Ukraine Girls and Liverpool Boys Back in the USSR: Revisiting The Beatles in Times of Trouble and War

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Abstract

This paper was prompted by two totally unconnected but highly evocative events: The Beatles International Conference, organized by the Lisbon branch of CETAPS at NOVA (June 2021), and the Russian military invasion of Ukraine (February 2022). My purpose in drawing them together is to offer some brief comments on "Back in the USSR", the opening track of the double LP *The Beatles* (November 1968), the first edited by Apple Records, and usually known as "The White Album".

Keywords: "Back in the USSR"; Ukraine Girls; *The Beatles* (Double LP, 1968); "The White Album"; The Beatles

Resumo

Este artigo foi despoletado por dois acontecimentos totalmente independentes, mas profundamente simbólicos: o Congresso Internacional sobre os Beatles, organizado pelo polo de Lisboa do CETAPS na NOVA (junho de 2021) e a invasão militar da Ucrânia pela Rússia (fevereiro de 2022). O meu propósito ao relacionar ambos é o de tecer alguns breves comentários sobre "Back in the USSR", a faixa inaugural do disco duplo The Beatles (novembro de 1968), o primeiro editado pela Apple Records e geralmente conhecido apenas como o "Álbum Branco".

Palavras-chave: "Back in the USSR"; Mulheres da Ucrânia; *The Beatles* (LP duplo, 1968); O "Álbum Branco"; Os Beatles

To Prof. Teresa Botelho (NOVA FCSH)

This position paper was prompted by two totally unconnected but highly evocative events: The Beatles International Conference, organized by the Lisbon branch of CETAPS at NOVA (June 2021),[1] and the Russian military invasion and occupation of Ukraine (February 2022), which filled the European TV screens with images of women fleeing from the conflict with their children under their arms, as they were forced to leave husbands, fathers, brothers, belongings and homeland behind. My purpose in drawing them together is to offer some brief comments on "Back in the USSR", the opening track of the double LP *The Beatles* (November 1968), the first edited by Apple Records, and usually known as "The White Album", due to its minimalist cover, so deeply different from the graphic exuberance of those of the two preceding LPs: *Revolver* (1966) and *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967).

To Mark Donnelly, 1968 "was the most symbolic year of the sixties. If proof was required of how far events had moved from the conformism of the fifties, it came in 1968" (143); whereas Barry Miles argues that: "If 1967 was the summer of love, 1968 was best characterized as a year of political action" (241). From the viewpoint of (early) contemporary history, international politics, and the world order, 1968 was indeed a momentous year, witnessing, for example, the ongoing Vietnam war and the Tet operation; the brutal murders of Martin Luther King (b.1929) and Robert (Bob) Kennedy (b.1925); the Chicago demonstrations at the Democrat Convention; the students' revolt and protests at the Sorbonne; the ideological impact in the West of Mao's Cultural Revolution in China; the first stirrings of "The Troubles" between Catholics and Protestants in Ulster/Northern Ireland; here at home, Salazar's physical and symbolical fall from both chair and power; and, more to my point here, the Warsaw Pact's invasion of Czechoslovakia, cutting short the reforming breeze of the "Prague Spring" led and inspired by Alexander Dubček (1921-1992), to name but a few main events.[2] To Simon Philo,

> . . . 1968 was a watershed year for rock music that protested the war, tied as it was to these and other key political and military events . . . . Through '68 and beyond, a creeping paranoia and violence had seeped into much of rock music . . . an apocalyptic edge that was hard to miss and difficult to ignore. (134)

Considering then, on the one hand, the signs and mental context of the times and, on the other, the new "Cold War" we are now living under, with China and North Korea

playing their part behind the (reframed iron) curtain that has descended across the Continent, the Russian aggression to Ukraine, reminiscent of Soviet (if not Tzarist) imperialism itself, certainly justifies "getting back to where I once belonged" - the late Sixties -, not to mention Paul McCartney's passionate waving of the Ukrainian flag in several concerts earlier this year.

As Marcus Collins puts it, ". . . existing scholarship on the Beatles' political impact resembles an echo chamber in which writers amplify each other's assertions and mistakes" (152-3). In fact, critical assessment and evaluation of the Fab Four and everything that they (may) have stood for does not involve politics alone, but larger cultural questions: for example, were The Beatles mostly agents and representative embodiments of tradition, continuity, and the Establishment or, on the contrary, of novelty, change, and young(th) (sub)cultures?[3] According to Arthur Marwick,

> . . . many took them, legitimately enough, as symbolizing youthful radicalism, though they were never more than what one might call "honorary" members of the movement; like many others they dipped in and out of "counter-cultural" events, being obviously also part . . . of the highly commercialized rock/pop scene. (457-8)[4]

