

Ideological Narratives in Contemporary Russian War Genre Cinema

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A Thesis

in

The Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts (Film and Moving Image Studies)

at Concordia University

Montréal, Québec, Canada

January 2024

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

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ABSTRACT

Ideological Narratives in Contemporary Russian War Genre Cinema

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This thesis titled “Ideological Narratives in Contemporary Russian War Genre Cinema” explores popular commercial films about the Second World War produced between 2018 and 2022. Through analyzing popular culture and media this study aims to build a framework of contemporary Russian war genre cinema as a tool for the promotion of Vladimir Putin’s government’s ideological rhetoric. This thesis will focus on three case studies: war genre films *T-34* [*T-34*] (2019, dir. Alekseï Sidorov), *Zoya* [*Zoia*] (2020, dir. Leonid Plîaskin and Maksim Brius), and *To Paris!* [*Na Parizh!*] (2019, dir. Sergeï Sarkisov). Each case study will be put in conversation with other media, such as music, literature, and television, as well as genres, such as comedy, melodrama, and documentary. Building on the works of Denise J. Youngblood and Nancy Condee, I will explore how these films sponsored by the Russian government through organizations such as the Russian Military and Historical Society, Culture Fund, and state-owned TV channels represent the current imperial and nationalist ideology in the country that has contributed to the military invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The feeling of patriotism manifested through continuous reproduction of the Second World War military history and glorified representation of the Russian characters is capitalized upon in this political context. The goal of this research is to demonstrate how these films restructure the memory of the Second World War into a commercial enterprise that actively contributes to the construction of the new Russian identity and rapid militarization of Russian society prior to and after the invasion of Ukraine.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Masha Salazkina for supervising this project. I am extremely lucky to have been working with such an amazing, inspiring, and supportive supervisor. Writing this thesis has been quite an emotional and personal journey, and I am eternally grateful for all the help I have received.

I would also like to thank my partner Felix Guenette for being with me throughout the whole process.

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Introduction

The Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces officially opened on the 14th of June 2020 in the Odintsovskii district, in the vicinity of Moscow. The construction of the church happened over one and a half years as part of a larger park complex called ‘Patriot’, which includes museums, outdoor activities, and the reconstruction of the Battle of Moscow that took place in 1941. In the wintertime, the square in front of the Cathedral is transformed into a large ice-skating rink. Standing 75 meters tall, the construction, located in the upper part of a cross-shaped park, is green-lead color executed in the traditional Orthodox Christian style, with domes shape modeled from the helmet of Aleksandr Nevskii. The cathedral emulates the ideology of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union through the visual iconographies which symbolize and reference the wars Russia participated in – with the primary emphasis on the Great Patriotic War.¹ The ringing tower is 75 meters high to commemorate the years passed since the end of the war, the stained-glass windows have medals inscribed in them, and the floors and steps of the building are made from military green slates that have the remains of German tanks and rockets molded into them. The icons on the walls, infused with various jewels, depict the Orthodox Christian patrons of the Russian army, along with the paintings of important battles situated below them. The main icon in the Church, the *Image of Edessa* [*Spas Nerukotvornyi*], is painted on the frame of a gun barrel from the 1710s.

Wrapping around the Cathedral is the museum exposition ‘Memory Road’ [*Doroga Pamiatii*], which stretches for 1418 steps, the number of days the Great Patriotic War took place. This interactive exhibition takes one on a trip through the most significant moments of the war and was created with the help of Russian and post-Soviet-bloc citizens, who submitted information about their relatives who served and died in combat. Following the Orthodox tradition, one can even light a digital candle on a touch screen to commemorate a

¹ *Velikaia Otechestvennaia Voina* - the Russian name for the Second World War.

particular person. The other exhibitions also include a re-enactment of the first victory over the German troops that took place in this location, with the environment reconstructed to look like an active battlefield.

