

Russian Hip Hop and the War in Ukraine

Comparison of Performed Ideologies

ABSTRACT In response to the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia, beginning as early as 2014 but reaching a critical apex in the early parts of 2022, hip hop in Russia has only further cemented its role as a “popular” vehicle for the promotion of cultural activism and sociopolitical critique. Born out of post-Soviet antagonism, imperial hegemony, neoliberal commercialism, and jingoist logic, “Russian” rap is a mouthpiece of contemporary conditions. A tangible vehicle for the rediscovery of post-Soviet optimism and the promise of financial prosperity, rap in Russia both upholds and challenges cultural norms and values. In February 2022, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict turned savage, and what it meant to be Russian and be a Russian rapper changed forever. While some rappers rejected Putin’s actions, others either endorsed Putin or stayed silent. Despite the foreignness of rap to the Russian nation, by studying Russian rap and its response to geopolitical unrest the Russian “popular” thought can be more accurately understood. To ascertain how the invasion was conceptualized and synthesized into rap by the Russian rap community, two Russian rap tracks (Oksimiron, Miron Yanovich Fyodorov, Oida and Husky, Dmitry Kuznetsov, *God of War*) were aesthetically and linguistically analyzed. Lying on divergent sides, they represent polar opposites of Russian rap, each encoding their worldview and position of Russian life in disparate ways, reflecting their respective political voice. While limited in scope, the study provides researchers one possible way to observe how Russian rappers internalize and then aestheticize their political beliefs into their musical style.

KEYWORDS aesthetics, politics, hip hop, Russian rap, Ukraine war, rap

FRAMING THE PICTURE

Having almost completed the second year of Russia’s recent invasion of Ukraine, an extension of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in 2014, studies on political activism’s role in Russian popular culture are vital in understanding how conflict epitomize musical realities. Among the many tools in service of the “cultural reification” of ideology is rap. A genre that historically arose from the dissolution of one type of community, building another from the promising ruins of the first, the study of rap is to study how the marginalized reclaim space in the dominating spaces of majority rule. Reshaping landscapes, hip hop offsets power and ownership by giving agency to the people to shape their own narratives and tell their own stories. The aesthetics of that sonified story, however, are often related to the teller’s perspective.

Moreover, studying rap, as Simon Frith conveyed regarding popular music, requires a prioritization regarding the aestheticization of the sociological element. Or, as Frith put it, that “collective, disruptive cultural effect” has only manifested itself through music interpolating itself in the technologies of human development.¹ Just before and shortly after the beginning of the currently unfolding chapter in Russia’s revanchist fight for Ukrainian domination, many works foregrounded the role of music, culture, and media in the war’s mediation through Russian society. Concentrated focus is required in dissecting how ideologies, power relationships, and national mythologies are fabricated, sustained, and challenged in contemporary Russian culture. This article will show how, in the aesthetics of two ideologically and aesthetically, opposed rappers in contemporary Russia—Oksimiron and Husky—politics are rendered audible to the astute observer. In other words, the politics of the creators are aestheticized and yet decipherable through close readings, which can be decoded by an informed listener, culturally speaking or otherwise.

Rap, while an “invented tradition” in Russia, following its first semi-appearance in 1979 and more formal introduction in 1985, has trailed the country’s journey from late-Soviet utopianism to post-Soviet realism to contemporary Putinist ironic-cynicism.² But how has this ongoing war been rendered “something aesthetic, as Ilya Dagalp and Benjamin J. Hartman write,” is what I seek to understand more concretely in this article. Within the Russian rap community, as life has become more and more neo-Soviet in tenor, many have emigrated, with those staying falling prey to self-censorship or mandatory submission to state power. While rappers such as Timati, Ptakha, and Husky, pro-Donbass, seem antithetical to left-leaning Noize MC, Oksimiron, and FACE, they are inevitably bound together due to their mutual sense of “Russianness.” Each has internalized the notions and philosophy of being Russian in their own ways, however expressed aesthetically in relatively idiosyncratic ways.

In this article I try to understand the interpolation of ideological politics into the aesthetics of Russian rap by looking at two rappers and their corresponding songs, which use the war as the basis of their expressionary languages. To aid this, I will detail three different manners by which Russian rap deals with politics, namely: sociocultural positionality and its relationship to domestic culture and global flows, aesthetics and the furtive motivations that educate the aesthetic choices made, and direct political dialogism with the topical discourses of the day. I will then analyze the two antithetical tracks that use Russia’s invasion as its theme and discuss how each rapper’s viewpoint is expressed musically and textually, paying particular attention to how political ideologies are invoked in each element. The article focuses on “Oida” by Oxford-educated rapper Oksimiron,

1. Simon Frith, “Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music,” in *Taking Popular Music Seriously: Selected Essays* (London: Routledge, 2007): 257–73.

2. The history of rap in Russia is contentious as, in previous research on the women of rap in Russia, the beginnings of ‘Russian’ is not as understood as it seems. The Soviet/Russian singer Sofia Rotaru seems to be one of the first to use the aesthetics of rapping. That is to say, rhythmic chanting that can be understood as an early predecessor of rap outside the standard Mcing which rap is most commonly understood as coming from in the last thirty seconds of her 1979 song ‘My Homeland’. For published work on the theme of women rappers in Russia, see Alina Albertovna Diveeva, “History That Is: Themes And Pragmatics Of Russian-language Women’s Rap,” *Russian rock poetry: text and context*, no. 22 (2022): 281–289.

one of the most well-known Russian rappers throughout the world, and “God of War” by Husky, a rapper located within the Slavophile ideological vein. Both songs successfully reached large audiences within Russia, being circulated online and in concert. Thus, the choices made within the songs concerning aesthetics should not be treated as accidental but purposeful, used to convey a specific point to the listener.

By foregrounding the aesthetic realization of political ideologies in the rap of Oksimiron and Husky, how national and international conflicts are realized in Russian rap aesthetics can be more readily understood with closer readings of their sounding discourses. Popular music, regardless of genre or geography, acts as a mirror of its cultural environment, reflects the zeitgeist of its day, and can be useful in gauging the views of those living within the epoch. Thus, how artists realize this relation in their aesthetic choices can help popular music researchers understand how artists navigate times of great turmoil and change by critically evaluating how musical aesthetics reflect the beliefs of its creators. Whether transparent or covert, the choices made in the construction of a track, song, or album are almost always purposeful. A hidden message, its *raison d'être* must be understood for the analysis to be robust. What is being said? Why? Are you listening?

REVIEWING RAP AND ITS POLITICALITY

Studying the aesthetics of politics in popular music presents many routes for a researcher. I argue, however, that meaning creation and political expression lie at the heart of them all. The reciprocity among listener, creator, and their surroundings can have immediate implications on how politics are musically aestheticized. Frith’s argument for “a sociology of popular music as the basis of an aesthetic theory” echoes this life-politics-aesthetics merger. Others, such as Roy Shuckler argue similarly. Examinations of meaning creation have also branched into semiotic discourses. Brian Longhurst’s foregrounding of “social context,” affect, and visual modalities in the cultivation of meaning have shown the importance of context in popular music study. Cultural theorization has also left an indelible mark on how music is understood as both a method of knowledge creation and world-building more broadly.

Robert Walser’s statement, “Musical interpretations are always open to refinement and contestation, but they are never arbitrary” is a fitting epistemic corollary. In terms of discourse on political expression in popular music, some argue that it is through practical usage that popular music gains its politicality, whereas others contend that it is the discourse generated where politics lie. Historically defined power relations as mediated through “informal processes of socialization” have also been shown to contribute towards popular music’s politicality. John Fiske argues semiotically, while James Garratt foregrounds the role that the political vs. politicized dichotomy plays in invoking musical politics. But music may be political through the promotion of what David Hesmondhalgh calls “human flourishing.” A way to voice the disparate articulations of “plebeian indignation,” in the words of Kostas Savvopoulos and Yannis Stavrakakis, rap seems to do just that.