> With Beatles songs direct links between lyrics and current events are not easy to find . . . . Of explicit political commitment there is not a great deal . . . : the single most obviously associated with one particular contemporary outlook on the world's problems, *All You Need Is Love*, was one of the more banal; *Revolution 1* . . . and *Revolution 9* . . . were both, in their verbal messages, confused and contradictory, and were bitterly attacked by the Left. (459)

Be that as it may, and besides the "political impact" Collins speaks of, much has been written on the ideological views and stances of the Fab Four, again a subject of hot, controversial, and endless debate,[5] often focused on "Revolution", also from "The White Album". In spite of John Lennon's twofold, ambivalent statement towards destruction,[6] "Revolution", and "the White Album" as a whole, mark a clear shift in The Beatles' (particularly John's) political outspokenness, even if/when they choose to dwell on, or resort to, the "warm gun" of ambiguity. There is, however, nothing ambiguous or equivocal in the lyrics' blatant rejection of violence, hate,[7] and fundamentalism/fanaticism/radicalism.[8] As Fred Inglis points out,

> Written by John Lennon, it ["Revolution"] signaled his frustration and resentment at the Beatles' commercial obligation to avoid overt political comment. Envious of Bob Dylan's ability to engage in meaningful contemporary debates in song, Lennon's

> politicization had accelerated since his relationship with Yoko Ono, and the death of Brian Epstein [1967] had removed the last serious restraint on his desire to participate in "serious" forms of discourse. (117)

Inglis' view is also endorsed by Sean Egan (177-8). However, as far as pacifism is concerned, the best musical example of Lennon's commitment and militancy is probably "Give Peace a Chance" (1969), recorded and released in the context of the Plastic Ono Band project.[9]

As is commonly known, "Back in the USSR" is traditionally seen as inspired by, and responding to, two American rock and pop songs, both tinged with chauvinistic notes, which somehow materialize, in some cultural and civilizational respects, mid-20th century musical versions of the American dream: Chuck Berry's "Back in the USA" (1959),[10] and The Beach Boys' "California Girls" (1965).[11] This influence, as well as an underlying parodical[12] intention by The Beatles, has been noted by the critics throughout the decades,[13] raising the possibility of expert, finely-tuned readings in musical intertextuality/intertextual musicality and/or comparative musicology. Such approaches would be, of course, far beyond the aims of this paper, but, in any case, I would suggest a close and careful verbal-oriented listening to the following two videos, each one interesting in its own way: "The Beatles Back In The USSR" (https://my.mail.ru/mail/gorlova_luba/video/2926/7601.html) and "Paul McCartney - Back In The USSR" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_JbLsYoL3ug).

At this stage, it should perhaps be added that, in spite of a rumour that The Beatles had given a secret concert for the Soviet élites, the band as a whole never played in the USSR, which is perhaps not surprising, considering that they were, after all, global idols and icons of Western consumerism and capitalism, not Eastern communism and state-regulated, military-driven economies. Leslie Woodhead argues, not mincing words:

> Unrecorded in accounts of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the impact of the Beatles - and the musical revolution they inspired - were crucial on washing away the . . . totalitarian edifice. Their music, their style, their spirit were the keys. They were forbidden, never allowed to play in the U.S.S.R. But their music . . . blasted open the door to Western culture, fomenting a cultural revolution that helped to destroy the Soviet Union. (2)

The band's dramatic and traumatic break-up (1970) occurred indeed 15-20 years before Mikhail Gorbatchov's *glasnost* and *perestroika* policies drastically improved the

relations between the USSR and the Anglo-American axis, featuring Ronald Reagan (1911-2004) and Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013), in the mid-1980s,[14] leading, later in the decade, to the demolition of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the beginning of political and ideological "decolonization" and independence of the countries and nations hitherto bound - in every sense of the word - by the Warsaw Pact. Speaking of concrete walls, barbed wire and iron curtains, Des Brown recalls that Elton John (b.1947), the singer of the moving hit *Nikita* (1985, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tg-Q-Acv4qs), was a pioneer in gaining musical access to the USSR and there is a nice story involving him and The Beatles:

> Elton John became the first Western pop or rock act to penetrate the Iron Curtain when he played Leningrad and Moscow concerts in May 1979.
>
> Elton John was considered acceptable, but not the Beatles. Woodhead explained that by the 1970s, the Kremlin recognized that rock music still had to be reconciled with the Soviet system.
>
> While the spirit and energy of the Beatles remained too risky, musicians like Elton John were felt to be safe and unchallenging. Even so, the authorities tried to insist that Elton should not perform "Back in the USSR".
>
> When he defied the ban at the end of his final concert and played the song, it unleashed exactly the explosion of uncontrolled enthusiasm the authorities had feared. (Brown, n. pag.)[15]

