobilized performers. The main governing body that organized these units was the Союз работников искусств [the Union of Arts Workers]. This committee from the first day of the war were given instructions by the government and military authorities to initiate performances. When the war broke out, the Union of Arts Workers sent a letter to recruitment offices and railway stations, notifying them that artists would accompany navy and army units on the front [Kuznetsova 1996: 372].

Hundreds of diaries and letters from the Great Patriotic War have been published. To limit the material under consideration here, I took my primary sources from the online library *Военная Литература* [War Literature], a non-commercial repository of military literature that has been in operation since 2001 and is rated as a "top 100" site on Rambler, one of the main Russian internet browsers. (5) I utilized all the available wartime sources in the "Diaries and letters" section, excluding civilian and non-Russian-language sources. The total number of sources came to fifty-two, although not all provided equally rich information.

I conducted global searches for the following keywords in all their inflected forms:

1 Instruments: балалайка [balalaika], баян [bayan], гармошка [accordion], гармонь (на гармошке) [(on the) accordion], and гитара (на гитаре) [(on the) guitar].
2 Genres: музыка [music], песенка [song], песни [songs], плач [weeping], пляски [dance], припев(ка) [refrain], причитание [lamentation], стихи [poems], строки [lines], фольклор(ный) [folklore(ic)], частушка [ditty], and четверостишие [quatrain].
3 Performance-related verbs and verbal nouns: играть [to play], исполнение [performing], исполнять/исполнить [to perform], написать [to write], напеть [to hum], певать/петь [to sing], поиграть [to play a little], плясать [to dance], сыграть [to play], спеть [to sing], and сочинить/сочинять [to compose].
4 Other: звуки [voices], катюша [Katiusha], and смех [laughter].

For each "hit" in the search, I skimmed the context to determine whether the example was relevant. I copied each relevant example along with its surrounding context—usually, the entire letter or diary entry. I then did a close reading to determine who performed the songs, where and when they were performed, and why they were performed if it was stated explicitly.

Frontline Music During the Great Patriotic War

The Great Patriotic War was very productive for the arts, not only literature with more than 150 major works published during the war from 1941 to 1945 but also music [Brintlinger 2012: 91]. Nearly one hundred songs were composed during the first days of the war in Moscow alone [Sokhor 1944: 249]. Songs composed during the war tended to linger in popular memory and are frequently mentioned in post-war memoirs.

Even before the Great Patriotic War, it was widely recognized that songs were vital for raising both military and civilian morale, inspiring patriotism, and unifying citizens around the state. The editor of the anthology *Красноармейский фольклор* [Red Army Folklore] notes that when folklorists asked an old partisan which songs had been sung in his detachment he answered, "Бойцу без песни никак нельзя. С песней и умирать и голодать легче" [A warrior cannot live without a song. It is easier to die or starve when you have a song] [Sidel'nikov 1938: 9].

In the 1930s, songs highlighted the country's readiness against unnamed adversaries. For example, the 1938 song "Если завтра война" [If tomorrow war comes], written by the well-known Soviet poet Vasiliy Lebedev-Kumach, was one of the most famous songs at the time:

Если завтра война, если враг нападет,
Если темная сила нагрянет,
Как один человек, весь советский народ
За любимую Родину встанет.

> If tomorrow war comes, if the enemy attacks,
> If the dark force comes up,
> All the Soviet people, as one man
> Shall rise for the free Motherland.

This song, performed as a march, exemplifies the official 1930s' emphasis on массовые песни [mass songs], that is songs intended for singing by large groups and expressing collective emotions at the expense of individual ones [Rothstein 1995: 76]. The song additionally highlights the government's desire to prepare Soviet citizens for war that was also seen in intensified civil-defense training and in visual and verbal propaganda in the later 1930s.

One such mass song was "Священная война" [Holy War], which was composed by A. V. Aleksandrov with words by V. I. Lebedev-Kumach during the first two days of the war. The song, officially sponsored and used as a national anthem—"the musical emblem of the war" [Rothstein 1995: 79]— was published in newspapers on 24 June, and from 26 June onwards it was customarily performed on railway platforms to troops who were being sent to the front. It also served as the daily morning wake-up call on Soviet Radio. It was very popular not just during but after the war as well, often eliciting strong feelings in audiences [Rothstein 1995: 79].

