

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Censoring the Muses: Opera and Creative Control in Nicholas's Russia (1825–1855)

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Abstract

This article offers the first systematic investigation of the institution of opera censorship in Russia during the reign of Nicholas I. Drawing on new archival sources, it examines censorship legislation, the organisation of dramatic (i.e., theatre) censorship, the workings of its bureaucracy, censors' reports and protocols and Nicholas's personal decrees on productions of specific operas, and printed and manuscript librettos. From these, it distils the patterns of state intervention in opera, revealing a remarkable fluidity – even capriciousness – of approaches. Decisions to ban or permit, and specific intrusions into the texts, were based on the censors' adherence to or disregard for the Empire's censorship laws, Nicholas's inclinations and impulses, changes in cultural policy, practical needs of the Imperial Theatres, the shifting political climate at home and abroad, and, most of all, the national point of origin of the operatic work under review. In addition to surveying the trends, the article offers three case studies: Glinka's *Zhizn' za Tsarya* (*A Life for the Tsar*), Verdi's *Rigoletto* and Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*.

Keywords: Opera; Censorship; Russia; Nicholas I; Glinka; Verdi; Meyerbeer

In the first decade of his reign, Nicholas I set in motion an ambitious cultural agenda designed to elevate the arts in St Petersburg to the level found in major European centres and to extend Russia's cultural reach in Europe.¹ He assigned opera a major role in this project. Among his initiatives were the creation of two new opera troupes – Italian and Russian; the overhaul of the German opera troupe; the building of new theatres to accommodate an ever-growing array of dramatic spectacles in St Petersburg; the architectural expansion of the city's biggest public space – the Bol'shoy (Kamenniy) theatre – and its dedication to opera and ballet; the professionalisation of St Petersburg's musical establishment; and, most significantly for the present study, the modernisation of the repertoire. The last component included both support for homegrown opera and the importation of recent works from Italy and France. Nicholas's imperial ambitions for opera were hardly new: the reforms largely followed the pattern set in motion by his grandmother,

¹ I use anglicised, Germanised or Latinised spellings of names when such are standard in scholarship (e.g., Nicholas I rather than Nikolay I) or when the key players discussed used such variants themselves (e.g., Benckendorff instead of Benkendorf). In other cases, and in all citations, I transliterate from Russian, employing the system first developed in Richard Taruskin, *Musorgsky: Eight Essays and an Epilogue* (Princeton, 1993). All translations – from all languages – are mine, unless otherwise specified.

Catherine the Great.² However, the magnitude of the vision and especially the swiftness of its implementation were uniquely his.

Nicholas wanted to stage the latest and finest of European operas. But he feared the volatile mix of disconcerting new ideas found in the librettos coming from the West, music's emotional appeal and socially heterogeneous mass audiences: this combination could easily ignite public unrest. To contain such a risk, the content and messages of dramatic works had to be censored, a process which became fully systematised during his period of rule. Nicholas selected the Third Section of his Imperial Majesty's Own Chancellery (secret or political police) to administer all theatre censorship and instructed them to uphold the monarchy as the ideal system of governance, stymie any suggestion of republicanism or political reform, safeguard the church and protect public morality.

As it did everywhere else in Europe, albeit in different ways and to different degrees, censorship in the Russian Empire shaped both individual works and the genre of opera as a whole. Nevertheless, despite its enormous if mostly hidden socio-cultural influence, opera censorship remains something of a *terra incognita* in the historiography of music in Russia in the first half of the nineteenth century.³ Little is known about opera censorship as a process and practice, and there has been no systematic attempt to clarify its ideological precepts or investigate its mechanics.⁴ Soviet musicology contributed virtually nothing to the subject other than indiscriminate claims of censorship brutality – claims largely unsupported or suffering from methodological flaws.⁵ Today's still-patchy understanding of opera censorship for this period comes primarily from work undertaken by historians and literary scholars on print censorship.⁶ Scholarship on dramatic (i.e., theatre) censorship, of which opera censorship was a component, remains highly fragmented

² Facets of Catherine the Great's operatic politics are treated in Inna Naroditskaya, *Bewitching Russian Opera: The Tsarina from State to Stage* (New York, 2012); Anna Giust, *Cercando l'opera russa: la formazione di una coscienza nazionale nel repertorio operistico del Settecento* (Milan, 2014); Anna Giust, 'Gli inizi del governo di Oleg di Caterina II: Sarti, Canobbio e Paškevič al servizio di un'idea', *Studi musicali* 1 (2016), 39–66; Elise Lauren Bonner, 'Catherine the Great and the Rise of Comic Opera in Late Eighteenth-Century St. Petersburg' (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2017).

³ The situation is only slightly better for the second half of the century. See Robert W. Oldani, 'Boris Godunov and the Censor', *19th-Century Music* 2/3 (1979), 245–53; Taruskin, *Musorgsky*, ch. 4; Simon Morrison, *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement* (Berkeley, 2002), *passim*; Walter Zidaric, 'Traduction/adaptation des livrets d'opéras: le rôle de la censure en Russie aux XIX^e et XX^e siècles', in *La traduction des livrets: aspects théoriques, historiques et pragmatiques*, ed. Gottfried R. Marschall (Paris, 2004), 495–504; Olga Haldey, *Mamontov's Private Opera: The Search for Modernism in the Russian Theater* (Bloomington, 2010), *passim*.

⁴ References to censorship are usually fleeting (see in the following notes for specific examples of such studies). For Russian composers, there is nothing comparable to the valuable scholarship on the censoring of Verdi's operas in Italy and elsewhere: Andreas Giger, 'Social Control and the Censorship of Giuseppe Verdi's Operas in Rome (1844–1859)', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 11/3 (1999), 233–65; Philip Gossett, 'Censorship and Self-Censorship: Problems in Editing Operas of Giuseppe Verdi', in *Essays in Musicology: A Tribute to Alvin Johnson*, ed. Lewis Lockwood and Edward Roesner (Philadelphia, 1990), 247–57; Francesco Izzo, *Laughter Between Two Revolutions: Opera Buffa in Italy, 1831–1848* (Rochester, 2013); Roberta Montemorra Marvin, 'The Censorship of Verdi's Operas in Victorian London', *Music & Letters* 82/4 (2001), 582–610.

⁵ For example, not distinguishing between print and theatre censorships; or comparing Russian adaptations of Western operas to their original texts without also examining adaptations incurred by the 'European censorial network', which offered already-reworked versions of the problematic originals (see my discussion of *Rigoletto* and *Les Huguenots* later).

⁶ See, for instance, Marianna Tax Choldin, *A Fence around the Empire: Russian Censorship of Western Ideas under the Tsars* (Durham, NC, 1985); or Chester Dunning, 'The Tsar's Red Pencil: Nicholas I and Censorship of Pushkin's "Boris Godunov"', *The Slavic and East European Journal* 54/2 (2010), 238–54; V.R. Firsov et al., eds., *Tsenzura v Rossii: istoriya i sovremennost'*, *Sbornik nauchnikh trudov*, 6 vols. (St Petersburg, 2001–13); G.V. Zhirkov, *Istoriya tsenzuri v Rossii XIX veka* (St Petersburg, 2000); Sergey I. Grigor'ev, *Pridvornaya tsenzura i obraz verkhovnoy vlasti: 1831–1917* (St Petersburg, 2007).

and outdated.⁷ Finally, there is no comparison of opera censorship in Russia with parallel practices in other states across Europe.⁸

To re-create the story of opera censorship in Russia, it is necessary to study censorship legislation, Nicholas's decrees on productions of specific operas, the biographies and attitudes of his censors,⁹ the workings of the massive bureaucracy within which these censors operated, operatic scores side-by-side with their printed and manuscript librettos, and censors' reports and protocols. This study presents the story for the first time, bringing these elements together and documenting them through new archival sources.¹⁰ In so doing, it reveals the censorial precepts and patterns of state intervention established during Nicholas's reign that would continue to shape domestic and foreign opera in Russia until the end of the Empire, and arguably well into the Soviet period. Without the story of censorship, the history of opera in Russia remains incomplete.

I begin with a survey of Nicholas's worldview and how that manifested in censorship as a tool of state control. The rest of the article then details the practices of censorship, with particular reference to the ways in which the national origin (Russian, Italian or French) of an operatic work determined how it was handled by the censors. By concentrating on the censorial travails of Italian and French hits in Russia (by far the majority of operas heard at the time), the study broadens our understanding of transnational operatic culture in mid-nineteenth-century Europe.

Codifying censorship: Statutes of 1826 and 1828

In monarchical systems, legislation encodes and realises the autocrat's vision of the state, even when it is drawn up by committees. Nicholas I (1796–1855) came of age in the period of reaction.¹¹ Influenced by the increasing ultra-conservatism of Alexander I following the restoration of the monarchy in France in 1815, Nicholas saw in the post-Revolutionary West what his Minister of People's Enlightenment termed the 'rapid collapse in Europe of religious and civil institutions' and the 'spread of destructive [i.e., liberal] ideas'.¹² The Decembrist revolt (1825), which marked the start of his reign and fed his fear of rebellion, challenged not only the legitimacy of Nicholas's succession to the throne but also autocratic power itself. W. Bruce Lincoln has claimed that Nicholas's state ideology – termed in 1833 'Official Nationality' with its trinity of Orthodoxy, Autocracy and

⁷ Nikolay von Drizen, *Dramaticheskaya tsenzura dvukh epokh: 1825–1881* (Petrograd, 1917) addresses musical theatre only tangentially. Other scholars, often relying on Drizen, offer overviews of dramatic censorship; see, for example, Richard Stites, *Serfdom, Society, and the Arts in Imperial Russia: The Pleasure and the Power* (New Haven, 2005), 162–7.

⁸ Attempts to situate Russian theatrical censorship within the context of European censorship practices have produced only brief surveys, in which generalisations abound and discussions of opera are in short supply. See, for example, Anthony Swift, 'Russia', in *The Frightful Stage: Political Censorship of the Theater in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Robert J. Goldstein (New York, 2009), 130–61.

⁹ See Daniil Zavulunov, 'Nicholas I and his Dramatic Censors Tackle Opera', *Russian Literature* 113 (2020), 7–32.

¹⁰ With the exception of published legislative codes, this study relies on documents at the Russian State Historical Archive (Rossiyskiy Gosudarstvenniy Istoricheskiy Arkhiv; henceforth, RGIA), the St Petersburg State Theatre Library (Sankt-Peterburgskaya Gosudarstvennaya Teatral'naya Biblioteka, or TB) and the Russian National Library (Rossiyskaya Natsional'naya Biblioteka, or RNB).

¹¹ Here I distil only the most relevant elements of Nicholas's political, religious and aesthetic outlook based on A.E. Presniakov, *Emperor Nicholas I of Russia: The Apogee of Autocracy (1825–1855)*, ed. and trans. Judith C. Zacek (Gulf Breeze, FL, 1974); Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *Nicholas and Official Nationality in Russia, 1825–1855* (Berkeley, 1959); and, especially, W. Bruce Lincoln, *Nicholas I: Emperor and Autocrat of All the Russias* (DeKalb, 1989).

¹² Sergey Uvarov (Nicholas's Minister of People's Enlightenment), quoted in Riasanovsky, *Nicholas and Official Nationality*, 74.

*Narodnost*¹³ – was intended to ‘serve as a bulwark against the challenge which Western ideas posed to the established order’.¹⁴

Nicholas viewed Russia and its people as one big family, with himself as its father.¹⁵ But his attitude was less paternal than paternalistic. He distrusted the masses, thought them to be inherently evil and stupid and in need of guidance and control. The last two were entrusted to the Third Section (political police), with its manifold censorship activities aimed to prevent the spread of radical ideas and concepts that could destabilise the nation’s religious and political foundations and sense of morality.¹⁶ One concern in particular is found running through official documents: the impact that a radical dramatic work might make on the impressionable youth and the intellectually inexperienced (i.e., uneducated) masses. Indeed, Nicholas became nineteenth-century Russia’s most paranoid and intrusive monarch when it came to theatre, which was a crown monopoly, seen as an extension of the government’s propaganda arm and serving the purpose of ideological indoctrination.¹⁷ Although himself a musician (he sang and played the French horn, flute and cornet), Nicholas particularly disliked opera, which he considered to be the most profane form of theatre.