Having named the videos (and there are, of course, many more from performances all over the world, including one in the Red Square, Moscow, in 2003, and a later one in Kiev, 2008), I would like now to put up some practical examples for consideration, by recalling O'Callaghan's remarks on the subject. Before that, however, a quote from Barry Miles, one of the main chroniclers of the British Sixties, may be useful to understand the context:

> . . . I went to Cavendish Avenue to see Paul, needing to have a serious meeting with him. . . . Years before, Paul had told me never to be scared to come to him if I was ever in dire need. "Years from now," he said. "Twenty years from now!" We took tea in his living room like two English gentlemen . . . .
>
> He was obviously very pleased about something. "Come and hear this", he said, and we went upstairs to the music room. He put on a white label acetate of "Back in the USSR". "How do you think the cocky Americans will like that?" We both laughed. It was superb. (246-7)

So now onto the song itself. After a ("dreadful") BOAC flight from Miami Beach, Florida, evoked through musical onomatopoeia at both ends, the USSR seems to be viewed, at face value, as an enviable place for "lucky boys", presumably better than the USA and the Western world at large. This stance, coming at the time of the invasion of Prague (1968), could hardly fail to inspire some adverse criticism from different political quarters, including New Left intellectuals and activists both in the UK and the US. As MacDonald recalls:

> Recorded as Soviet tanks rolled into Czechoslovakia, it was a rather tactless **jest** which in America, prompted the John Birch Society to charge The Beatles with fomenting communism (The song later percolated into the USSR on smuggled tapes and became a favourite among the group's Russian fans.) (309-10, emphasis added)

Nonetheless, one may wonder: were the Beatles speaking in earnest or were they being ironical or "mockers", as Ringo, in typical Liverpudlian fashion, once defined himself?[16] O'Callaghan, for instance, argues that "From start to finish, everything about 'Back in the U.S.S.R.' is tongue in cheek." (n. pag.), adding that:

> "Back in the U.S.S.R." is timeless, . . . for reasons beyond The Beatles' global appeal. In a tense world of spying allegations, proxy wars, and shoe-banging, the song was just about political enough to irk the world's overlords, while playing as a private joke to everyone else. (n. pag.)

To start with, "flight" can also mean any sort of "escape" (not necessarily an airborne one) and, if so, what was the character, spy or no spy, fleeing from (or into)? Additionally, did the "dreadful flight", after a bedless night, require a paper bag on his knee, because he was leaving the USA, going back to the USSR, or both? The very word "back" suggests that he had been in the USSR before, and, if so, why did he leave in the first place? And why the Americanism "Gee" before acknowledging that "it's good to be back home" (that is, in the USSR)? Finally, can this sign of linguistic acculturation be due to him "being away so long" to the point of "hardly knowing [knew] the place"?

Secondly, if we analyse the refrain, "I'm back in the USSR/ You don't know how lucky you are, boy/ Back in the USSR", we will find the last line repeated with a slightly different, though significant, ending: "Back in the US/ Back in the US/ Back in the USSR". How should we then, as listeners/readers, interpret this feigned stammer, similar, *mutatis mutandis*, to The Who's "Why don't you all f…, f…, f…, fade away" in

"My Generation" (1964)? If we also add up John Lennon's "count me out (in)" statement in "Revolution" (an intentional fake hesitation or slip of the tongue?), further studies on the extent and role of subtextual innuendo, ambiguity, and *double entendre* in the pop/rock scene of the Sixties would certainly be welcome.

Finally, if we bear in mind the "Backing Britain" campaign, run by the Wilson Cabinet, "**Back in** the US(SR)" is, phonetically speaking, quite close to either/both "**Backing** the US" or/and "**Backing** the USSR" (emphasis added), the superpowers that spearheaded and polarized the geopolitical, ideological, military, and economic world since 1945, including, of course, the late Sixties.

The third and last example from "Back in the USSR" which I would like to draw attention to is the following (including another stutter at the end):

> Well, the Ukraine girls really knock me out[17]
> They leave the West behind.
> And Moscow girls make me sing and shout
> That Georgia is always on ma-ma-ma-ma-ma-ma-ma-ma-ma-mind.

In his essay "We All Want to Change the World. Postmodern Politics and the Beatles' *White Album*", Jeffrey Roessner stresses the importance of irony as an active form of ideological engagement, rather than detachment or aloofness:

> "Back in the USSR" plays on stereotypical Western visions of . . . the United States and Soviet Union, and satirizes the absurdities in each. The song mocks the idealized fantasy of the . . . States as a vast beach populated with attractive women, a nation of sports cars and barbecues. At the same time, McCartney exposes how little the average listener knows of the real inhabitants of the communist empire . . . . The reference to "Georgia" seals the song's irony, as the name of the Soviet republic mirrors its U.S. twin and we confront . . . the cold war fable of absolute good versus absolute evil. . . . Listening to this song, . . . have we entered a postmodern hall of mirrors, constructed through . . . irony . . . ? [W]e find political significance in having our identities troubled, in being asked to confront contradictions in the Western fantasy of purity and goodness as defined against an evil, Soviet Other. (157)

Indeed, Georgia can either mean the American state or the former Soviet republic, now a sovereign and independent country. But till when or for how long?