In research, the study of meaning creation and how rap expresses the experiences of urban neglectfulness, inequalities, marginalization, and discontinuity in post-industrial

modernity is well established. Separate studies by Murray Forman and Kenneth French on the influence of physical geographies on the rap aesthetics demonstrate the multifaceted ways in which meaning and politics can be dialecticized in and through rap. For many, intertextuality carries inherently political potency through shared cultural knowledges, while others have demonstrated the power of sampling in the musical mechanics of black culture. Pertinent are the differentiations between the underground and the mainstream, or the discourse of cultural ownership versus commerciality. The influences of this precarious divide have been studied both musically and culturally. Others argue we now live in a changed world, where the very objectives of hip hop have been systematically altered, and the *raison d'être* of hip hop's artistic mission has changed altogether. As M. K. Asante writes, "Post-hip-hop is not about the death of rap, but rather the birth of a new movement propelled by a paradigm shift." The dawning of metamodernism and the new age of hip hop, a topic for another time as great work on topic has already begun.³

Others argue that studies on subcultures like rap depend on acknowledging its primary objective, "the very-real . . . struggles for identity and subjectivity." Thus, commercialized rap is a post-modern critique of itself, both "from within and without," writes Peter Manuel. Presiding *über alles* is rap's epistemic properties, with scholars such as Wanda Canton arguing for its intrinsically decolonial phenomenology. Rap's politicality is likewise multi-dimensional and long-standing. Peter Turner and Greg Dimitriadis have centered the discourse on the dichotomy of "gangsta" rap vs. conscious rap, or "knowledge rap" vs. "reality rap" as Adam Krims puts it. Of course, rap and its aesthetics have always been historically laced with political topicality as scholars across the hip hop paradigm show.

Russian rap studies, more aptly rap in Russia, having blossomed since its emergence in the mid-2000s, have centered rap's acculturation into late-Soviet/Russian youth culture. The lasting imprint of rap's influence on the development of Russian youth and national identity construction is clear, with others, noting cultural hybridity's importance in establishing rap as an "open" form of cultural communication. Russian popular music's mediation of meaning and politics has been shown to emanate from the choice of language. Yet, globalization has also helped render musical politicality universal. Rap in Russia and its musical aesthetics have not been systematically studied, although I have started the investigation. Nonetheless, meaning creation in Russian rap centers around identity creation and preservation, with commercialization frustrating the process. Recent studies demonstrate how existentialism and the reciprocity between the societally

3. While it is too large for one note, metamodernism is the next stage of cultural philosophizing which sublates modernism and post-modernism, akin to the Hegelian concept of the "negation of the negation." An overcoming of skepticism towards the modernist concepts of coherent linearity regarding history and civilizational progress, reliable segregation between the institutions of fact and fiction, abstract and functional truth, and structured epistemological paradigms towards skeptical optimism, its applicability towards Hip Hop "authenticity" has already been studied. But more is required for the discourse to evolve. Nevertheless, for more on the subject, see Dale Anderson, "Re/presentation Of Hip-Hop: An Exploration Of White Hip-Hop Fans, Consumers And Practitioners," Ph.D. diss., Wayne State University, 2015; Scott Hicken, "Rapping in the Clouds: Shifting Identities and Metamodern Tendencies in Internet Hip-Hop Public Deposited," Bachelors thesis, University of Colorado, 2018.

mediated fabrication of self-identity are integral to Russian rap. Anastasia Denisova and Aliaksandr Herasimenka have shown how community, both digitally mediated and physical, aids in the construction and sustainment of Russian rap cultural fabric. Alina Albertovna Diveeva, however, has argued for a gendered reading of Russian rap's aesthetics. Russian rap, like American rap, was never politics-less, growing out of political disunity. Scholars have shown how politics defines the genre's history and existence, many pointing towards the underground vs. mainstream dichotomy to show politics' diversity. Phillip Ewell has shown Russian rap's subversive politicality through satire and parody with the work of Vasya Oblomov, although since the late-2000s, politics have become far more explicit in the genre of rap.

Despite these advances, there has still been little progress made in coalescing musical aesthetics and political expression within Russian rap in published research. Anna Vilenskaya's 2021 online lecture is one of the few attempts at systematic analysis, while her second lecture on Russian rap charts its history sourcing a group unnamed in conventional academic literature on the subject.⁴ The present study derives its origin from her work and ventures to understand how Russian rap has come to imbue its aesthetics with political dimensionality, not just in terms of textual determinants, as research predominantly focuses on, but musically as well. By piecing together the aesthetic dimensions of Russian rap's politics, a better understanding of how politics touches the less observable planes of discourses emerges. One that can be defined as the "invisible dialectics" of Russian rap that underlines the creation of Russified truth itself, Russianness in its most abstracted formulation. Simply put, the power politics inscribed within the expressionary spaces of aesthetics. If hip hop is "inherently multimodal," as Kate Maxwell and Jonathan Greenaway write, then the search for meaning must change in turn.

RAP IN RUSSIA AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH POLITICS

The political dimensions of Russian rap are varied and numerous, each encapsulating varying degrees of political, social, and cultural contexts that shaped the contemporary manifestation of the artform called Russian rap. Having entered the country during the mid-late 1970s contemporaneously with the expanding "Eurodisco" movement and later international events and illegal cultural trading (*fartsovka*), hip hop culture in Russia was an opportune way for late-Soviet youth to gradually distance themselves from Soviet ideology. Unlike the American original, Russian hip hop culture began with skateboarding, later expanding to include graffiti, DJing, Mcing, and breaking during the 1980s before finally involving rap during the 1990s and formally creating what could be called Russian hip hop culture by the next decade. It is also vital to note the mimetic nature of Russia's hip hop culture at the time, although by the late 90s, a self-sustaining underground had emerged, replete with print channels such as RAPPRESS and Pytuch.

4. Anna Vilenskaya, "Russian rap of the 2000s: How it's done," August 2, 2021, 1:14:15. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xlq6yy1DUng&t=2492s>; "From Baroque to Morgenstern. Lecture by Anna Vilenskaya," June 15, 2021, 1:33:49. <https://youtu.be/O5ftUyPkjE>

Beginning in the 2000s, particularly the late 2000s to early 2010s, consonant with the rise of Putin and his influence, Russian rap culture is now irrevocably connected with and being shaped by political discourses, precarious notions of national identity, and conflicts domestic and abroad. Politics' influence can also be observed in the narratives, aesthetics, sociocultural treatment, and governmental censorship of the artform and its practitioners. Before moving to my analysis of the two rap songs, it is critical to explore how politics and political discourses work through and on Russian rap, mediating the artform and culture. I will first explore Russian rap's sociocultural politicality and the important factors of race, nationalism, and self-identity construction. I will then look at Russian rap's aesthetic politicality, and finally revisit Russian rap under Putin in order to contextualize the multilayered political characteristics of Russian identity as expressed in the study's songs. Given Russia's ongoing war with Ukraine, rap in Russia has moved well past anything "conscious," entering a world of its own.

SOCIOCULTURAL POLITICALITY

Russian rap is a product of hip hop globalization, "a global commonality of connective marginality combined with local elements," write Carol M. Motley and Geraldine Rosa Henderson. Having emerged at a time of widespread change, the acculturation of rap and the technology of "adoption to adaptation" writes Irina Six, reflected a bifurcated desire for commonality with American colleagues and an independent national identity. More importantly, rap represented a desire for self-determination and a greater control over what it meant to belong to a post-Soviet Russia. As scholars have noted, the grosser culture of hip hop, to late- and post-Soviet generations meant a great deal to the youth of the time. A union between the lost and the overlooked between two antithetical worlds, American hip hop was a way to make sense of the fraught ambiguities that the dissolution of the old Soviet world brought. Non-American hip hop is still seen as an "inauthentic" version of its American counterpart.