One of the recent exhibitions invites people to look at the trophy weapons captured during the Special Military Operation (SMO)², which includes tanks, vehicles, and guns provided by NATO countries and utilized by Ukraine in the conflict. One section of the installation even claims to expose the ideological work that has been done for Ukrainian youth. It includes textbooks, clothing with nationalistic slogans, and most interestingly “unique menus from bars and restaurants.”³ Access to this exhibition is limited to 18+ and is only allowed with a guide in the format of a group excursion.

The Cathedral and the park ‘Patriot’ exist within a temporal ahistorical space that best represents the country’s current ideological condition. The Byzantine style of the building, combined with the military green-lead exterior, attributes to Russian Orthodoxy the tradition of erecting Churches to commemorate battles of the Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War. Being a fully functioning Orthodox church, the Cathedral sanctifies and canonizes the status of war within the public’s consciousness, celebrating the military triumph. The construction, where one quite literally walks over the fallen enemy by stepping on former tank shells and weapons, is a physical manifestation of the imperialist and nationalist ideology which has grown in Russia over the past decade. In this thesis titled “Ideological Narratives in Contemporary Russian War Genre Cinema”, I explore the country’s socio-political state through the analysis of popular commercial films and media that deal with the topic of the Great Patriotic War.

² *Spetsial'naia Voennaia Operatsiia (SVO)*. Russian official title of the invasion in Ukraine which started on February 24th, 2022.

³ “Vystavka Trofeinogo Vooruzheniia, Posviashchennaia SVO” [Exhibition of Captured Weapons Dedicated to the SMO], Park Patriot, last modified March 1, 2024, www.parkpatriot.ru/afisha/vystavka-trofeynogo-vooruzheniya-svo/

Context

In the context of contemporary Russian politics, the memory of the Great Patriotic War and national identity are inherently connected, where Russia is represented at large as the Second World War's sole victim and victor. In his book *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus* Aleksandr Étkind addresses the creation of a new identity in post-Soviet Russia, which required "the adaptation of the Soviet commemorative cult of the Great Patriotic War."⁴ Étkind explores the relationship between memory and its commercial reproduction through media, connecting it to the contemporary politics of Vladimir Putin's government. The memory of the Great Patriotic War functions as a form of ideological control over the population, which is "built on hostile myths that depict Russian memory and identity as radically under threat, and that potentially justify and fuel inter-ethnic violence",⁵ something that has come into reality through the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The glorification and popularization of war in media and commercial cinema, therefore, partakes in the constant manifestation of pride over the past, at the same time creating the image of the superiority of Russia amongst other countries of the post-Soviet bloc.

Methodology

With the war being one of the most prominent genres within Soviet and Russian cinematic space, this topic has been addressed by many local and international scholars. In her book *Russian War Films: On the Cinema Front, 1914-2005* Denise J. Youngblood builds a framework for the development of the war genre in the Russian Empire, Soviet Union, and

⁴ Étkind, Aleksandr, *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, edited by Julie Fedor, Markku Kangaspuro, Jussi Lassila, and Tat'iana Zhurzhenko (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 45, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1651586>.

⁵ Ibid

Russian Federation, presenting an encompassing overview of films, media, and socio-political states of the country. Youngblood explores the films produced during and after the First and Second World Wars, the Civil War, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the Chechen Wars. The historiographic approach of the author situates the films within the relevant socio-political and ideological contexts, at the same time demonstrating the very significance of the genre for both government and population. Youngblood argues that the central idea for the filmmakers behind their depiction of war was "to subvert official history in the guise of art or entertainment", which has resulted in a certain deformation of the image of war amongst the public.⁶ While Youngblood briefly addresses the late Soviet and early Russian periods, when many anti-war films have been produced, the author concludes that with the rise of Vladimir Putin to power, the war cult has begun to develop again, alongside patriotic and nationalist tendencies. As my thesis focuses on the films and media produced during Putin's fourth presidential term, I engage with Youngblood's methodology to demonstrate how the tendencies that the author explores have evolved to contribute to the current militarization and canonization of war in the public imaginary.