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[1] “It Was Fifty Years Ago Today: An Academic Tribute to The Beatles” (17-18.06.2021).
[2] See also Sandbrook 658-9: “. . . 1968 had been a year of political turmoil and social upheaval: riots and assassinations in the United States; student rebellion in France; bombings in West Germany; massacres in

Mexico City; bloodshed in Saigon and Prague. But for Britain, it had been another year of gloom, of economic austerity and a limping, bloodied government [Harold Wilson's, 1964-1970]. Few people thought that 1969 would be much better."

[3] Although far too long to be quoted here, see Collins 2-3.

[4] David Fowler argues, in rather harsh words, that "The Beatles were not . . . at the forefront of a cultural movement of the young. Thew were young capitalists who, far from developing a youth culture, were exploiting youth culture by promoting fan worship, mindless screaming and nothing more than a passive teenage consumer" (171).

[5] As Collins puts it: "The ideological soundness of the Beatles was ultimately hard . . . to judge. Their politics changed from year to year and they were not card-carrying members of anything" (177). The whole chapter, entitled "Politics: The Beatles, Parliament and Revolution" (151-92), is worth reading.

[6] "But when you talk about destruction / Don't you know that you can count me out . . . in" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BGLGzRXY5Bw). On this hesitation or contradiction, see, for instance, MacDonald 280-6, 287-91 and 295-6 and Philo 136-8. According to the latter, ". . . 'Revolution' was quite simply the rawest and angriest the band had ever been, and would ever be, on 45. Yet, like 'Hey Jude', it addressed the need for positive and peaceful behavior as a constructive response to increasingly violent, destructive times" (138).

[7] "But if you want money for people with minds that hate / All I can tell you is, brother, you have to wait." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BGLGzRXY5Bw)

[8] "But if you go carrying pictures of Chairman Mao / You ain't gonna make it with anyone anyhow." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BGLGzRXY5Bw)

[9] "Give Peace a Chance" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C3_0GqPvr4U).

[10] "Well, I'm so glad I'm livin' in the U.S.A. (uh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah) / Yes, I'm so glad I'm livin' in the U.S.A. (uh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah) / Anything you want, they got right here in the U.S.A. (mm-huh, mm-huh)." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBsMEuRlq5o)

[11] "I been all around this great big world / And I seen all kinds of girls / Yeah, but I couldn't wait to get back in the States / Back to the cutest girls in the world." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8yph3rb27o)

[12] In Simon Dentith's definition, "Parody includes any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice" (9).

[13] John Hunter Davies, for instance, describes this song as "A good joke, in words and lyrics, to ape a very American-type rocker" (181), mentioning also the "Beach Boys-style falsettos" (*Ibidem*); likewise, Ian MacDonald presents it as "a thunderous wall of sound sprayed with jet-engine effects and falsetto backing vocals in the mould of full-tilt Beach Boys's records . . . " (310). Interestingly enough, "Back in the USSR" was also played live by The Beach Boys in Washington, on July 4th, 1984, with Ringo Starr on drums (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fBB6KlqTvig).

[14] Due to the British presence, influence, and interests in India and the Near and the Middle East, the distrust of Russia had been a regular feature of British foreign politics throughout the 19th century, often amounting to Russophobia (see Cunningham 72 and 74), and the Crimean War (1854-1856) had obviously worsened the relations between the British Lion and the Russian Bear. The military and political cooperation during the Second World War would not last long, as attested by Churchill's famous Iron Curtain speech, delivered at Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri, on 5th March 1946 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S2PUIQpAEAQ).

[15] According to Leslie Whitehead, "Elton said it was one of the most unforgettable performances of his life . . ." (121).

[16] In an interview recorded at Television House, London, on 20 March 1964, for the ITV programme "Ready Steady Go", "Cathy McGowan asked Ringo, 'Do you think you're a mod? Do you know what a mod is, Ringo? To which he replied, 'No, I'm not a mod, or a rocker. I'm a mocker" (Davies 551).

[17] "And the Southern girls with the way they talk / They knock me out when I'm down there." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8yph3rb27o) Likewise, the line "They [the northern girls] keep their boyfriends warm at night" is almost echoed by The Beatles in "Come and keep your comrade warm" (https://my.mail.ru/mail/gorlova_luba/video/2926/7601.html); compare also "The Mid-West farmer's daughters / Really make you feel alright" (Beach Boys) with "Take me to your daddy's farm" (The Beatles).