Despite this, scholars have deemed Russian rap a culturally rooted "social phenomenon", whose decidedly politicized nature finds its roots in Russia's "long-standing tradition of music in the role of counterculture," writes Anna Liebig. Yet the development of a Russian rap culture was less about purposeful countercultural antagonism and more akin to Soviet rock's politicality. In other words, post-Soviet Russian rap culture never sought to be political insofar as political means involvement in political affairs. Instead, Russian rap is "conscious," actively involving itself with the prevailing social issues that affect its practitioners, audiences, and larger society. Thus, as Forman notes, these awoken figures become "the vanguard of social activism" for the hip hop community and its members. Soviet rocker Konstantin Kinchev stated that politics was an inevitable, not chosen, part of the genre; "it is impossible not to write about it and that's all."⁵

5. A. Yu. Goryelkin, "Totalitarianism and Russian Rock," in *Totalitarianism and Totalitarian Consciousness 8th, 9th, and 10th Conference, Proceedings* (Tomsk: Commission for Human Rights in the Tomsk Region, 2006): 59.

Rap in Russia has now, admittedly, evolved far from politics by proxy. Instead, since the mid-late 2000s and the “subjectification” of Russian life altogether, Russian rap has become irrevocably synthesized with politics. Broken into two, yet inevitably each colored by the other, the Russian rap “mainstream” and the “underground” echo the intense alienation and anomia of youth that Russia’s long-standing social, cultural, economic, and political precarity has gestated. While the mainstream feigns high-browness and newfound joy in pleasure and luxury as a method of hijacking processes of economic uplift, the “contemporary underground” rejects mainstreamed violence and employs culturally coded semiotics like the “gopnik” as a method of purposeful alienation to do just the same.

While to say the former is political while the latter is apolitical is erroneous, as well as Russian rap’s requirement to choose sides, it can be said Russian rap is existential. Using official and banal politics to convey disparate forms of Russianness, rap was and is continuously used to negotiate between “glocal” universalism and domestic individuality. The complex politics of Russian rap’s relationship with “racial authenticity” and its influence on how being Russian is enacted through language and embodiment, obfuscates easy identification of “Russian” characteristics in Russian rap. Integrated with Russia’s ongoing problems of class inequality, political corruption, and human rights crisis, however, and hip hop’s main purpose, “speaking truth to power” becomes alive. Rap in Russia, while easily defined as political, is also the Russified representation of endemic class struggle. Or, the polemical feuding between “the individual and the state” and the sound of the “Russian collective unconscious.” In effect, Russian rap is not political per se but rather glocally conscious, with rappers consistently looking for those Russian elements that bind Russians and non-Russians together.

AESTHETIC POLITICALITY

As many like Marina Frolova-Walker outline, Russian rap mediates political discourses aesthetically by taking prevailing social, cultural, and political topics and renegotiating them in the form of rap. For Alexander Gorbachev, Russian rap’s politicality takes the form of justice, everyday life, and activism.⁶ He further outlines the genres “protest rap” and “patriotic rap” as the bifurcated invocation of left and right politicality, similar to Krim’s previously alluded to concept of “knowledge rap” and “reality rap.” But more confrontational involvement in political affairs is the predominant method by which Russian rap works through the political. Garratt’s reworking of musical politics as culturally mediated and purposeful is a convincing method to understand how Russian rappers engage with politics as a conscious choice and circumvented reality.

Yet, as John Street aptly notes, popular culture and politics are inseparable and intimately shaped by each other. Further, even uncompromising pleasure is political insofar as it eschews previously defined normative pleasure. While a rich area of inquiry, Russian rap’s politicality, for the sake of my study, is best understood from the outside in,

6. Alexander Gorbachev, “Russia, do not tear your soul to shreds: I am the same as you,” *Contrapoint* 4 (June 2016).

as most of the discourse deals with its textual politics. Beginning in the mid-1990s, rappers immediately began being political, with the group Bachelor Party releasing the 1992 album “Let’s Talk About Sex.” One of the first vivid examples of hip hop hypersexuality at a time when a no-holds-barred approach towards self-expression was the norm (*chernukha*), politicality was never far from Russian rap. In 1996, Bachelor Party again entered the political arena with their 1996 single, “Vote or We Lose,” part of Boris Yeltsin’s second-term campaign where he employed popular musicians such as Philip Kirkorov and Boris Grebenshchikov in several politically motivated concerts. One further example solidifies this early integration of politics into Russian rap. Namely, Russia’s first mainstream rap battle in 1999, “Beat Battle” (Bit Bitva).

Ostensibly a campaign event for presidential candidate Grigory Yavlinsky, the battle featured prominent teen rappers Detsl, Delfin, and groups such as Bad Balance and others. It ended up in violence, however, as skinhead (*formali*) youth started a confrontation with concert goers (*informali*).⁷ At the turn of the twenty-first century, Russian rap began shifting towards a more commercially friendly, R&B-infused aesthetic sensibility as post-Soviet popular music assimilated structurally and aesthetically with their American and grosser Western counterparts. Digitalization and online dissemination shaped the evolution of Russian rap, leading to the questions, “What is Russian popular music” and “What does it actually sound like?” In Frolova’s study of Russian rap’s textual themes from the 1990s to the mid-2010s, she outlines clear textual borrowings from American “gangsta rap” which then integrate with domestically topical themes.

During the 1990s, themes such as good cop/bad cop, ideologized media, and the “good citizen” were assimilated with Russian themes by the 2000s. Themes like corrupt politicians, national existentialism, and geopolitical conflict, such as the Chechnyan war, show how rap in Russia dislodged itself from the West, albeit incompletely. Another aspect is the prominent divide between “underground” and “mainstream” Russian rap’s usage of political subject matter, especially during the late 2000s and especially following Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012. While satire was a defining element of Russian rap prior to 2012, the contested return of Putin reformed how political were addressed in rap, leading to a return of satire. As Elena Grishina noted, rap culture is the “self-reflection of the generation.”⁸ Despite Kathleen Eaton Feyh’s assertion that mainstream rap is apolitical and avoids “overt criticism of the system,” whereas “underground rap” distrusts the Russian system, “close-knit conformism”⁹ and “symbolic aggression”¹⁰ seem to be Russian rap’s taut reality. A principle theme in Russian rap’s politicized aesthetic, however, is satire and cynicism, political “sublimation,” and genuine frustration.

7. “Beat-battle: trying to figure it out,” *Zvuki.ru*, accessed June 15, 2023. <https://www.zvuki.ru/R/P/2423/>.

8. Elena A. Grishina, “Russian Rap as a Self-Reflection of the Generation,” *RSUH/RGGU Bulletin. Series Philosophy. Social Studies. Art Studies*, no. 3 (2019): 86–96. <https://doi.org/10.28995/2073-6401-2019-3-86-96>.

9. Anastasia Denisova and Aliaksandr Herasimenka, “How Russian Rap on YouTube Advances Alternative Political Deliberation: Hegemony, Counter-Hegemony, and Emerging Resistant Publics,” *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 2 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119835200>.

10. Ilya Kukulkin, “Playing the Revolt: The Cultural Valorization of Russian Rap and Covert Change in Russian Society of the 2010s,” *Russian Literature* 118 (2020): 79–105. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ruslit.2020.11.004>.

POST-2000S POLITICALITY

The mid-late 2000s were a time when nearly every facet of Russian life had become, in Foucauldian terminology, “subjectified.” In other words, everything became a subject for some type of exploitation-for-profit scheme and a serf to dominating narratives of selfness and meaning. Or, a hijacking of sovereignty for institutionalized freedom. Putin’s rise to power and consolidation of power and national identity discourses fueled the fervent search for greater clarity on what it meant to be Russian. Along with Putin’s almost immediate cessation of the liberated “blackness” (chernukha) and expressively open climate of the 1990s was the curation of a nationalized Russianness dependent on collective buy-in.

