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## II. U.S.-Russian Relations

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# The Alexandrov Ensemble Remembered: One Year Later

by Diane Sare

Jan. 8—“On December 25, 2016, the Tu-154 plane of the Russian Ministry of Defense crashed in the Black Sea. There were 92 people on board, among them 64 artists of the Song and Dance Ensemble of the Defense Ministry named after Alexandrov. No one survived. The artists were flying to the New Year’s concert to be held in the Syrian city of Aleppo.

“The Alexandrov Ensemble had almost 90 years of history and had become one of the brightest symbols of the USSR, and after that of Russia.

“Alexander Alexandrov, a composer and conductor, was also the author of the music for the Russian National Anthem. Although the words of the Russian anthem have changed three times in history, the music is still that written by Alexandrov.”

So began the short speech of Olga Zatsepina, President of the Russian American Cultural Heritage Center, at a concert in Manhattan on January 6 in memory of the Ensemble, and of all those who died in the crash that day.

The concert was the second of two events organized by the Schiller Institute NYC Chorus and, in the case of the concert, co-sponsored by the Foundation for the Re-



EIRNS/Joe Friendly

*Color Guard at the Tear Drop Memorial in Bayonne, N.J.*

vival of Classical Culture. The occasion was the first anniversary of the terrible crash which occurred in the middle of the holidays, and came quickly on the heels of the assassination of Russia’s Ambassador to Turkey, who had been gunned down as he was giving a lecture in an art museum there.

This year, with the recent liberation of Syria from the Islamic State, the sacrifice made by those who perished in the crash has been answered by the “long arc

of justice,” with the potential to free that nation, and hopefully mankind, from the scourge of barbarism and war.

Earlier on that bitterly cold morning of January 6, a wreath-laying ceremony was held at the Tear Drop Memorial in Bayonne, N.J. This towering monument was a gift from the people of Russia to the American people, in memory of those who perished in the attacks of September 11, 2001.

In the memorial ceremony, directed by Captain Donald Haiber of the Bayonne Fire Department, a Color Guard from the New York Police Department and the Bayonne Fire Department Honor Guard presented the flags of the United States and Russia, as the Schiller Institute Chorus sang the Russian and American national anthems. Ray McGovern of the Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) joined the chorus for the anthems, and World War II Veteran Al Korby was seated next to the podium. Deputy Permanent Representatives to the UN of both Russia and Syria were present and spoke from the podium.

In the sub-freezing temperature and blistering wind, the remarks were brief but profound. A transcript follows. Father John Fencik gave the invocation and requested that the chorus learn a Russian liturgical piece for the ceremony next year. Father Fencik, we later learned, is the nephew of a man who translated at the famous meeting of Americans and Soviets on the River Elbe in 1945.

**Father John Fencik:** Oh God of spirits and all flesh, who has conquered Satan and vanquished death, and granted life to your world, Lord give rest to the souls of your faithfully departed servants, the members of the Alexandrov Choir, who lost their lives on Christmas [one year ago]. Give them rest in a peaceful, serene place, from which all pain and sorrow and sighing are absent. As the good and gracious God Who loves mankind, forgive all transgressions committed by them in word or in thought, voluntarily as a human frailty. There is no man living who does not sin. You



Captain Don Haiber, Bayonne Fire Department.

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Father John Fencik

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Petr Iliichev, First Deputy Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations.

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alone are without sin. Your truth is truth for eternity, your word alone reality. For You are the Resurrection, the Life and the Repose for your departed servants, Oh Christ, our God. We rend You glory together, Eternal Father, holy, gracious and life-creating Spirit, always now and ever, and forever. Amen.

In blessed repose grant eternal rest, Oh Lord, to the souls of Your departed servants. Make eternal their memories, *Vechnaya pamyat! Vechnaya pamyat! Vechnaya pamyat!* [Eternal memory!]

**Captain Donald Haiber:** Please welcome Mr. Petr Iliichev, the First Deputy Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the UN.

**First Deputy Representative Petr Iliichev:** Friends, we gather today one year after the tragic

events of 25th December 2016, when we lost the Alexandrov Ensemble, journalists, and humanitarian worker and philanthropist Elizaveta Glinka. We are still mourning the losses, which were terrible and tremendous, and we are grateful to the American who showed solidarity during those trying times. We are thankful to the Schiller Institute, the New York Police Department, and the Fire Department of Bayonne for organizing this event.

