

# Melodies of Music: Music as Culture Warfare in the Cold War

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## **Abstract:**

This paper explores the role of music as a cultural and ideological tool during the Cold War (1947–1991), when the United States and the Soviet Union competed not only for military and political dominance, but also for cultural influence. While ideological conflict and proxy wars characterized the era, music emerged as a powerful medium for both superpowers to express and share their values. The essay examines how the United States used genres such as jazz, folk, and Rock ‘n’ Roll to promote ideals of freedom, individualism, and diversity, often through government-sponsored cultural diplomacy. In contrast, the Soviet Union enforced socialist realism in music to reflect state ideology and proletarian values, regulating music output through censorship and state control. Despite restrictions, underground movements like “Magnitizdat” and a growing interest in Western styles among Soviet youth reflected cultural resistance and curiosity. Ultimately, music served as both a battleground and bridge—mirroring societal tensions while fostering global understanding across ideological lines.

**Keywords:** Cold War, Music, Cultural diplomacy, Socialist realism

From 1947 to 1991, the Cold War was an ideological conflict between Democracy and Communism, capitalism and socialism, that manifested as a conflict between two global superpowers and proxy wars throughout the Third World. The United States’ policymakers attempted to limit the growth of communism, create a free market global economy, and build stronger international diplomatic ties. While this conflict is often understood through military buildups and ideological conflict, both superpowers recognized that cultural influence inevitably played an essential role in the war. Music emerged as an

unexpected “battlefield” in this ideological war (O’Connell, n.d.). Though music has always been a form of emotional and cultural expression throughout history, the Cold War transformed music into a sophisticated diplomatic tool. The United States and the Soviet Union employed and deployed musicians and composers to project their values abroad—the United States showcasing diversity and freedom. At the same time, the Soviet Union promoted socialist ideals through state-sanctioned compositions and repertoires. During the Cold War, music reflected the respective cultures of the two superpowers and was

a way to illuminate the ideological conflict of the era further.

American art forms like jazz, folk, and Rock 'n' Roll reflected American values of individualism and diversity. By the late 19th and early 20th century, jazz emerged in the American south with roots that were intertwined with the African American experience (Smithsonian Music, 2016). Jazz builds on the foundation of blues, ragtime, and marching band traditions. It is considered to be one of the only purely American art forms (Jazz Observer, 2023). In the 1950s, Rock 'n' Roll emerged in the United States from a blend of African American musical traditions, white country, and gospel music. Rock 'n' Roll significantly influenced American culture by becoming a youth-driven force, challenging racial and social norms ("Rock 'n' Roll Revolution," n.d.). It is often considered a culmination of existing musical styles, and it inspired musicians around the world in shaping popular culture ("Rock 'n' Roll Revolution," n.d.). By the 1960s, American folk music became a vibrant and influential movement that blended traditional folk with genres like Rock 'n' Roll and became a vehicle for social protests (Kelsey, 2024). Famous musicians like Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Woody Guthrie used their music to address issues like the Civil Rights Movement and protest the Vietnam War (Smithsonian Music, 2016). American composers also incorporated elements of American folk music of the 1960s into classical music (Adam Gingery, 2020). For instance, American composer Aaron Copland used folk melodies from Shaker song book's "Simple Gifts" as the basis of his classical work "Appalachian Spring" ("How Do Classical Composers," n.d.). With the integration of different musical styles, American musicians brought more innovation and variety into the musical industry, aligning with its projected values of freedom and diversity.

On the other hand, the Russian Revolution led to the evolution of music from traditional Russian music to an emphasis on socialist realism. Traditional Russian music developed initially from a combination of folk melodies and nationalist sentiments linked to the rising Russian bourgeoisie (Express to Russia, n.d.). Composers like Glinka and Moussorgsky utilized national terminology and folk influences to create a culturally distinctive style aligned with the Russian identity (Taylor, 2016). However, when Russia became the Soviet Union in 1922, there was a dramatic shift toward strict ideological control over music. Before the revolution, many composers like Glazunov, Balakirev, and Moussorgsky created music in a relatively free artistic environment rooted in nationalist and Romantic traditions. However, after the Bolshevik Revolution, the emphasis that socialist realism was the official artistic doctrine, enforced by the Union of Soviet Composers, led

to significant transformations. Consequently, the music industry was forced to serve the goals of the revolution and reflect the interests of the proletariat, subsequently limiting artistic freedom (Seventeen Moments in Soviet History, 2015). Composers like Shostakovich and Prokofiev faced public condemnations and political attacks because their work conflicted with the ideological demands of socialist realism and the political expectations of the Soviet regime; on the other hand, they were also criticized by the artistic community for compromising their principles. Under Stalin's rule, official artistic doctrine mandated that music emphasize clear, accessible, and propagandistic content. As a result, works like Shostakovich's opera "Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk" and Prokofiev's ballet "Romeo and Juliet" were rejected and scrutinized for not conforming to the approved style (Liao, 2024).