As Helge Blakkisrud notes, Putin had reframed the Russian identity as civic, with ethnic tinges, but something that can be entered into upon the adoption of customs and traditions. But ethno-centric conceptions of Russianness challenged the state-sponsored civic rhetoric, leading to charged disagreements. Eventually, by Putin’s return in 2012 and the middle of the decade, the divide between ethno-centric and civic-centric Russian nationalism was hard to distinguish, the ambiguity having been institutionalized at the highest levels of the government. While some argue “ethnic core nationalism” is a more accurate title for mid-2010s Russian nationalism, others refer to the “imperial syndrome” to explain how the Crimean annexation solidified “Us vs. Them” ideologies. At the beginning of the 2000s, Russian rap was untouched by official censorship and not yet subject to censure, although broader popular music censorship began during the late-2000s, reaching its peak during the mid-2010s. This has been argued to be the consequences of “over-politicization” at a time of increased “social polarization, mobilization, and politicization, as Yauheni Kryzhanouski writes. The return of Putin after Medvedev, following large-scale anti-corruption protests, increased term lengths, stricter controls on communication and media, and a fundamentally centralized nationalist identity with ethno-nationalist sympathies, marked a turning point for Russian rap.

Marlene Laruelle’s note of Russia’s tripartite identity and gradual institutionalization of conservatism is reflected in Russian rap’s formation of indirect politics that Hesmondhalgh argues is music’s true politicality. The “cultural and social valorization” of rap, as Ilya Kukulkin notes, had occurred in the mid-2010s, and was consonant with several developments. Namely, the expanded diversity of subgenres like “cloud rap” and “hookah rap,” the growing popularity of Russian “battle rap” domestically and abroad, an increase in internet mediation of rap culture, as well as the “third wave” of Russian hip hop research. Moreover, aesthetically first Feyh and then Liebig noted that Russian rap’s aesthetics first went from American dependency to something domesticated, what Liebig called “a multi-faceted confrontation of anti-intellectualism.”¹¹ Further still was the occurrence of what Vladimir Zavalov called the “coup of the game.”

11. Anna Liebig, “No Face, No Case: Russian Hip Hop and Politics under Putinism,” *FORUM* 30 (2020). <https://forumjournal.org/article/view/4473>.

In other words, a period where the aesthetic and narrative identity of Russian rap was being split along three dimensions: intellectualism (Oksimiron), introspection (Scriptonite), and mythologism (ATL). On top of this, the gradual gestation of contemporary Russian rap along the lines of the borrowed sounds of southern trap, represented a growing majority of “bedroom artists” and the democratization of rap music accessibility in Russia. All this lay under the veil of Russian nationalism’s slow descent into ethno/cultural ambiguity, tied together by the hazy constants endorsed in the imperial tenets of “Official Nationalism,” rendered starkly tangible with the ongoing war in Ukraine. With Putin’s national project having morphed into “civilizational” territory, Russian rap has now become almost exclusively an “art of engagement.” A clear indication of this is the foregrounding of Russian rap in anti-war journalism following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.¹²

BREAKING DOWN THE TRACKS

“Oida” by Oksimiron

Released in September of 2022, the Russian-language track examines the Russo-Ukrainian war by way of domestic policy; Oksimiron uses both his rap texts and aesthetic choices to exemplify his disdain for the ideological hold Putin’s rhetoric had on him and currently on the Russian people. He describes Russia as a house that inflicts damage on itself yet is necessary for new life to emerge. But within the span of two verses it becomes clear that the overall narrative is of personal liberation from tyrannical ideology, evidenced by the lines, “Fed up with super ideas. They say: ‘Start with yourself’ - I killed the Empire in me.”¹³ As a rapper and social activist, Oksimiron has routinely integrated introspective and externally “conscious” themes in his texts, additionally exploiting sound worlds and compositional choices to bolster his messaging. As a result of his text’s semantic density, isolated scholarship on his texts has emerged, providing rich insight into how rap is used as a vehicle for social change and historical synthesis. But hermeneutic richness is not solely contained within the text and saturates the musical texture as well. Using a quasi-folk chorus integrated with “New School” aesthetic language, Oksimiron champions a very particular image of the Russian identity, bringing the historical, “folk,” face of “musical Russianness” in dialogue with contemporary notions of the Russian national sense of self. Generally, Oksimiron’s aesthetic language is one of intricacy and intentionality, using multi-layered instrumental textures and pulling from a myriad of culturally specific sources and references to tell complex narratives around feelings of domestic belonging and foreign isolation. In this track, his awareness of Russian music history and his stance on the Russo-Ukrainian war is both opaque and transparent, using the juxtaposition between Russian folk music and trap-heavy rap as an allusion to the geopolitical forces at play on the world stage. By converging his political identity with his

12. Mikhail Oger, “Taking the rap. How Russian rappers found themselves at the cutting edge of protest during the war in Ukraine,” *TheIns.ru*, 2022. <https://theins.ru/en/society/251167>.

13. For full lyrics, see Oksimiron, *Oida*, 2022, <https://genius.com/Oxxymiron-oida-lyrics>.

cultural one via aesthetics, Oksimiron argues for a particular vantage point to be not only understood but endorsed as well.

In verse one, Oksimiron attempts to free himself from imperialist influence, such sentiments traceable to 2010, when he first started using the term “empire” to express his desires to use his music as a way to purge the Russian people of their absolutist indoctrination. He remarks that anti-war oppositionalism is a fixture in contemporary Russia, verse one referencing the modified Russian flag and its adoption as a provocative semiotic of pro-peace advocacy. Oksimiron’s allusion demonstrates his anti-invasion/pro-peace mindset, the possessive adjective “Our” (*nash*), used as a sign of his anti-war solidarity, although equally invoking hints of communist fraternalism in his appeal to a mass identity. Further evidence of his political views was expressed in March when Oksimiron hosted a series of benefit concerts titled “Russians Against War.”¹⁴ The usage of benefits concerts as social protest and an effective mean of galvanizing public support for political causes and championing continued discourses on human rights has been shown. Yet, it is equally notable that scholars such as Adorno and other, more contemporary, researchers have questioned their hijacked altruism thanks to commercial and mass consumption influences.¹⁵ In light of these factors, it remains to be seen the efficacy of anti-war concerts by rappers like Oksimiron, Noize MC, and Lugalize, along with their tangible influence within European, East European, and Russian populations. Returning to the narrative, however, in November 2018 domestic censorship of hip hop reached its first apex, sparked by two domestic terror attacks by minors that would usher in a wave of trepidation.

In November, Buryatian rapper Husky was jailed following a shutdown concert. In opposition of his jailing, a benefit concert geared towards musical censorship and free speech was organized called “I Will Sing my Song,” resulting in Husky’s speedy release. Verse one also chastises Russian pop music’s culture of political quietism, and the unwillingness of artists to publicly repudiate the war and Putin’s government. Estradnaya artist Alla Pugachova gained international attention for her anti-war actions, leaving the country and then requesting the label of “foreign agent,” a title Oksimiron defined as anyone “who is not guarded and not a cop.”¹⁶ The rest of the verse draws parallels between Stalinist despotism and Putin’s agenda, nostalgia for Oksimiron’s pre-war homeland, and the ramifications of governmental elitism in Russia.

14. Umit Ozdal, Anti-war Russians in Turkey unite at rap concert for Ukraine, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/anti-war-russians-turkey-unite-rap-concert-ukraine-2022-03-15/>.

15. Research on benefit concerts diverges regarding their effectiveness in light of the corporatization of popular music and music performance remuneration. See Joel Pruce, “Benefit Concerts, Constituencies of Compassion, and the Culture Industry,” in *The Mass Appeal of Human Rights* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019): 39–76. Others have argued that their efficacy is not necessarily in generating awareness but in spurring community offshoots and blurring the conventional bifurcation between performer and audience. See Jonathan Friedman, “Concerts for a Cause (Or, ‘Cause We Can?),” in *The Routledge History of Social Protest in Popular Music*, ed. H. Louis Davis (Routledge, 2013). Recent work has shown how benefit concerts, while temporarily helpful in instigating change, often are challenged given their short-lasting efficacy in cultivating attention and practical action towards the cause. See William Michael Schmidli, “Rockin’ to Free the World?: Amnesty International’s Benefit Concert Tours, 1986–88,” *Diplomatic History* 45,4 (2021): 688–713. <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhob37>.

