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Big Is Beautiful Again in Russia: The Return of the Bolshoi Theater

By [Anna Paretskaya](#), November 28th, 2011



The long-anticipated opening of the renovated Bolshoi Theater in Moscow last month was another sign that the country has transitioned from post-socialism to post-post-socialism. As one scholar **observed**, the post-Soviet Russia of the 1990s (not unlike its Soviet predecessor, I should add) was founded on a metaphor of “historical rupture and social rebirth,” of rejection of the past and construction of the new social, political, and economic realities. However, in the new millennium, which more or less coincided with political ascent of Vladimir Putin, a new metaphor, that of “civilizational continuity,” has emerged and the current Russian “vision of political history and social identity [is] based in continuities, at various historical depths, linking [its] present with the Soviet and pre-Soviet eras.” Such reconceptualization of the distant and more recent pasts is “coupled with the reappearance of particularist ideologies that set Russia in explicit opposition to Western states, social norms, and geopolitical interests,” which no doubt is a reaction to the post-Soviet import of Western “experts” and their economic wisdom and political counsel backed by NATO troops encroaching on the Russian space.

At the theater’s opening ceremony, Russian President Dmitrii Medvedev pronounced the theater to be “one of our grandest national brands” (*bolshoi* translates as big or great). The six-year-long and nearly 700-million-dollar renovation resulted in extensive upgrades to stage technology (it now has 3D and multimedia capability) and at the same time in the return to the 19th-century look of the theater’s décor. Frescoes, tapestries, chandeliers, mosaic floors were restored, while the Soviet hammer and sickle throughout the theater were **replaced with a double-headed eagle**, the symbol of both the tsarist and contemporary Russia.

The restoration and the opening performance attest more to Russia’s recent movement toward reconciliation with its various pasts. Guests at the invitation-only gala consisted of Russian beau monde: haute couture designers and television personalities, artists and designers, bankers and industrialists. But it seemed that whoever was issuing invitations wanted or, likely, was instructed to put together a guest list showing that whatever momentary political disagreements Russians might have, they can be put aside to mark the return of a “national treasure,” to use Medvedev’s other moniker for the Bolshoi. Thus, the broadcast of the gala repeatedly showed that leaders of Russian parliament’s minority (if not necessarily opposition) parties were in attendance, as well as a **recently fired finance minister** who openly disapproved of the planned swap of leadership positions between President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin. Invited were the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and the wife of Putin’s predecessor, the late Boris Yeltsin. Soprano **Galina Vishnevskaya**, who with her late cellist-husband Mstislav Rostropovich had been exiled abroad for 15 years until the end of the Soviet Union, was seated prominently next to the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church. Putin was conspicuously absent, but one had the feeling that if Generalissimo Joseph Stalin and Tsar Nicholas II were still alive, they would have been invited too.

The performance itself showcased different time periods from the country’s history, sometimes within the same scene: the Soviet-era Bolshoi curtain, unmistakable with its copious hammer-and-sickle emblems, served as the backdrop for the Polovtsian Dances from the opera *Prince Igor*, set in the 12th century. The concert’s opening number combined Soviet-era imagery and Imperial-themed chorus. Dozens of theater’s stagehands, singers, and dancers wearing hardhats and overalls reenacted the Bolshoi’s reconstruction site, complete with trucks and jackhammers, while performing the hymn “Glory, Glory to you, holy Russia!” that celebrates expulsion of foreign invaders and installment of the first tsar from the Romanov dynasty. Other performance pieces seemed to have been cleansed of their Soviet-period connotations. *Swan Lake*, which premiered at the Bolshoi some 130 years ago and in the Soviet years was televised during days of entertainment blackouts, such as frequent in the early 1980s state funerals and the 1991 anti-Gorbachev coup, seemed to again be just an iconic symbol of the theater received by the gala viewers with **delight and near tears**. Some of the Soviet-era most popular (because of their ideological correctness) opera and ballet heroes, such as Joan of Arc and Spartacus, made an appearance. Selections from *Cinderella* and *The Flame of Paris* (aka *Triumph of the Republic*, set in the 1791 France) gave a nod to the *demos*. But other elements of the gala, including a light installation of Bolshoi’s reopening after a previous renovation on the Tsar Alexander II coronation day and especially the final number—a procession of the entire troupe in evening gowns and tuxedos (not unlike many people in the audience) set to Tchaikovsky’s “Coronation March” composed for the inauguration of yet another Russian tsar—underscored contemporary Russians’ desire for continuities, on both personal and societal levels, with the earlier, Imperial past as well.



There also were signs of “the reinscription of Russian territory as non-Western space”: the gala showcased only domestic composers, with the exception of Ludwig Minkus, who spent a third of his life in Russia composing for the Bolshoi ballet. Though streamed onto dozens of big screens outside of Russia, the ceremony was largely a domestic affair. No A-list international celebrities seemed to have been in the audience. The biggest-name performer billed for the opening, Plácido Domingo, cancelled due to a scheduling conflict, and even David Hallberg, the **first American** ever to be a principal at the Bolshoi, didn’t take the stage. With the exception of three guest sopranos, the two-hour gala was pretty much an all-Russian affair.

One can only hope, in Russia and in the West, that the imperial music was chosen to glorify the theater as the national symbol rather than the current Russian autocrats, and that the regal gold and red of the theater's interior won't be enjoyed only by the country's new aristocracy. But the tickets are now available only through scalpers who are **alleged to give kickbacks** to the theater administration. The danger, then, still remains for the Bolshoi to turn into another well-known Russian "national brand"—a **Potemkin village**.