Ever methodical in implementing his vision and obsessed with systematisation and regimentation, Nicholas signed into law Russia’s new comprehensive Censorship Statute on 10 June 1826.¹⁸ It replaced the first (more liberal) statute of 1804. Although the conception of the new code predated Nicholas’s rise to power – it was drafted in the last five years of Alexander I’s rule, though rejected by him – its resurrection and realisation in 1826 reflected Nicholas’s own ideology, intensified by his experience with the Decembrist uprising. From the start, the law became known colloquially as the ‘cast-iron statute’ for its scope and strictness.¹⁹ These qualities contributed to its impracticality, prompting Nicholas to charge a committee of his closest ministers with reconsidering the entire law. Its replacement – the Statute of 1828 – would govern and guide all censorship practices in the Empire for almost forty years and dramatic censorship until the fall of the monarchy in 1917.²⁰

Although directed at print censorship, the Censorship Statutes of 1826 and 1828 articulated the foundational philosophical principles for all types of censorship. In the language of the 1828 law, works of art were to be automatically banned if they: 1) questioned the Greek-Russian Church and Christian faith in general; 2) contained anything against the monarchy, the Imperial household or the government; 3) offended mores and decency;

¹³ *Narodnost*, from *narod* or folk, is usually rendered in English as ‘nationality’, but it is closer to the German *Volkstümlichkeit*. Because there is no English equivalent, I leave *narodnost* untranslated.

¹⁴ Lincoln, *Nicholas I*, 241. On the role of music in this nationalism, see Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton, 1997), esp. 25–47; and Marina Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism: From Glinka to Stalin* (New Haven, 2007), esp. chs. 1–3.

¹⁵ Lincoln, *Nicholas I*, 251.

¹⁶ Lincoln, *Nicholas I*, 248–9, 237.

¹⁷ The process of monopolisation was begun by Catherine the Great and completed by Nicholas in 1843. Neither Alexander I nor Alexander II, whose reigns flank that of Nicholas, exerted much censorial pressure on operatic works.

¹⁸ *Polnoye sobraniye zakonov Rossiyskoy Imperii, Sobraniye vtoroye, 1825–1881* (St Petersburg, 1830), I: 550–71. Henceforth PSZ1.

¹⁹ On the creation, implementation, execution and problems of Nicholas’s censorship codes, see V. Yakushkin, ‘Iz istorii russkoy tsenzuri’, in *Russkaya pechat’ i tsenzura: v proshlom i nastoyashchem*, ed. Vl. Rozenberg and V. Yakushkin (Moscow, 1905), 1–87; and Sidney Monas, *The Third Section: Police and Society in Russia under Nicholas I* (Cambridge, MA, 1961), ch. 4.

²⁰ *Polnoye sobraniye zakonov Rossiyskoy Imperii, Sobraniye vtoroye, 1825–1881* (St Petersburg, 1830), III: 459–78. Henceforth PSZ2.

or 4) insulted the honour of any one person (article 3).²¹ Still, the Statute of 1828 permitted far more than it prohibited, to the extent that the censor was obliged to approve the artwork under review if these tenets were upheld. The law explicitly forbade the censor from considering ‘the fairness or groundlessness of the individual opinions or judgments of the writer, unless these are contrary to general rules of Censorship’, or from evaluating ‘whether or not the work under consideration is beneficial, so long as it is not harmful’ (article 15). The censor’s job was to permit or prohibit, but not to offer comments or intervene in the work except by identifying questionable passages for the author to address (articles 6, 7, 62, 64). In practice, and especially in the case of dramatic works, censorial approaches frequently diverged from these precepts. Any drama, being a form of mass entertainment, often with a didactic twist, required a stricter approach than the new law would allow. Indeed, a systematic study of the dramatic censors’ reports and text interventions reveals that what they questioned and sought to modify aligned with the prescripts of the earlier statute.

Unlike its successor, the Statute of 1826 was defined through prohibitions.²² For example, artworks that attacked rulers and governments of any state were automatically rejected (170–1). Censors reviewing historical works were instructed to consider the moral and political aims thereof (177). Historical discussions of public unrest were strictly prohibited (178). The law explicitly noted that it was the censor’s duty to ensure that the work of art did not contain ‘anything that can lessen the feeling of devotion, loyalty and voluntary obedience towards the prescriptions of the Highest power and national laws’ (167). While the censors were required to guard against all the potential violations, they were also expected to guide artworks in a direction that was ‘beneficial to or, at a minimum, harmless for the wellbeing of the Nation’ (1). In order to do so, the law allowed the censor to intervene in the work itself (60). Taken as a cluster, the articles admitted little flexibility, and it is hard to imagine how dramatic works of the period – often treating religious and political conflicts, historical events and hazy morality – would pass censorship at all.

Although the degree of authorial responsibility for the choice of subject matter and its realisation varied between the two statutes, authors were mandated to know the law and to abide by it and were held accountable for their work’s content (PSZ1: 212–14; PSZ2: 133, 150). By expecting authors to be familiar with the law and conform to it, both statutes institutionalised a system of preventative censorship of two types – ‘positive’ and ‘negative’.²³ Positive censorship shaped the artwork during its creative process by discouraging authors from engaging with politically incorrect or immoral topics. Authors knew what was and was not allowed and worked within these creative constraints – in other words, they were expected to censor themselves. What this suggests is that before an opera even reached the actual censorship phase, it had already been legally ring-fenced. If ‘positive’ censorship predated the submission of a dramatic work for censorial review, then ‘negative’ censorship resulted from the actual review of the completed work, with the aim of suppressing it in part or in whole. The censor entered the process in an official capacity only in this latter phase.

The effect of the statutes on Russian opera is clear: aware of the constraints, librettists and composers were limited in their choice of subject matter and its treatment from the start. Violating the law could land the author in prison, have him blacklisted or permanently placed under police surveillance.²⁴ With these deterrents, little wonder that most

²¹ All references to PSZ2 are given parenthetically in the text by article number.

²² All references to PSZ1 are given parenthetically in the text by article number.

²³ I adopt and adapt the distinction between ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ censorship from John Rosselli’s use of the terms in his ‘Censorship’, *Grove Music Online*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.40602>.

²⁴ Charles A. Ruud and Sergei A. Stepanov, *Fontanka 16: The Tsars’ Secret Police* (Montreal, 1999), esp. 20–2.

contemporaneous Russian librettists – such as Mikhail Zagoskin in Moscow, Georg von Rosen and Nestor Kukol'nik in St Petersburg – were devout and fully fledged supporters of the autocratic system in all its manifestations. They produced monarchist stories, bland fairytales and pseudo-historical operas set in Russia's imagined antiquity.

Most imported operas were sung in German or Russian translation and (often) adaptation. Reasons for this were both practical and political, relating to troupes' availability, audience make-up and the primary language of listeners. At the time of Nicholas's ascent to the throne, St Petersburg had only one professional opera company – the German. Whereas the Russian theatre also performed operas, it was not until the mid-1830s that a professional opera troupe – and one that was strong enough to tackle the latest repertoire being imported from the West – was established by the state. Nicholas experimented with having an Italian opera troupe in the city twice – from 1828 to 1831 and again from 1843 onwards (more on which later). The French theatre troupe in St Petersburg did not have professional singers by intent and, with very rare exceptions, did not sing opera.²⁵ Although all theatres were state-operated and accessible to anyone, each troupe was patronised by a particular layer of the public. The German theatre was attended almost exclusively by the city's German-speaking residents (a very substantial portion of St Petersburg's population). The Russian theatre was frequented by the lower echelon of Russian nobility, wealthy merchants, city visitors and anyone who could afford a ticket – this was the city's most heterogeneous audience ('the masses'). Finally, Russia's high aristocracy attended the French dramatic theatre and Italian opera.²⁶ All opera troupes sang in their own language exclusively, though their repertoires were not constricted by the corresponding national point of origin of a given work – for instance, both Russian and German troupes also sang French and Italian operas, but always in translation. When it came to social safety, the state did not view languages in which operas were performed as being equal. Italian was considered to be the safest, because it was the least familiar language within the rich multilingual environment of St Petersburg. For that reason, Italian operas could be heard in Italian, but only when performed by the Italian opera troupe. German was considered to be reasonably safe, and that was in part because many of the German theatre's audience members formed the core of the city's civil service and thus were viewed by the state as politically loyal (i.e., uninterested in challenging the status quo). With Russian being the language of the masses, Western operatic works translated into that language required the most vigilance on the part of state censors. French – the mother tongue of Russian aristocracy and intelligentsia, and consequently of political ideas – was not available as a language of opera. For that reason, no French serious opera (arguably the most politically charged of any operatic tradition at the time) could be heard in its original form during Nicholas's reign; these works could only be presented in translation and interventional adaptation. Translation and adaptation in any form were considered to be original creative endeavours and as such were subject to the two types of censorship described previously.

Censorship process

Under the Statute of 1828, any dramatic work (including opera) that was to be published would be reviewed by the office of print censorship under the Ministry of People's

²⁵ Russia's other major cultural centres with operatic establishments included Moscow (which had an Italian opera company until 1827, but only a Russian opera troupe thereafter), Odessa (which had Italian opera intermittently throughout Nicholas's reign), Riga (opera in German) and Warsaw (until 1831).

²⁶ Some of these demographic distinctions in opera audiences began to dissolve in the latter half of Nicholas's reign.

Enlightenment. Were the same work to be staged, however, it had to undergo review by the Third Section, which also had to grant permission for performance (PSZ1: 23). The basic precepts of censorship established by the law were shared (24), but the agencies operated independently: permission from one did not guarantee permission from the other. Perhaps the most famous example of this is Alexander Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*. In 1830, after being reviewed and emended by Nicholas himself, the play was approved for publication, but it was not permitted for staging until 1866 – more than a decade after Nicholas's death.²⁷ Similarly, printed opera librettos and scores, at least those coming from abroad, were often accessible to the public while staged performances were prohibited. For example, Nicholas's Minister of People's Enlightenment, Sergey Uvarov, personally found the French score of Giacomo Meyerbeer and Eugène Scribe's *Le prophète* to be permissible for circulation in the Empire in 1849, the year of its Paris premiere.²⁸ However, the opera was prohibited for staging numerous times, and when it was finally permitted, in August 1852, the work was drastically altered and publication of its new libretto denied.²⁹ An opera libretto, then, travelled along two different censorial paths to its realisation – as a printed poetic text and as a staged, musicalised script.

The mechanics of censoring a libretto intended for publication were straightforward.³⁰ Anyone could submit a work for consideration to one of the regional censorship offices (36), which were usually associated with universities in the Empire's largest cities (26–33). One censor would review the work and his (unilateral) decision was final, except for bans, which had to be agreed by a committee of all censors working at the office. The author or publisher could appeal against an unfavourable outcome (44–5), and controversial cases travelled up the hierarchy chain, ultimately reaching the tsar himself.

There was no comparable system of checks and balances in place for Dramatic Censorship. Unlike Print Censorship, which was regional, Dramatic Censorship in Russia became fully centralised during Nicholas's reign – all works intended for the stage anywhere in the Empire (e.g., Moscow, Odessa, Riga) had to be reviewed and approved by the Third Section in St Petersburg.³¹ Whereas the censors working for the Ministry of People's Enlightenment were by and large academics, their confrères in the secret police were professional bureaucrats – censorship was their job. More significantly, there was only one person responsible for censoring all theatre works in the Empire at any one time. Over the course of Nicholas's thirty-year reign just three people occupied this position: August Oldecop (part-time 1822–8, full-time 1828–40), Mikhail Gedeonov (1840–50)³² and Alexander Hederstern (Gedershtern) (1850–6).³³

Although the Statute of 1828 clearly outlined the censorship mechanism for printed works, it did not do so for staged pieces: that process was elastic, often clarified and

²⁷ The history of censoring *Boris Godunov* is treated in Dunning, 'The Tsar's Red Pencil'; see also Chester Dunning et al., *The Uncensored Boris Godunov: The Case for Pushkin's Original Comedy* (Madison, WI, 2006).

²⁸ RNB, fond 831, opis' 1, no. 8, f. 53.

²⁹ On the ordeals of *Le prophète*, see Zavlunov, 'Nicholas I and his Dramatic Censors', 21–6.

³⁰ My analysis of the process of censoring printed texts relies entirely on PSZ2.

³¹ Studies of the Third Section and its many censorial roles (but generally not concerned with opera) include Mikhail Konstantinovich Lemke, *Nikolayevskiy zhandarmi i literatura 1826–1855 gg.: po podlennim delam Tret'ego Otdeleniya S. E. I. V. kantselyarii*, 2nd edn (St Petersburg, 1909); Monas, *The Third Section*; Ruud and Stepanov, *Fontantka 16*; O. Iu. Abakumov, 'Dramaticheskaya tsenzura i III otdeleniye (konets 50-kh—nachalo 60-kh godov XIX veka)', in *Tsenzura v Rossii: istoriya i sovremennost'*, *Sbornik nauchnikh trudov*, ed. V.R. Firsov et al., Vypusk 1 (St Petersburg, 2001), 66–76.

³² Mikhail Gedeonov should not be confused with Alexander Gedeonov, his father and the Director of the Imperial Theatres.

