

DECIPHERING THE WAGNER GROUP'S LOVE FOR WAGNER

Nazism influenced the mercenary group's twisted aesthetics, but so did Wagnerian Hollywood spectacle.

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September 2, 2023



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Contemporary discourse has little patience with maddening contradictions of the kind that Wagner embodies. Photograph from brandstaetter images / Getty

“WAGNER CALLS OFF THREAT TO MARCH ON RUSSIA CAPITAL” was the

“**W** disorienting lead story in the June 25, 2023, edition of the *Times*. The eternally problematic composer Richard Wagner, the godfather of all cancelled artists, was once again at the top of the news, seventy-eight years after the *Daily Mail* reported on Nazi radio memorials for Hitler under the headline “WAGNERIAN CONCERT OF DEATH.” Having spent a fair portion of my life sifting through the chaotic aftermath of Wagner’s life and work, I had assumed that the old wizard’s notoriety was past its peak, but his capacity to consternate the world anew should never be discounted. A Russian mercenary organization called the Wagner Group, its name supplied by an ex-G.R.U. agent with Nazi leanings, was protesting the erratic conduct of Russia’s war on Ukraine—a country that, according to Russian propaganda, was overrun by neo-Nazis, even though Volodymyr Zelensky, the Ukrainian President, is Jewish. To quote Hans Sachs in “Die Meistersinger”: “Madness! Madness! Madness everywhere!”

On August 23rd, Yevgeny Prigozhin, who led the Wagner Group, and Dmitry Utkin, who coined the name, were killed when their plane fell from the sky. As Valkyries carry their corpses to whatever army-surplus Valhalla awaits them, a question lingers, one that may never be answered in full: what role, exactly, did Wagner play in the mercenary imagination? Before the group was founded, around 2014, Utkin had been using “Wagner” as his military call sign. Most observers assume that he adopted the name because of his penchant for Nazi imagery. He had a habit of signing letters with two angular S-strokes, signifying the S.S. As hundreds of articles about the group have reminded us, Wagner was Hitler’s favorite composer; ergo, he must have served as a code for Hitlerism. Anyone collecting evidence of Wagner’s inherent odiousness could be satisfied that the case had been proved beyond a reasonable doubt.

Yet Utkin did not appear to be a Wagnerian of the pilgrimage-to-Bayreuth variety. Luke Harding, a *Guardian* reporter who has written extensively about the Wagner Group, asserts that the mercenary’s main inspiration was

the “Ride of the Valkyries” sequence in “Apocalypse Now”—the scene in which an American helicopter squadron rains destruction on a quiet Vietnamese village while blasting Wagner from loudspeakers. The suggestion that Utkin’s interest in the composer had been mediated through big-budget Hollywood spectacle changes the complexion of the matter. It exposes the degree to which Wagner has become a floating signifier in pop culture—a vessel through which modern furies pass.

Wagner has deep roots in Russia. A cult of his music began building in the late nineteenth century and reached its zenith in the years after 1900, when an impressive array of personalities, ranging from Tsar Nicholas II to the radical theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold, embraced his operas. Russian Symbolists greeted him as the prophet of artistically integrated dream worlds, and when the likes of Alexander Blok and Vyacheslav Ivanov turned to Bolshevik radicalism they brought Wagner along with them. Blok wrote, “When the Revolution starts sounding in the air, Wagner’s Art answers back.”

In the early years of the Soviet Union, Wagner was made over as an exemplary proletarian artist. Anatoly Lunacharsky, the People’s Commissar of Education, sponsored a translation of Wagner’s 1849 essay “Art and Revolution,” comparing it to “The Communist Manifesto.” The operas received startling stagings in Constructivist and Futurist styles. Lenin himself was a casual Wagner fan; after his death, in 1924, “Siegfried’s Funeral Music” was played at his memorial. The Bolshevik fad for Wagner faded with the rise of Stalin, although, in the period of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, Sergei Eisenstein was able to mount a production of “Die Walküre.” The German invasion of 1941 put an end to Russian Wagnerism for generations.