The construction of a new national identity through popular culture and cinema plays an essential role in the development of the new rhetoric of nationalism and patriotism in the country. While the roots of nationalism in Russian history go back to the 18th century, finding its clearest articulations in the writings of the Russia Imperial statesman Sergeĭ Uvarov in the mid-nineteenth century, these ideas have been re-engaged in the work of the 20th-century philosopher Ivan Il'in as applied to both Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. A central influence on Vladimir Putin's political positionality, Il'in's ideas were used in the conceptualization of the reunification policy that promoted the reassembly of the former Soviet states, particularly Ukraine and Belarus under the (new) imperial rule of Russia. This

⁶ Denise J. Youngblood, *Russian War Films: On the Cinema Front, 1914-2005* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 3.

process of reunification also promotes an idea of homogeneity of different Slavic nationalities under the all-encompassing notion of Russianness. An example of this could be Vladimir Putin's constant references to the philosopher in his public speeches, and the president's recent publication of "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" [*Ob Istoricheskome Edinstve Russkikh i Ukrainitsev*] in 2021.⁷ My case studies, films and media about The Great Patriotic War, are a clear example of this ideological rhetoric, where the Russian identity of the protagonist is rendered at once as the main reason for the inevitable victory, and yet that identity is presented as being constantly under the threat of destruction.

With a variety of war genre films, TV shows, and documentaries being produced in Russia each year, this thesis will mainly focus on the popular commercial films belonging to the war genre and produced in Russia between 2018 and 2022, partially or entirely funded by government organizations such as the Russian Military Historical Society, Russian Culture Fund, and state-owned TV channels. Through situating these productions in the broad socio-political context of Putin's Russia, my goal here is to demonstrate how the war genre gets adapted to represent an imperialist and nationalist ideology favorable to the state and promote patriotic sentiment among the population. My analysis of the films also explores how this phenomenon reshapes the genre itself: I explore three distinct subgenres – blockbuster, drama, and comedy – to demonstrate how in all these cases the national identity and historical memory of the Great Patriotic War is reconstructed within the current political milieu, drawing connections between the films and the invasion of Ukraine, Slavophilia,⁸ and anti-Western sentiment. This thesis engages three war genre films that are set during or shortly

⁷ Vladimir Putin, "Stat'ia Vladimira Putina "Ob Istoricheskome Edinstve Russkikh i Ukrainitsev" [Vladimir Putin's Article On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians], Kremlin, last modified July 12, 2021, kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181

⁸ Understood through the works of Sergeĭ Uvarov and Ivan Il'in Slavophilia here symbolizes a return to and romanticization of the traditional cultural practices of Czarist and Imperial Russia, at the same rejecting Soviet and Western influence.

after the events of the Great Patriotic War: *T-34 [T-34]* (2019, dir. Alekseï Sidorov), *Zoya [Zoïa]* (2020, dir. Leonid Pliaskin and Maksim Brius), and *To Paris! [Na Parizh!]* (2019, dir. Sergeï Sarkisov) and puts them in conversation with other media, such as music, literature, and television.

Through analyzing popular culture, media, and commercial state-sponsored cinema, my goal is to build a framework that can account for the contemporary canonization of the Great Patriotic War and its function in Russian society. I address the three main case studies from the broad perspectives of religion, gender, and nationalism to showcase how, whether engaging with Soviet sources or rejecting Soviet culture altogether, these films participate in restructuring the memory of the Great Patriotic War to fit within the current political agenda. Analyzing war-blockbuster, war-drama, and war-comedy allows for a broader look at the genre in general, as well as for considerations of other popular productions in the contemporary Russian film scene.

A major methodological approach I employ for assessing the influence and significance of the selected films in this thesis is via my engagement with the public online resources, such as review forums, as well as the promotional material for the films and their circulation on Television. I make frequent use of the online database Kinopoisk (the Russian equivalent of IMDB), as well as the reviews from film critics on online platforms, especially those of Evgeniï Bazhenov and Anton Dolin, on their respective YouTube channels. Through the analysis of the promotional material for the selected films, I demonstrate the relationship between the cinema apparatus and government-owned TV channels. Specifically, I examine First Channel [*Pervyi kanal*] and Russia One [*Rossiiã 1*] as primary platforms for the promotion and circulation of the selected films via the analysis of digitally archived news reels. I argue that the memory of the Great Patriotic War on the one hand functions as a form of entertainment, and on the other hand is mobilized for the current nationalist discourse of

patriotism. Media plays a crucial role in the promotion and distribution of this patriotic sentiment through television broadcasts more generally, or in a targeted way through genre cinema.

