



Whose Wagner is it?

RUSSIA'S WILD CARD

Wagnerian Army

Why is Prigozhin's Russian mercenary force named after Hitler's favorite 19th-century German composer?



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PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY CHOP CHOPPISH SHOP

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Among the many confusions about the private Russian army known as “the Wagner Group” is how to pronounce its name. Reporters and pundits seem to vacillate between “Wag-ner” and “Vog-ner.” Also, nobody seems to know how the group got its name.

Let me state this as simply as I can: Russia, invoking memories of the German invasion in 1941, has an internal (and separately funded) army named for an icon of its arch-enemy, Adolf Hitler. It is an army that claims to be fighting neo-Nazis in Ukraine, a country whose president is a Russian-speaking Jew. (You may need to read that again.)

If Lewis Carroll, Franz Kafka, and George Orwell shared a cabin at the MacDowell colony, they might come up with this explanation, but only after a great deal of drinking.

Katharina Wagner, the composer's great-granddaughter, wrote in *Die Welt* this week that it took her breath away to see the Wagner name on the “bloody banners” of warmongers.

In case this is not head-spinning enough, the Wagner Group was founded in 2014 by Dmitry Utkin, a former lieutenant colonel in the Russian military-intelligence agency, who is a real-life neo-Nazi, the very thing the Wagner Group is presumably fighting. (Utkin has not been seen in public since 2016.) However, on September 26, 2022, [Yevgeny Prigozhin](#) stated that it was he who had founded the Wagner Group, specifically to support Russian forces (the “little green men”) in the war in Donbas, in May 2014. Why Prigozhin named his army after Richard Wagner, however, remains a mystery. Perhaps he is an opera fan—one who unfortunately slept through the last half-hour of *Götterdämmerung*.

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If a private army were created to stamp out Nazis, then it might be called the Churchill Group or the Ike Squad. The Russians might have preferred Marshal Georgy Zhukov, who led Stalin's army when it put an end to Hitler's terror in Eastern Europe. After World War II, however, instead of lionizing him, Joseph Stalin saw Zhukov as too popular and powerful (he led the army!) and had him demoted for being disrespectful of his military colleagues and politically untrustworthy—something that might echo the current situation between Vladimir Putin and Yevgeny Prigozhin.

If a Russian army of mercenaries meant to wipe out 21st-century Nazis had to be named for a composer of classical music, it might have been named for one of its two most admired World War II composers, Sergey Prokofiev or Dmitry Shostakovich, but their names do not translate into “power” the way Wagner's does. The selective use of Wagner as a “power” image began in the silent-movie era, with “The Ride of the Valkyries” used for the K.K.K. scene in *The Birth of a Nation*. Famously, it was also used in *Apocalypse Now*. Currently, it is accompanying an ad for Legoland.

What no one seems to have noticed is that Wagner's operas are always about the power of human love and forgiveness. Also, “The Ride of the Valkyries” is the first (and practically only) description of powerful women! Friedelind Wagner—R.W.'s granddaughter, and Katharina's aunt—made speeches during W.W. II in London and New York in which she said, “If Hitler actually understood my grandfather's music, he would ban it.”

Aram Khachaturian and Dmitry Kabalevsky were celebrated for composing precisely the kind of music Stalin wanted: uplifting and tuneful, and therefore not descriptive of the kind of toxic masculinity favored in an army culled from Russia's prisons.

Igor Stravinsky had composed the perfect vehicle of unrepentant violence, his 1913 *Rite of Spring*, but that would be awkward since he was outlawed in Russia for a half-century and died an American citizen after living for decades in West Hollywood.

Perhaps the army's *nom de guerre* could have been found in Russia's earlier musical history. (After all, Mussolini had to go back to ancient Rome to find his unifying cultural image.) The 1812 Overture is a world-famous description of Russia's military victory over Napoleon. The Tchaikovsky Group! Alas, Pyotr Tchaikovsky was gay, so *nyet*. The profoundly non-European and pro-Russian—and perhaps straight—Modest Mussorgsky was an alcoholic (not necessarily disqualifying), but his “Great Gate of Kiev” could create confusion. I mean, is that a good thing or a bad thing?

The fact that every few minutes the name of Richard Wagner is said on national and international media is disturbing. Yes, Wagner was an outspoken anti-Semite. He did not invent it. Yes, he was the greatest musical genius of his time, but so were Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Ludwig van Beethoven in their times. The unique history of how Wagner and his music have fared shines a light on politics and music, and the lasting power of his musical genius.

In the run-up to America's entry into World War I, the Metropolitan Opera banned his operas because they were thought to contain the essence of the Hun. It would take a few years—and the arrival of Wagner's son, Siegfried, in New York City—to return his operas to the stage.

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In World War II, when Hitler was supporting the Wagner Festival in Bayreuth (and was a frequent and very welcome visitor), one would think that the taint of that association would condemn Wagner's music once more. But no! Wagner's operas continued to be played at the Met, though casting occasionally proved challenging. Even more fascinating is that the world's most acclaimed anti-Fascist maestro, Arturo Toscanini, frequently programmed excerpts from Wagner's operas, which were regularly broadcast nationally on NBC radio.

At the same time, refugee Jewish composers in Hollywood continued their admiration for Wagner and adapted his techniques of synchronization, tone painting, and the use of little melodic phrases for individual characters and objects—the so-called leitmotifs that can be heard in Wagner's “Ring” cycle, as well as in *Gone with the Wind*, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, and *Bride of Frankenstein*. The refugee Jewish conductors simultaneously became the greatest interpreters of Wagner's music—Fritz Reiner, Otto Klemperer, Bruno Walter, Georg Solti, George Szell.

Germany found it necessary to de-Nazify Wagner's reputation even though he had died in 1883, six years before Hitler was born. When the Bayreuth Festival reopened in 1951, it played it safe with a performance of Not Wagner: Beethoven's eternal palate cleanser, his Ninth Symphony, conducted by Hitler's favorite conductor, Wilhelm Furtwängler, in a manic performance that can be heard on an easily available archival recording. (Skip to the last few minutes and you will see what I mean.)

Beethoven's Ninth would continue to heal the world, as when Leonard Bernstein conducted the symphony after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in 1989. Its “Ode to Joy” is the anthem of the European Union. But, while Putin now describes his military action in terms of Russia defending itself against the West rather than fighting the Jewish Nazi government of Ukraine, we currently have a wandering and leaderless Russian army of 50,000 men, named for the Western European composer Richard Wagner.

In case you were wondering, it's *Vog-ner*. @

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