Time passes by, but the loss is still felt. But the best way to pay tribute to those courageous men and women who perished that night, is to remember them, and to continue their course.

In Russia, the Alexandrov Ensemble was reconstituted just two months after the tragedy. Now, new performers, new singers, new dancers were found. And they were found not only because of their merits, because of their voices, because of their craftsmanship, but because of their moral qualities, because of their solidarity.

So, by summer, they performed in more than a dozen countries.

The charity foundation that was founded by Elizaveta Glinka is continuing its noble cause, helping people in need, sometimes under very difficult situations. It was decided that a public award named after Elizaveta Glinka will be established, and the first award will be made on the 20th of February, her birthday.

So, let's remember those people who are trying to show solidarity, to show sympathy with people all over the world, especially the people in Syria. And this year, Syria saw some positive changes. The so-called "Islamic State" was defeated, the Syrian parties have started talking to each other—talks in Astana, talks in Geneva continue. Now they are going to have a Congress of National Dialogue in Sochi, trying to bring an end to the civil war in Syria.

And again, the best tribute to those people who perished will be to remember them, may their souls rest in peace. Thank you!

**Captain Haiber:** Thank you. Now, I'd like to ask Deputy Permanent Representative Mounzer Mounzer, from the Syrian Mission to the UN, to speak.

**Deputy Representative Mounzer Mounzer:** Let me say that the disaster of losing the Alexandrov Ensemble, was not only a big national loss to the Russian



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*Mounzer Mounzer, Deputy Permanent Representative of Syria to the United Nations.*

people and to the Russian government. It was, and it is, a big national loss to the Syrian people and to the Syrian government. We all know this ensemble was established about one century ago. All this time, the Alexandrov Ensemble was a partner in all the achievements of the Russia people along its struggle during this time.

We feel regret of course, and we are partners with the Russian people, because this ensemble gave their lives while they were on their way to celebrate with the Syrian people the victory against terrorism.

I will conclude to say, the Syrian people will never forget the Alexandrov Ensemble. We will never forget their sacrifice. They will remain forever living in our souls and in our consciousness, and may their souls rest in peace.

Thank you.

**Captain Haiber:** On behalf of the Bayonne Fire Department and the City of Bayonne, we want to thank everyone and welcome everyone participating today in this ceremony. A year ago today we gave our condolences to the families of the Alexandrov Ensemble and to the people of Russia. Everyone here proves, I believe, that this small remembrance shows our humanity towards one another, and God knows we could use more of that.

Once again, it is fitting we are here at the 9/11 Tear Drop Memorial, since the creator of this monument was the Russian sculptor Zurab Tsereteli. In the darkness after 9/11, this monument helps to bring peace and hope to many people who visit it. We now wish to pay that





*Diane Sare*

EIRNS/Joe Friendly

forward. This small token our sympathy, hopefully, will bring back a touch of hope and light to the Russian people.

On a personal level, I am honored to be here again, as I worked at Ground Zero, and this monument has personal meaning to me. May the peace and hope that I feel when I am here, be conveyed back to the people of Russia, and the families that have suffered this terrible loss. Music has meaning, and this quote from Billy Joel conveyed that better than anything I can say:

“I think music in itself is healing, it’s an explosive expression of humanity. It’s something we are all touched by. No matter what culture we are from, everyone loves music.”

It is at times like that, that we are neither Russians, Syrians, or Americans, but just human beings who feel loss, and genuinely wish peace and happiness towards one another. With a little help from my friend who has tutored me, I’m going to try to convey those thoughts in Russian, so please bear with me:

[Our love and prayers are with you. God bless you.]

Thank you all for coming. Now Diane Sare will say something. She is the director of the Schiller Institute New York City Chorus.

**Diane Sare:** Thank you very much. I would also like to thank the New York Police Department, the Bayonne Fire Department, and all of those who are joined together in the fight to save human beings, as Captain Haiber said, and to protect people against terrorism, and people who responded and gave their lives on Sep-

tember 11.

I am going to read a statement from Col. Richard Black, State Senator of Virginia’s 13th District.

**Statement of Col. Richard Black:** Today, the civilized world stops to give thanks to Almighty God for the Alexandrov Ensemble, its musicians, its dancers, and the journalists and beloved charity worker who perished on a flight to Syria on December 25, 2016.