Chapter Overview

The first chapter of this thesis, titled *Religious Narratives in War Genre Film*, explores the relationship between war and religion through the analysis of the film *T-34* by Alekseï Sidorov (2019). Using the works of Zoe Katrina Knox, Sarah Oates, and Ellen Propper Mickiewicz, and analyzing the role of the Orthodox Church in contemporary Russian society this chapter will explore how the film employs religious rhetoric to canonize the status of the Great Patriotic War. Presented as a remake of the Soviet war drama *The Lark [Zhavoronok]* (1965, dir. Nikita Kurikhin and Leonid Menaker), the film transforms a tragic humanist narrative into the story of a journey of a Christ-figure by altering its symbolic and visual aspects, such as costumes, make-up, and music, which I will address in my analysis of the film's formal elements.

The second chapter, titled *The Feminization of Soviet Soldier in Russian War Genre Film*, focuses on the questions of gender and specifically the figure of the female soldier. By approaching this topic within a comparative context of Soviet, Hollywood, and Egyptian cinema, I will address how the canonical representation of women in the war genre functions differently across various cultural contexts. Furthermore, using the scholarly works on Soviet cinema by Denise J. Youngblood, Lynne Attwood, and Birgit Beumers I will compare the representation of the war hero Zoïa Kosmodem'ianskaïa in the original Soviet film from 1944, and the contemporary Russian film from 2019, titled *Zoya* (Leonid Pliaskin and Maksim Brius), demonstrating the melodramatic feminization that occurred to the figure of the female soldier within the Russian contemporary film canon.

The third chapter of this thesis, titled *National Identity and Slavophilic Nativism in Russian War Comedy Film*, focuses on the topic of national identity and its representation in Russian contemporary cinema. Understood as rejecting both Soviet and Western influence, its new iteration promotes a return to its ‘traditional’ Slavic imperial roots. The inspiration for this identity comes from the works of Sergeĭ Uvarov and Ivan Il’in, and one of its representations is the figure of an unruly but lovable Slavic man in popular culture, film, and media. To explore this new archetype further, I will be looking at popular comedies as the site of its initial formation, and then further focusing on how this figure translates into the war genre, by using the film *To Paris!* (2019) by Sergeĭ Sarkisov as a case study.

While this thesis analyzes and builds a framework of commercial films about the Great Patriotic War, which are sponsored by the government, its coda gestures at the new contribution to the war film genre, which deals explicitly with contemporary military conflicts, demonstrating a rift in the understanding between the population and the state. Titled *Special Military Cinema*, the coda to this thesis will address the film *Vnuk* [*Vnuk*, 2022] by Timur Garafutdinov and Wagner Group-produced films, offering an overview of a new form of war genre film, that transcends the impact of the government and questions the relationship between it and the public.

Conclusion

In the context of the current invasion of Ukraine and the intensifying totalitarian politics of Vladimir Putin’s government, cinema produced by the state plays an essential role in constructing public opinion and conducting information to the population. With films about the Great Patriotic War being steadily released in theatres, television, and streaming platforms, even during the ongoing military conflict, understanding the manipulation of the public memory of this tragic historical event is inherently connected to understanding the

contemporary militarized state of the country. While the scope of this thesis addresses examples from Russian war genre cinema that focuses on the topic of the Great Patriotic War, the coda of this thesis opens a conversation about the state of the contemporary war genre that engages recent conflicts and demonstrates a shift in the public's perception of the government's role in the political and military life of the country. As such, this thesis aims to offer an initial roadmap to understanding the contemporary socio-political context of Russia through analyzing the cinematic framework in place before the invasion of Ukraine and active military action.