³³ For biographical details for the three censors, see Zavlunov, 'Nicholas I and his Dramatic Censors'.

amended through imperial decrees.³⁴ For instance, starting in 1833, the librettists and composers could no longer submit their works directly to the office of Dramatic Censorship for consideration; the libretto had to be vetted by the Director of the Imperial Theatres first, who would then forward the libretto for censoring. This provision added an extra layer of vigilance while reducing the caseload of the censor.

The main responsibility of the dramatic censor was to summarise the libretto and make a recommendation. He was powerful enough to affect the outcome either through his report or through the changes he demanded, but powerless to make the final decision. His reports were internal memos intended for the Chief of the Corps of Gendarmes and Director of the Third Section, whose job was to issue the resolution. Whether the reports actually reached the head of secret police is unclear, as most carry the resolution 'To be permitted' or 'To be prohibited', penned by his chief of staff. But in contentious cases, the director was certainly consulted. He might declare that 'without the command of his Majesty, he does not dare to take a single step', as the notorious Director of the Third Section, Alexander Benckendorff, once did, and the ultimate decision to permit or to ban would come directly from the emperor.³⁵ Because cultivation of opera was a matter of state policy, and also because Nicholas was never one to trust the work of his subordinates, the tsar intervened in the censorship process with extraordinary regularity. However, he could not oversee the censoring of every dramatic work in the Empire, and typically he participated only when none of his subordinates dared touch the libretto under review. Nicholas himself stood above the law, but his dramatic censors, as law enforcement agents, were bound by the regulations governing their work. Still, they applied the tenets of the law with considerable flexibility, their approach guided in no small measure by the national point of origin of the operatic work.

Censorship in practice: Russian opera

During Nicholas's reign, the state systematically cultivated Russian opera only in the years 1827–42. Much of that period coincides with the tenure of Nicholas's first and longest serving dramatic censor, Christian August Wilhelm ('Yevstafiy Ivanovich') Oldecop.³⁶ Like most intellectuals in Russia of the 1820s and 1830s, Oldecop considered musical theatre to be primitive, dramatically ineffective and stylistically low, and he despised opera. In his reports he habitually criticised the dramatic and literary qualities of opera librettos and added other kinds of commentary – an approach that was prohibited in the Statute of 1828. Even the opera that epitomised Official Nationality and had already received the tsar's blessing could not escape some censure. Writing his report on the libretto of Georg von Rosen and Mikhail Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* (the original report in French³⁷ is reproduced in Figure 1),³⁸ Oldecop first praised its high subject, but then added further reflections:

³⁴ Some of these imperial decrees are gathered in *Sbornik postanovleniy i rasporyazheniy po tsenzure s 1720 po 1862 god* (St Petersburg, 1862).

³⁵ Quoted in 'Persiya i Turtsiya pod oboronoyu Gr. Nessel'rode i Tsenzuri v 1827–1828 gg', *Russkaya Starina* 19/6 (1888), 615–18, at 617.

³⁶ Snapshots of Oldecop's life, work and worldview can be found in Zavlunov, 'Nicholas I and his Dramatic Censors'; for a more expansive biography, see B. Alekseyevskiy, 'Ol'dekop, Yevstafiy Ivanovich', *Russkiy Biographicheskiy Slovar'* (St Petersburg, 1905), XII: 244–5.

³⁷ It seems that Oldecop amused himself by writing his censorship reports in the original language of the play or opera under review (except for Italian, which he probably read but did not write). But when his load became particularly heavy, his recourse was always to French, which was speedier. One should underscore that although the official language of state bureaucracy was Russian, most of the top bureaucrats were polyglots who used languages interchangeably. Still, French was the preferred language among those in this circle.

³⁸ Every report provides some basic but essential information about the dramatic work under review. The three numbers in the upper left-hand corner, seen in Figure 1, indicate different inventories: 'No. 171' is the

N. 171.
N. 74p.
236.

193
6^e - 02/04/1836

Aluzno' z a Uzapla.
Orepu la mpeix d'huimilidax
L'oumenie Capona Pajena. Muzika sk. U. Tausku.
Dra u. u. neparnopovaro (andarnomepypakaro mearpa.)

Le sujet de cette pièce est le haut fait d'Ivan Susa-
nin qui a consacré sa vie pour sauver celle du Tsar
Mikhael Romanow. — La pièce est belle, il n'y a rien à dire,
elle doit animer l'esprit national; mais de l'autre côté
sont exposés dans cet opéra des Polonais avec toute leur
haine contre la Russie — et qui sont représentés avec une
jalousie si pernicieuse! — La censure ne peut rien opposer aux
expressions des Polonais dans cette pièce, car ces expressions sont
conformes à la manière de penser du temps que l'Opéra
nous présente, mais il est à demander si le gouvernement
approuve
adoptera ces expressions?

Auguste Bligny

Figure 1. Dramatic Censor's Report for Rosen and Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* (RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 12, f. 198).

The subject of this play is the great feat of Ivan Susanin who gave his life to save that of Tsar Mikhail Romanov. The play is beautiful, there is nothing [more] to say; [and] it must animate the national spirit; but, on the other side, exposed in this opera are

number of the report for the year 1836 (171 reports have been written so far); 'No. 74p' indicates that seventy-four dramatic works in Russian have been reviewed; 'No. 236' represents the total number of dramatic works subjected to censorial review that year (some reports contain several works). The information in the right-hand corner indicates the resolution on the report and the date of that resolution. The first three lines of the text proper reproduce exactly how the dramatic work is titled in the original manuscript libretto submission. Often this information provides crucial evidence about the work being reviewed and its origin source and language. Finally, the fourth line specifies the intended Imperial stage (this one is for St Petersburg, but others – Moscow, Odessa, etc – would be similarly noted).

the Poles with all their hatred against Russia – and what good is it to resurrect a hate once so pernicious? The censorship can do nothing to oppose the [kinds of] expressions [used] by the Poles in this piece, because these expressions are consistent with the thinking of the time with which the opera presents us, but it should be asked whether the government approves such expressions?³⁹

Oldecop's concerns about the kind of language used were ignored by his superiors, who approved the opera. Nor did these concerns manifest themselves in the form of censorial intrusions in the poetic text. To be sure, Oldecop demanded a few changes, but the modifications are unrelated to the points he raised and are more representative of standard censorial emendations, as can be seen from the censor's protocols. (Figure 2 reproduces the section of the protocols devoted to *A Life for the Tsar*,⁴⁰ which I have transcribed and translated from Russian in Table 1.⁴¹)

The censor was required to keep track of all the passages he identified as unacceptable and the changes 'suggested' to the author, so that these could be verified when the revised libretto was resubmitted for final approval. The boxed text indicates the unacceptable passages in the original. The smaller text above, below and to the side (in boldface in my transcription) indicates the replacements made subsequently, presumably by Rosen himself, and submitted by Glinka for reconsideration.⁴²

These changes underscore the fact that one could not reference a Russian tsar's imprisonment or mention the tsar in any other unfavourable context and that even the most common of religious symbolism was not permissible onstage. The modifications also bring out the propagandistic message already emphasised in the censor's report: Susanin did not die for the people, he died for Rus' and for his tsar. On the surface, the request for this last change – the only substantial one – seems arbitrary, as it does not appear to be driven by censorial concerns. But the deletion of the reference to the Russian *narod* (people) was political: any suggestion of the empowerment of the common folk was impermissible (as exemplified also by removal before publication of the dangerous *narod* in the original version of Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*).⁴³

The censor's report on the opera and the changes demanded in his protocols (both reproduced here in full) have long been presumed lost; the recovery of these documents should put to rest the Soviet myth about extensive censorship befouling Glinka's first opera.⁴⁴ The few changes seen here were the only modifications demanded by the state

³⁹ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 12, f. 198; 6 October 1836 (original French).

⁴⁰ The protocol highlights that the libretto was censored from a manuscript copy of the text and not the score, referring, as it does, to the scene division that exists in Rosen's libretto, but is not present in Glinka's holograph score. Although Rosen's manuscript libretto is not extant, the first publication of the opera libretto appears to preserve the original structure. See *Zhizn' za Tsarya. Opera v trekh deystviyakh. Sochineniye Barona Rozena. Muzika M. I. Glinki* (St Petersburg, 1836). The opera's autograph score is archived in RNB, fond 190, opis' 1, nos. 1 and 2.

⁴¹ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 45, f. 9; 6 October 1836 (original Russian).

⁴² That these changes were made by Rosen or Glinka, rather than the censor, is made clear by the cover letter from the Third Section, which accompanied the re-censored, updated libretto on its way back to Glinka. RGIA, fond 497, opis' 1, no. 7266, f. 91.

⁴³ See Dunning, 'The Tsar's Red Pencil'; Dunning et al., *The Uncensored Boris Godunov*.

⁴⁴ This myth was propagated even by those Soviet scholars who had some knowledge of these documents. Aleksandr Ossovskiy, for instance, knew of the censor's report, because he vaguely references its only publication (in 1911), but he never explained what it contained or explored its implications. See A.V. Ossovskiy, 'Dramaturgiya operi M. I. Glinki "Ivan Susanin"', in *M. I. Glinka: issledovaniya i materialy* (Leningrad-Moscow, 1950), 252, n. 7. Similarly, Vladimir Protopopov was aware of the censor's excisions to the opera's libretto, but simply ignored these in his monumental study of Glinka's first opera: Vladimir V. Protopopov, *Ivan Susanin' Glinki: muzikal'no-teoreticheskoye issledovaniye* (Moscow, 1961), 48–9. Aleksandr Brodskiy, 'Tsarskaya

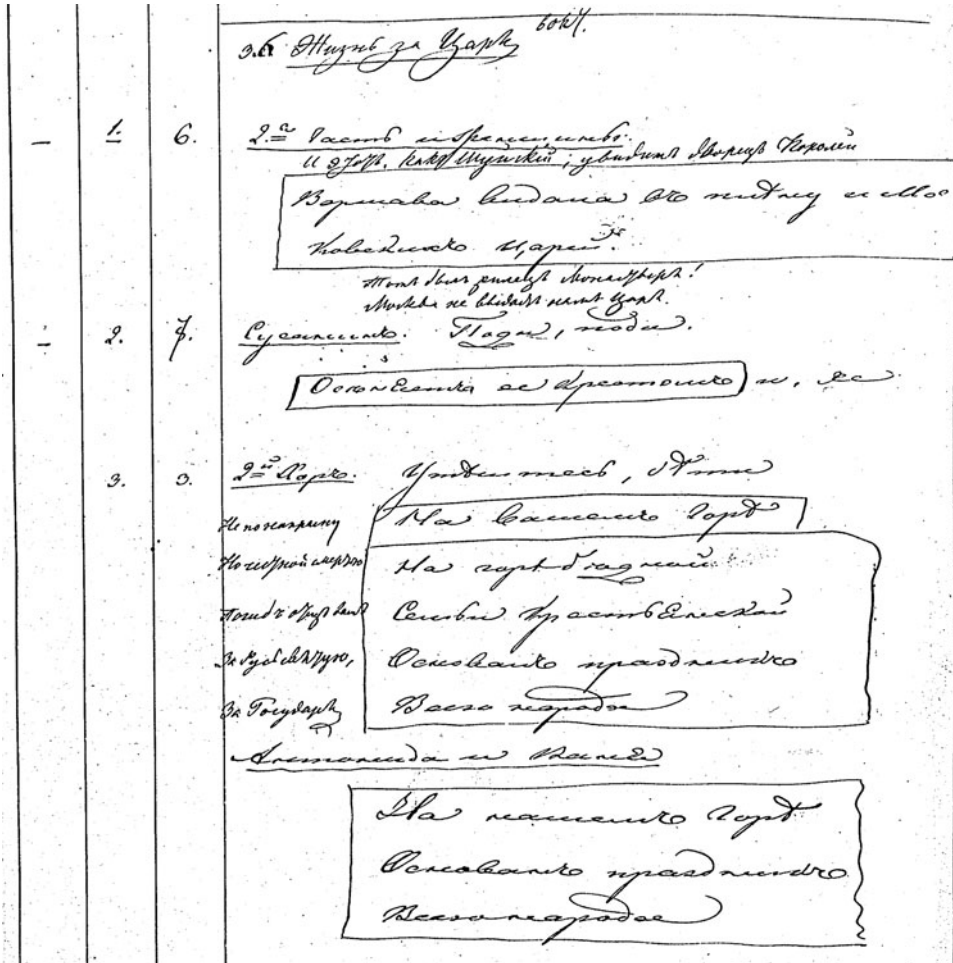


Figure 2. The entry from the Dramatic Censor's protocols devoted to *A Life for the Tsar* (RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 45, f. 9).

from Rosen and Glinka. Indeed, the quantity and types of interventions one sees in *A Life for the Tsar* are representative of most opera librettos, whatever their language. Small-scale intrusions in the poetic text were common enough; large-scale redactions were rare, except for French grand operas (more on which later). In the case of Russian operas, such sparsity might be attributed to 'positive' censorship. The libretto was conceived from the start to meet the requirements imposed by the censorship statute, by which the authors were bound. *A Life for the Tsar* furnishes an extreme case

tsenzura i "Ivan Susanin": po neizdannim dokumentam', in *Leningradskiy Ordena Lenina Akademicheskiiy Teatr Operi i Baleta imeni S. M. Kirova*, ed. F.P. Bondarenko (Leningrad, 1940), 69-77, shows no awareness of these documents, but claims that Glinka's holograph score preserves the censorial changes. There is no proof for Brodskiy's assertion. The three such changes that he identifies – changes that he argues were 'imposed upon Glinka by the III Section' (77) – are not related to any of the modifications from the Third Section highlighted earlier; besides, only one of the changes that Brodskiy points to introduces an element that, arguably, renders the text more monarchist. In all cases, the changes in Glinka's score suggest avoidance of repetition, and/or poorly constructed original text, and/or replacement with text that rhythmically better aligns with the music.