16. Meduza, Pugacheva’s rebellion will lead to the fall of the regime, 2022. <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/09/19/vosstanie-pugachevoy-privedet-k-padeniyu-rezhima>.

In verse two, Oksimiron's position transforms from openly confrontational to poetically strob-like (self-consciously ironic). He begins by admonishing Russia's propagandistic culture, its real-world connection being the pro-Russian concert/rally in celebration of Crimea's annexation whereupon performers and speakers espoused their support of Putin's leadership and love of Russia. Among the performers were pro-Putin rapper Timati. Oksimiron formalizes the track's message, stating that Russian culture can be reformed from the devastation of the war, but it is unclear where Russian culture will choose to go:

*"We have a puzzle:
What's in the trash, and what's in the knapsack?
Fuck it, culture means reassembly.
Rubik's Cube"*

This ambiguity of Russian futurity is expressed in the track's *musique concrete* opening. A cascade of imbricated sound clips of domestic coverage surrounding his anti-war views as the track's introduction, cementing its connection to its source of inspiration in a direct fashion, the line "Why Oksimiron returned is unclear" being the last audible line in the texture. This inclusion is highly significant, as the audio clips are in Russian and therefore cannot be understood as significant unless one understands Russian, demonstrating the track's intended audience by proxy. But it is the chorus where Oksimiron's conception of the non-imperialized "Russian people" (*Ruski narod*) is exemplified. The track's chorus is an all-female, choral-like texture, somewhat reminiscent of the Russian folk-song style known as "undervoices" (*Podgoloski*), one of Russia's traditional folk-song styles, composed of a main melodic line with closely related variations underneath. The origin of the form can be traced to the late eighteenth century, with nineteenth-century ethnographic researchers Mikhail Stakhovich, Yuli Melugnov, and Nikolai Palchikov rooting its place in Russian music culture, although in subjective manners.¹⁷ Nevertheless, by the mid- to late nineteenth century and the start of the "New Trend" in Russian sacred music, folk music had become the central aesthetic tenet of "musical Russianness." To be an authentic Russian composer meant having an ear to the people.

The technique, as Frolova-Walker notes, had frustrated earlier imaginations of "folk polyphony," of which "podgoloski" is a foundational element, by Russia's "national school," otherwise known as "The Mighty Five."¹⁸ As she notes, these composers sought

17. Marina Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism: From Glinka to Stalin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

18. Research on Russian folk polyphony and conceptions of the Russian national identity point towards the form called, "protyazhnaya," or the long song, an indigenous folk music genre from Mongolia and migrating to Russia with the nomadic lifestyle of the Mongol tribes. Even prior to the emergence of the "Balakirev Circle," folk song ethnomusicology was underway, but it was the work of composer and ethnographer Yuly Melgunov that jumpstarted new investigations into the true nature of the Russian folk song and its musical contours. This is to speak nothing of the compositional "New Trend" in Russian sacred music, an offshoot of the nationalist project begun by the Balakirev Circle. For an introduction to one of the most important, and earliest, collections, known as the "Lvov-Prach Collection" published in 1806 and later denigrated by those like Vladimir Odoyevsky as insufficient, see Marina Ritzareva, *Eighteenth-Century Russian Music* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2006).

to nationalize the compositional process as inspired by Mily Balakirev's Herderian dream of usurping the normalization of Germanic methodologies (i.e., V-I cadence, excessively formal structures, and strict tonal purity) as championed by Anton Rubenstein and later endorsed by member Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Sergei Taneyev, and Alexander Glazunov. Thanks to continued study, the rich textures of Russia's folk music had been discovered, with its conjoining lines of polyphony surrounded by sonorous monophonic and quasi-sacred viscerality. Frustrating the European major-minor dichotomy, the pre-Petrine modalism of folksong was the key to creating a non-European Russian identity through the art of music. Thus, Oksimiron contributes to this project. Ironically, Soviet musicologist Antonin Preobrazhensky had agreed, arguing that it was not aesthetic recontextualization that made Russian music Russian but rather the usage of folk song and its aesthetics. As Frolova-Walker quotes Preobrazhensky as stating, "[W]e can consider "Russian" only those features, which had crystallized as such within Russian folk music."

Outside of form, the chorus also uses the C Phrygian mode [b2, b3, b6, b7], one of the eight traditional church modes and which, in its 'Hypo' iteration ["Tone 5" in Russian naming], came to form the second half of Melgunov's self-constructed theory of Russian folk music. In short, he saw Russian folk music as being centered on two modes (the Dorian and the Hypophrygian), thus creating an obfuscation of standardized tonal progression [I-V-VII⁷-I] with its inverted counterpart. This is to say, an obfuscation and elimination of the "Westernized" leading tone which, in the eyes of Nationalist utopians, had resulted in the essential de-Russification of Russian classical music that Balakirev's circle was working to eradicate. Regardless of Melgunov's assertions, given the seminality of modalism in the aesthetic and ideological developments of Russian classical and folk music, this is not a minor detail nor an accident by Oksimiron. Without essentializing, a Russian using modalism means something.

The "Mighty Five," responsible for effectively establishing Russia's "National School" of musical aesthetics no matter how illusory or fabricated, used elements like modalism, cadentialism, evocative melodies, and chromaticism, to decouple Russian music from Western influence. Rallying to offset Rubenstein's antithetical championing of Germanic institutionalization, modalism was an effective strategy to harness the power of the people (*narod*). More broadly, modalism was something that could exploit the power of Russian folk music and the power that came with the aesthetics of exoticism. Expressing the Russian experience through their compositional voice was another hallmark of the "National" mission, and so too was modalism a highly advantageous tool. Vladimir Stasov, one of the main ideologues of the Mighty Five, argued that "the time has come to stop transplanting foreign institutions to our country and give some thought to what would be really beneficial and suitable to our soil and our national character." Modalism and plagalism [I-IV] are linchpins in the construction of a Russian aesthetic. This is highlighted in Arthur Pougin's examination of Russian folk music. Replete with unshakable and genuine pride of one's nation he writes, "The harmony is based on a system of transparent clearness with plagal and Phrygian cadences that seem to open up distant horizons to the mind."

By using the Phrygian mode and the Russian folk chorus, Oksimiron follows in the Slavophilic footsteps of the “Mighty Five” and is returning focus to pre-Petrine practices and traditions, albeit critically and with high suspicion. These historically illuminated allusions to pre-Petrine Russia and Slavophile aesthetics demonstrate his awareness of Russian nationalism’s split nature and foregrounds his anti-imperialist conceptions regarding the constitution of a Russian aesthetic and national consciousness. Whether his aesthetic implications were consciously chosen cannot be proven but it is not far-fetched to assume that his Oxford education put him into contact with the music and philosophy of Glinka and Balakirev.

Returning to the lyrics, Oksimiron’s portrayal of Russia’s future is further evidenced in his allusion to the infamous quotation, “Let them eat cake.” Oksimiron uses the words “truffle” and “spinning ball” to allude to Russia’s entrenched culture of elitism and the medieval concept of the wheel of fate (Rota Fortunae) to demonstrate Russia’s unpredictable but promised future. Oksimiron also alludes to the socioeconomic divisions the war has only exacerbated, and the resulting forced migration, food shortages, the expendability of human life, and threats of physical (and national) security for Ukraine and Russia:

*“The ball is spinning, spinning.
Kanut¹⁹ truffles
Full you won’t be a donut hole.
Human destinies in the smoke
Like droplets on a bulb”*

But their usage is also “conscious.” In March, the EU applied sanctions to the importation of luxury good into Russia, and truffles were among them, demonstrating Oksimiron’s awareness of geopolitical developments. As the verse continues, Oksimiron’s habit for self-referencing becomes obvious. His allusion to his 2011 track “In The Bong” with the line, “Human destinies in the smoke, Like droplets in a bulb,” alludes to the cheapness and expendability of human life during geopolitical conflict. He also refers to his 2021 track “Celebration” and his 2022 track “Beauty and Ugliness” when addressing the unnerving normalcy of Moscowian life and Russian vacation culture as Ukrainian casualty and migrant figures increase daily.