Things changed in the nineteen-nineties, when Valery Gergiev, the artistic director of the Mariinsky Theatre, in St. Petersburg, began conducting the

operas on a regular basis. In 1997, he presented the first Russian staging of “Parsifal” in almost eighty years; in 2000, he turned to the “Ring” cycle. At the time, Gergiev evinced little interest in politics. When I interviewed him in 1998, he told me, “You never know what kind of communists or socialists or President or military dictator will come along. You better just do what you can do tomorrow rather than think ahead seven years.”

The dictator did come along, and Gergiev got along well with him. Under Vladimir Putin’s patronage, the conductor has become one of the most powerful cultural figures in Russia. Perhaps Gergiev’s transformation into a Putin oligarch encouraged the absorption of Wagner into militant Russian nationalism. The fascist-adjacent pseudo-philosopher Aleksandr Dugin, whose advocacy of a Eurasian sphere of influence has influenced both Putin and the Wagner Group, may also have played a role. Dugin once tried to twist a line from “Parsifal”—Gurnemanz’s enigmatic utterance “Here time becomes space”—into a “proclamation of the triumph of geopolitics.” Yet Dugin’s knowledge of the opera seems slight; he claims that the line comes at the end of “Parsifal,” which is not the case. It is doubtful that mercenary Wagnerism can be understood without reference to Hollywood.

Hollywood has a long history of fetishizing Wagner, going back to the Ride of the Ku Klux Klan in “The Birth of a Nation” in 1915. The composer’s IMDb page contains more than fifteen hundred entries. (Many of these, to be sure, are for the Bridal Chorus from “Lohengrin,” which is usually free of ideological ramifications.) For some years, I have been compiling an annotated list of Wagner’s movie appearances, which presently goes up to 1950. His career as a vessel of Nazi malevolence begins in the late thirties. One of the earliest and strangest instances is Busby Berkeley’s 1939 film of the Rodgers and Hart musical “Babes in Arms,” in which disaffected vaudeville kids enact a vaguely Nazi-ish torchlight-and-bonfire ceremony, at one point devising new words for “The Ride of the Valkyries”: “What do we cheer for? What are we here for? Why were we born?” (Elmer Fudd’s Kill

da wabbit” is a better fit.) The figure of the Wagner-loving Nazi villain, a trusty device to this day, was inaugurated by Conrad Veidt in the 1940 film “Escape.”

A survey of German cinema from the same period shows that the Nazis drew more sparingly on Wagner than one might expect. There was no heroic bio-pic, nor did the “Ride” figure in many battle scenes. In general, despite Hitler’s lifelong infatuation with Wagner, the composer’s propaganda value proved limited. His work was too long, too complicated, too ambiguous in its implications. “Die Meistersinger” was performed each year at the Nazi Party rallies in Nuremberg, but the Party’s rank and file found the ritual onerous; an irritated Hitler once had guests from a nearby hotel brought in to fill empty seats. Some members of the Nazi hierarchy harbored doubts about Wagner’s suitability for the new Germany: an aura of decadence surrounded him, and rumors of hidden Jewish ancestry circulated. Winifred Wagner, the composer’s daughter-in-law, asked Heinrich Himmler to stop the Jewish stories from spreading.

The most blatant deployment of Wagner in Nazi film comes in the 1941 war picture “Stukas,” in which a fighter pilot suffers a loss of morale after sustaining injury. As part of his recovery process, he is sent to the Bayreuth Festival—Hitler actually believed that wounded soldiers could benefit from exposure to Wagner—and is miraculously healed. When the pilot hears the strains of “Siegfried’s Rhine Journey,” his eyes light up and his mind is filled with memories of joyous service to the Fatherland. Yet, when he takes to the air again, he and his comrades sing not Wagner but a lusty fighting anthem: “We are the Black Hussars of the air, / The Stukas, the Stukas, the Stukas.” Joseph Goebbels, who controlled Nazi film and radio, had a fine-tuned sense of how popular culture could energize the masses. During the war, classical music was heard less often on the radio. A respondent to a Wehrmacht survey had written, “The soldier who is fighting at the battle-front wants light music, dance, and jazz.”