Chapter One:

Religious Narratives in War Genre Film

Introduction

In her study of the evolution of the institution of the Orthodox Church in post-Soviet Russia, Zoe Katrina Knox explores how the connection between religion and one's national identity functions as an essential element to the understanding of patriotism in the contemporary context of Russia. While during the Soviet period, religious expression by and large was banned and legally persecuted as the symbol of the monarchy and bourgeoisie, its status's official revival during the 'glasnost' period in the 1980s has made it an active player in renewing and maintaining Soviet society.⁹ As Knox argues, after the period of 'glasnost' the followers of Orthodox Christianity became younger, and the Church's popularity gradually has even spilled into politics, through nationalistic ideas. Knox particularly focuses on the notion of National Patriots, who have emerged during perestroika, as a part of the resurrected Russian nationalist movement. The ideology of these political groups, while on one hand liberal and capitalist, on the other hand, relied heavily on the Orthodox Church, Slavophilia, and imperialism. These terms are best understood in the context of Sergei Uvarov, a 19th century scholar who, in his work on official nationalism of the Russian empire, established orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality as fundamental elements of the country's

⁹ It is important to note that there has been another significant episode that contributed to the de-stigmatization of the institution of the Church and religion in general. In 1943, in the middle of the Great Patriotic War, Joseph Stalin met with Orthodox priests, removing the long-standing ban on religious expression. This act, however, was not done because of Stalin's particular religious nature, but for the sake of boosting morale and strengthening the position of the government with religious support, during a complex time in the war. The significance of the institution of the Church here was to serve as the support of the Soviet government, granting soldiers not only ideological but spiritual superiority. However, in the post-war period and late Soviet era, despite its restored status, the Church was still considered an activity predominantly for the older part of the population and would not gain popularity until much later.

structure.¹⁰ For National Patriots, who held the imperial Russia as “the ideal model of statehood,”¹¹ the Russian man therefore must be, first and foremost, an Orthodox Christian, Slavic, and be patriotic and subservient to the existing government. Today, Uvarov and his rhetoric have become an essential part of the new ideology of governance, which positions both the country and every Russian as a morally superior entity tasked with eradicating evil in the world as part of Russia’s unique spiritual mission.¹² Orthodox Christianity, then, plays a fundamental role in defining this spirituality and encourages the return to tradition. The National Patriots movement and their ideology here are essential to both understanding the roots of the current antagonization of the West by Putin’s government, but also the ideological subtext of war genre cinema, which uses religious symbolism to project the same idea of the spiritual journey onto the events of the past.

In post-Soviet Russia, the influence of the Church kept growing steadily, with holidays like Easter or Orthodox Christmas being televised on main TV channels to showcase the politicians and presidents attending the sermon. This gesture symbolically connected the person in power with religious tradition, demonstrating not only their ‘piousness’ but also their conservatism. However, the significant changes to the position of the Church did not come until 2012, when the opposition artist group Pussy Riot performed a so-called ‘punk-prayer’ in one of the main cathedrals of the country – The Church of Christ the Savior. The cathedral was detonated in 1931 and was made into a public pool, and later in 1994, the reconstruction began, with the support of the Patriarchate and the government. This

¹⁰ Andrei Zorin, and Marcus C. Levitt, "The Cherished Triad: S. S. Uvarov’s Memorandum of 1832 and the Development of the Doctrine “Orthodoxy—Autocracy—Nationality’,” in *By Fables Alone: Literature and State Ideology in Late-Eighteenth – Early-Nineteenth-Century Russia* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2014), 325-358, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781618116697-013>.

¹¹ Zoe Katrina Knox, *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia After Communism* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2005), 64, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=111372>.

