



A very early picture of the choir

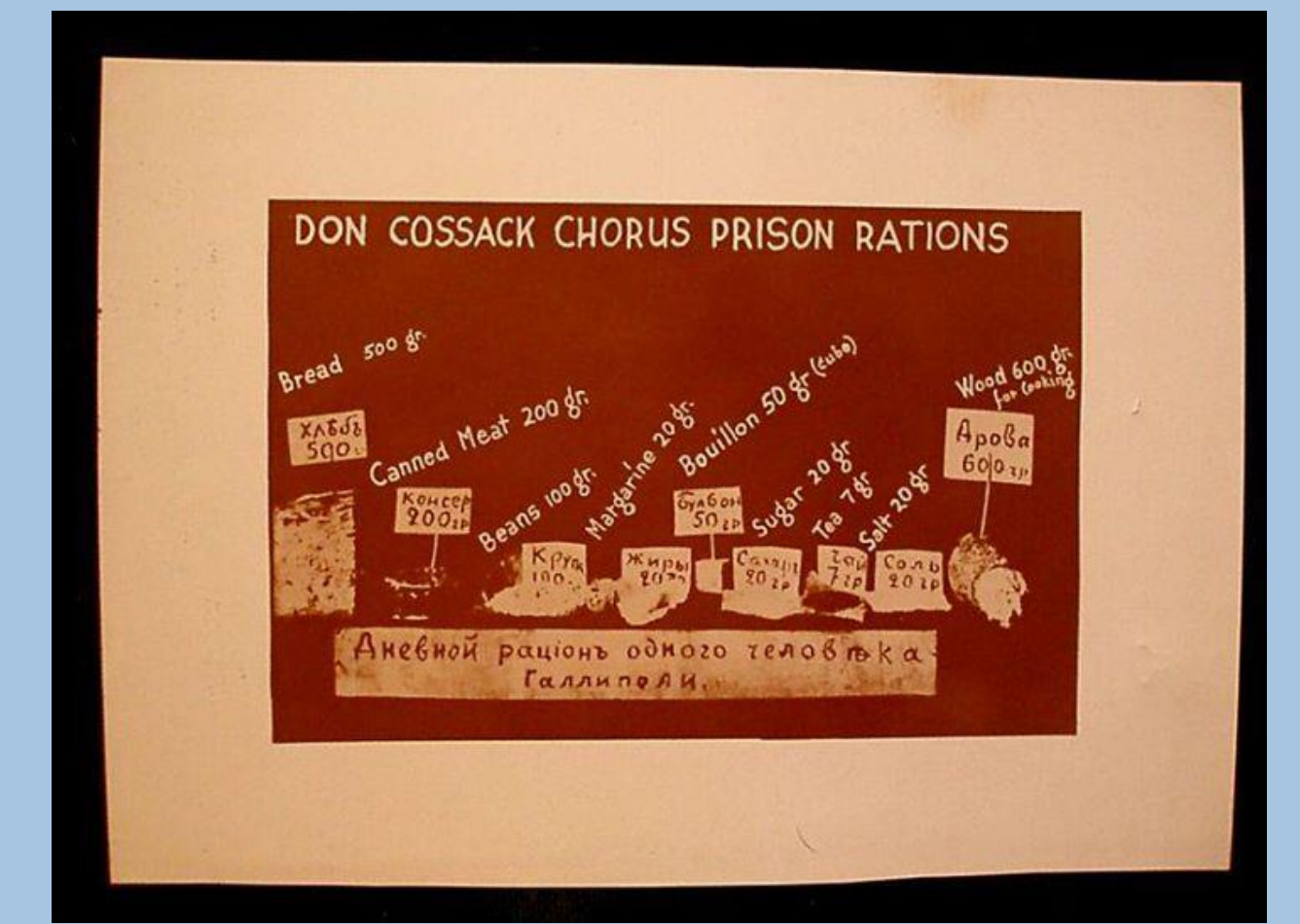
Serge Jaroff and the Don Cossack Choir: the State of Research in the 21st Century

Serge Jaroff's Don Cossack Choir was founded at a miserable Turkish concentration camp in 1921 in an attempt to raise morale. It drew singers from the Tsarist Don Cossack regiments deported by the Red Army after their defeat in the Russian revolution. Jaroff, a detainee, had graduated from the famous Moscow Synodal Choir School, so he was ordered to conduct it. He arranged repertoire for it from memory, and against all odds, polished 36 amateurs into a brilliant world-class unit. Once freed, the destitute men stayed together and kept singing. Discovered by an impresario, they gave a groundbreaking concert at Vienna's Hofburg on July 4, 1923, which launched their remarkable professional career. They proceeded to tour the world with unimaginable success for nearly 60 years. They always sang only in Russian, and they always wore the same kind of austere Cossack uniforms they had been wearing when they were deported.