Table 1. Transcription and translation of Figure 2

Page	Act	Sc.	
			6 Oct. [1836]
			<u>36. A Life for the Tsar</u>
--	1	6	<u>2nd half [of men's chorus] and women:</u> And this one, like Shuyskiy, will see the palace of the Kings [Warsaw has seen in its captivity even the Moscow Tsars.] That one was a resident of the Monastery! Moscow will not give us the Tsar.
--	2	7	<u>Susanin [to his daughter]:</u> Go, go. [Stage directions:] [Blesses her with the cross]
	3	3	<u>2nd chorus:</u> Take comfort, children. Not in vain But in honourable death Your father perished For Holy Rus', For the Sovereign. <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block; margin-left: 20px;">On your sorrow On the sorrow of a poor Peasant family Is based this celebration Of the whole [Russian] people</div>
			<u>Antonida and Vanya [Susanin's children]</u> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block; margin-left: 20px;">On our sorrow Is based this celebration Of the whole [Russian] people</div>

because the very creation of its libretto was likely nurtured by Nicholas himself.⁴⁵ But in other cases positive censorship proved effective: for the entirety of Nicholas's reign, not a single Russian opera was banned and few were modified. In other words, creative activity and censorship in Russia (as elsewhere in Europe) existed in a symbiotic relationship: the authors knew what they could and could not do and conceived and realised their artworks within the constraints imposed by the system; the job of the censor, then, was to ensure that the requirements were successfully upheld and to add the seal of approval. By this means, censors provided quality control for Russian operas.

The situation with imported operas was more complex. This politically too-liberal new repertoire could inspire unrest – or so Nicholas and his subordinates feared. Censorial vigilance was a must. However, the general approach to censoring foreign works varied according to the operatic tradition in question and often to the language in which the opera was performed in Russia.

⁴⁵ Nicholas's role in the shaping of *A Life* remains unclear, but three things are certain: Nicholas handpicked the appropriately reactionary librettist for Glinka (and subsequently rewarded him with the lucrative job of secretary to the crown prince), gave the opera its eventual title and took particular interest in the opera's realisation. See Daniil Y. Zavlunov, 'M. I. Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* (1836): An Historical and Analytic-Theoretical Study' (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2010), ch. 2.

Italian opera

Italian opera in St Petersburg always received preferential treatment from the Russian censors because it represented an enormous investment of state resources. To restrict it in any way risked creating unfavourable conditions, and one might argue that the hands-off approach was essential to the success of the entire enterprise. The process was made easier by the fact that almost all Italian operas that were performed by Italians in Russia were based on librettos already censored, and sometimes re-censored, abroad. Usually, the Theatres Directorate would submit printed librettos (censored and published in Milan, Rome, Venice, London and elsewhere) to the Russian censors for consideration, and these librettos would receive approval for staging without any modifications.⁴⁶ The libretto would subsequently be translated into French (the language of Russian aristocracy) and, if approved by Print Censorship, would be published in St Petersburg in a dual-language (Italian–French) booklet, available for purchase. It is not insignificant that Italian librettos performed by the Italian opera company were never printed with a Russian translation. Italian opera in St Petersburg – the whole enterprise conceived as opera of the nobility – maintained rigorous social divisions, both through ticket prices and languages used.

Nicholas attempted his first experiment with Italian opera in St Petersburg in the years 1827–31.⁴⁷ There had been no Italian opera company in the city since 1807, and he now aimed to establish a permanent Italian opera presence. Much of the troupe was imported directly from Italy, gathered there piecemeal in 1827–8 by Nicholas's personal envoy. With the exception of the summer months, the troupe performed exclusively at the Bol'shoy Theatre, accompanied there by a superb orchestra of fifty created especially for it. During the three years of the troupe's activity (beginning in January 1828), only one opera out of eighteen reviewed gave the censor pause, and that was *Mosè in Egitto*. Gioachino Rossini's opera with its original libretto was never up for consideration – its biblical characters and story would be prohibited by default. The libretto that reached the censor's desk in October 1828 was already an adaptation: '*La Vestale sedotta, osia [sic] I Prodigj di Numa [sic]*'. *Dramma Tragico-Istorico in tre atti. Musica di Rossini. Argomento surrogato al Mosé [sic]*'.⁴⁸ Rather than being banned altogether, it seems that the libretto was returned to the Italian troupe with the request that a substitute libretto be submitted in its place, for only a month later a new text was before the censor. This time, Oldecop was reviewing a libretto likely published in London (apparently for the

⁴⁶ Many of these original librettos, carrying the signature of the Russian dramatic censor and the indication of approval, are preserved at the Theatre Library, St Petersburg.

⁴⁷ In the annals of opera in Russia, the Italian company that operated in St Petersburg in the years 1828–31 remains one of the most under-researched and misunderstood, with existing literature on it perplexingly unreliable. Official documents preserved in the collection of the Ministry of the Imperial Court (RGIA, fond 472) allow us to sketch in some details. Only a handful of the troupe's sixteen soloists were found locally, including the four transferred from Moscow's Italian opera company (after its contract expired in February 1827). Among the latter was the famed, if by this point well past his vocal prime, Luigi Zamboni, who became the St Petersburg troupe's artistic director. Problematically, despite the state's numerous and multifaceted attempts to bolster the troupe, the Italian opera company failed to attract a following in St Petersburg, performing in the theatre usually more than half empty, which forced Nicholas to allow the singers' three-year contracts to lapse. Reasons for the troupe's failure were many (including, it would seem, audience unfamiliarity and discomfort with the latest Italian repertoire with which the troupe flooded the Bol'shoy stage), but chief among them was the quality of the singers – virtually everyone involved in realizing Nicholas's Italian opera project ultimately agreed that the troupe as a whole was second-rate. Still, although the troupe itself collapsed, its presence permanently transformed St Petersburg's musical landscape.

⁴⁸ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 2, f. 109; 17 October 1828 (the censor's report carries no resolution). I have been unable to trace this libretto adaptation to another location in Europe.

1827 revival of the opera there): '*Pietro l'Eremita* or *Peter the Hermit*, a serious opera in three acts, adapted to the music of Mosé [sic].'⁴⁹ Retaining the Egyptian setting, that adaptation transposes the characters and action to the time of the crusades, with the Egyptian pharaoh as sultan Noraddin, Moses as Peter the Hermit, and biblical Hebrews as imprisoned Christians. Permission was granted and the opera was duly accepted. As this example demonstrates, and as others confirm, Italian librettos that presented challenges within the environment of Russian censorship were frequently reviewed and approved in the form already adapted and (re)censored elsewhere.⁵⁰

The censorial treatment of Italian opera was only slightly different a decade later,⁵¹ when Nicholas tried the Italian experiment again, this time most successfully.⁵² Between 1843 (the year when the new Italian opera company began to operate in St Petersburg) and 1855 (when Nicholas died), approximately 120 distinct librettos in Italian were reviewed, with only four requiring changes to their text or action – and most of these were relatively minor modifications.⁵³ Salvatore Cammarano and Gaetano Donizetti's *Maria di Rohan* lost its final page, including the opera's *scena ultima*, in which a character (Chalais) commits suicide. In 1850, *L'Ebreo* (Eugène Scribe and Fromental Halévy's *La Juive* in Italian) required substantial changes to its stage directions and text, together with priest-to-civilian changes in the *dramatis personae*. Here the censor used the German-language version of the opera previously approved for performance in St Petersburg to adjust the Italian text. In Giulio Alary's *Sardanapalo* – an opera apparently composed specifically for St Petersburg in 1851 – the censor found the last moments of its finale, with the Assyrian king dying, his throne engulfed in flames, to be *neudobnim* ('inconvenient' or 'uncomfortable').⁵⁴ How exactly the burning of the throne – the aspect troubling the censor the most – was 'excluded' remains unclear. By far, the most extensive modifications of any Italian opera were demanded of Francesco Maria Piave and Giuseppe Verdi's *Rigoletto* in 1853, to address its pervasive and multifaceted immorality (more on which shortly).

During the same period (1843–55), twelve operas in Italian (roughly ten percent of all reviewed) were banned initially. (Table 2 presents those operas and summarises their eventual fate.) Of these, three were French grand operas in Italian translation: Rossini's *Guglielmo Tell*, Donizetti's *Don Sebastiano re di Portogallo* and Giacomo Meyerbeer's

⁴⁹ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 2, f. 138; 19 November 1828. The opera's title and corresponding details are in English in the original report. The published libretto being reviewed was likely the bilingual – Italian and English – *Pietro l'Eremita, opera seria, in due atti. La musica di Rossini. Rappresentata nel Teatro del Re, Haymarket, March 17, 1827* (London, 1827).

⁵⁰ Rossini's French *Moïse et Pharaon* (1827) could serve as another illustration. Again, the original would not be allowed; instead, the opera was censored and permitted as *Zorà* in October 1850, once again likely based on the adaptation originally created for London. RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 19, f. 74; 21 October 1850.

⁵¹ I base the discussion in this section on my analysis of the relevant reports and censor's protocols in RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, nos. 19 and 58.

⁵² Unlike the first Italian opera experiment, the second one is reasonably well researched and understood. A useful primer is Richard Taruskin, '*Ital'yanshchina*', in *Defining Russia Musically*, ch. 10. What made the second experiment a success has to do with at least four factors: 1) commitment of enormous state resources; 2) elimination of competition – Nicholas suffocated the German opera troupe and then exiled the Russian troupe to Moscow (even if only temporarily); 3) audience familiarity with the repertoire – by the time the second Italian troupe was created, St Petersburg was already enthralled by the latest Italian operatic works, so effectively performed by the German and Russian troupes for nearly a decade; and most importantly, 4) the star-studded troupe itself – for example, the principal singers in the first season included Giovanni Battista Rubini, Antonio Tamburini and Pauline Viardot.

⁵³ The number is significantly higher, but I exclude from this count the duplicate librettos that – for whatever reasons – were reviewed multiple times.

⁵⁴ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 19, f. 112; 28 December 1851 (original Russian).