¹² Ibid

architectural object can be considered an ultimate symbol of Orthodox Christianity revival in the country, which is perhaps why it was chosen for this public act of protest. The performance was primarily targeting Vladimir Putin's political figure, as the lyrics were asking the Mother Mary to get rid of him, on the eve of the new Presidential election. The incident, for which the members of the group have all received prison sentences, triggered the creation of a new bill that aimed to protect the Church and religion from desecration and blasphemy. Accepted in 2013, within a year after the incident, the bill presumes everything from fines to imprisonment and has been colloquially named 'the bill of offending the feelings of the believers' [*zakon ob oskorblenii chuvstv veruushchikh*].¹³ And even though the bill presumes to protect any religion, this episode is quite significant in understanding the position of the Orthodox Church within the current political context. After 2013, the institution of Orthodox Church, and Christianity in general, have gained the status of an endangered entity that is legally protected by the government. The bill became a tool for targeting opposition leaders, bloggers, and comedians, and with the intensified traditionalist politics of Vladimir Putin it became yet another tool for selective repressions. The significance of this bill is not only strengthening the position of the church or control of the population but rather invoking a need to protect the traditional values that the Orthodox Church represents. The ideological value of the bill here is to once again position Russia as the bearer of moral values, in opposition to the collective West, which is thought to be on a mission to destroy them. Another example of this would be the bill against the propaganda of homosexuality, which has also been used for selective repressions, and most importantly ideologically signals the importance of traditionalism to the current government. Addressing the position of the Orthodox Church in contemporary Russian cultural sphere, this chapter

¹³ N. Korchenkova, and S. Samohina, "Gosduma priniala zakon ob oskorblenii chuvstv veruushchikh" [Duma Has Passed the Bill for Offending Believers' Feelings], *Kommersant*, June 11, 2013, www.kommersant.ru/doc/2209841

will primarily focus on the analysis of the war-blockbuster film *T-34* [*T-34*, 2019] by Aleksei Sidorov, which is based on the Soviet war drama *The Lark* [*Zhavoronok*] (1965, dir. Nikita Kurikhin and Leonid Menaker). By comparing the Soviet and Russian films, I will argue that *T-34* transforms a tragic humanist narrative into the story of a journey of a Christ-figure, subsequently canonizing the status of the Great Patriotic War and the Russian soldier.

Orthodoxy in Popular Culture

In popular culture and media, the films that deal with religion were particularly popular in the early 2000s, and mostly focused on the individual stories and legends from the Czarist period, finding their most striking manifestation in Pavel Lungin's two internationally celebrated films: *Island* [*Ostrov*, 2006] and *Tsar* [*TSar'*, 2009]. While *Tsar* is a dramatic re-enactment of Ivan Grozny's rule, *Island* is a more modern approach to religion, where the protagonist joins the monastery in the hope for atoning for his past and gaining emotional peace. Another version of such a religious turn in post-Soviet cinema were animated films for children. Compared to some of the other incredibly successful projects, such as the *Three Bogatyrs* [*Tri Bogatyria*, 2004-2021] franchise by Melnitsa Animation studios, these films were of considerably lower artistic quality and despite the extensive promotion of these Orthodox animated films on national television, they never reached popularity with the public. One of the most infamous examples is the animated film *Kids Against the Sorcerers* [*Deti Protiv Volshebnikov*, 2016] by Nikolay Mazurov and Grig Skomorovski, which was sponsored both by the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ministry of Culture. The story positions Russian Orthodox cadets against the warped world of Harry Potter, the book and film series highly popular among young Russian readers. However, here the magicians and witches are represented as an evil force that attempts to corrupt Russian cadets. This

ultimately proves to be unsuccessful, particularly because the cadets are pious believers, and the protagonists return home safely after destroying the school of magic.

The topic of religion has recently re-appeared in the war drama, often focusing on the Orthodox priests during the Second World War. One of the recent examples of such genre collision is the film *Pravednik* (2023) by Sergei Ursuliak, which can be translated as ‘The Righteous Man’. The film follows the story of a Red Army commander whose job is to lead a group of Orthodox Jews from an occupied Byelorussian village. The title of the film refers to the protagonist, who is therefore assigned some form of spiritual superiority, as the one who performs the role of a savior, once again positioning Russia and Russians as having a unique national identity that is based on traditional values that therefore can bring salvation to the rest of the world. In this case, a Russian commander is given the status of a righteous man for helping a group of people from different religions escape the Nazi attack.