It is well documented that "Holy War" had a strong motivational effect on Soviet listeners, military as well as civilian. One of the women interviewed by Svetlana Alexievich for her book *The Unwomanly Face of War*, who had been wounded in the first days of the conflict, recalled:

> I was taken to the field hospital from there. We lay on the floor next to each other. Many of us got sick then I had a high fever. Chills. I lay there—I cried. The door to the ward opened, the doctor says from the threshold (he couldn't get any further, the mattresses were lying so close to each other): "Ivanova has plasmodium in her blood." Me, that is. She didn't know that for me nothing could have been scarier than this plasmodium, ever since I read about it in a textbook back in the sixth grade. And at that moment the radio played: "Arise, vast country…" I heard this song for the first time then. "I'll recover," I thought, "and go to the front at once." [2017: 40]

Yet "Holy War" did not remain merely "official"; it was also performed in individual settings. Another of Alexievich's informants, Tamara Lukyanovna Torop, recalled:

> The war was going on. I was growing up. In the evenings papa and I sang "The Internationale" and "The Holy War"; Papa accompanied on the accordion. When I turned eighteen, he went with me to the recruiting office. [2017: 172]

Folklorists might not consider "Holy War" to be a folksong; besides having known authors, it was institutionalized and officially promoted in newspapers and on the radio. It did not undergo any adaptations into new versions typical of folklore. Its language is that of high rhetoric, quasi-religious rather than folksy. Yet statements like Torop's suggest that it was adopted by Soviet citizens as their own outside of official performance contexts in person-to-person communication, that is the essence of folklore, as Ben-Amos notes:

> For the folkloric act to happen, two social conditions are necessary: both the performers and the audience have to be in the same situation and be part of the same reference group. This implies that folklore communication takes place in a situation in which people confront each other face to face and relate to each other directly. [1971: 12–13]

Songs that undeniably meet these folkloristic criteria for folksongs were quick to appear. The song "Двадцать второго июня, ровно в четыре часа" [On the twenty-second of June, at exactly four o'clock] was first documented in the fall of 1941 [Rothstein 1995: 77]. Even here, the tune was taken from a pre-war popular love song, "Синий Платочек" [The Blue Kerchief]. Significantly, as Rothstein points out, this earliest known folksong of the war was an expression not of mass but of individual emotions. Soon after the beginning of the war, lyric songs—that is, songs expressing individual emotions rather than the collective spirit of 1930s "mass songs"— gained new acceptance:

> "On the twenty-second of June" exemplifies the "interactive" character of the wartime repertoire: songs by professional composers and lyricists provoked responses and reworkings, and old melodies acquired new texts written by (often anonymous) amateur poets. World War II was a time when the Soviet concept of "mass songs" (*massovye pesni*), songs for the masses, took on the new meaning of songs by the masses. [Rothstein 1995: 77].

This change of emphasis was already recognized during the war. In February 1942, Aleksei Surkov, a well-known poet and the author of numerous articles on poetry and songs, wrote, "Песни хочется не только распевать Песни хочется и напевать" [You don't always want to sing songs at the top of your lungs. You also want to hum them, in private] [Rothstein 1995: 94]. Surkov also observed that, since the start of the war, even published (i.e., state-controlled) poetry was focused more on individual feelings, expressed in a lyrical manner and emphasizing the individual side of front-line folklore [Rothstein 1995: 87].

One of the main characteristics of folklore is variation; its anonymity leads to a sense of collective ownership [Brunvand 1998: 12]. Thus "On the twenty-second of June" quickly developed numerous variants. The same is true of another iconic song of the war, "Katiusha" written in 1938 by Mikhail Isakovskii. This song is not originally a folksong, although it draws on both the musical and verbal

motifs of genuine folksongs; it is about a greeting sent by a young girl, Katiusha, to her beloved who is serving as a border-guard in a distant region. Katiusha asks her beloved to guard their motherland just as she protects their love. In the years before the war, "Katiusha" was one of the most popular pieces of Soviet popular music, and it was perceived by the Soviet public as "one of their own" [Rozanov 1964: 310)]. During the war, it underwent full "folklorization"; the folklorist Rozanov collected over fifty variants [Rothstein 1995: 78].

Soldiers sang not just on the front but also in hospitals. Because the wounded often belonged to different units, their contacts with fellow patients gave them opportunities to transmit tunes and lyrics via the folk interpersonal transmission process. Wounded soldiers, when they were recovering, also had more time for leisure, including music and verse. To be sure, it was rare for soldiers to sing publicly because hospitals enforced a regime of quiet, except when official concert brigades came to entertain wounded soldiers. Music, both public and private, helped soldiers overcome the trauma of combat [Pushkarev 1995: 35]. A vivid depiction of the value that music could have on patient morale is found in the memoirs of V. Viazovskii:

> Shvachko [a severely wounded soldier] asked the surgeons in a muted tone, "Allow me to sing before the operation, to ease my soul. Have them bring the guitar." What he asked for was unusual; however, his request was granted as a very rare exception. They brought the guitar and he, nearly in a whisper, sang several lines from the song about the Motherland: "Great is my motherland…" Shvachko died on the operation table." [1978: 27]

Posidelki

As a traditional context for folksongs and dances, the *posidelka* was a seasonal form of youth gathering in the autumn-winter time. Ostensibly, posidelki were convened for certain types of collective work among unmarried girls of a village, but everyone understood that the unmarried young men of the village would show up sooner or later, uninvited, to socialize and customarily bring treats and musical instruments. These events usually included jokes, flirtation, games, singing, and dancing, as well as unsupervised courting. Typically, they were held in empty cottages, borrowed or rented buildings, or the front rooms of bathhouses [Uzenëva 2009: 196–197].