The last few lines are exclusively directed towards his fans, where he petitions them to continue their pro-peace advocacy and protest, using the phrase “Ingria will be free”²⁰ (the historical name for northwestern Russia and the native homeland of the Finno-Ugric peoples before Russian colonization under Peter I).²¹ Paradigmatic of his anti-imperialist

19. The term may be in reference to Alexey Tolstoy’s 1872 poem “Canute” which talks about the hubris of Prince Kanut after having received an invitation by friend Magnus. He is doomed to die but does not realize this due to his pleasant surroundings. For the poem, see A. K. Tolstoy, *Ballads, epics*, 1981, http://az.lib.ru/t/tolstoj_a_k/text_0090.shtml.

20. Dmitry Cimanovsky, *What is Ingria? Why will she be free?*, 2022. <https://holod.media/2022/09/24/simanosvski-ingria/>.

21. I. Nikolina, “Ingria - Izhora Land - Ingria,” *Baltic Ray* 44 (2017), http://petrodv-cbs.digst.ksob.spb.ru/B_11103_5.pdf.

beliefs in a decolonial Russia, Oksimiron's Slavophilic musical inclinations and characterization of a liberated Russian people as folk in orientation is perplexing. Oksimiron's Russianness is neither Slavophilic nor Western, neither Balakirevian nor Belyayevian, but precariously metaxic.

"God of War" by Husky

Husky's track revolves around Husky (acting as a peasant) and his fears during the night as war rages on outside his farm. The main character prays to the God of War that he will make it through the night and that he will survive the gruesome dreams that he is having because of the war. There is an oscillation between the fear of waking versus the fear of death, yet it is unclear how the text concludes. From a musical standpoint, this theological ambiguity is clear. The cultural cosplaying of the Russian peasant is hardly a coincidence and points towards Husky's usage of the self-essentialized semiotics of the so-called Russian consciousness, Russian soul, or the Slavophile-Herderian '*narod*' (i.e., the genuine Russian people uncorrupted by Western influence, Enlightenment secularity, and colonial modernity), can be hermeneutically decoded as a strategic device. Akin to Mikhail Glinka's mythical synthesis of his cosmopolitan education with the, mainly urban, folk music traditions to paint himself as one with the people despite its remarkably foreign tutelage, Husky's folkishness is strategic. It seems that Maria Brock was correct when she said, "[. . .] and to this day authentic Russianness is believed to be found in the countryside."²² Whether Husky's characterization of the Russian peasant, stuck in endless war but with hope in their country's success despite little to no evidence, actually captures the "common life of the simple Russian man" as Richard Leonard professes is a central part of Russianness, is outside the purview of this paper.²³ But it is clear that Husky is professing his belief in an ideal Russian person, one outside the urban sprawl.²⁴

Unlike Oksimiron, Husky's musical texture provide little evidence of his ideological and political views, although textually the rapper's position is alluded to in a single line which, to non-Russians, has little real-world significance. Thus, it is in the music's aesthetic details that the rapper's archetypal enigmatism can be semiotically decoded, and from a singular line from verse two, in dialogue with self-references, that his views on the conflict can be understood. While both rappers are expressing support of Russian culture, albeit in fully disparate manners, Husky exemplifies his Russian identity far more

22. Maria Brock, "Moments of Russianness: locating national identification in discourse," Ph.D. diss., University of London, 2015. <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/40126/>.

23. Richard Anthony Leonard, "A History of Russian Music" (Ann Arbor, MI: Macmillan, 1957): 65.

24. A detailed summary of the notions of the Russian identity, both musical and philosophical in dimension, is beyond the ability of a note. But allusions to an "authentic" ontology of the "Russian soul" as being one intrinsically connected to the Russian peasantry can be found in music as early as the late eighteenth century onwards with the writings of composer Yevstigney Fomin, Mikhail Glinka, Alexei Lvov, and Johann Gottfried Pratch. While the Balakirevites, as they were epithetically called, tried to harness an "authentic" folk mentality in their musical language, composers such as Alexander Serov, and later Pyotr Tchaikovsky, much to the ire of the Balakirevites, were read by the public as inhabiting a Russian sensibility. Of course, later scholars such as Richard Taruskin eviscerated the notion with his characterization of Exoticism in Russian music as nothing but cultural imperialism. For a look at the history of Russian musical nationalism and "its central myth, that of the Russian national character," see note 15.

cryptically, never fully articulating his belief systems nor political position. As I will show, Husky's cunningness in playing with charged domestic politics, poetic ambiguity, and subtext can be deciphered both textually and musically.

In the second verse, Husky is awakened by an unknown figure saying, "Wake up, let's go to work." The referenced phrase (*Procypaisya, poyeddyom rabota*) is a rephrasing of the aphorism, "Work brothers!" (*Rabotaitye, bryatya!*). Husky's usage is deeply symbolic, as the phrase first became a slogan of anti-terrorism in its connection with the death of police lieutenant Magomed Nurbagandov in 2016 by militants. Having been instructed to tell his colleagues to stop work, Nurbagandov instead uttered the phrase, "Work brothers" in defiance of his captor's wishes, the slogan acting as a call to arms against terrorist forces and threats to Russian national security. After his death, protests emerged whereupon Nurbagandov's words would undergo "phraseologization," when words lose their objective meaning and are given alternative, socially encoded, meanings.

The phrase had become a culturally rooted idiom in opposition to (perceived) external threats to the homeland and the national, cultural, and ideological security of Russia's citizens. Once the term is synonymized with counterterrorism and defense against tyranny, the new meaning, "Destroy the militants," is canonized. It is also significant that law enforcement uses the command "We work" (*Rabotaem*) for anti-militant and anti-bandit activity. The phrase is now a slogan of counter-hostility and is being used by Husky as an allusion to his pro-Russian sympathies. Husky is not the first musical figure within popular culture to utilize the phrase. In 2016, the Soviet/Russian rock band Pilgrim used the idiom as the title of a single. In recent months, for apparent reasons, comments under the official music video have been laced with jingoist rhetoric.

Nostalgic conceptions of communist unity also play a part in the term's resurgence, anti-Westernism unifying with the resurgence of sympathies for Socialism and the messianism of the Soviet period. The YouTube comments may indicate the motives behind Husky's usage of the phrase. Much like Oksimiron and Noize MC, two politically involved rappers, not only does Husky personify Slavophile sentiments through his actions but also his textual narratives and allusions. Yet, outside this one line, and one is left to read into the track's narrative, the conclusionary ambiguity is an allusion to Russia's future, akin to Oksimiron's text.

Given the phrase's historical origin, Husky's usage of the phrase seems a purposeful attempt to induce feelings of nationalist zeal and patriotism among his listeners against the militants, in this case the Ukrainian forces, although nothing is objectively stated as such. In this case, given the context, it can be assumed that the Ukrainian forces and perhaps President Zelensky are being referred to here. Evidence of this sociopolitical supercharging comes from both Husky's pre-existing Slavophile ideological beliefs and pro-Russian sentiments regarding Russia's geographical neo-colonialism, as well as the phrase's exploitation during the early months of the Russo-Ukrainian war, when the term was digitally weaponized by pro-Russian nationalists as a way of galvanizing support for attacks on the Ukrainian forces.