At a time when many nations engaged in a sinister conspiracy to unleash hideous terror on the peaceful Syrian people, Russia boldly stepped forth, and its armed forces fought heroically alongside Syrian forces. Together, they conquered ISIS and restored peace and safety to a beleaguered people.

Just as the Russian Armed Forces brought security and freedom to millions of Syrians, the Alexandrov Ensemble came to bring precious gifts of civilization, morality and decency to that heroic land.

The Alexandrov Ensemble symbolized Russia’s commitment to preserving civilization from powerful forces of evil. Beautiful strains of classical music still haunt the ruins of Palmyra, recalling Russia’s and Syria’s recapture of the priceless ruins from terrorists sent by foreign powers to ruin, loot, and desecrate the archeological legacy of all mankind.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Russia and to President Vladimir Putin for rescuing Syria from terrorists sent by foreign powers to rape, behead, crucify and degrade every decent human in Syria. I thank you for sending your finest artists—the Alexandrov Ensemble—as a clear demonstration that Russia does not wish to bring war, but rather to bring peace, beauty and God’s blessings upon mankind.

My prayers are with Russia, the Alexandrov Ensemble, and all who fight to defend freedom in Syria.

May God bless you all.

**Captain Haiber:** Thank you Diane. Now we’re going to move the wreath over to the monument. We’d ask everyone to take a flower and place it at the wreath.

Once again, thank you all for coming. And now, as we leave, please feel free to stop by the firehouse and have some coffee and everyone can warm up. Thank you once again, and God bless.

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Observers, choristers, and officials alike expressed their happy realization of the importance of what they



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*Schiller Institute Chorus singing Russian and U.S. national anthems.*

were involved in, through this anniversary commemoration occurring on Russian Orthodox Christmas Eve (Epiphany in the Western Christian calendar).

One commented: “The sense that I had, was that the people who spoke were just so genuine. You see so many of these memorials, and people are just reading a speech, or mumbling into the microphone, but I was crying throughout the whole thing. It was really, really moving to have people from three different nations come together and honor an ensemble that I never experienced live. But it was just the fact that they were [being honored]. We were there as human beings to honor and recognize the role that Beauty plays in the relationship among the world’s people.” Captain Don Haiber, speaking to members of the media present, said “I’ve learned through the Schiller Institute and through the Alexandrov Ensemble that music might be the place where we can all be brought together.”

The unity of intention and of moral effect achieved by the ceremony was not contrived. An uncanny occurrence, over coffee and donuts immediately following the outdoor ceremony, illustrates the deeper, real connection that had long antedated the simple occasion of the memorial. VIPS founder Ray McGovern was a Russia analyst for the CIA from 1963 to 1990. Initially

seeking to warm up the still-freezing group with a joke, he wondered aloud, “Why didn’t my good friend Vladimir Putin tell me this monument was here, and that he came here in 2005 to dedicate it?” He said the Tear Drop Memorial, which he had just discovered that day, was a profound offering of love and respect to the American people.

Captain Haiber also spoke of the significance for Americans of the memorial, which contains the names of all those known to have perished in the September 11 attack. (Terry Strada, founder of 9/11 Families and Victims United in the Struggle Against Terrorism, whose deceased husband Tom Strada’s name is written on the monument, was unable to attend as she had last year, but sent this short message: “Please let them know that as long as their names are always spoken and their stories are kept alive, they will never be forgotten.”)

McGovern then recited in Russian a passage from the poem, “Paying Attention to the Horrors of War,” by Nikolai Nekrasov, which he had used for his talk at the Moscow commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the meeting of Russian and American forces on the Elbe, on April 25, 1945, two weeks before VE day.

He asked the group, “How many Americans know

what the Russians went through at the end of the Second World War? How many know that the Russians lost 27 million people, and the United States lost 500,000? This is not about “numbers,” but the magnitude of what that represents for a population. What, for example, does this mean for Putin, who lost his oldest brother in that war? I lost my older brother from spinal meningitis, and that was very difficult for me. Imagine losing your brother from a war, and then imagine a whole nation of people like that. Therefore, for people to remember, and for people to know—that is the significance of why we were there today.”

McGovern concluded his extempore thoughts by referring to the famous picture of the Americans and Russians meeting at the Elbe River in April of 1945. “That’s the end of the war. That was more significant than Normandy, in a sense,” he said. Father John Fencik, who had been speaking to others about his boyhood in Chicago, added, “You know, my uncle was at Elbe. He was the translator for the American and Russian troops there!”

