**Sochi opening ceremony: glimpse of New Russia, echo of the old**

**The opening ceremony of the Sochi Olympics included a technical glitch and many impressive moments. But best of all, it arrived someplace real and emotionally resonant at the end.**

By [Mark Sappenfield](http://www.csmonitor.com/About/Staff/Mark-Sappenfield), Staff writer / February 7, 2014

Russian President Vladimir Putin has said he hopes that the Sochi Olympics will show the world that his country has shaken off the shackles of a narrow past to embrace a boundless future. Friday’s opening ceremony provided support for his optimism but also, at its heart, suggested that Russia is still sorting through its complicated legacy.

The event held Friday night here to begin the 22nd Olympic Winter Games had something for everyone.

It was, for long stretches, an ambitious interpretation of what an opening ceremony "should be," from the idealized window into a host nation's past to the waifish child as a pseudo-narrator to a Cirque du Soleil carnival of spectacular floating and glowing things.

It was, at other times, fuel for the folks at the "Sochi Problems" Twitter feed when the fifth of five floating, glowing snowflakes failed to transform into an Olympic ring during the signature opening sequence. One could almost hear Mr. Putin's palm slapping his forehead.

Yet, as the performance built, there at last came moments of true insight into the nation's soul, when all the artistry was less about dropping jaws and more about conveying something real and poignant. And, tellingly, that was the Soviet portion of the program. In the end, a journalist might say that the opening ceremony buried the lead.

By choosing a programmatic structure – following Russian history in a strictly chronological timeline – the Sochi opening ceremony missed an opportunity to be more than just another fabulous light show.

We saw the founders of Russia, who looked a lot like the cast of "300." We saw a visually stunning, glowing, floating troika pulling the sun. We saw a "festival" of floating boyars and men bouncing around on giant inflatable sprinkled doughnuts (well, that’s what it looked like) to celebrate the Russian rite of spring. We even saw an homage to Leo Tolstoy's "War and Peace" that brought the Bolshoi to the Black Sea for at least an evening.

But in the end, what did it amount to? They seemed things designed to awe and to impress, not an expression of the yearning of the Russian spirit, whatever that might be.

Then came the Russian Revolution, and we began to get a glimpse.

If Putin is indeed correct and his country is emerging into a New Russia, then it is doing so precisely because it is evolving out of its Soviet past. In London, the opening sequence of the opening ceremony gave the world a glimpse of the post-imperial world, when a former world superpower looked back on its legacy and accepted it, both good and bad. *That* is the New Britain, and director Danny Boyle hit the world over the head with it from the start.

Had the directors here made a similarly bold move, it could have been an artistic confirmation of Putin's statements. Instead, the world was made to wait 90 minutes to get to the raw heart of modern Russia – and that fact bespeaks a nation still a bit tentative as it processes its past.

That's understandable. There's a lot to process, and when the ceremony attempted to do it, it was engrossing stuff.

The communist order swept in by the Russian Revolution was all cacophonous noise – a visceral, throbbing beat that was at once fearsome and intoxicating. The elements of industry assembled and broke apart overhead – the grand idea aspiring but constantly failing to amount to something solid. Below, menacing gear-choked machines seemed more suited to grind men under spiked wheels than reap a proletarian utopia. The program notes include a mention of "54 tractor warriors."

Here, at last, was at least the beginnings of an answer to the questions that would seem to loom over a New Russia: Who was Lenin? Who was Stalin? What is the legacy of the Soviet era? Do we embrace it? Do we pretend it never happened?

The answer, it seemed, was none too nostalgic. And yet, coming from that scene of blood-red machines and the coal-black of a massive steam locomotive, followed the most emotionally resonant scene of the entire show. And it was joyous.

There, rising out of the industry of the revolution, was Soviet Moscow. Above floated the ponderous ideals of the state, the hammer and sickle, giant busts of the idealized worker man and woman. Yet underneath, Moscow sparkled.

Fifties-era cars zipped across the stage as Uncle Styopa, a policeman character from a series of Soviet children's poems, safely shepherded pedestrians across the street. And all the artifice melted away. Radiating from the floor of the Olympic stadium was finally something from the heart of Russia itself, a snatch of a poem from childhood remembered, a fleeting scene of stories handed down from mother and grandfathers – not ideal, perhaps, but cherished all the same. This, the ceremony were saying, is who we are.

Out came a swirling circle of baby carriages, and when the women lifted the babies out, it was impossible not to think that they were the Russia of today, born of a complicated time still held dear.

Is this a New Russia? In the last act before the torch was lit, the young girl through whom the story was told released a single red balloon, which floated away before being extinguished – and in that moment, the young girl motif and the floating and the glowing all made sense.

Russia, it seems, is learning to let go. But what comes next? That, apparently, will have to wait for the opening ceremony of the next Russian Olympics.