There are of course some examples of resistance against the intensification of religion’s role in society and the idea of piousness and traditionalism as fundamental to Russian identity. One of them is the film *Student* [*Uchenik*, 2016] by Kirill Serebrennikov, which is set in a small provincial town and demonstrates the obsession of a high school student with the Bible, which turns him into a violent individual who murders and destroys others’ lives out of his belief in the greater good. However, such films, while being extremely popular at film festivals around the world, rarely received any distribution or promotion within Russia. What is even more significant in this context is that, shortly after the release of the film, Serebrennikov faced continuous persecution by the Russian state for both his artistic and political position, eventually forcing the director to leave the country after the beginning of the war in 2022.¹⁴

¹⁴ “Rezhisser Kirill Serebrennikov Uekhal Iz Rossii” [Director Kirill Serebrennikov Left Russia], *Nastoiashchee Vremia*, March 29, 2022, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/serebrennikov-uehal-iz-rossii/31776560.html>

Television plays a particularly significant role in the promotion of the Orthodox Church in the Russian media space, especially via the TV channel ‘Spas’, which focuses exclusively on religious topics and is owned by the Moscow Patriarchate. It has educational programs and spiritual counseling, and its main goal is to strengthen the position of the Church via the promotion of traditional values. One of the running shows that gets broadcasted during the Victory Day is the documentary series *1418 Steps to Victory* [*1418 Shagov k Pobede*, 2021-]. The docuseries revisits the events and battles of the Great Patriotic War through the perspective of the Orthodox Church and its involvement in the battle. The relationship between religion and the army here is traced through a reimagining of Great Patriotic War events by attributing successes or failures in the battle to religious causes. And while this series deals with the past military history of the country, the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and mass mobilization has given life to new projects. *War Fathers: The Chronicle of Military Servitude* [*Boevye ottsy. Khronika sluzheniia voennogo dukhovenstva*, 2023] by Andrei Afanas'ev aired on TV channel on 9th of May 2023, focusing on Russian soldiers currently participating in combat, and their baptism and religious counseling. The mission of the ‘Special Military Operation’ (SMO)¹⁵ here is positioned as Russian soldiers eradicating evil from the world, which is represented by Western values that control the Ukrainian army and their goals. Once again, the ideological positioning of Russian soldiers as the righteous savior is invoked, this time to justify the invasion of Ukraine and the actions of the military.

While it could be argued that this documentary, and other material from ‘Spas’, is a unique example of political extremism that gets manifested through the religious context, Russian state TV channels, such as the First Channel [*Pervyi kanal*], Russia One [*Rossia 1*] and Russia 24 [*Rossia 24*,] have used Orthodox Christianity symbolism as a form of propaganda for quite some time. All three channels have a similar structure of broadcast and

¹⁵ *Spetsial'naia Voennaia Operatsiia (SVO)*. Official Russian title of the invasion in Ukraine which started on February 24th, 2022.

are differentiated by the public figures who in a certain way represent the said channel, for instance First Channel – Artëm Sheĭnin, Russia One – Vladimir Solov'ëv and Dmitriĭ Kisilëv, and Russia 24 – Alekseĭ Kazakov. Despite the illusion of 'choice' between the news channels and their content, the broadcast on these platforms remains under significant control of the Russian government. For instance, the First Channel receives annual funding from the government, and focuses on news and political talk-shows, the amount of which has significantly intensified in recent years, averaging eleven showings per day. At the same time, Russia One and Russia 24, which also focus primarily on news coverage, are part of the government owned All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company. The financial sponsorship of the channels allows for the control of the political narrative, especially with the absence of any alternative mainstream source of information.¹⁶

The infamous news report about a crucified boy, who was killed and put up on the cross by the 'neo-Nazis in Donbas' aired on the First Channel in 2014. The story soon turned out to be fake, as the witness came forward to deny her testimony; however, the created martyr figure remained an important part of propaganda's agenda for quite some time. The significance of religious symbolism here does not only invoke the feeling of empathy from the population, but also positions the enemy as devoid of any spiritual or moral identity, therefore depicting Russian soldiers in Donbas, or now in Ukraine, as the defenders of the greater good. Another example of this religious conditioning of military action is manifested in referring to the ongoing conflict as the 'Holy War' [*Sviashchennaia Voĭna*], which became quite popular in televised political talk shows. During his performance at the concert for the annexation of the occupied territories in 2022, a former priest and actor Ivan Okhlobystin