Posidelki were characteristically cheerful, often rowdy events. To go with that atmosphere, participants often performed *chastushki*—humorous or satirical songs in colloquial language. Thus is a very popular genre, recorded from the nineteenth century to the present by anonymous authors and circulated via the interpersonal contact characteristic for folklore. Chastushki can be a poetic way of responding to current events, so they are often narrative in character. However, they can also include second-person pronouns and satirize the behaviors of members of the audience. Structurally, they consist of one or more quatrains in an

ABAB rhyme pattern; each line generally has a maximum of four stressed syllables. The songs are typically performed loudly in a fast tempo, often with the accompaniment of an accordion, guitar, or balalaika [Lazutin 1975: 444-445]. The words can be traditional or improvised on traditional models to fit the occasion. (6) However, chastushki are not always sung at the top of one's lungs; they can also be read as poetry without any musical accompaniment [Kviatkovskii 1966: 334]. This may be the case for some of the front-line transmissions that are mentioned in diaries or letters without any details about their performances.

As Z. Vlasova [1963: 149] notes, the subject matter of chastushki varies, but the genre is characteristically a means of expressing a performer's own perspectives. Thus, even though they are not lyrical, chastushki during the time of the Great Patriotic War provide a good example of re-focusing on individual experiences, as mentioned above, because chastushki can vividly convey emotions aroused by the events of war.

The performance of chastushki in wartime conditions is documented in one of the diaries of Timofei Sergeevich Liadskii, a fighter pilot who received the highest military honor, Hero of the Soviet Union, in 1945. Liadskii was born in Kirovohrad Oblast (now Ukraine) in 1913; he began his postsecondary studies in Leningrad but soon transferred to the Military Aviation School in Engels. Skilled in flying several types of aircraft, he was sent to the front in 1942 and flew a total of 185 combat missions. After the war, he lived in Vitebsk and worked in transport aviation at the local airport. He died in 1995.

Liadskii began keeping a diary in May 1942, when he was stationed on the Kaliningrad front, and stopped in May 1945, the month of the victory in Czechoslovakia, where some of the final battles of the war were fought. His diaries, first published in 2001, report a long series of events, often very similar, juxtaposed with the impressions and emotions of a sensitive man longing for peace and home [Liadskii 2001]. As recounted by Liadskii, the everyday life of pilots alternated between monotony and danger. They had to fly combat missions in often challenging weather conditions. If they were shot by enemy anti-aircraft guns or fighter planes, they could burn up in mid-air or be maimed or killed in crash landings or parachute jumps, after which they could be captured by the enemy. Constantly facing violent death, pilots often expressed fatalistic opinions, some of which Liadskii quotes. We read in his diaries that, when fighter pilots received their pay, they immediately sent it to their families or loved ones or else quickly squandered it in bouts of partying. The reason was simple: tomorrow, the money might not be needed because death was hovering around them.

While the tone of Liadskii's diaries is mostly dark, at times he recounts how the members of his unit spent their time in cheerful gatherings. On 13 December 1942, on the Kaliningrad front, he and his friends attended what was clearly a posidelka, held despite wartime hardship. Liadskii portrays the posidelka as a very cheerful event and depicts the scene in a detailed way, even mentioning how local attendees were dressed. Evidently, he wanted to emphasize the "folksiness" of the gathering as inside the cottage, several teenagers and younger children were seated on the floor. (7) Most wore traditional peasant clothing—*kozhukhi*

[sheepskin jackets] and *valenki* [felt boots]. Only a few had modern shoes, acquired in visits to the city, and only one of the girls was wearing a dress that was not homemade.

An older man with an accordion was playing music, and some of the girls were dancing in a folk style. Soon some of the girls began singing a chastushka. The words had a non-narrative and comic character, bantering with the soldiers about their stinginess—evidently, they failed to bring the treats expected on such occasions—and their attempts to romance the girls. Liadskii provides no information about the author of the chastushka; it may have been improvised for the occasion, following traditional models:

Здравствуйте, военные,
Как вы поживаете?
Все девчата говорят,
Что плохо принимаете...

Он военный, он военный,
Он военный—непростой.
Он на севере—женатый,
А на юге холостой. [Liadskii 2001]

Hello, soldiers
How are you doing?
All the girls say,
That you're not good at playing host...

He's a soldier, he's a soldier,
He's a soldier, not an ordinary guy.
In the north—he's married,
And in the south—he's a bachelor.

What we see in this entry in Liadskii's diary is a fully traditional event; the peasant girls (and, presumably, their visitors) seem to be behaving just as their ancestors might have in the 1880s. The verses show that some of the folklore experienced by frontline soldiers was traditional and pre-Soviet even under wartime conditions.