Table 2. Operas in Italian prohibited upon initial review between 1843 and 1855, and their eventual fate (data compiled from an analysis of documents in RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 19)

Composer	Opera	Destination	Date banned	Permitted as	Destination	Date permitted	Source text
Rossini	<i>Guglielmo Tell</i>	St Petersburg	23 Oct 1844	→ <i>Rodolfo di Sterlinga</i>	Odessa	25 Jul 1845	Rome
				→ <i>Carlo il temerario</i>	St Petersburg	1846–7 season	Russian libretto by Rafail Zotov
Verdi	<i>Ernani</i>	Odessa	1 Dec 1844	→ <i>Elvira d'Aragona</i>	Odessa	25 Jul 1845	Palermo
				→ <i>Ernani</i>	St Petersburg	1846	Original, approved by imperial decree
Verdi	<i>Nabucodonosor</i>	Odessa	13 Aug 1846	→ <i>Almazor, re di Maskate (sic)</i>	Odessa	10 Feb 1847	Undetermined
				→ <i>Nino, re d'Assiria</i>	St Petersburg	1 Oct 1851	London
Verdi	<i>Macbeth</i>	Imperial Theatres	17 Oct 1847	See below			
Donizetti	<i>Don Sebastiano re di Portogallo</i>	Odessa	15 Jun 1849	See below			
Verdi	<i>Macbeth</i>	Odessa	15 Jun 1849	→ <i>Sivardo il Sassone</i>	Imperial Theatres	7 Aug 1853	Undetermined
Donizetti	<i>Don Sebastiano re di Portogallo</i>	Odessa	12 Jan 1850	→ <i>Camoens</i>	Imperial Theatres	9 Sep 1854	Undetermined
Donizetti	<i>Il diluvio universale</i>	Odessa	12 Jan 1850				
Mercadante	<i>I briganti</i>	Odessa	14 Apr 1850				
Verdi	<i>I masnadieri</i>	Odessa	14 Apr 1850	→ <i>Adele da Cosenza (sic)</i>	Odessa	22 Oct 1851	Undetermined
Verdi	<i>Rigoletto</i>	Odessa	7 Jul 1851	→ <i>Viscardello</i>	Odessa	8 Feb 1852	Rome
Vaccai	<i>Virginia</i>	Odessa	19 Jul 1851				
Meyerbeer	<i>Giovanni di Leide, ossia L'assedio di Gand</i>	Imperial Theatres	28 Sep 1851	See below			
Meyerbeer	<i>Giovanni di Leide, ossia L'assedio di Gand</i>	Imperial Theatres	20 Oct 1851	→ <i>L'assedio di Gand</i>	St Petersburg	30 Aug 1852	Vienna, but significantly modified
Moderati	<i>Il cavaliere di Marillac</i>	Odessa	29 Apr 1852				
Verdi	<i>Rigoletto</i>	Imperial Theatres	19 Dec 1852	→ <i>Rigoletto</i>	St Petersburg	5 Jan 1853	Original, but modified

Giovanni di Leide, ossia L'assedio di Gand (an adaptation of *Le prophète*). Their stories belong to the censorship history of grand opera in Russia. Of the remaining nine, five were subsequently approved in another form. The onus for finding an appropriate substitute for a banned libretto rested with those trying to mount the opera, not with the censor. And frequently, following the initial ban, the theatre would submit a modified libretto, but one that originated abroad, almost always in an Italian state where local censorship also found the original version of the opera to be problematic. In 1844, Verdi's *Ernani* – sent for consideration from Odessa – was prohibited because it presented the King of Spain on the stage, the target of conspiracy.⁵⁵ Eight months later the same censor had no reservations recommending a modified version, noting that Don Carlo had been replaced with a nobleman general and the title changed to *Elvira d'Aragona*.⁵⁶ The libretto submitted was likely either identical to or based on the one performed in Palermo earlier in the same year (1845). When no satisfactory existing substitute could be found, then the agency submitting the original libretto appears to have got more directly involved in its modification. Verdi's *Nabucodonosor* was prohibited because of its biblical subject matter.⁵⁷ However, as soon as the character of Nabucco became the (invented) Prince Almazor and the Hebrews turned into Phoenicians, under the new title *Almazor, re di Maskate (sic)*, the opera was approved.⁵⁸

In these cases, as in others, the operas in question were Verdi's. By the early 1850s, his illustrious status guaranteed that even his most ideologically problematic works would be heard in some form. Only a handful of operas was permanently prohibited, including Donizetti's *Il deluvio universale*, because of its biblical story, and Saverio Mercadante's *I briganti*, because it was based on Friedrich Schiller's *Die Räuber* – the play banned in any realisation by Nicholas's personal decree. However, Verdi's *I masnadieri* – adapted from the same play and according to the censor set to music by Verdi 'with the addition of some republican excesses [vikhodok]'⁵⁹ – was eventually permitted, transformed with a new libretto and title.⁶⁰

These exceptional cases notwithstanding, the majority of Italian operas did not trouble the censors unduly. Their librettos were often censored *en masse*, the censor's opinion channelled into the one-liner, 'These pieces contain nothing reprehensible.'⁶¹ The general attitude of the censors towards Italian librettos can be summarised simply, if crudely, as 'stupid but safe'. A sample of Oldecop's remarks suffices to illustrate the trend, which hardly changed with his successors:

This famous opera ... contains nothing reprehensible, and without obstacle could be presented in the Italian Theatre here. (Rossini, *Otello*, 1828)⁶²

This opera is a most pathetic but utterly innocent creation. (Sapienza, *Tamerlano*, 1828)⁶³

⁵⁵ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 19, f. 17; 1 December 1844. Victor Hugo's play *Hernani* was already prohibited by this time by the Minister of the Imperial Court.

⁵⁶ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 19, f. 21; 25 July 1845.

⁵⁷ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 19, f. 28; 13 August 1846.

⁵⁸ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 19, f. 30; 10 February 1847. This was done for Odessa. Four years later, *Nabucco* was performed in St Petersburg, with equally substantial changes, as *Nino, re d'Assiria* (RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 19, f. 105; 1 October 1851), likely using the libretto of the opera heard in London in 1846.

⁵⁹ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 19, f. 65; 14 April 1850 (original Russian).

⁶⁰ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 19, f. 110; 22 October 1851.

⁶¹ See, for example, RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 19, f. 5; 12 April 1844 (original Russian).

⁶² RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 2, f. 25; 10 August 1828 (original Russian).

⁶³ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 2, f. 31; 14 August 1828 (original Russian).

The whole thing – like all nonsense – is innocent. (Rossini, *Zelmira*, 1830)⁶⁴
 The piece is innocent through and through. (Bellini, *Il pirata*, 1836)⁶⁵

Even when a libretto was not as ‘innocent’, the censor would frequently recommend strategic adjustments. In 1836, during the absence of Italian opera in Italian in St Petersburg, Donizetti’s *Anna Bolena* seemed headed for rejection. The city’s German Theatre troupe was trying to mount the opera, its libretto reaching the theatre censor in May in printed form in German.⁶⁶ Having read the text, noting that it was ‘yet another Italian libretto, as absurd as its brethren’, Oldecop wrote a brief summary.⁶⁷ Since he knew that the opera would be banned, because of the established tradition that prohibited depiction of any monarch on the operatic stage, he did not even have to mention the fact, but he did close his report with a caveat: ‘To save the music of this opera I take the liberty of proposing an alteration, changing the King of England into the Duke of Ferrara; since the whole text [already] makes no common sense, the music will lose nothing through this metamorphosis.’⁶⁸ Despite the proposed changes, the opera was banned. Affixing this prohibition to the censor’s report, the head of the Third Section nevertheless suggested a solution: ‘The piece cannot be performed as it now stands; but if for the same music one were to make another text that is [better conceived?], I will then see if the new piece may be allowed’ – by Nicholas, presumably.⁶⁹

Seven months later, Oldecop reviewed the opera again (see Figure 3). Whether the libretto had changed in any way is unclear; it is possible that the Theatres Directorate, after doing a bit of lobbying at the government’s highest level, simply resubmitted the original printed libretto. This time, Oldecop offered a rationale for the ban, and, rather than make suggestions, actually imposed changes upon the text to make the libretto permissible. He wrote:

The story of Anna Bolena and her disastrous fate are too well known to require one to go into any unnecessary detail. Almost none of the plays, in which Henry VIII of England is featured, qualify for performance [in Russia], because the royalty there is debased, and his cruelty towards his wives can please only the modern French school. To avoid all of that, the undersigned has moved the setting to Italy, making Henry the reigning Duke of Mantua, Federico II Gonzaga, who had several wives. The opera does not lose anything by this change and the music remains intact, which is the most important thing.⁷⁰

It would have been unprecedented for the censor to thus reconfigure the libretto, since the law prohibited him from doing so. Nevertheless, permission to perform the opera in its altered form and retitled *Anna Gonzaga* was granted on 17 December.⁷¹ A week later, however, the Minister of the Imperial Court (Nicholas’s chief of staff) informed the Third Section that the emperor ‘deigned’ to have ‘*Anna Boulén*’ performed as it

⁶⁴ RGIA, fond 780, opis’ 1, no. 5, f. 9; 16 January 1830 (original German).

⁶⁵ RGIA, fond 780, opis’ 1, no. 12, f. 27; 26 February 1836 (original French).

⁶⁶ It was likely the libretto that had been published and performed only recently in Berlin.

⁶⁷ RGIA, fond 780, opis’ 1, no. 12, f. 99; 13 May 1836 (original French).

⁶⁸ RGIA, fond 780, opis’ 1, no. 12, f. 99; 13 May 1836 (original French).

⁶⁹ RGIA, fond 780, opis’ 1, no. 12, f. 99; 13 May 1836. The bracketed text in my translation is not fully legible in the original.

⁷⁰ RGIA, fond 780, opis’ 1, no. 12, f. 256; 17 December 1836 (original French).

⁷¹ RGIA, fond 780, opis’ 2, no. 1, f. 5; 17 December 1836.

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 17² bezapustsk.

Gonzaga
 - Anna (Boleina.)

Grosse Oper in 2 Akten nach dem Italienischen
 des Felice Romani
 Musik von Donizetti

(Für das Kaiserliche Hoftheater zu St. Petersburg.)

L'histoire d'Anna Bolena & son sort funeste est trop
 connu pour qu'il soit nécessaire d'entrer dans des
 détails superflus. Presque toutes les pièces, dans
 lesquelles figure Henri VIII d'Angleterre, ne se qualifient
 pas pour la représentation, parce que la royauté y est
 avilie, & ses crimes envers ses épouses ne peuvent
 plaire qu'à l'école française moderne. — Plus sur
 tout, le sous-joint se transmet la scène en Italie, en fa-
 sant de Henri VIII le duc regnant de Mantoue Frédéric
 St. Gonzaga, qui a eu plusieurs épouses. — La pièce
 ne perd rien par ce changement & la musique reste
 intacte, ce qui est le principal.

Auguste Oldecop.

По Высочайшему повелению
 сей пьесы представлено
 без всяких изменений

Figure 3. Dramatic Censor's Report for Romani and Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* (RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 12, f. 256).

was, without any of the changes proposed by the censor.⁷² That instruction subsequently made its way into the margins of the censor's report (see Figure 3), in the form of a terse note by Oldecop: 'By the Highest decree, this piece is to be performed without any

⁷² RGIA, fond 780, opis' 2, no. 1, f. 7; 24 December 1836.

alterations.⁷³ Nicholas wanted to hear *Anna Bolena* in its original form. No censorship codes, or censorship tradition or censor's concerns mattered, because Nicholas, of course, could override any decision.⁷⁴

No Italian opera demanded as much direct intervention on the part of the censor, both fitting and defying the patterns just sketched, as did Verdi's *Rigoletto* – the opera that in the eyes of Russian censorship was especially loaded with moral impropriety. In July 1851, only months after the opera's Venetian premiere, the Odessa Theatre forwarded the libretto for censoring. Having written a detailed and fair synopsis of the opera, censor Alexander Hederstern added his reflections:

In this melodrama, the young Duke, who has a wife, is presented as a desperate philanderer, who spares no woman; and all the other courtiers are depicted in the same colours. The circumstances of the abduction and dishonouring of the daughter of the jester, and the latter's bloody revenge against his sovereign Duke, are wholly obscene.⁷⁵

The opera was banned. Nor did the censor change his mind when the Odessa Theatre resubmitted the opera's libretto in February of next year in the form of the Roman adaptation, called *Viscardello*⁷⁶ – the adaptation that Verdi himself so abhorred.⁷⁷ Although the action was moved to sixteenth-century Boston (in Lincolnshire, England, presumably), with the Duke of Mantua transformed as the Duke of Nottingham, *Rigoletto* as *Viscardello*, other main characters renamed, and the overall dramatic situation significantly sanitised, Hederstern did not find the changes sufficient: 'The Censorship [office] believes that this melodrama, because of its content, is subject to prohibition.'⁷⁸ His admonition was ignored by his superiors, who granted approval – the new libretto's remaining moral problems were mitigated by the Italian language (not readily accessible to Russian audiences) and by the fact that the opera was destined for a provincial theatre.

By the end of the year, however, the Imperial Theatres Directorate in St Petersburg, too, was eager to mount *Rigoletto*, submitting the Piave-Verdi libretto to the censor in December 1852.⁷⁹ Rather than write a full report, Hederstern simply noted that the performance of this opera in its original form had been prohibited already for the Odessa Theatre, and sent his report up to his superiors. The resolution on the report indicated another ban; however, the word 'why?' had been added next to it in pencil. It is unclear what specifically precipitated the query or who was doing the asking (the head of the Third Section – Count Aleksey Orlov – or his chief of staff, or Nicholas himself), but one might deduce that in the likely oral exchange that ensued between the censor and his superiors, the censor was instructed to annotate the libretto under review, striking

⁷³ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 12, f. 256; 17 December 1836 (original Russian).

⁷⁴ The same thing happened with Verdi's *Ernani*, which, though it had been prohibited in its original form since 1844, was suddenly approved for performance by the highest decree in 1846, when Nicholas simply lifted the ban. RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 45, f. 17 (note in the footer).

⁷⁵ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 19, f. 101; 7 July 1851 (original Russian).

⁷⁶ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 19, f. 115; 8 February 1852.

