

Title: Shanson: the Soundtrack of Russian Politics
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Abstract:

My talk examines the phenomenon of Russian shanson (the underworld song, from the French chanson) in its cultural context, with special attention paid to the “glamorization” of this musical genre and the consequence of that process. The long-standing popularity of the shanson reflects temporal continuities in Russia’s fascination with criminals in Tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods. I contend that historical circumstances (e.g. sociopolitical developments, populations, and locations) in all three eras created favorable conditions for the sustained fascination with underworld music. The glamorization of this musical genre accounts for its successful and repeated adaptations to changing sociopolitical situations and its resultant status as an integral, influential, and commercially successful component of Russian popular musical culture. Specifically, through the process of glamorization of shanson, a public image of the Russian underworld song has gradually shifted from a low-brow “dirty” musical genre to a socially accepted popular culture phenomenon. Moreover, shanson has become a part of many official commemorative practices in Russia, thereby becoming the soundtrack of Russian official events.