Additional evidence for the performance of chastushki in frontline conditions can be found in a 1942 entry in the diaries of Pavel Luknitskii, who worked as a special war correspondent for the state news agency TASS. From 1941 onwards, he participated in the defense of Leningrad and then in counterattacks. In the blockade of Leningrad, he participated not only in military operations, but he also interacted with civilians suffering extreme hardships. In the 1960s, he complied his frontline diaries and published them under the title *Ленинград действует* [Leningrad Acts]. (8) Luknitskii wrote his diaries in a factual rather than impressionistic manner, as he himself states in the introduction,

and provided a tremendous number of details, not just about battle scenes, but also about the everyday lives of the heroic defenders of the city.

Luknitskii discusses the performance of a chastushka in his entry for 7 October 1942 [1971]. At that time, he was stationed on the Leningrad front; he was embedded in the Nevskiy Operational Group during the Sinyavino offensive. The audience for the chastushka performance included infantrymen and female anti-aircraft gunners of the Thirteenth Battery. They had gathered for a ceremony in which the commanding officer, Major Zengbush, read a letter commending the unit and announced the promotion of several of its members, starting with the battery officer Platov, who had recently shot down his tenth airplane. While the event was an official ritual, Zengbush himself set the tone for a transition to more informal interactions, as he personally embraced and kissed those being promoted. After the commander, *batia* [daddy], left, the attendees continued to celebrate on an unofficial footing, and the event began to be reminiscent of a peasant posidelka with young women and men socializing together.

The chastushka that Luknitskii cites was more suitable for the celebratory atmosphere than a somber, lyrical song would have been. Unlike the chastushki recorded by Liadskii above, this song was new rather than traditional; the words were composed by Luknitskii himself, but they were also performed in an entirely folkloric manner, spontaneously and from memory, by the unit cook and gunner Dusya, whose "cunning eyes were sparkling" [Luknitskii 1971]. Luknitskii provides no information about the tune to which it was sung.

The chastushka, which is written from the perspective of a woman, is a narrative of individual experience; it does not focus on the official "heroes" of the occasion but instead on the courage of a rank-and-file female anti-aircraft gunner who did not receive a medal. He writes:

Первый раз дошла до фронта,
Но бояться не пришлось,
Столько фрицев с небосклона
В землю носом сорвалось!

Из отечественной пушки
Научилась я стрелять,
Навалила у речушки
Пикировщиков штук пять.

Если в сене есть иголка,
Все равно ее найду!
От зенитного осколка
Фрицы с неба упадут!

Ехал гад на самолете,
Да нарвался на стрелка,
Коль ты гад—лежи в болоте,

А не лезь под облака!

Катит он Илья-пророком,
По-над тучей, в город мой,
Да пришлёпнется он боком
К ленинградской мостовой! [Luknitskii 1971]

It was her first time at the front,
But there was no need to be afraid,
So many Fritzes went nose-first
From the heavens to the earth!

From our cannon of the Fatherland,
I learned how to shoot,
By the stream, I downed
Some dive-bombers, about five of them.

If there's a needle in the haystack,
I'm still going to find it.
From the battery's shrapnel,
The Fritzes are falling from the sky!

The vermin came in an airplane,
And got ripped apart by our fire.
If you're vermin, stay in the swamp.
Don't crawl up to the clouds!

There he goes like Elijah the Prophet,
Above the storm clouds, to my city;
Let him get smashed up sideways,
Onto the Leningrad pavement!

Dusya performed the chastushka in a ritualized and collective context. While singing, she "grabs the shoulders of the first soldier that she comes across and starts dancing with him," again as would be likely to happen at a peasant posidelka [Luknitskii 1971]. There is no hierarchy during this event; the cook and, probably, other members of the battery sing and dance with the infantrymen, regardless of rank.

Folklorists previously used the term "fakelore," coined by Richard Dorson in 1950, to deprecate writings by professional authors that are presented to the public as examples of folk creations but do not meet most of the criteria for defining authentic folklore—transmitted traditionally, passed by word of mouth over time, typically anonymous, and informally shared. Nevertheless, contemporary folklorists have examined fakelore itself as a reflection of traditional culture and have shown that it can function as a substitute for the real

thing in times of need [Brunvand 1997: 6]. This is clearly the case for Luknitskii's chastushka, written at the front for frontline combatants. Although a member of the intelligentsia, Luknitskii understood the appropriate structure, tone, and style required by the folk genre, and his composition was accepted and performed as a "real" chastushka, no different from the traditional ditties that the participants of the event might had heard in their pre-war lives.