After the Bolshevik Revolution, there were four main groups of Soviet musicologists who attempted to influence contemporary Russian musical culture ("Musicologist," 2025). The first group was "the Old Bolsheviks", such as Vladimir Lenin and Anatoly Lunacharsky, who believed in a new culture of music built on the foundation of the arts from the past (Tompkins, 2013). The Bolsheviks were a radical faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party that seized power in the October Revolution. Music was a powerful tool for them to shape public opinion ("Music in America's Cold War Diplomacy," n.d.). Another group was the militant communist cultural organizations, such as the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM). They wanted proletarian control over the arts and a new workers' culture (Ansari, 2014). The RAPM specifically advocated for songs that were simple, accessible, and based on folk tunes. Their purpose was to create music that could be understood easily and embraced by the working class (Ansari, 2014). RAPM also opposed musical styles they considered Western or non-proletarian, such as jazz and classical music. The mainstream intelligentsia was a newer group of musicologists who believed in embracing traditional values while promoting artistic freedom. Despite carrying the tenets of professional autonomy, the mainstream intelligentsia opposed the Old Bolsheviks by supporting artistic liberty. The last group of musicologists incorporated the Russian avant-garde. They believed music should be innovative, experimental, and challenge traditional musical styles and structure. Russian artists such as Vladimir Mayakovsky and Vsevolod Meyerhold specifically wanted to institute this radical program of change by excluding all the former and competing visions of culture. Avant-garde music often avoids tonal centers and embraces dissonance, creating a sense of tension and unpredictability that significantly differs from traditional harmony. Despite the emergence of

newer groups of musicologists who were more avant-garde and championed artistic freedom, the older groups of musicologists had more influence because they already adhered to Soviet ideology (Tompkins, 2013).

During the Cold War, the United States established organizations and deployed musicians as a form of cultural diplomacy to foster respect, demonstrate cultural superiority, and counteract Russian stereotypes of American society. In the early 1950s, fears of communism fueled censorship and censorship in the United States. For instance, famous singer and activist Paul Robeson was called to testify before House Un-American Activities Committees because of his outspoken leftist political views and alleged ties to communism. In 1956, President Eisenhower initiated a cultural exchange program called the People-to-People Program. This program sponsored American musicians to perform abroad to showcase the diversity and freedom inherent in American culture. The program encouraged open communication between the participants so that they could share ideas without government control or interference (Eisenhower Presidential Library, n.d.). By doing so, the program aimed to foster mutual understanding and appreciation for diverse perspectives. With this in mind, the US was very selective in the type of artists sent abroad; they wanted artists who represented American diversity, democratic ideals, and cultural sophistication ("Cultural Diplomacy," n.d.). Classical musicians, jazz performers, and other types of musicians were chosen based on their ability to appeal to foreign audiences, as the goal was not only artistic excellence but, more importantly, ideological messaging. Jazz was specifically chosen for its abilities to appeal to foreign audiences because it represents American values of creativity, improvisation, and individual expression; it also blends different musical traditions that resonated with diverse audiences ("Cultural Diplomacy," n.d.).

In addition to Eisenhower's program, the US State Department created the Cultural Presentations program, where thousands of American musicians traveled internationally, performing music of different styles—classical, Rock 'n' Roll, folk, and jazz—to promote and enhance the prestige of American culture (EPOCH, 2024). One example is the performing arts exchanges, such as jazz musicians' global tours sponsored by the United States. By exposing the international audience to American jazz music, the United States attempts to challenge stereotypical views of the "socially segregated" society since jazz music is a powerful form of expression and reflection of the Black Americans' experience (Aldrich, 2015). Similarly, the Soviet Union and China also sent artists abroad. These concerts offered a different perspective of United States culture to the audiences—one that exemplified the improving racial

relations, excellent musicianship, and generosity toward other people (EPOCH, 2024). Through international tours and media, American music diplomacy created subtle music, social, and political relationships on a global scale.