## The Concert

Later that afternoon, an extraordinary concert was held at Good Shepherd-Faith Presbyterian Church in Manhattan. In the audience were three individuals who had lost immediate family members in the Tu-154 crash. Dr. Zatsepina, whose speech I quoted at the opening of this article, concluded her remarks as follows (excerpted).

**Dr. Olga Zatsepina:** In the list of the passengers who didn’t survive on that tragic day, a year ago, is the name of Anton Gubankov.

His mother, Marianna Viktorovna Proshkina, and his sister, Liza Kaymin-Gubankova, are in the audience with us today. We express our deep condolences for your loss.

We are dedicating this concert, prepared by the Chorus of the Schiller Institute, to the memory of the legendary Alexandrov Ensemble and all people who died on December 25, 2016 in that plane, and to the memory of your son, Anton Gubankov.

Anton Gubankov served as the Director of the newly organized Department of Culture at the Russian Defense Ministry.

Anton was born on January 29, 1965 in Leningrad. His father, Nikolay Gubankov, was a professor of Philosophy in the Theater Academy, and his mother, Mari-

anna Proshkina, is an artist-painter. Anton came from a very famous Russian artistic family of painters who were apprentices in the workshop of Petrov-Vodkin. Their paintings are exhibited in the Russian State Museum today.

Anton Gubankov graduated from the Philology department of Leningrad State University, majoring in the French language. After graduation he worked for three years in Syria, teaching the Russian language in Homs, a city which is completely ruined today.

A true renaissance man, he collected antique books, knew several foreign languages: French, Arabic and English.

Later, at the reception, we learned that another member of the audience had lost his brother on that flight as well.

Following Dr. Zatsepina’s speech, I again read Senator Black’s statement and also read the short message of condolence from Rev. Andrew Ashdown in Britain, an Anglican priest who has traveled to Syria a number of times since the conflict began, and returned to report the truth about the war, in England and elsewhere. His meeting with Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad and his dissent from the official British policy toward Syria, have earned him a barrage of criticism, including from the BBC, but it has not muted his voice.

**Message from Rev. Andrew Ashdown:** I write to convey my sincere condolences on the anniversary of the loss of the Alexandrov Ensemble last year, as they were travelling to bring light and joy to the people of Syria at Christmas 2016. It was a time of new hope following the liberation of the city of Aleppo, which I was privileged to witness first hand, and that hope continues to shine as the terrorists are defeated all over the country, and as the people of Syria begin already to embark upon the rebuilding of their great country. Syrians are a beacon of resilience, faith and determination in the face of so much violence, and Russia has been a great blessing in helping to ensure the survival of the Syrian nation, and the possibility of peace. We thank God for all those who have given their lives in the service of the Syrian people, and especially today, those who through music and culture, celebrate and witness to the life we have in common. May those who died in order to share that vision, rest in peace.

Following these remarks, and knowing that bereaved family members of those who died last Christmas were seated in the audience, the musicians were profoundly moved, and this was evident in their impassioned performance.

The young violinist XinOu David Wei whispered to these family members before he began to play, saying “I hope that Bach will help them to rest in peace.” He performed the Bach Chaconne in D minor to open the program, in resonance with the May 2016 concert, “Prayer for Palmyra: Music Revives Ancient Ruins,” of the Mariinsky Theatre Orchestra, held in the famous ruins of Palmyra, Syria which had been desecrated by ISIS’ acts of terror. Not a whisper was heard as the audience sat enraptured by his playing.

He was followed by soprano Michelle Fuchs, who sang very sweetly a Russian folk song, particularly appreciated by Russian speakers in the audience. She was accompanied by Kimmy Szeto, a very capable pianist, who has a lively commitment to music as part of life. This was his first time working with the Schiller Institute, and he seemed very happy about it.

Bass-baritone Costas Tsourakis, who sang in the Mozart Requiem performances on the fifteenth anniversary of 9/11 in 2016, sang “Lord God of Abraham” from Mendelssohn’s *Elijah*, followed by soprano Indira Mahajan, who sang the Bach/Gounod “Ave Maria.” Both were accompanied by pianist Saffron Chung; again, the performances were very beautifully done, solid and musical, and inspired by the occasion, and inspiring the audience.