Rites of Passage

During the Great Patriotic War, songs and poems were also performed during rituals, both official and improvised. Occasions of both kinds can be seen in entries from the wartime diaries of Dmitri Alekseyevich Shcheglov. Shcheglov was a member of the Soviet intelligentsia. He was born in 1898, and his father was a military doctor; during the October Revolution, he worked as a messenger in Smolnyi and then served in the Baltic Fleet (one of the hotbeds of Revolutionary fervor) until 1925. A playwright, Shcheglov was the author of the plays *Пурга* [Blizzard], *Побег* [Escape], and *Девичье озеро* [Maiden Lake], among others. When the war started in 1941, he volunteered to join a fighter battalion; later in the war he worked in the political department of the army. He also participated in combat missions ranging from Leningrad to Berlin.

One ritual, which Shcheglov vividly describes in his diary, is as a rite of initiation. The ceremony took place on the Leningrad front on 21 January 1942 [Shcheglov 1960]. About two hundred soldiers—the entire regiment, including the commanders—assembled in a tight formation on a lawn surrounded by a "grey forest." As the day was very cold, they were dressed in jackets, valenki, and fur caps with earflaps. The atmosphere, as described by Shcheglov, was "proud and official" rather than intimate. The ceremony began with a greeting speech from the head of the Red Army political department, Pankov. After this, there was a switch to a more personal focus, as Sergeant Major Ivan Dmitrievich Vezhlivtsev, a famed sniper who was soon thereafter awarded the order of Hero of the Soviet Union, shared his experiences on the front. (9)

Then the entire assembly collectively recited an "Клятва истребителей" [Oath of the destroyers] in verse. This was not the standard soldier's oath "военная присяга" [military oath], recited individually by all recruits to the Red Army before being trained or even receiving a uniform in a ritual that initiated them into military status. According to Shcheglov, he and poet Lev Levin received orders to write a new oath for the soldiers graduating from sniper training. Following Vezhlivtsev's speech, the oath was performed collectively—not individually, like the basic military oath—with the initiates repeating after Shcheglov himself. After taking the oath, the soldiers threw their fur hats in the air with exclamations of "hurrah." Finally, the political director, with tears in his eyes, closed the ritual by shouting the slogan "Вперед, на победу" [Forward, to victory].

This performance is a clear example of a rite of passage initiating participants into a new status. According to the anthropologist Victor Turner,

during times of social displacement, rites create comradeship as well as a sense of the sacred. Turner calls the solidarity created in rituals communitas (Latin for community). Communitas is necessary for establishing a person's position in a social structure, which involves the recognition of generalized bonds and social ties within the commune [Turner 1969: 360]. Thus, when Shcheglov read the Sniper's Oath, echoed by the initiates, he felt, as he records in his diary, "excitement and an uncommon feeling of love for all those soldiers" [Shcheglov 1960: 266]. He praises the success of this work on the morale of the collected soldiers—that is, its effect in creating communitas.

It is particularly significant that Shcheglov and Levin composed the oath in verse in what Shcheglov calls "былинным стилем" [byliny style]. Byliny is a genre of Russian folk epic—verse legends about knights and heroes (богатыри) and historical events in medieval times [Kviatkovskii 1966: 68]. Central to byliny are images of heroes endowed with remarkable strength or skills, admirable moral qualities, and self-sacrificing devotion to the motherland. Because of this, byliny are probably more important to Russian national identity than any other form of folklore.

Shcheglov and Levin's use of an ancient epic form followed established precedents. In the pre-war period, folksingers, with the encouragement of the state, began composing patriotic works in traditional styles; their main emphasis was Russia's high military position in the historical context. When the war started, these folk poets joined the war effort by composing and performing new byliny [Miller 1990: 14-15]. In the given example, Shcheglov celebrates heroism in the Soviet Union by using the traditional byliny style. The new bylina with its ancient style and subject-matter was intended to inspire its audience with a sense of belonging to a grand tradition. The event that Shcheglov describes had the function of a ritual of initiation—a rite of passage in which the community symbolically took initiates out of their old status as plain soldiers so that they could be reborn into their new status and transformed into a select group of heroes.

Shcheglov's choice of the byliny form was very timely. The most famous byliny depict feats of valor by the heroes Dobrynia Nikitich, Ilia Muromets, and Alesha Popovich [Miller 1990: 15]. In the early days of the Great Patriotic War, these ancient heroes were mobilized in official propaganda for the war effort.

The resurgence of the heroes' theme was undoubtedly inspired, in part, by Stalin's reference to medieval Russian heroes in his speech on Red Square on 7 November 1941:

> Let the courageous image of our great ancestors — Alexander Nevsky, Dimitry Donskoy, Kuzma Minin, Dimitry Pozharsky, Alexander Suvorov, Mikhail Kutuzov - inspire you in this war! Let the victorious banner of the great Lenin fly above you!" [1997: 86]

Stalin's words were quoted on several posters featuring the "great ancestors" as ghost warriors inspiring or fighting alongside Red Army troops. The theme of

the "great ancestors" could be explicitly juxtaposed with references to the heroes of folklore.