Hollywood's wartime enthusiasm for Wagner, therefore, did not stem solely from a desire to replicate the soundscape of Nazi Germany. It had deeper, more twisted roots. The movies had long been employing Wagner as a shorthand: the "Ride" was already a popular choice for horse stampedes and battles. The proliferation of Nazi bad guys allowed for the continuation of that practice, in a somewhat hypocritical way: Wagner could deliver his thrilling orchestral charge to action scenes even as he was being demonized as a Teutonic menace. It soon became clear that the silver screen had a general weakness for Nazi iconography, as Leni Riefenstahl had first demonstrated in "Triumph of the Will." The orderly columns, the banners and swastikas, the crisp uniforms, the clean-cut faces and superhero bodies: Hollywood keeps recycling this stuff because it seizes the eye. At the end of the original "Star Wars," the Riefenstahl aesthetic is triumphantly appropriated by the American-style Rebellion.

This is the subtext of the "Ride of the Valkyries" set piece in "Apocalypse Now," in which the music of Hitler's favorite composer becomes the theme song for American military aggression. Francis Ford Coppola, who directed the film, and Walter Murch, who edited the soundtrack, undoubtedly intended it to have a critical component, aligning the bloodthirsty Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore with the Wagnerian generals of war movies past. Still, "Apocalypse" had the effect, inadvertently, of creating a new form of Wagner fetishism. American soldiers blared the "Ride" over loudspeakers during the invasion of Grenada and during both Iraq wars. Dmitry Utkin's attachment to Wagner was evidently a baroque variation on that military vogue.

Hypermasculine Hollywood bombast is the dominant model for the Wagner Group's own propaganda efforts, which are collectively known as the Wagner Extended Universe or the Wagnerverse. From what I have seen, the composer of the "Ring" and "Tristan und Isolde" plays little or no role in this body of work: Metallica's "Enter Sandman" is more likely to be used as the accompaniment for a recruiting video. In 2019, Prigozhin began releasing

Hollywood-style movies that celebrate mercenary derring-do. These projects mix the cheesy strut of old-school action flicks—“Rambo,” “Red Dawn,” and the like—with the splatter porn of first-person-shooter games. The soundtracks follow the current Hollywood trend for sullen drones, thudding beats, and minor-mode minimalism. A climactic scene in a Wagner Group film called “Tourist” echoes Samuel Barber’s Adagio for Strings, previously heard in “Platoon.”

From a cultural-history standpoint, then, the Wagner Group is more an American problem than a German one. The cult of violence, the appeal to young-male rage and bloodlust, the celebration of a robotic urge to fight to the end—Hollywood has been injecting all of this into the global id for the better part of a century. Wagner, an artist who was primarily concerned with entanglements of earthly power and spiritual love, has no place in such a world, except as a source for cut-up musical memes.

Utkin and Prigozhin succeeded in tarnishing Wagner’s name for a new generation. Those who see the composer as something other than an irredeemably evil figure may wonder if he will ever escape the historical purgatory in which he dwells. In all likelihood, he will not, nor should he. Wagner’s antisemitism was lethally intense, and it seeped into his operas. His chauvinism fed a sense of German supremacy. The “Ring” may be a critique of power, but its own flexing of musical muscle undermines its gospel of love. Thomas Mann masterfully articulated that dilemma when he observed that Wagner’s work lends itself to its own misuse. “Stukas” and “Apocalypse Now” are distortions; yet the music enables those distortions with its will to overwhelm the spectator.

At the same time, the annals of Wagnerism offer up a host of countervailing messages. A long procession of outsiders and dreamers have used the composer to assuage their sense of isolation or to transmit their ideals. There were, and are, socialist Wagnerians, mystical Wagnerians, feminist

Wagnerians, Black Wagnerians, Jewish Wagnerians, gay Wagnerians. The latest issue of the German scholarly journal *Wagnerspectrum* highlights the last named, going so far as to put a rainbow flag on the cover. At the turn of the last century, Bayreuth served as a homosexual refuge, not least because Wagner's son, Siegfried, who ran the festival for several decades, was known to be gay. Kevin Clarke, in a *Wagnerspectrum* essay on "hidden LGBT networks" at Bayreuth, notes that the festival has never officially acknowledged its substantial gay heritage; rainbow flags do not fly there, as they do at many other institutions.

In the permanently contested case of Wagner, neither sweeping apologies nor blanket condemnations will suffice. The difficulty is that contemporary discourse has little patience with maddening contradictions of the kind that Wagner embodies. Was he bad or was he good? Did he make the world better or worse? To which the best answer is Tristan's reply to King Mark: "O King, that / I cannot tell you; / what you would ask / you can never know." ♦