In addition to the performers who represented American diversity abroad, the composers also engaged in diplomatic initiatives. American composers Aaron Copland, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington went on international tours as a part of the US State Department's efforts to promote cultural exchange abroad ("When Aaron Copland," n.d.). In 1958, the US-USSR Composers' Exchange program sent a group of composers including Ulysses Kay, Roy Harris, and Peter Mennin to the Soviet Union; a year later, Soviet composers such as Dmitri Shostakovich and Dmitri Kabalevsky visited the US in a reciprocal exchange (Ansari, 2014). This program allowed American composers to discuss the relationship between music, style, politics, and national issues. American individualism, the strong emphasis on personal expression and uniqueness of musicians' styles, has always been crucial in American music. Throughout the program, American composers further emphasized diversity as a positive outcome of American individualism, showcasing a divergence from traditional styles.

The performances were well-received, fostering a global admiration for American creativity and openness. The American National Theatre and Academy collaborated with the State Department to send more musicians and artists around the world to showcase American culture as a form of diplomacy (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). This spread of American music countered some Soviet propaganda in newspapers, radios, and televisions, focused on anti-Western and anti-capitalist stories. In addition, the cultural presentation program also facilitated cultural exchange and fostered understanding between the United States and other countries, even those with ideological differences. The program demonstrates the diversity of American culture by featuring a diverse range of artists of different genres, such as musicians, actors, and dancers. Importantly, the role of jazz particularly countered the perception that the US is rigidly segregated as it featured mostly African American artists and its relatively free-flowing nature (Birdland Jazz Club, 2018). Jazz music was seen as a demonstration of American ingenuity and racial equality. In the long term, the cultural presentation program not only countered the Soviet system but also its global presence influenced international art and music.

On the other hand, despite the diversity and integration of races the US presented to the world, segregation remained an issue internally. In the 1950s and 1960s, the national trends significantly increased toward more segregation

and resistance to desegregation. In addition to the entrenched segregation from Jim Crow Laws, practices like Redlining remained influential despite being made illegal in 1968. Redlining is the practice of denying access to financial services to residents of a specific neighborhood, particularly those with racial and ethnic minorities (Legal Information Institute, n.d.). This practice deepened the existing racial wealth gap, as Black families were systematically denied financial opportunities. Additionally, Redlining was based on the existing geographical segregation among races, further exacerbating the racial inequalities and segregation in access to resources. Although Redlining was outlawed by the Fair Housing Act of 1968, its long term impact on racial disparities in wealth and housing remains (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015). Another form of racism during this period was the colorblind racism, a contradictory practice that believed ignoring race would lead to a more equitable society (Burke, 2017). By asserting that race is no longer relevant and that everyone has equal opportunities, proponents believe that racism is in the past, and increased attention on racism would only make it worse. However, this “masked” racism and denialism of facing the problem is exacerbating the systematic racism (Burke, 2017). Similar to how the US attempts to present images of equality and diversity abroad, it’s also trying to mask the existing racism internally, exacerbating the real issue. At the same time, the USSR frequently criticized the US’s “commitment to equality”, using domestic problems such as racial segregation and discrimination as evidence of hypocrisy (Schlitz, 2025). The Soviet media and propaganda publicized instances of racial discrimination and violence against African Americans in the US. The Soviet Central often used acts of lynching in response to US criticism of the USSR’s human rights record. They usually focused on the ongoing struggles for civil rights such as the Scottsboro Boys case, when nine African American teenage boys were accused of raping two white women on a train in Alabama (Lynn, 2018).

Internally, the Soviet Union enforced socialist realism in art and music to promote socialist and soviet ideology. Socialist realism is when art forms such as music, sanctioned by the communist state, reflect and promote socialist ideals and Soviet ideology. While it is easier to see in the visual arts, socialist realism also affected music. It can be heard in melodies that reflect traditional Russian folk music and seen in lyrics that depict workers and peasants as heroic figures, emphasizing their dedication, strength, and importance to the socialist state (EMP\_Art, n.d.). Additionally, many artworks often featured idealized portrayals of labor in factories, fields, and construction sites, demonstrating the dignity and nobility of work. One specific example is the concept of the “New Soviet Man”,