Shcheglov's verse oath has a narrative and serious character. It incorporates motifs and phrases from actual byliny. In its conclusion, it makes each initiate into an embodiment of the trio of knights Muromets, Nikitich, and Popovich:

> Подымайтесь, советские витязи!
> Наши славные Добрыни Никитичи,
> Ильи Муромцы да Алеши Поповичи!
> Стойте крепко грудью могучею
> За добро и за ласку великую,
> За привольные нивы родимые!
> Размахнись рука саблею острою,
> Бей по недругу, пуля меткая!
> Не стоять врагу на родной земле,
> Не топтать цветов, не сжигать домов,
> Не затмить ему солнца нашего! [Shcheglov 1960: 266]

> Arise, Soviet knights!
> Our glorious Dobrynia Nikitiches,
> Ilya Murometses, and Alesha Popoviches!
> Stand firm with your mighty breasts,
> For good and for our great love,
> For our vast native fields!
> Hand, swing the sharp sabre.
> Strike at the enemy, bullseye bullet!
> The enemy will not stand on our native land,
> Not trample its flowers, not burn its homes,
> He will not eclipse our sun!

In his diary, Shcheglov records a more spontaneous rite of passage that also involves verse. On 25 November 1941, he received an order recalling him from his battalion, which was at the time stationed on the Leningrad front near the Neva River. The next day was to be his last at the front. Unable to sleep, he tried to get out of his trench, but he immediately dropped down because an enemy shell exploded nearby. He called to the second unit and told them he wanted to say goodbye to his friends, if possible. In a wide field that contained the ruins of a forest, there was a path that branched out to all the other units and platoons. Shcheglov's fellow servicemen Lobasov and Ulyanov and the political instructor Mironchik waited for him there. They immediately set out for to a *zemlyanka* [dugout] in the snow-covered forest. Shcheglov spoke briefly about the circumstances of his departure and his desire to create a gathering for a farewell—in other words, to implement a ritual of leave-taking.

Saying goodbye in life-and-death situations tends to be fraught with emotion and ritual significance. During the farewell gathering, Shcheglov's friend

Lobasov poured tea. Then Mironchik raised a toast with a glass of wine. Drinking together often features in rites of passage, both as a symbolic form of sharing in the new state and as a symbolic form of separation from the old state [van Gennep 1960: 29]. As Shcheglov describes it, Mironchik suddenly lowered his glass and began singing in a ritualistic manner, in an enthusiastic and slightly "naive" manner [Shcheglov 1960: 236]. Presumably, Shcheglov uses the word *naivnost'* [naiveté] to signal that the style of singing was simplistic, different from polished, professional performances.

Над Балтикой серой холодные ветры,
Осенние тучи кружат.
Ты помнишь, товарищ, боев километры
К победе ведут Ленинград.
Такого, как он, не найдешь ты на свете,
Он—город сражений, он—город-герой.
В нем матери, жены и малые дети
С надеждой следят за тобой. [Shcheglov 1960: 236]

Over the grey Baltic blow cold winds,
Autumn clouds encircle it.
You remember, comrade, kilometers of fights,
Led Leningrad to victory.
You won't another city like it in the world.
It is a city of battles. It is a hero of a city.
In it, your mothers, wives, and little children,
Are following you with hope.

After Mironchik finished singing, Shcheglov reports, nobody said anything for a while; they drank in silence (a typical marker at ritual boundaries). This suggests that each listener was immersed in his own world of emotions, sharing in the rite. Shcheglov broke the silence by asking Mironchik whether the poem was his own work. He acknowledged that it was and added that Shcheglov could now depart with good emotions.

In sum, the shared event described by Mironchik became an improvised rite of passage, marking Shcheglov's departure from the collective to a new social status. Compare the Russian rite of присесть на дорогу [sitting for the journey], when a traveler is about to depart for a long term, that also involves an obligatory period of silence. Although many older folkways were gradually disappearing in the Soviet Union, there was a constant need to create new rituals; songs and verses were typical markers that separated an occasion as ritual rather than as part of the everyday.

"Frontline Folklore" and Folklorization

In several of the diaries that I investigated, authors mention texts that they themselves call "frontline folklore," in recognition of the fact that these new texts were being transmitted by traditional means, just like folklore. One poignant example of such a text is detailed in a letter written by Lieutenant Nikolai Chekhovich to his fiancée Shura on 23 January 1944 and published by one of the foremost state publishers, Молодая Гвардия [Young Guard] in 1945 [Chekhovich 1945:90].

The 23 January letter to Shura, sent from the Leningrad front, was the last that Chekhovich was able to write for himself; he was seriously wounded the next day and died soon thereafter in a military hospital. Chekhovich writes in detail about his preparations for an attack planned for the next day. He says that, if he survives the battle, he will tell Shura all about it in detail. He also tells her that he will be carrying her last letter with him into battle:

> И если мне суждено пройти невредимым сквозь огонь штур¬ма, оно пройдёт вместе со мной. Ощущение его в кармане наполняет сердце радостью и еще больше воодушевляет меня. [Chekhovich 1945: 91]
>
> And if I am fated to go unharmed through the fire of the storm, [the letter] will go with me. Feeling it in my pocket fills my heart with joy; even more, it inspires me.

