

Protests mount in Germany and internationally against boycott of Russian artists and culture

Sybille Fuchs
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The cultural boycott against Russian artists, museums and scientific institutions is assuming an increasingly vindictive character. Any artist who refrains from making a political declaration of solidarity with Ukraine and opposition to Russia is treated as an accomplice of Vladimir Putin by various cultural organisations, regardless of that artist's contribution to global culture in the fields of music, art or literature.

Artists and scholars of Russian origin are being excluded from cultural activities in a manner that threatens to resemble the fate of Jewish artists in Nazi Germany almost 90 years ago.

At the same time, however, there is a growing chorus of artists and intellectuals who oppose the anti-Russian campaign. To a certain extent, they articulate the sentiments of millions of workers and young people who are deeply concerned about the massive rearmament taking place and the growing danger of nuclear war—a danger that is not being addressed by political parties or the media.

The recent courageous declaration by the Belgian national opera La Monnaie in Brussels that it would continue to perform Russian works in the coming season because its task was to create art, not wage war (“make art, not war”), has found a resonance in other countries, including Germany.

One recent example is the awarding of the Osnabrück Music Prize to young Russian violinist Dmitry Smirnov for a concert in which he played a concerto by the Ukrainian composer Valentin Silvestrov. The programme for the concert was deliberately changed and took place under the motto “Don’t Burn Bridges.” Instead of the music of Haydn, the focus of the concert became pieces by Ukrainian composers and the Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich.

Confiscation of works of art

The anti-Russian cultural boycott has become a central component of the current hysterical war propaganda. Contrary to their deep roots in mankind’s yearning for peaceful and humane social relations, art and culture as a whole are being turned into weapons of war by those responsible for cultural policy.

In a criminal act, Finnish customs officials recently confiscated famous works of art by European masters worth about €42 million that were on loan to Western European museums. The artworks were on their way back to Russia after the Russian government ordered its

museums to retrieve their possessions.

Among the confiscated paintings and sculptures from Russian museums, which until recently was on display in the Gallerie d’Italia in the Palazzo Reale in Milan and in the Fondazione Alda Fendi in Rome, is Titian’s world-famous work “Portrait of a Young Woman with Feather Hat” (1536). It was loaned to the Milanese museum along with other works by Titian, as well as paintings by the high-Renaissance artist Giovanni Cariani and Pablo Picasso. The masterpiece “Winged Cupid” by Antonio Canova was also exhibited in Milan. The works came from the collections of the Hermitage and the Tsarskoe Selo State Museum in St. Petersburg, and the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.

The confiscation by customs at the Vaalimaa border crossing in southern Finland was justified on the basis of European Union (EU) sanctions against Russia. That such sanctions should include the confiscation of works of art recalls barbarous acts carried out by the Nazis.

In the Second World War, Finland was allied with Germany and participated in the war against the Soviet Union with its own divisions from 1941 to 1944. Now the Finnish government is seeking to join NATO as soon as possible and is attempting to whip up extreme hostility toward Russia.

Similar efforts in France to confiscate artworks from Russian owners have so far been rebuffed. In the past few months, over 1 million visitors have viewed the Morozov collection of modern art at the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris. The collection includes some 200 works by artists such as Pierre Bonnard, Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, Claude Monet and Picasso. When the exhibition ended, there were calls made to confiscate these works under EU sanctions or even auction them off to “help Ukraine.” Such a move, however, was declared impermissible by French lawyers.

Other museums are now having to cancel exhibitions featuring Russian works of art or otherwise alter their plans. This not only affects art museums; the archaeological museum in Chemnitz, Germany has had to review its schedule. A mummified Scythian figure from Novosibirsk was due to be exhibited in the museum, which had procured a special cooling device to preserve the figure.

Joint research projects and cooperation between German and Russian museums, universities and scientific institutions, some of which have existed for decades, have also been abruptly terminated. For example, the director of Berlin’s Museum of Prehistory and Early History, Dr. Matthias Wemhoff, expressed his regret that a planned exhibition dealing with excavations carried out by famed

archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann (1822-1890) due to open in May, will not go on later to Moscow as previously planned.

Tchaikovsky and Dostoevsky targeted

The current culture wars even affect composers and poets from past centuries, active long before Putin's birth, and at a time when Europe's elites were favoured guests in the court of the Tsar. In addition to cancelling performances by first-rate Russian musicians, such as conductor Valery Gergiev and soprano Anna Netrebko, spineless education and cultural officials are seeking to erase immortal works of literature and music from the cultural heritage.