The “Recordare” from Mozart’s Requiem, with Indira Mahajan, soprano; Linda Childs, alto; John Sigerson, tenor; Costas Tsourakis, bass-baritone; and Saffron Chung on the piano, was exquisite. The balance was excellent, and each musician seemed to understand and mean what she or he was singing:

Remember, dear Jesus,  
That I am the reason for Thy journey [into this world]:  
Do not cast me away [from Thee] on that day.  
Seeking me, Thou didst sit down weary,



Schiller Institute NYC Chorus

*The quartet, accompanied by Saffron Chung, singing at the One-year Memorial Musical Commemoration, Jan. 6, 2017 in New York City. From left to right: Indira Mahajan, Linda Childs, John Sigerson, and Costas Tsourakis.*

Thou didst redeem me, suffering the death on the  
Cross:  
Let not such toil have been in vain.

Just Judge of vengeance,  
Grant me the gift of pardon  
Before the day of reckoning.

I groan like one condemned:  
My face blushes for my sins:  
Spare a supplicant, O God.

Thou who didst absolve Mary [Magdalene],  
And heard the robber,  
Hast given me hope as well.

My prayers are not worthy:  
But Thou, of Thy goodness, deal generously [with me],  
That I burn not in the everlasting fire.

Give me a place among the sheep,  
And separate me from the goats,  
Setting me on Thy right hand.

The chorus performed two pieces *a capella*, directed by John Sigerson and myself, respectively. The first was “Praise the Name of the Lord” from *All Night Vigil*, by Russian composer Alexander Grechaninov, and William Dawson’s arrangement of “Soon-ah Will Be Done.”

Finally, alto Linda Childs, joined by Margaret

Greenspan on the piano, closed the program with the first and last of Brahms' *Four Serious Songs*. They were powerfully rendered, and the full meaning of their profound words was apparent.

### 1. From Ecclesiastes 3:19-22

For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts;  
even one thing befalleth them:  
as the one dieth, so dieth the other;  
yea, they have all one breath;  
so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast:  
for all is vanity.

All go unto one place;  
all are of the dust,  
and all turn to dust again.

Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward,  
and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth?

Wherefore I perceive that there is nothing better,  
than that a man should rejoice in his own works;  
for that is his portion;  
for who shall bring him  
to see what shall be after him?

### 4. From I Corinthians 13:1-3, 12-13

Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels,  
and have not agape,  
I am become as sounding brass,  
or a tinkling cymbal.

And though I have the gift of prophecy,  
and understand all mysteries,  
and all knowledge;  
and though I have all faith,  
so that I could remove mountains,  
and have not agape,  
I am nothing.

And though I bestow all of my goods to feed the poor,  
and though I give my body to be burned,  
and have not charity,  
it profiteth me nothing. . . .

For now we see through a glass darkly;  
but then face to face;

now I know in part;  
but then shall I know  
even as I am known.

And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three;  
but the greatest of these is love.

After the concert, a lively reception was held in the slightly warmer social hall downstairs. Everyone was invited to sing all three verses of the Russian National Anthem, which was done with gusto. The audience was a wonderful combination of Russians, Chinese-Americans from the Schiller Institute Chorus, and friends of the musicians and chorus.

As Captain Haiber said at the Tear Drop ceremony, Americans seem to be desperately seeking beauty and affirmation of our dignified human nature. After all, although the potential for the United States to enter a new paradigm of peace and prosperity, based on President Trump's stated intent to work with Russia and China, is undeniable, the vicious barrage of pornographic and violent media attacks on that potential, creates fear and uncertainty, and the future of the United States, and the world, is not secure.

Appropriately enough, while we spent the weekend of Orthodox Christmas reflecting on the important legacy of the Alexandrov Ensemble, and the urgent need for the United States to leave the realm of geopolitics forever, the reconstituted Alexandrov Ensemble was in China for several days of glorious, inspiring performances, doing the tour they were to have done a year ago. This concert tour fulfills what Helga Zepp-LaRouche called for in the last paragraph of her message of condolence a year ago:

"There is a New Paradigm in the process of becoming, as exemplified by the integration of the Eurasian Union and the New Silk Road Initiative, establishing a completely new kind of relations among nations. We need a dialogue of the best traditions of each culture for this New Paradigm to grow into a new era of civilization—the knowledge of the best of another culture will lead to a love for it, and therefore supersede xenophobia and hatred with more noble emotions. In this new era, geopolitics will be overcome forever and the dedication to the common aims of mankind will establish a higher level of reason. It is a reason for consolation for all of us, that the tragic death of the victims of the plane crash contribute with their immortality to the building of that better world."