*“What a dream, oh my god
Like a drone, I’m hovering over a ditch.
At its bottom on wormwood yarn
I see half of me in the blood.
Smoke everywhere and caustic soot
And then someone pats me by the elbow:
“Wake up, let’s go to work.”*

Videos using the title were also released on the Russian equivalent of YouTube “RuTube,” while other informal videos exhibited Russian youth, donning the infamous orange-black Z, touting the term alongside their support for Putin.²⁵ It is evident that Husky’s intention of partnering the idiom with a Russian peasants’ dreams about the horrors of war and the fear of death is to rationalize Russia’s role in the Russo-Ukrainian war, and to show his furtive endorsement of Putin’s geopolitical agenda. The final verse of the track alludes to Husky’s personal experiences during the early parts of the war in Donbass, specifically 2014, when he travelled to the area in order to gain a more “objective” view of the war, and where he would meet then-leader of the Spartan Battalion Arsen Pavlov (aka Motorola). But the way the final two lines of the chorus are written, “And in the morning, sticky like scales I went to death,” suggests an enigmatic future for the protagonist. As in Oksimiron’s text, the war’s outcome cannot be predicted, and so Russia’s future remains unclear. Given Husky’s previous statements on his views on Russia, Husky’s true stance on the war also remains unclear.

Musically speaking, Husky employs several elements that articulate his pro-Russian-qua-Slavophile position, although his methods are encoded within the historical aesthetics and epochal currents of hip hop culture. In my previous research, I argued that Husky (un) consciously uses aesthetics that harken back to the days of the “Mighty Five,” most particularly his usage of chromaticism, modalism, and folk music references. In this track, Husky’s soundscape is typical of his later releases and those included on his 2021 album, *Russian Album*.²⁶ In ideological contrast, pop rapper Morgenshtern had released the album, “The Last One,” where he professed to stop using the Russian language for all future musical work.

Using slower tempi, transparent textures, and more introspective soundscapes, Husky’s philosophy of caustic existentialism and subdued nods to antihumanism is evidenced by way of dissonance and musical dis-ease (read: dynamic listening experience) paired with conventional rap textures and ostinato layers. The track’s main motif is an oscillating fifth interval [Eb - Ab - Eb - D- Eb] with a chromatic pattern occurring between the dominant (Eb) and the adjacent leading tone, rooting the track in the key of Ab minor, symbolically invoking “wailing lament, difficult struggle.”²⁷ Previous analysis of his musical language expressed on the 2020 album *Hoshkhonog* revealed that the choice of key is both

25. Euronews Russia, “War in Ukraine: what do we know about the Russian symbol Z,” 2022, <https://ru.euronews.com/2022/03/09/what-do-we-know-about-the-russian-pro-war-z-symbol>.

26. The-Flow, Husky announced Russian Album, 2021. <https://the-flow.ru/releases/haski-russkiy-album>.

27. Western Michigan University Music Department, Affective Musical Key Characteristics, <https://wmich.edu/mus-theo/courses/keys.html>.

aesthetically and narratively important, the key often complementing the narrative's tenor. For Husky, key serves as an exemplification of his persona and vantage point. Here, the track is expressing the fear and ambiguity of a peasant amidst the chaos and uncertainty of war, and thus the music takes on an enigmatic character, while the Ab minor key personifies the protagonist's dismay induced by his vivid dreams and thoughts of death. Noted for its dreary atmosphere, Ab minor has been used by numerous composers, such as Beethoven, Mahler, and Bach, to invoke a more pensive, somber, sober, and overall stoic feeling that draws the listener's attention inward and up.

Husky also uses the technique of "scratching" (i.e., rupturing the musical flow of records by manipulating the standardized turning of the records while playing music that produces a scratching effect), an aesthetic element rare in his language overall, thereby connecting him to the "Old School" era of Russian and American hip hop music (former: 2000s, latter: 70s-80s). This technique has become a quintessential element of Djing which, historically, served as the link between disco and rap, with Mcing being the intermediary between the two. Dubbed the "backbone of hip-hop Djing," once Grand Wizard Theodore's brainchild entered the world, Djing changed forever. As Tricia Rose notes, 1970s DJ culture drew disparate communities together under the banner of hip hop celebration, and frustrated the supremacy of disco by literally breaking the flow of the music. Thanks to the innovation of early DJs like Kool Herc's exploitation of the break-beat (or b-beat), a host of performance techniques, including "beat juggling," grew, underscored by a philosophical, quasi-Brechtian disposition of alienating hegemony and reshaping the assumptions of dominant mainstream musical flows. Although Justin Williams argued that given the recontextualization of techniques like "scratchings" resulting from technological interference, its presence on the track still conveys the same level of "historical authenticity" that it did years ago. By utilizing this "Old School" technique within a "New School" fabric, Husky conveys his knowledge of rap's aesthetic history. The song argues for an, albeit jingoist, universality as a result of impending warfare. Much like Kool Herc was a "street DJ," ushering in his crew and crowds to the "jam" in celebration of communal pleasure, so too is Husky vying for his people. Williams notes the ability of scratching to invoke nostalgia in Jay Z's track "A Dream," where the technique reflects rap at its "Old School" prime in the last chorus.

Similarly, the technique is heard after the introduction of Husky's first chorus, whereupon it is continuously recirculated in the musical texture upon the chorus's periodical return. In effect, "scratching" is introduced and then rendered an extraneous detail in the texture, as if making a point and letting it sit in the air. Because of its rare application in Husky's music and partnering alongside a slower rhythmic pulse and tempo, its presence signals Husky's potential interest in demonstrating an air of "authenticity" much like Jay Z and others. A rarity across almost all of his previously released tracks, given the war-themed subject matter the usage of turntablist techniques here raises the question of what is being said through its presence. Julius Bailey's conception of the DJ as one who "takes what is old or what has, perhaps, been forgotten and breathes new life into it through his or her art" provides an interesting addition when thinking about Husky's intentions through the reference. Turning back the clock away from the present to an idyllic past

of his own creation, away from the ‘threat’ of modernity, Husky invites listeners to the glory days of hip hop and the “hip hop sublime,” where aesthetics and cultural ideologies were colored by memories of the “Fathers of hip hop.”

As the track demonstrates, Husky’s views on the war must then be understood through the subjective decoding of semiotics. It can be hypothesized that by aligning himself with the early days of rap music adjacent to the idiom, Husky is arguing for a return to convention, albeit a pro-Russia version. By using “Old School” musical techniques, a more introspective musical soundscape, and a plot steeped in war-time symbolism, a rivalry between reality, nostalgia, and ideology is sonified. This rivalry, however, is hidden behind a smokescreen of encoded culture and melodicism that frustrates easy comprehension of where life ends and art begins.

COMPARE/CONTRAST

Both “God of War” (Husky) and “Oida” (Oksimiron) use the Russo-Ukrainian war as the narrational basis of their tracks, yet for the former, the war is extrapolated as the basis of a story and overtly referenced in a domestically centric phrase, while the latter uses straightforward, albeit poeticized, language to express the rapper’s personal beliefs. Alongside differences (especially prominent in the musical aesthetics of the tracks), similarities are appreciable between the tracks, although augmented by each rapper’s expressionary idiosyncrasies.

Husky and Oksimiron are both well-known for their highly poetic, intricate, and philosophic texts that use classical literature (not exclusive to these two), Russian history and political events, personal beliefs, and complex symbolism to tell convoluted narratives. With Husky’s text, verse 1 sets up the story of the fearful peasant told by the first person, with the phrase stated during the verse 2 dream sequence, while verse 3 references Husky’s own Donbass experiences. With Oksimiron’s texts, while the track’s politics are unambiguous, his descriptions of his experiences and feelings force a listener to read between the lines. Taken at face value, Oksimiron’s texts pose a challenge to non-Russian audiences, as his allusions to personal statements, actions, and tracks requires listeners to mediate between Oksimiron’s public and professional career, while references to Russian culture and sociopolitical developments may not be recognized by foreign consumers. Both Husky and Oksimiron, however, deal with contemporary politics and the crisis of cultural identity. Unafraid to ingratiate themselves to overtly political spheres of discourse, albeit artistically and with varying degrees of tact and nuance, their respective tracks highlight the evolved nature of Russian rap. No longer a Western mimetic, rap has become a recontextualizer of dense, and inaccessible, contemporary Russian topics.