In Cardiff, Wales, a concert programme of works by Tchaikovsky was cancelled, even though the composer was very fond of Ukraine, the birthplace of his grandfather. The Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra cancelled a performance of Tchaikovsky's "Slavonic March" and instead played a hymn by the Ukrainian composer Mychailo Werbyzkis. In Szczecin (Poland), Tchaikovsky's music was replaced in a concert by pieces by Antonin Dvořák and Ludwig van Beethoven. In Bydgoszcz in northern Poland, Tchaikovsky's opera "Eugene Onegin" was cancelled along with a performance of Mussorgsky's "Boris Godunov" at the Polish National Theatre.

Back in March, the Greek Culture Minister Lina Mendoni cancelled all performances of Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake" with the Bolshoi Ballet, triggering a storm of protest. Dozens of Greek Facebook users posted angry comments addressed to Mendoni. "You are ridiculous to a dangerous degree and, of course, outrageously ignorant," and "let us know when the book burning starts." And: "Soon we'll be reading Tolstoy in the cellar and hiding Tchaikovsky's records in a basket with the dirty laundry. Mendoni is a disgrace to culture in Greece."

Even world literature in the form of works by Tolstoy or Dostoevsky has been targeted. The University of Milan, for example, sought to cancel a Dostoevsky lecture in order to "avoid tensions"—a move that also led to fierce protests. The lecturer who was going to give the lecture, Paolo Nori, wrote: "What is happening in Ukraine is terrible and makes me weep, but these reactions are ridiculous. When I read this email from the university, I couldn't believe it."

Dostoevsky, he said, had not only been sentenced to a labour camp for taking part in an uprising against the tsarist regime, he was also in frequent trouble with censors. "We should talk more about Dostoevsky or Tolstoy, the first to promote non-violent movements and who were greatly admired by Gandhi. For a university to ban this course of study is incredible!"

In a tweet, Nori also pointed out that the famous author Mikhail Bulgakov was born in Kiev, but had always written in Russian.

Even a statue of Dostoevsky in Florence has become the object of an absurd attack. It stands in Cascine Park and, according to so-called "culture warriors," should be removed to disappear into a depot.

Increasing protests

The ferocious campaign against Russian culture inevitably brings to mind the era of Nazi rule in Germany and the exclusion of all Jewish

artists and their works of art from cultural life.

"What gives us as Germans the right to equate Russian culture with war? Don't we remember what German culture meant after the world war?" wrote film producer Günter Rohrbach in an angry comment in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. He referred to the crimes committed by the German Wehrmacht in its war of extermination in the Soviet Union and asked how serious were the "confessions of guilt" "that our politicians make year after year with good reason at the places of our shame?!"

Rohrbach continued: "What gives us, we Germans of all people, the right to ban Russian artists, scientists, and athletes from public life, to prevent them from practising their profession, to demand they make statements resembling confessions? Do we no longer know who we are, where we come from?"

In another critical article in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the well-known filmmaker, film producer and writer Alexander Kluge (b. 1932) expressed his horror that "great Russian artists are being pressured into making convenient statements." He stated forthrightly: "A war is a challenge to art. In times of war, art is often used by both sides for propaganda purposes. It is not suitable for such a purpose. Actually, it belongs to the popular resistance against war." Therefore, "obstructing artists cannot be an act against war."

Among the few critical voices that have found a hearing in the German media are the writer Christian Baron, the philosopher and former Minister for Culture Julian Nida-Rümelin and the writer and vice-president of the Berlin Academy of the Arts, Kathrin Röggla. On Saarländischer Rundfunk, the Austrian-born Röggla expressed her opposition to the "deranged debate" about a blanket cultural boycott of Russia. She warned of the dangers "if people were once again exposed to currents such as xenophobia or nationalism."

Working people, young people, artists and intellectuals across Europe must not allow any repeat of this abuse of art. The bloodletting of Jewish culture in the 1930s has left deep scars up until this day. A renewed racist and nationalist suppression of human cultural achievements and works of art would inevitably pave the way for barbarism. Workers, youth and serious intellectuals must protect and preserve the art and culture of all countries by building an international and socialist anti-war movement.



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