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Russia's Red Army Choir 'happy' with pop approach

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Russia's Red Army Choir wears imposing military uniforms that conjure up Joseph Stalin, and in fact was established in 1939 at the height of the Soviet era to glorify the revolutionary ideal of communism and, later, lift the morale of exhausted troops in World War II. These days Stalin may be turning in his grave as they become well-known for their pop song covers such as Daft Punk's

"Get Lucky" and Adele's "Skyfall".

The choir in full decorated uniforms has always been known for its renditions of classic Russian folk songs and patriotic tunes, and remains an official ensemble of the Ministry of the Interior of the Russian Federation. Its repertoire now also includes such other top-40 fare as Tom Jones' "Sex Bomb", The Beatles' "Hey Jude", Men at Work's "Down Under" and, lately, Pharrell Williams' infectious hit "Happy".

In a Red Army Choir "Happy" music video on YouTube, a traffic cop on a wintery street just can't control his happy feet when he overhears the choir's cover version of the poppy tune as a cellphone ringtone. Two other policemen sing along in their car.

The video shows the choristers wearing their signature tall hats and spotless uniforms, clapping their hands, smiling away and bopping along to the beat. A groovy handsome young fresh-faced singer with trendy dance steps leads the way.

Appearing on YouTube in three versions of varying length, the video has been watched more than 330,000 times. The conductor, Major General Viktor Eliseev, who also "gets down" a bit in the film, says that despite the pop hits, the singers' mission remains the same as when the choir was founded 76 years ago.

"Since the time of Peter the Great there were musicians and orchestras which reinforced the patriotic tunes inside every warrior, to raise their morale so that they would win the battle and defeat the enemy," he said.

"We perform for our soldiers, their commanders and their families to reinforce the feeling that the Motherland really needs them, that we are proud of them, that they are doing their patriotic duty."

Alexei Dmitriev, one of the lead vocalists, said they want "people who are watching and listening to us to understand that we are doing this only for them. It's personally for them, not for the government, not for their bosses, but personally for everyone who is in the hall, or watching us on television. We want to touch every heart."

The Red Army Choir increased their audience when they helped open the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, Russia, last year, and will appear at Papp László Budapest SportAréna on September 19.

The choir may be stepping out a bit these days but they still have some way to go before creating the sort of controversy that compatriots Pussy Riot managed in Sochi.