⁷⁷ On Verdi's attitude towards *Viscardello*, see David R.B. Kimbell, *Verdi in the Age of Italian Romanticism* (Cambridge, 1981), 279; and Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, rev. edn, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1992), I: 509. The Roman adaptation of *Rigoletto* is discussed in some detail in Martin Chusid, 'On Censored Performances of "Les Vêpres siciliennes" and "Rigoletto": Evidence from the Verdi Archive at New York University', *Verdi Forum* 25 (1998), 3–19; and Francesco Izzo, "'Years in Prison": Giuseppe Verdi and Censorship in Pre-Unification Italy', in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Censorship*, ed. Patricia Hall (New York, 2018), 237–57.

⁷⁸ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 19, f. 115; 8 February 1852 (original Russian).

⁷⁹ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 19, f. 130; 19 December 1852.

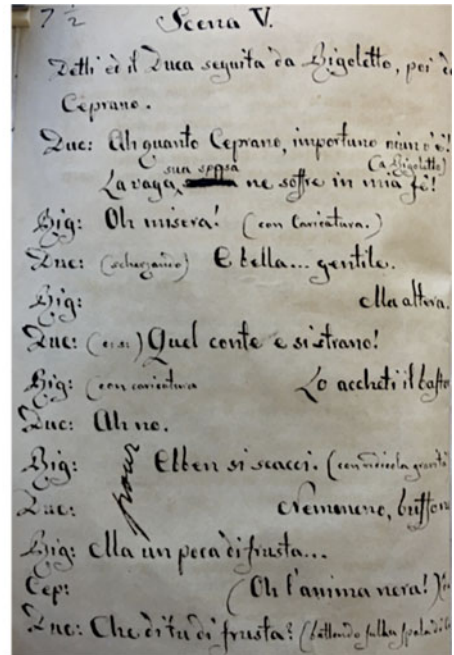
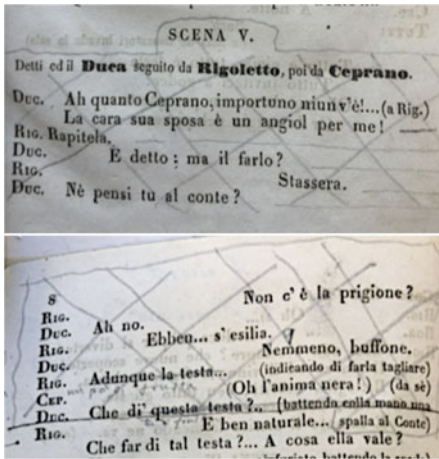


Figure 4. Verdi, *Rigoletto*, Act I scene 5. Changes demanded by the Dramatic Censor and the replacement text (Sankt-Peterburgskaya Gosudarstvennaya Teatral'naya Biblioteka, Ila-V41-42499; pp. 7–8 and f. 7½).

all of the unacceptable passages, situations and character names, and return the text to the Theatres Directorate for modification. The substantive changes the censor demanded are preserved in the copy of the original printed Italian libretto, published by Ricordi in Milan, which Hederstern used as his source text.⁸⁰ The same copy of the libretto also contains inserted handwritten pages featuring the substitute texts, which were submitted for re-censoring.⁸¹ Taken together, the expurgated passages and their subsequent modifications allow one to glean what the censor found objectionable and how these objections were redressed.

In Act I scene 5, the censor demanded that a portion of the scene with Count Ceprano – the segment featuring an intense exchange between the Duke and Rigoletto – be reworked.⁸² (Figure 4 reproduces both the original crossed-out text and its replacement.) Two concerns are apparent. One related to the Duke's illicit interest in Ceprano's wife and to Rigoletto's suggestion that they kidnap her. If this was a moral concern, the other was more political: the form of Ceprano's potential punishment was deemed unacceptable, and the intensity of the exchange between the Duke and Rigoletto seems to have contributed to the censor's apprehension. The jester's suggestion of imprisonment, exile and beheading in the original was neutralised as beating, casting out and whipping in the new version. In the very next scene (6), the censor marked for modification Rigoletto's affront – speaking for the Duke – with Monterone (Figure 5).⁸³ Here, political and moral concerns

⁸⁰ TB, Ila-V41-42499; *Rigoletto: melodramma in tre atti di F. M. Piave, musica di Giuseppe Verdi* (Milan, n.d.).

⁸¹ Most of these modifications found their way into the censor's protocols as well, preserved in RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 58, ff. 4–7; 1853.

⁸² TB, Ila-V41-42499, pp. 7–8 and f. 7½ (sic). Page numbers refer to the printed pages in the libretto, which document the censor's expurgations (and, on occasion, other markings). Folio numbers refer to the handwritten pages containing replacement texts.

⁸³ TB, Ila-V41-42499, p. 9 and f. 9.

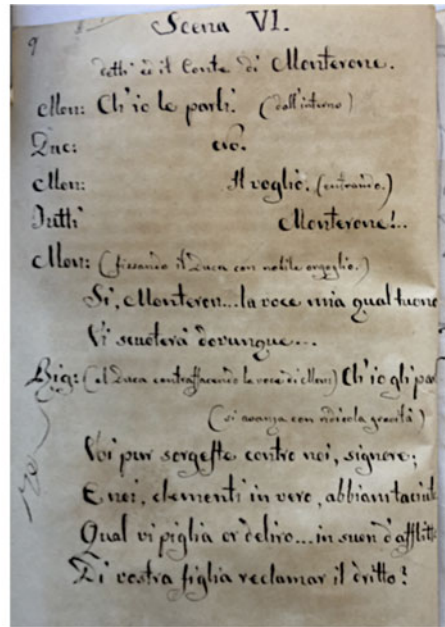
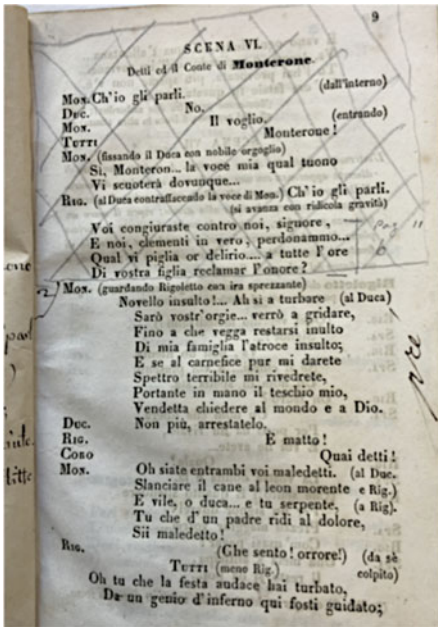


Figure 5. Verdi, *Rigoletto*, Act I scene 6. Changes demanded by the Dramatic Censor and the replacement text (Sankt-Peterburgskaya Gosudarstvennaya Teatral'naya Biblioteka, Ila-V41-42499; p. 9 and f. 9).

converged, as Rigoletto referenced both Monterone's conspiracy against the Duke and the 'dishonouring' of Monterone's daughter – neither of which was acceptable within Russian censorial context.

If Rigoletto's mock offensive against Ceprano and Monterone could not stand, it is certainly unsurprising that Hederstern singled out Rigoletto's aria of real rage against the courtiers and their depraved behaviour, 'Cortigiani, vil razza dannata', in Act II scene 4. But though the censor crossed out some seven lines of text, from the end of Rigoletto's *scena* and into the first quatrain of the aria proper, ultimately only one word was emended, 'Cortigiani' ('Courtiers') mutating to 'O perversi' ('Oh perverts').⁸⁴ Something similar happened to the text of Rigoletto's final monologue (Act III scene 9), in which the censor marked the entire scene, but only a single line was altered in the end. Arguably, the line was one of the opera's most potent. Addressing what he believes to be the corpse of the Duke, Rigoletto proclaims: 'Ora mi guarda, o mondo ... / Quest'è un buffone, ed un potente è questo!' ('Now look upon me, oh world ... / This is a buffoon, and a mighty [prince] is this!'). In the reworked libretto, the latter line transformed into the banal 'Quest'è l'offeso e l'offensore è questo!' ('This is the offended one, and his offender is this!').⁸⁵

In the scene that follows Gilda's emergence from the Duke's chamber (Act II scene 5), the censor demanded text changes both to minimise the gravity of Gilda's accusation (and consequently the immorality of the entire situation) and to remove any mention of the Duke (as shown in Figure 6). Throughout the revision process, an attempt was made to conceal any indication of the Duke's high status. For instance, Monterone's 'O Duca' in the very next scene was replaced with 'signore'.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ TB, Ila-V41-42499, p. 23 and f. 23½.

⁸⁵ TB, Ila-V41-42499, p. 35 and f. 35.

⁸⁶ TB, Ila-V41-42499, p. 26 and f. 26. Strangely, the censor did not copy this scene's changes into his protocols.

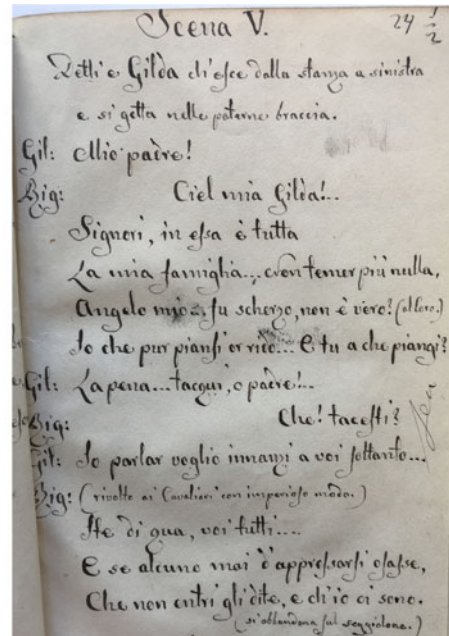
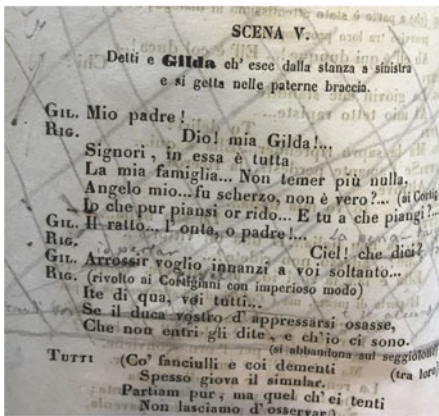


Figure 6. Verdi, *Rigoletto*, Act II scene 5. Changes demanded by the Dramatic Censor and the replacement text (Sankt-Peterburgskaya Gosudarstvennaya Teatral'naya Biblioteka, Ila-V41-42499; p. 24 and f. 24^{1/2}).

The sack, in which the mortally wounded Gilda was eventually to be carried out, vexed the censor in particular, and all references to it had to be suppressed.⁸⁷ Act III scene 6, featuring an exchange between Maddalena and Sparafucile, observed by Gilda, shows several alterations. Instead of instructing Maddalena to mend the sack, which he throws her way, Sparafucile tells his sister to mend the drape, with the word 'manto' ('cloak') pencilled over the 'drappo', perhaps by the censor, as a more logical alternative.⁸⁸ To Maddalena's query of 'why?' Sparafucile originally responded that 'Entr'esso il tuo Apollo, sgozzato da me, / Gettar dovrò al fiume'; in the altered version, 'sgozzato da me' ('slaughtered by me') became 'involto da me' ('bundled by me'), with the cloak assuming a practical function and allowing the elimination of the graphic comment. The censor likewise crossed out references to the sack in the stage directions. When Rigoletto comes to collect the Duke's body (Act III scene 8), instead of 'torna trascinando un sacco' ('returns dragging a sack'), Sparafucile now 'torna conducendo sul limitare della porta il ferito, che crede estinto, coperta di un mantello' ('returns carrying to the doorway the wounded, whom he believes to be dead, covered in the cloak').⁸⁹ In the penultimate scene, 'il sacco', which Rigoletto is about to drag to the river, again becomes 'il ferito' ('the wounded'), and, upon hearing the Duke's voice in the distance, instead of cutting the sack open, Rigoletto unwraps the cloak.⁹⁰

As these last few examples already demonstrate, if the censor concerned himself with the sung text, he also became involved in the details of the staging. Thus he crossed out

⁸⁷ Censors virtually everywhere in Europe found the sack to be objectionable. The Russian censor did not elaborate on the reasons for the sack's impermissibility.

⁸⁸ TB, Ila-V41-42499, p. 32 and f. 32.

⁸⁹ TB, Ila-V41-42499, p. 35 and f. 35.