But Husky’s phrase is equally untranslatable without culture knowledge of its importance. Both rappers have chosen to infuse their raps with politically augmented “couleur locale” which cannot be fully articulated outside its cultural context. Further, while Husky’s preoccupation with Russian history is not explicitly evidenced on the track, Oksimiron refers to Stalinist Russia while also espousing a nostalgia for his lost home as a result of the war, interpolating current events as a continuation of Russia’s Soviet

past. An overt similarity between Husky and Oksimiron is their focus on constructed musical textures, each exploiting tempo, instrumentalism, boom-bap traditionalism, atmosphere, and their flows to radiate their individualized ideologies about the war. With Husky, the nostalgic airiness of the main melody, coupled with the open atmosphere, causes one to feel reflective on the tragedy of war and wistful for the past days of peace. The monotony of the track's melody also highlights one's urge for change of any kind, and as the bass comes in at the end, as the main protagonist questions whether his dream of war was real, so too is the track caught in a limbic state of being/nonbeing. Oksimiron, however, takes a sonically confrontational approach. Punches of bass resonance, rhythmic subdivisions and articulations of poetically fabricated text, along with folk-inspired harmonies trigger emotions, even if one does not understand Russian. The track grabs your attention and, balancing between emphasis and suavity, Oksimiron argues for a recalibration of what it means to be Russian. While Husky offers us nostalgia, Oksimiron offers us a future. The conception of "musicalized propaganda," if defined as "organized mass persuasion with covert intent,"²⁸ is intrinsic to the observation of what each rapper is saying with their aesthetic language. Every musician is vying for the listener's attention and approval, and by using their music to reflect their worldviews, Husky and Oksimiron ask you to believe them.

But the differences between the rappers' aesthetic and textual invocations of the war (as previously alluded) are great. From an aesthetic basis, Husky's track is far slower than Oksimiron's and uses the "Old School" technique of "scratching," whereas Oksimiron chooses to incorporate a folk-derived musical texture for his track's chorus. The socio-ideological implications of these choices demonstrate that each rapper is positioning their track adjacent to a particular place in both Russian music and cultural history, thereby attaching themselves to a certain ideological framework by proxy. By using "scratching," slower tempo and rhythmic pulse, alongside an emphasized boom-bap understructure, Husky attaches himself to the Russian "Old School" and the "authentic" era of hip hop culture (i.e., American 1970-80s). In contrast, Oksimiron's choice to use folk-styled singing (a modal texture a la "podgoloski" or some other folk variant, sung by women) as the basis of his track's chorus, unifies his track with the Slavophilic, pre-Imperialist conception of the Russian people (*narod*) and their musical traditions (*Russkaya narodnaya pesnya*). If such a reading is accepted, then Oksimiron's anti-imperialist sentiments in concert with his usage of a folk-music texture further separate him from Husky's more Slavophile, borderline nationalist political views yet couple with his views on Russian rap's current status as still heavily American in orientation. This sits uncomfortably abreast Oksimiron's Western-oriented education and his current living conditions, having left Russia. The texture of Husky's track utilizes a simplistic, five-note motif which is then recycled throughout the track rather than having a fully decorated musical texture like Oksimiron's, a common trait in Huskyian vocabulary, as analysis suggests.

The difference in the textual allusion to the Russo-Ukrainian war bears reiteration. Whereas Husky is far more surreptitious and culturally focused, Oksimiron is more

28. G. Jowett, V. O'Donnell, and J. Ellul, "The Characteristics of Propaganda," in *Readings in Propaganda and Persuasion: New and Classic Essays* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2006), 3.

explicit and open. Yet both rappers use culturally specific inclusions (“Ingria will be Free” and “Let’s Get to Work”) which, for Western and non-Russian audiences, might not be understood and therefore fail to achieve political significance. Regardless, the intended audiences for each track are not identical, as Oksimiron’s views are antithetical to Husky’s in form and content. Finally, on the one hand, Husky’s track reads like the fictionalized story of a fear-struck peasant during the night who suffers from nightmares as a result of the war around him only to be woken up and sent to work by an unknown figure. In short, Husky paints the Russian as a victim of circumstance. On the other hand, Oksimiron utilizes his personal experiences and sociopolitical views to tell a poetic narrative about the awakening of his anti-imperialist views, and how Russia must redefine itself to survive a “cold,” post-war reality that does not have an easy end.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I detailed how Russian rap historically developed as a cultural phenomenon alongside sociopolitical change that was beginning in the early 1980s amidst the declining impact of Soviet rock and the rise of hip hop culture, all the way to the late 2000s, when Russian rap turned “political.” To demonstrate how Russian rappers incorporate political messaging into their texts, I analyzed two rap tracks by two ideologically disparate rappers, Oksimiron (*Oida*) and Husky (*God of War*), both of which use the Russo-Ukrainian war as its subject matter. Although sharing subjects, politics centered on the Russian war against Ukraine are dealt with in different aesthetic ways. By one, the folk is musicalized and decolonialized Russia is endorsed whereas the other focuses on an embodied view of the Russian folk experience and self-essentialism.

As stated in my historical account of hip hop culture in Russia, the development of the rap element, much like its American counterpart, grew in popularity thanks to the decline of sociocultural and geopolitical security, as well as the increasing aversion to political complacency and the strong desire to build an anti-Soviet, Western-style cultural identity by the post-Soviet youth community. As the American-styled culture industry moved in during the 2000s, Russian rap underwent a process of intense acculturation, by the end of the decade becoming synonymous with the cultural worldview of Russian youth. Further, it had also become an advantageous, populist vehicle for political debate and societal critique, although such synthesis had begun as early as the 1990s, reaching its first substantive peak during Russia’s second and third presidential elections. By that time, however, Western popular culture had successfully interpolated itself into the Russian context, hip hop culture (with its five elements) becoming firmly situated within the public consciousness as a living, breathing cultural norm. In other words, as the Soviet Union dissolved “Russian” rap was conceived, bringing with it a radical new way of thinking about the world and the idea of *being* Russian and *performing* “Russianness” through music aesthetics and self-expression. A new way of viewing self and Other, a blurring of the positions, and what it meant to express one’s self through music took a radically new direction. In contemporary Russia, rap is a “conscious” vehicle for debate and discourse.

In other words, rap music is an advantageous way of voicing sociopolitical grievances and ideological critiques without resorting to overt displays of either, encoding one's views within their texts without resorting to saying it aloud necessarily. Yet for those who are able to read between the lines, a rapper's worldview and cultural-identity philosophy can be easily ascertained from what they say and what they *say*. As shown in my analysis, both Husky and Oksimiron engaged with the Russian contemporary, using the Russo-Ukrainian war as their theme, although articulating different ideological positions with varying levels of explicitness and musical synthesis. Husky's position is voiced via the usage of the culturally rooted phrase, "Let's Get to Work," an anti-terrorist/nationalist slogan coined in 2016, whereas Oksimiron's position is easily readable by both Russian and non-Russian audiences alike. Moreover, each track's musical texture is used to support its author's individual position. Husky draws a relationship to "Old School" rap culture by using "scratching," and Oksimiron uses a quasi-folk chorus texture to invoke an anti-imperialist, pre-Petrine conception of the Russian national identity akin to the "Mighty Five" collective.

As the Russo-Ukrainian war continues without an easy conclusion in sight and Vladimir Putin's crackdown on anti-normative views and worldviews grows in frequency, research into how Russia's popular music culture responds will be necessary to gauge how personal relationships with the Russian identity have changed. No longer a mundane expression of ethno-cultural fact, ascribing "Russian" to oneself has now become a political statement in its own right. By rapping in Russian as opposed to English, encoding culturally specific phrases and idioms, and using musical textures that invoke the specter of folk traditions and the "National School," Oksimiron and Husky are voicing their beliefs on what it means to be Russian for the public to hear. It is up to researchers to understand not what is said on the surface to the passive listener, but what is being surreptitiously transmitted. In effect, what are you actually hearing? ■

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