This reminds Chekhovich of a frontline song, which he proceeds to quote:

> В грудной карман зеленой гимнастерки
> Вложил я трижды читанную весть
> И в бой пошел на штурм немецких дзотов,
> Неся на сердце и любовь и месть!
> Твое письмо прибавило мне силы,
> Оно придало мужества в бою.
> Я сквозь огонь фашистов ураганный
> Пронес в кармане весточку твою [Chekhovich 1945: 91-92]
>
> Into the pocket of the green tunic [it went]
> I put the message I had read three times
> And into battle to storm the German pillbox went I,
> Carrying both love and revenge in my heart!
> Your letter gave me strength.
> It gave me courage in battle.
> I [went] through the hurricane of fascist fire.
> While I had your message in my pocket.

The song quoted by Chekhovich recalls a romantic song from Konstantin Simonov's famous 1941 poem "Wait for Me," which was adapted as a popular song and inspired countless wartime love poems [Rothstein 1995: 84]:

Жди меня, и я вернусь,
Всем смертям назло.
Кто не ждал меня, тот пусть
Скажет—повезло!
Не понять нездавшим, им,
Как среди огня
Ожиданием своим
Ты спасла меня.
Как я выжил,—будем знать
Только мы с тобой,—
Просто ты умела ждать,
Как никто другой! [Simonov 1949: 159-160]

Wait for me and I'll come back,
Escaping every fate!
"Just a lot of luck!" they'll say,
Those that didn't wait.
They will never understand
How, amidst the strife,
By your waiting for me dear,
You had saved my life!
Only you and I will know
How you got me through!
Simply—you knew how to wait!
No one else but you!

Chekhovich is our only source for this "слова фронтовой песенки" [little frontline song] [Chekhovich 1945: 91]. The context in which it was communicated was an informal, shared event; Chekhovich sang it along with his soldiers. The motivation for this song is compelling. The author says that he is ready to do anything and go anywhere with these soldiers. In a sense, this song and its collective performance give him a strong motivation. It inspires not just his individual emotions but a sense of communitas. It is worth emphasizing that the officer is singing the folksong along with his enlisted men without any notion of hierarchy.

Another reference to frontline folklore occurs in the diaries of a young soldier with the extraordinary name of Elektron Evgen'evich Priklonskii [2008]. Born in 1924, Priklonskii began his diary while studying at the Chelyabinsk Tank Technical School (June 1942–early 1943) at the age of 18, in June 1942 and continued it through Victory Day (8 May 1945). He describes months of intense fighting in difficult living conditions, often experiencing half-starvation, but he also praises the professionalism of his instructors who trained students to fight on the front. Later, Priklonskii served as a lieutenant in a unit of the Самоходная артиллерийская установка [Self-propelled motorized artillery] and took part in many combat missions on the territory of the Soviet Union, Latvia, Ukraine,

Estonia, Poland, and Germany. He recounts how he had to change tanks and units repeatedly and how he lost comrades. Despite these traumatic events, Priklonskii's style is not melancholy but instead full of subtle humor.

In his diary entry for 2 August 1943, while on the Belgorod front, Priklonskii describes a spontaneous performance of folksongs after dinner. One of the tanks was encircled by several others. From that direction came the sound of an accordion, and singing and whistling could be heard. These unfamiliar songs grabbed his attention. Priklonskii came closer so that he would not miss a word of one song, which he describes as "Песня была танкистская, из фронтового фольклора" [a tank song from frontline folklore] [Priklonskii 2008]. The song has a serious, narrative character:

> Прощай, родная, не забудь.
> Проводят нас в последний путь.
> Слышна команда: «Заводи!»
> Разрывы встали впереди… [Priklonskii 2008]
>
> Farewell, dear and don't forget [me].
> We are about to set off on our final journey.
> The command is heard: "Start the engines!"
> Explosions are rising ahead…

Priklonskii says that the mood of the song was sad and drawn out, which reminded him of an old miner's song about a young horse driver who died in a mine collapse. Priklonskii gives moving details about the overall atmosphere: the servicemen had strong and stern voices, the field darkened, the black helmets of the tank crews, the heavy dark blocks of tanks, a scarlet sunset, moving tanks, uncovered barrels of tank guns, and nearby rumbling artillery. All this together made an impression on him. His commander, Petya Kuznetsov, was lost in his thoughts, standing next to the gun, and leaning on the gun turret. He stubbed out his cigarette, hiding it in his fist. The song transfixed the young Priklonskii for a while; then he returned to his duties as new orders arrived for the next day's battle.