⁹⁰ TB, Ila-V41-42499, p. 35 and f. 35.

the scenic instruction for the opening of Act II, which had to be rewritten, eliminating one of the two wall portraits specified, namely that of the Duke's wife.⁹¹ Although the reference to her character remained in the sung text, her presence had to be de-emphasised by other means. Similarly, the mentions of the courtiers in the stage directions turned into the more neutral 'Nobile',⁹² 'Coro'⁹³ or 'Cavalieri'⁹⁴ (the last two can be seen in Figure 6). In the case of courtiers, the audiences would have no sense of what was in the original, unless the libretto was printed (censoring of printed librettos, however, was outside of the dramatic censor's job description – that was a prerogative of Print Censorship).⁹⁵ Originally, the censor marked the entire cast of characters and the opera's setting for modification, presumably with the intent of addressing the more pressing concern of the socio-political status of the dramatis personae. In the end, however, only the Duke of Mantua was demoted to an abstract 'Il Duca' – a nobleman to be sure, but no longer an absolutist ruler. All other characters remained the same, as did the setting. The censor could never make a decision of this magnitude unilaterally, and one could speculate with some confidence that since the opera was ultimately approved, the permission to leave the characters and setting intact was granted by Nicholas himself.

Most of the changes here catalogued, which comprise virtually the entirety of the modifications undertaken, are remarkably similar to the changes that Austrian censorship in Venice demanded of Piave and Verdi two years earlier, and which Verdi was successful in rebutting on both dramatic and musical grounds.⁹⁶ What these changes reveal are nearly identical mindsets and concerns over morality and decency between the censors of the two empires. Where Russian censorship went further was in its attitude towards the depiction of the nobility, and in particular the presence of a sovereign ruler.

Who made the adjustments to the libretto demanded by the censor remains unclear. It was unlikely to have been the censor himself (though there are pencilled-in word replacements in the text, which might have originated with him); rather, it was probably a functionary at the Imperial Theatres Directorate or someone attached to the Italian opera troupe. At some point in the process, the censor and the adaptor of the text must have collaborated, clarifying and negotiating which of the changes demanded were essential and which could be ignored. Evidence pointing to this includes the fact that Hederstern struck out some seventy-seven poetic lines from the original libretto, but in the end only twenty-four lines were altered, in most cases affecting single phrases or words.

More notable still is the fact that almost none of the replacements originated with the censor or the adaptor: they were instead borrowed from the 1851 Roman libretto of *Viscardello*.⁹⁷ Comparison of the parallel scenes in *Viscardello* with those of the 'Russian'

⁹¹ TB, Ila-V41-42499, p. 19 and f. 19 $\frac{1}{2}$.

⁹² TB, Ila-V41-42499, the folio (unnumbered) with the new list of characters.

⁹³ TB, Ila-V41-42499, p. 24 and f. 24 $\frac{1}{2}$.

⁹⁴ TB, Ila-V41-42499, ff. 23 $\frac{1}{2}$, 24 $\frac{1}{2}$ and elsewhere.

⁹⁵ It is unclear whether the libretto of *Rigoletto* was, in fact, published for performance in St Petersburg (I was unable to locate a copy). If it was not, then here dramatic censorship was augmented by the Ministry of People's Enlightenment preventing the public from accessing the printed text, even in its new form (a practice already common for French opera).

⁹⁶ Kimbell, *Verdi in the Age of Italian Romanticism*, 269–71.

⁹⁷ *Viscardello* is not mentioned either in the libretto of *Rigoletto* under review or the censor's report, but there are pencil markings in several crossed-out passages that indicate page numbers. Those numbers reference and match the page numbers of the libretto of *Viscardello* issued by Ricordi, *Viscardello: melodramma in tre atti. Musica di Giuseppe Verdi* (Milan, n.d.); needless to say, the corresponding texts match as well. Even the slips of the Roman censors made their way into the 'Russian' *Rigoletto*. In one spot of the altered *Rigoletto* the reference to 'Dio' was replaced with 'Ciel', but at a later point Gilda's 'Gran Dio' remained untouched: these parallel similar inconsistencies in *Viscardello*.

Rigoletto reveals that the censor or adaptor of the latter chose to borrow from *Viscardello* with extreme selectivity, opting to preserve much of Piave and Verdi's original text instead – something that the Roman censors did not do. The Roman adaptation was far more comprehensive in its intrusions, with changes more numerous than anything attempted by Russian censorship, including in those very spots targeted by the Russian censor. Since the concerns of Russian censorship generally aligned with those of other intrusive regimes, this begs the obvious question: why not simply use the ready-made libretto of *Viscardello*? The answer might hide in the censor's report on the modified libretto.

Writing the report – dated 5 January 1853, and thus drafted only two weeks after the original prohibition – Hederstern highlighted some of the changes while also directly addressing the earlier question of 'why' the opera was banned in the first place, echoing his own report from 1851:

The libretto of this opera was banned because the sovereign Duke of Mantua and his courtiers are presented as shameless and criminal philanderers and because the Duke's jester, Rigoletto, whose daughter Gilda was abducted and seduced, makes an attempt on the life of his Prince, having hired an assassin, who, however, by mistake, which happens because of Gilda's self-sacrifice, stabs her and passes on her dead body, in a sack, to jester Rigoletto for the agreed-upon fee.

Now the [Theatres] Directorate has forwarded to the 3rd Section the aforementioned libretto in a reworked form. The Duke is no longer the Prince of Mantua, but a nobleman; the courtiers are transformed into his friends, and Gilda is not seduced but is only taken away, and, because of her love for the Duke, sacrifices herself to save him. Her dead body is brought on stage not in a sack but wrapped in a mantle.

In its current form, the plot of this opera presents nothing contrary to the rules of censorship.⁹⁸

The first paragraph of the report rehearses all elements that Russian censorship normally would find unacceptable: the Duke's absolutist status; the negative depiction of his court; the immorality of Gilda's seduction, abduction and rape; her self-sacrifice (with its implication of suicide); Rigoletto's attempt on the Duke's life; and, finally, the sack. The second paragraph purports to summarise the changes made, but there is something fraudulent about the censor's characterisation of the modifications imposed. Although the Duke of Mantua was demoted and direct references to him suppressed, none of his and his courtiers' behaviour was neutralised. The Duke remained the libertine that Piave and Verdi wanted him to be, and the depravity of his court was equally on display. At least up to this point, the censor is truthful about what was done, pro forma though those changes might have been. With his reference to Gilda's situation, he crosses into the territory of falsehoods, as there is nothing in the new libretto that would corroborate his declaration.

Even when taken collectively, then, the changes demanded and accepted by the censor are superficial. To be sure, they demonstrate some semblance of interference, as if to prove that an effort was made to identify and rectify the offences, but the effort itself was never serious enough to begin with, as witnessed by the elements in the libretto left unmodified. The curse, *la maledizione*, appears to have been of no concern to the censor; nor did he find the treatment of Gilda by others or her self-sacrifice problematic enough to warrant any real action; and the misogyny of the original drama remained, too, as did the characters affected by it. That the opera was allowed to be staged, almost

⁹⁸ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 19, f. 132; 5 January 1853 (original Russian).

certainly with Nicholas's approval, only confirms that these concerns could be set aside when expedient. In this case, the exigency was to have Verdi's new masterpiece staged in St Petersburg, with its original title and largely in its original form, which, apparently, far outweighed any potential social risks.

French grand opera

If the treatment of Italian opera exemplifies the lax side of censorship, then practices for French grand opera expose Russian censorship's most aggressive side. With the genre's emphasis on history, political and religious conflict, and bourgeois sensibilities, grand opera should not have had a place in Nicholas's Russia. And at first it did not: Nicholas resisted the importation of that particular tradition for several years. Early attempts to stage Daniel-François-Esprit Auber's *La muette de Portici* and Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* – operas that deal with popular uprisings against hegemonic powers – were quashed by Nicholas's personal decrees. His 1835 resolution for *Tell*, already sanitised in Vienna and reworked there into *Andreas Hofer*, stated: 'To be prohibited both in the German language and in Russian translation.'⁹⁹ Since French grand opera could never be sung in French, such prohibitions would bar public access to the genre altogether.

Nicholas appears to have realised, however, that this clashed severely with his vision to modernise the operatic repertoire. The solution was the wholesale rewriting of the librettos as part of the translation process. He devised the solution in February 1833, in response to yet another attempt by the Theatres Directorate to stage *La muette*, issuing a directive instructing that any French dramatic work should be sent to him in the form of a programme or scenario for review *before* the Directorate began to consider it for staging.¹⁰⁰ If he approved, the next step would be the translation based on that programme, with the resulting adaptation requiring further authorisation. The first opera to be subjected to the process was *La muette* itself, which eventually reached the stage performed in German under the title of *Fenella*.¹⁰¹ An attempt to stage the work in Russian in 1835 prompted the ever-vigilant Nicholas to resolve that 'he does not want to see *Fenella* in Russian either in translation or in adaptation'.¹⁰² The same fate awaited other operas. As realised in Russia, Rossini's *Tell*, Halévy's *La Juive*, Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* and *Le prophète* have little in common with their French originals. Censorship of each of these operas merits its own story, and collectively they deserve a history.¹⁰³ But for now, *Les Huguenots*, the most notorious case of repeated prohibitions and eventual reversal, will give a sense of the dynamics at play.

The saga of *Les Huguenots* in Russia began in June 1836, only months after the opera's hugely successful Parisian premiere, when Nicholas instructed his ambassador in France to acquire three copies of the opera's score.¹⁰⁴ The emperor was clearly interested in having it staged in Russia. While the ambassador was executing the order, in July the Moscow Theatres Director submitted the original French libretto to the office of Dramatic

⁹⁹ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 11, f. 21; 31 January and 2 February 1835 (original Russian).

¹⁰⁰ RGIA, fond 472, opis' 13, no. 1384.

¹⁰¹ For an important survey of the history of *La muette* on the Russian stages, see S.K. Lashchenko, "'Fenella" na stsena kh imperatorskikh teatrov', *Iskusstvo muziki: teoriya i istoriya*, 8 (2013), 5–45.

¹⁰² RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 11, ff. 60–61, at 61 (original Russian).

¹⁰³ Segments of that history could be found in Abram Gozenpud, *Muzikal'niy teatr v Rossii: Ot istokov do Glinki* (Leningrad, 1959); Abram Gozenpud, *Russkiy operniy teatr XIX veka (1836–1856)* (Leningrad, 1969); Yu. V. Keldish et al., eds., *Istoriya russkoy muziki*, V, 1826–1850 (Moscow, 1988); Marina Frolova-Walker, 'Grand Opera in Russia: Fragments of an Unwritten History', in *The Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera*, ed. David Charlton (Cambridge, 2003), 344–63; Zidaric, 'Traduction/adaptation des livrets d'opéras'.

¹⁰⁴ RGIA, fond 472, opis' 13, no. 1295, ff. 1–2.

Censorship for review. Since the Moscow opera troupe performed operas exclusively in Russian, the Director wanted to see if he could receive permission to initiate the process of translation and adaptation.¹⁰⁵ Oldecop's report on the opera presents a mild but detailed summary, with only two personal observations. After discussing Act I, the censor added: 'I must note that during the feast, Marcel, a servant of Raoul, sings a Church hymn, composed by Luther himself, to distract his young master from the group of Catholics.'¹⁰⁶ Oldecop was referring to Martin Luther's 'Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott', the chorale that permeates the opera, in evolving transformations. His other comment referenced the 'Consecration of the Swords' tableau in Act IV: 'In case that the piece will be permitted, the fifth scene of this act must be restricted: [after all,] those are monks who bless the swords of the Catholics [intended] to kill the Huguenots.'¹⁰⁷ Stage depictions of the clergy of any denomination were always strictly prohibited by censorship, and its presence in this specific context would guarantee a ban.

Oldecop dictated his report to a scribe (or perhaps had the scribe transcribe from his draft), and then added a brief note of clarification in his own hand.¹⁰⁸

Since the Russian translation of the opera *Les Huguenots* will be subject to Censorship [review], I have marked in the French original all the passages that in the translation will need to be modified. As to the so-called Luther hymn, I do not remember having heard the music in the church, but I believe that it is one of those songs that during the Thirty-Years' War the Swedish troops would intone before starting a battle. Besides, we already have so many prayers in several of our operas that this hymn should be no obstacle [to staging].

The first sentence of the note confirms that Oldecop's review of the French original was only the first step in what might become a multi-phase process of Russian-language adaptation. That adaptation would then be submitted for another censorial evaluation. The remainder of Oldecop's note is more informative still, for it hints at the censor's attitude towards the work and might indicate his attempt to guide his superiors in their decision-making. Oldecop, it seems, encouraged approval. Being Lutheran, it is almost certain that he would have known 'Ein feste Burg' as one of the foundational hymns in the Lutheran church. His claims that he could not recall hearing it or that it was something that Swedish soldiers would have sung come across as disingenuous and, perhaps, even deliberately misleading. The final sentence of the note would corroborate such a reading: generic prayers in opera were common enough; specific texts and music that rise to the status of liturgy were not. Oldecop's demotion of 'Ein feste Burg' is certainly suggestive of his true intentions. Whatever the case may be, his note was of no use: the opera was banned.