Donna Arnold, University of North Texas



A very young Serge Jaroff



For 22 years Jaroff and his choristers travelled with "Nansen" passports, devised by the League of Nations for Russian émigrés without a country. The passports read "en voyage" where a country name would have been. For some time the men were based in Germany, but they sought permanent-resident status in the United States as war was breaking out in Europe. They attained United States citizenship in 1943.



The young Jaroff with his mentor, Rachmaninoff



Jaroff and the choir in El Paso, Texas, 1942



A 1978 concert poster celebrating over 55 years of the Don Cossack Choir and over 80 years of Serge Jaroff



Fast Forward:

The choir gave its last concert in Paris in 1979; Serge Jaroff died in New Jersey in 1985. Wanja Hlibka, the choir's youngest soloist from 1967-1979, now conducts its authorized successor, the "Don Kosaken Chor Serge Jaroff," in Germany. Hlibka reportedly came to the U.S. and took possession of Jaroff's choral library in 2007, but details have not been publicized.

Tragedy and Intrigue:

Jaroff's personal effects were abandoned around 2007. A shady antiques dealer found them in a dumpster outside his small house in New Jersey. She said she rescued about 40% of them.

Enter Russian musicologist Dr. Svetlana Zvereva and her husband, Scottish musicologist Dr. Stuart Campbell: they came from Scotland to try to help. The dealer gave them many of Jaroff's effects to take to a Moscow museum. Then after they went home, she accused them of stealing them from her, and had police in 2 countries investigating. The musicologists were exonerated. The story was reported in the New York Times.

A significant portion of Serge Jaroff's archive now resides in Moscow's renowned Glinka Museum of Musical Culture. Dr. Zvereva and Russian colleagues have done important research on Jaroff and his choir, but their findings have been published in sources not readily available outside of Russia.

Irina Minsky, widow of long-time Don Cossack Choir soloist Michael Minsky, maintains a significant archive of Jaroff materials in the Netherlands. She led a Don Cossack Choir study group at the University of Groningen. An important outcome of its work was that she produced a video and 3-CD set of historic recordings of Jaroff's choir in 2007, and has participated in related CD projects. The set and some of the related recordings are available on Naxos Music Library. If anything else from Minsky's study group has been published, it is not readily discoverable.

The Don Cossacks began every concert with Russian Orthodox liturgical music arranged by Jaroff for classical performance. They continued with Russian art songs and concluded with Russian folk and soldier songs, most of them arranged by Jaroff. The style of the music was essentially classical, but was still difficult to classify. The choir constantly played to packed houses all over the world in venues great and small, inspiring a broad spectrum of the public with their brilliant technique and unusual repertoire. They performed on UNT's Denton campus in 1935, 1939, and 1946 to considerable acclaim.

Superb octavists and falsettists (countertenors) defined the choir's signature sonority, 6- or 7-part harmony being typical. The use of falsettists was innovative and greatly expanded the repertoire the choir could perform. Jaroff's restrained but demanding conducting style, characterized by intensely expressive rubatos and dynamic changes, became legendary. Its resulting emotional impact rendered language barriers irrelevant.

Jaroff's Don Cossacks were long renowned as the best choir in the world. For nearly sixty years they garnered millions of fans, sold millions of records, and inspired countless rave reviews, but received almost no scholarly attention.

The Phenomenon of the Extreme Fans:

Jaroff and his Don Cossacks always attracted particularly passionate, extreme fans; thanks to the legacy of their recordings and German film and TV appearances, they still do. Not surprisingly, the choir was totally banned in the Soviet Union. Since its fall, it has been a revelation for Russians to encounter their music for the first time.

*One extreme fan, Russian Orthodox Archpriest Andrey Diakonov, has amassed a vast collection of Jaroff recordings and memorabilia. He has shared part of his collection, particularly in Russia. Scholars and fans will welcome any further treasures he is able to bring forth.

*A superb online discography at russian-records.com, maintained by U.S.-based Russian Yuri Bernikov, includes a comprehensive Jaroff discography. Extreme fans have contributed to it significantly.

*Fans have posted countless Jaroff recordings on YouTube, and also the 3 German feature films and TV specials in which he and the choir appeared. Due to the scarcity of much of this material, particularly in the U.S., these videos constitute a major source for Jaroff research.

*Other extreme fans, some quite enigmatic, continue to collect recordings and memorabilia avidly. If vitally important unknown treasures are extant, these zealots will unearth them.

Research Lacunae: The following topics are ripe for the in-depth research they never had in Jaroff's lifetime:

- 1) stylistic analyses of Jaroff's arrangements
- 2) the nature and vital importance of performance practice in Jaroff's performances
- 3) Jaroff's remarkable manner of rehearsing and conducting the choir
- 4) the training and development of individual singers
- 5) the brilliant soloists who were essential in bringing Jaroff's concepts to life
- 6) Jaroff's biography

These are only a small sampling of the important topics that await scholarly attention. Perhaps most urgent of all, the persons who were directly involved with Jaroff and his choir need to tell us what they know while there is still time. Irina Minsky and Wanja Hlibka would have particularly valuable input.



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