While Priklonskii writes that he was unfamiliar with this song, it is in fact a frontline remaking of an old miner song entitled "Молодой коногон" [Young Konogon], which dates to pre-revolutionary times and is an adaptation of a version of song entitled "По полю танки грохотали" [Tanks rumbled across the field]. In other words, "Tanks rumbled across the field" is based on the same "Konogon." The song begins with the line "Гудки тревожно загудели" [Sirens began to buzz anxiously], so the song is often referred to by this line. The word konogon means driver of a horse that pulls a trolley in a coal mine [Ushakov 1935]. The song "Young Konogon" became well known when it was sung in the 1939 film *Большая жизнь* [A Great Life] directed by Leonid Lukov and starring Boris Andreev and Mark Bernes. (10) The film is about a small Donbass miner's settlement in the 1930s. In the movie, the song is sung by a character named

Makar Liagotin, performed by Lavrentii Masokha, who plays the tune on an accordion.

The significance of this example is that the song began as miners' folklore, was made famous by a film, and then was re-folklorized in various adaptations during the Great Patriotic War. Folklorization was a widespread phenomenon [Rothstein 1995: 82]. Non-folklore forms easily became folkloric when transmitted repeatedly in wartime conditions, especially when these texts were drawn from soldiers' memories. Soldiers could recite poetry—their own or published—or sing songs from popular culture, but the contexts of these performances did not differ significantly from those in which they sang folksongs.

Conclusions

Amateur performances, including those of folksongs, were an important part of life in the Red Army, not just in official propaganda. These folksongs expressed diverse emotions, ranging from cheerfulness and optimism to lyrical feelings and longing for families and loved ones at home. Singing folksongs gave strength to weary soldiers and helped them keep faith in an ultimate victory. At the same time, the songs fulfilled functions that were not individual but rather communal and collective, making the songs more resemble folkloric performances. This was true not only for actual folksongs, such as chastushki, but even for works by well-known composers. The way that soldiers used the songs at the front belies any clear difference between folklore and popular culture in the process known as folklorization [Rothstein 1995: 82].

The process of folklorization, i.e., the remaking, making variations, or adapting songs, changed the text, melody, or tunes to which they were sung. Considering that these songs spread through oral tradition, by means of word of mouth, rather than through press or publication, demonstrates how folklorization allowed songs to resonate with large masses and effectively address soldiers' feelings [Rothstein 1995: 82–83]. In the context of wartime performances, no clearcut boundary existed between folklore texts and songs from popular culture or between musical pieces and spoken verse. Soldiers recited Esenin and sang songs from pre-war movies and popular broadcasts, but in so doing they turned those poems and songs into their own folklore.

NOTES

1 "Swarthy Girl" is not actually a folksong but rather a popular song with music and lyrics that imitate folk music. However, in the setting of the film it is transmitted and performed like a folksong.

2 The lyrics of the song were written and published by the poet Andrei Ugarov in 1940 in a style imitating folklore. Ugarov was the pseudonym of Iosif Itskok-Aizikovich Ostropol'skii.

3 Throughout his book, Miller emphasizes that many of the texts in this cult of folklore were actually "fakelore—popularized adaptations of folk art" [1989: ix]. I argue in this paper that fakelore was used in the contexts of performance just like actual folklore, so that the distinction is too blurred to be maintained.

4 Merridale [2006: 195–97] discusses how songs were "beloved" by Red Army soldiers, but all the sources that she cites are either memoirs or second-hand accounts.

5 For the history and statistics of the site, see https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Военная_литература_(сайт), consulted 27 October 2023.

6 For example, a journalist writing on 7 August 1942 from Demjansk, near Novgorod, recounts how Red Army soldiers mocked the propaganda broadcast by "Baron von Busch" (General Ernst Busch of the Wehrmacht 16th Army) in the form of a chastushka: "Наши бойцы сочинили не очень благозвучную, но зато правильную частушку" [Our warriors have composed a not very euphonious but nonetheless correct chastushka]. "У фон Буша рожа бита —Мы отметили бандита" [Von Busch has had his ugly mug beaten; we've put our mark on the bandit] [Solonitsyn 1986]. The title of that collection, *For the Sake of Life on Earth* is a quote from the war correspondent and poet Alexander Tvardovsky's "Vasilii Tërkin," a depiction of an everyman soldier that circulated widely among troops during the war.

7 The inclusion of pre-teen children is a non-traditional element here, as posidelki were traditionally held by village youth, i.e., young people who had been recognized by society as of marriageable age.

8 The three volumes of Luknitskii's diaries were published separately in 1961, 1964, and 1968 and in a single volume in 1971.

9 Shcheglov mentions earlier in his diary entry for 13 December 1941 that Vezhlivtsev was already the subject of frontline folklore, as the hero of a song circulated by "Безыменные солдатские поэты" [Nameless soldier poets].

10 "A Great Life" was a big success in 1940 with 18.6 million viewers; the director was awarded the Stalin prize.

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