When the scores of *Les Huguenots* that Nicholas ordered finally arrived in October, he retained one copy and distributed the others for consideration to the Director of Military Music and the Director of the Imperial Theatres.¹⁰⁹ But having reviewed the opera himself in November, Nicholas apparently banned *Les Huguenots* in all languages, the bloody religious conflict and the immoral behaviour of some of its characters clearly not to his liking. Despite this nationwide prohibition, submitting some variant of *Les Huguenots* for

¹⁰⁵ RGIA, fond 780, opus' 1, no. 12, ff. 154–6; 30 July 1836 (original French).

¹⁰⁶ RGIA, fond 780, opus' 1, no. 12, f. 154.

¹⁰⁷ RGIA, fond 780, opus' 1, no. 12, f. 155.

¹⁰⁸ RGIA, fond 780, opus' 1, no. 12, f. 156. There is an alternative possibility that the note originated later, in response to a request for clarification from Oldecop's superiors.

¹⁰⁹ RGIA, fond 472, opus' 13, no. 1295, ff. 5–9.

ensorial review became something of a ritual: every few years, one theatre or another would request permission for its staging.

Thus in September 1840, the governor of the northwestern province of the Empire, with its centre in Riga, forwarded to the Third Section a libretto of 'Die Welfen und Gibellinen'¹¹⁰ – most likely the 1839 Viennese adaptation of *Les Huguenots*. Under normal circumstances, the censorship process would be completed within about two weeks; but in this case it took two full months. The response from the Third Section came only in December, informing the governor that 'the piece titled Welfen und Gibellinen was presented to his Imperial Majesty for consideration and was not granted the Highest permission for its performance in Russia'.¹¹¹

The following summer, the Director of the Imperial Theatres in St Petersburg, Alexander Gedeonov, decided to try his luck with the same opera. On 14 August 1841 he submitted a request to the Minister of the Imperial Court, his immediate superior and the emperor's chief of staff:

I have the honour of presenting for consideration by your Highness the libretto of the opera *Die Welfen und Gibellinen*, written for the music of Meyerbeer's opera *Les Huguenots*. The strict – both in moral and political respects – Viennese Censorship would not permit the opera *Les Huguenots* for the stage; consequently, the attached libretto was created and immediately approved in Vienna.¹¹²

Highlighted here, and confirmed by other sources, is the fact that when adapting French operas, Russian theatres often based their librettos not on the French originals but on the librettos previously censored in another (foreign) cultural centre, with preference given to Vienna. The libretto, which Gedeonov appended but which does not survive, was likely identical to that submitted earlier by the Riga Theatre, namely the 1839 Viennese adaptation of the text. So what did the strict Viennese censorship do to Meyerbeer's opera, according to Gedeonov?

Everything that could appear to be impermissible in the opera *Les Huguenots* is completely eliminated here. The fanatical and religious character is replaced with a feud between two factions, there are no monks on the stage, no slaughter of the protestants; in its general sense, the opera *Die Welfen und Gibellinen* entirely resembles the opera *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*, which has been performed in Russia both in Russian and German languages.¹¹³

The Viennese censorial requirements were clearly on a par with those of Russia. To turn the opera's original violent religious clash of the St Bartholomew's Day massacre into a Romeo and Juliet story, with all religious symbolism suppressed, would require some serious intervention. Gedeonov next deliberately references the audiences, which censorship is meant to protect, in effect anticipating their reaction:

I can in no way foresee that the performances of this opera could have any harmful effect on our public, and thus I humbly ask that your Highness obtain His Imperial Majesty's Imperial permission for the performance of this opera on the St

¹¹⁰ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 2, no. 6, f. 1; 13 September 1840.

¹¹¹ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 2, no. 6, f. 2; 2 December 1840 (original Russian).

¹¹² RGIA, fond 497, opis' 1, no. 8835, f. 1; 14 August 1841.

¹¹³ RGIA, fond 497, opis' 1, no. 8835, f. 1; 14 August 1841.

Petersburg stage by the Russian or German troupes, whichever works better in terms of voices.¹¹⁴

The mention of either troupe confirms that unlike Russian operas, which were censored as they were already being mounted, permission for French operas was sought well in advance of any prospective production.

Having neutralised the possibility that the opera might be perceived by his superiors as containing anything that could instigate public unrest or corrupt morals, Gedeonov turns to the public good, the opera's entertainment value. But he also reminds his superiors that operatic repertoire in Russia is lacking precisely because of censorship: 'Our operatic repertoire has not been enlivened for some time now by any important new opera, and that is because the most significant new [European] compositions as originally composed cannot be permitted on our stage.'¹¹⁵

Gedeonov's letter was intended for Nicholas, who remained unmoved by the plea, but decided to shift the blame for the negative decision onto the dramatic censor. The Minister of the Imperial Court informed the Director of the Imperial Theatres that his Majesty wished to have the libretto submitted to the censor for review first, before he considered it, and have him informed of the decision.¹¹⁶ The Director immediately contacted the Third Section, asking whether it would be possible to have the opera performed in St Petersburg, adding that 'anything that might have appeared to be impermissible in the opera *Les Huguenots* was completely eliminated in the proposed libretto'.¹¹⁷ The Third Section responded that it was already familiar with *Die Welfen und Gibellinen*, having reviewed it only the previous April at the request of the Riga Theatre.¹¹⁸ The chief of staff to the Director of secret police continued: 'The censorship [office] does not consider this opera to be contrary to the accepted rules and intended to approve it, but following its report to the Tsar-Emperor, his Majesty's approval for this work was not granted.'¹¹⁹ Although the Censorship office 'sees no obstacles to its staging', it could not grant permission for the opera's performance.

The Third Section, then, would approve the opera, but Nicholas would not (and eventually did not).¹²⁰ Perhaps more than any example considered thus far, this brief exchange of documents vividly paints the reality of censorship in Russia. The process and the mechanism worked well, and those entrusted with guarding the public and the state did exactly what they were expected to do. But in the end, the system was ineluctably capricious because of Nicholas's personal involvement. The situation of Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* serves as another reminder that in the Russian Empire there were censors and there was The Censor.

Four years later, in June 1845, the theatre in Riga made another attempt to see *Les Huguenots* performed, this time in the form of *Margarethe von Navarra*, an adaptation by one Ludwig Meyer. Censor Gedeonov reported:

¹¹⁴ RGIA, fond 497, opis' 1, no. 8835, f. 1; 14 August 1841.

¹¹⁵ RGIA, fond 497, opis' 1, no. 8835, f. 1; 14 August 1841.

¹¹⁶ RGIA, fond 497, opis' 1, no. 8835, f. 2; 17 August 1841.

¹¹⁷ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 2, no. 6, f. 3; 20 August 1841 (original Russian). Also see RIGA, fond 497, opis' 1, no. 8835, f. 3; 20 August 1841.

¹¹⁸ I was unable to find the report associated with that earlier review.

¹¹⁹ RGIA, fond 497, opis' 1, no. 8835, f. 4; 28 August 1841 (original Russian). See also RGIA, fond 780, opis' 2, no. 6, f. 4; 28 August 1841.

¹²⁰ The prohibition was invoked anew only a year later, when the theatre in Vilna tried to stage *Die Hugenotten*, noting that the opera had already been prohibited for the imperial theatres in St Petersburg and Riga 'as a result of the Highest command [voli] of His Imperial Majesty'. RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 18, f. 195; 26 October 1842 (original Russian).

This is a translation of the banned opera *Les Huguenots*. Eliminated in the translation is the religious fanaticism; however, the massacre of St Bartholomew's Night is retained in its entirety. Several similar adaptations were already presented for the Highest approval, and were all subjected to prohibition.¹²¹

No exception was made now either. Undeterred by the decision, within three months the Riga Theatre had submitted a variant of *Die Welfen und Gibellinen*. This time, the censor simply noted that any performance of the opera was already prohibited.¹²²

In October of 1848, the new governor of Riga, Prince Alexander Suvorov, writing on behalf of his theatre director, begged the chief of the Third Section Count Orlov to permit a new adaptation of *Les Huguenots*, now called *Raoul und Valentine*. The governor noted that both the title and the entire content of the opera were changed. Appealing to Orlov, the governor explained that there was paucity of good operas in Riga and that the public desired to see this particular work. He also reminded Orlov of other examples of problematic operas, such as Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*, which were granted permission when completely rewritten. And he concluded his letter by insisting that 'in the current piece, the most important role is played not by the words but by Meyerbeer's music, and the narration of the text is borrowed from *I puritani*, which in itself contains nothing reprehensible, in my opinion'.¹²³ On 12 January 1849, Orlov's assistant responded that his Imperial Majesty granted his permission for the performance of '*Raoul und Valentine*'.¹²⁴

What prompted Nicholas's acquiescence is not known, but the reason must have been political. In light of the discontent sweeping across Europe in 1848–9, one wonders whether this move was strategic: to score points with his subjects in the Empire's unstable western-most periphery during a turbulent time and to keep them distracted. It was a strategy of which Nicholas was fond. After all, despite its many controversial themes, political uprising is not one that is highlighted in *Les Huguenots*.¹²⁵

Whatever the case may be, with the emperor's shocking change of heart, the Director of the Imperial Theatres rushed to have the opera also staged in St Petersburg. Permission for that staging was granted on the 18 November and was communicated by the Minister of the Imperial Court to the Theatres Director:

I have the honour of informing your Excellency that the Tsar-Emperor Imperially permits the staging, in Italian, of the opera *I guelfi ed i ghibellini* based on the attached libretto, which I am returning, should this libretto be permitted by the censorship [office].¹²⁶

Forwarding the libretto to the Third Section, the Theatres Director echoed that 'the Tsar-Emperor has imperially permitted the performance in Italian of the opera *I guelfi*

¹²¹ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 22, f. 126; 14 June 1845 (original Russian).

¹²² RGIA, fond 780, opis' 1, no. 22, f. 209; 30 September 1845.

¹²³ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 2, no. 6, ff. 5–6; 31 October 1848 (original Russian).

¹²⁴ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 2, no. 6, f. 8. I was unable to locate the libretto of this adaptation to determine its provenance.

¹²⁵ *Les Huguenots* represents an exception. Starting in 1848, Nicholas tightened censorship considerably, and repression of artefacts became even more widespread. *Le prophète* – the next big censorship battle – could prove the point (see Zavulunov, 'Nicholas I and his Dramatic Censors'). Moreover, the emperor decreed that musical scores intended for publication be reviewed meticulously, requiring that censors now pay close attention to the musical symbols – that is, the actual notes – as a possible means of subversion. See Yakushkin, 'Iz istorii russkoy tsenzuri', 68.

¹²⁶ RGIA, fond 497, opis' 1, no. 12496, f. 1; 18 November 1849 (original Russian).

ed i ghibellini, if it contains nothing contrary to the censorship provisions'.¹²⁷ The opera smoothly sailed through Dramatic Censorship and was performed in Russia's capital without further changes in 1850, fourteen years after its Parisian premiere. The variant of the opera that was sung was the Italian text by Calisto Bassi, as printed by Ricordi in Milan in 1843,¹²⁸ which itself was a reworking of the German-language adaptation created in Vienna in 1839 (discussed earlier). What Nicholas would not permit for the Russian and, earlier, German troupes, he would allow for the Italian. Different standards applied to different companies and languages. Still, he prohibited the publication of the opera's full libretto: one could buy only a synopsis.¹²⁹ The libretto would not be published in Russia until after Nicholas's death in 1855. And it would take another thirteen years before Russia would hear Meyerbeer's opera in its more-or-less original form in 1868. But by then the Empire had a very different Censor-in-Chief at its helm.

* * *

This study has constructed a panorama of opera censorship for the entire reign of Nicholas I. Despite total codification of censorship in this period, censorial interventions in operatic texts varied greatly, based on the censor's interpretation of the statutes, Nicholas's own multifarious involvement in the process, the practical needs of the Imperial Theatres, the international status of the composer, the contemporaneous political climate and much else besides. But, as I have shown, the greatest variable was the geographic point of origin of the operatic work. In order for the story of opera censorship to become more comprehensive, it would need to be integrated within a broader account of the intersection of opera and politics in Russia (which, by extension, would also have to situate Russia in the greater context of European operatic politics). Such an account might expand the very definition of censorship, for there were additional checks on opera not considered in the present study at all – for example, state control over published opera criticism. Manipulating critical reception of artworks was censorship by other means. Opera in Russia had never experienced such ubiquitous social control before Nicholas and would not experience it again until the 1930s, but that parallel is a story all its own.

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¹²⁷ RGIA, fond 780, opis' 2, no. 6, f. 9; 20 November 1849 (original Russian).

¹²⁸ The censor's copy of the printed libretto survives as TB, Ila M64 41854, with the approval date of 3 December 1849.

¹²⁹ RGIA, fond 777, opis' 2, no. 28; 1850; the new version's synopsis could be found in TB, 1a/A/Sb-11 56357.

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