who is a muscular and selfless man who contains intellectualism and complex discipline, creating a single united Soviet people and Soviet nation (“What Was the New Soviet Man,” n.d.). Generally, composers were encouraged to make music that celebrated the revolution, the Soviet state, and the working class, albeit more abstractly. The central government especially encouraged patriotic songs, music based on the Russian revolution, and operas depicting socialist heroes. At the same time, the socialist party strictly controlled the type of music created; the head of the Composer’s Union, Andrei Zhdanov—enforced strict rules regarding styles and punished deviations from the approved style. For instance, Zofia Lissa was a communist musicologist who used Marxist principles to analyze musical works. She was a prolific writer whose works were well-known throughout the 1950s (Tompkins, 2013). However, to Americans, Soviet realism was not realistic because it intentionally portrays solely the positive image of the Soviet people when, in fact it propagates reality. Critics argued that socialist realism’s rigid guidelines and focus on promoting state ideology suppressed artistic innovation and individual expression (Schools, 2000).

Although music was used as propaganda to depict the Soviet Union’s societal values positively and to contrast against Western decadence, the popularity of Western music led to a broader appreciation of Western culture within the Soviet Union. One such western music style is Rock’n Roll—its rebellious nature and connection to the western culture gained popularity among the Soviet youth. Another example is Jazz—its improvisational nature and connection to American “diversity” became a symbol of freedom and democracy among the Soviet people. However, just as the Central government censored composers, they also tried to limit access and exposure to Western music. Consequently, a cultural underground developed. To regulate popular culture, the Soviet authorities first promoted official music ensembles, like Vocal Instrument Ensembles, which are state-sponsored groups that performed songs with lyrics aligned with the communist ideological standards. At the same time, the Soviet Union also aimed to restrict access to Western music and culture by controlling the spread of media. Aligned with Marx’s theory on the means of production, the Soviet government had total control over the physical machinery to produce cultural outputs, which in turn were used to propagate ideology (“Russian Music,” n.d.). In the music industry, only musicians who had graduated from a state-run music conservatory were approved to produce music, and only under the strict supervision of the censors. The USSR also tried to counter Western music by supplying equipment such as tape recorders, radios, and Western instruments. However, even with these appropriations, the Soviet people still wanted to and could



listen to and spread Western music through a phenomenon called “Magnitizdat” (O’Connell, n.d.). This is when people listen to poor sound quality tape recordings through illegal methods because of the content of that Western music. Despite the continuous efforts to regulate Western music such as Rock ‘n’ Roll, the authorities’ policies inadvertently highlighted the cultural and technological gap between the USSR and the West.

Following the Death of Stalin in 1953, there was a gradual decline of strict socialist realism, a relaxation of artistic censorship, and a resurgence of diverse musical expressions. These forms of cultural revival reflect the broader political and cultural shift within the Eastern bloc. Although the state still maintained controls over media, composers gained more artistic freedom to explore dissonance and liberal musical qualities (ARTMargins, 2001). In the period after Stalin’s death, the sudden relaxation of strict ideological control allowed Soviet musicians to experiment with different styles. The Soviet officials ensured composers a livelihood and maintained oversight that affirmed government interests. With this combination, the 1950s marked a transitional phase, when composers began to reclaim artistic freedom, setting the stage for the rich musical pluralism of the 1960s (“Russian Music,” n.d.). Internally, in the Soviet Union, not only were the people interested in Western music, but also, the composers had more freedom and diversity over expression, gradually deviating from their original purpose of presenting Soviet music as a symbol of collective unity.

Finally, the Cold War was not only an ideological conflict but also a technological race between the US and the USSR. On the military side, there was the Space Race, where the two superpowers fought for technological superiority, including space exploration (“The Space Race,” n.d.). Technology also helped end the Cold War by enabling Soviet youth to see American culture through media like music and visual arts. At the same time that music offered another lens through which to look at the ideological conflict, the current events also affected the musical trends over time. For example, in the 1970s and 1980s, when the Cold War was ending, people had an increasing interest in rock music, partially driven by the anti-war and rebellious youth sentiments. Similarly, in the 2000s, artists like U2, Cher, and Green Day released music exploring themes of hope, resilience, and disillusionment with the events of terror after the September 11 terrorist attack (Donelan, 2015). Partially driven by the desire for nostalgia and escaping reality, there has recently been a resurgence of 2000s music and fashion trends (Kasinskas, 2024). Thus, the Cold War’s musical legacy extends beyond the historical boundaries, demonstrating music as both a mirror reflecting societal tumult and a bridge con-

necting people through shared emotional experiences.

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