¹⁶ The independent TV channel TV Rain (*Dozhd'*), which also focuses on news and political coverage has been part of the broadcasting network between 2010-2014. However, it was disconnected from the network by Russian TV providers after a controversial discussion about the siege of Leningrad and pressure from the government's officials to shut the channel down.

proclaimed that the special military operation name should be changed to the ‘Holy War’, as the mission of the Russian soldiers is to combat global evil. The actor then proceeded to threaten the ‘Old World’, which would be changed soon by Russia. His speech was finished by yelling out the word ‘Goida’, as the call for action.¹⁷ The origins of this call come from Ivan the Terrible’s corps Oprichnina, whose main function was to protect the Tsar’s regime through the use of violence.¹⁸ Okhlobystin’s performance, which refers simultaneously to Orthodox Christianity and sovereignty, while appearing extreme, concisely reflects the current political state of the country that balances the notions of traditionalism and the religious savior complex.

‘Fast and Furious on Tanks’: Production and Distribution

The film *T-34* (2019) by Alekseï Sidorov, which this chapter will analyze, is an example of how the rhetoric of the righteous savior and Russia’s unique spiritual journey gets adapted to the context of the Great Patriotic War through the figure of the protagonist. However, before addressing the narrative and diegesis of the film itself, it is necessary to situate it within the context of discourses central to its marketing and promotion. The film was actively promoted on Russian TV channels, primarily on Russia One, which was one of the main sponsors of the picture. The role of television in the context of the promotion and distribution of cinema in Russia is perhaps the most significant element in understanding the construction of the public’s memory of the Great Patriotic War via contemporary productions. And while the tactics of state-owned channels in the political milieu have been extensively

¹⁷ “Aplodismenty, kotorykh ne bylo” [Applause That Did Not Happen], YouTube, October 4, 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ogcvt7O4pHw

¹⁸ Charles J Halperin, “Contemporary Russian Perceptions of Ivan IV’s Oprichnina,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 18, no. 1 (2017): 95–124.

discussed by scholars such as Tina Burrett,¹⁹ Ellen Mickiewicz,²⁰ and Sarah Oates,²¹ here I would like to address the ideological conditioning that occurs through the promotion and distribution of war-genre cinema, specifically Alekseï Sidorov's *T-34*.

It has been claimed by multiple news outlets that *T-34* became the second most successful national film in Russian cinema history, with the box office being roughly around 3 billion rubles, which is almost five times the budget of the film.²² The distribution of the film, however, was not limited to theatres. Even though it remained at the box office for 25 weeks, the film then gradually migrated to state-owned TV channels where it would either be shown as a part of regular programming, or on special occasions, like Victory Day. Since the year of its release, Russia One has aired *T-34* both in its full and theatrical version every Victory Day, which, being a national holiday, simultaneously increases the film's viewership, and signifies the replacement of canonical Soviet films with the 'new generation' of war genre blockbuster. In addition to this, the film has been distributed by Central Partnership, one of the largest companies in Russia. In 2014 it was acquired by Gazprom Media Holding, which owns 38 TV channels as well as countless online media outlets. The association with this kind of company allows for bigger distribution potential, therefore creating a certain monopoly of what and where is shown both on TV and in theatres.

Nicknamed 'Fast and Furious on Tanks' [*Forsazh na Tankakh*] by media outlets, the film has been actively promoted on television, with a total of 891 promotional videos being

¹⁹ Tina Burrett, *Television and Presidential Power in Putin's Russia* (London [i.e. Abingdon, Oxon]: Routledge, 2011).

²⁰ Ellen Propper Mickiewicz, *Television, Power, and the Public in Russia* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

²¹ Sarah Oates, *Television, Democracy and Elections in Russia* (London: Routledge, 2006), <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=268709>.

²² Yelena Rychkova, "Forsazh na tankakh": "T-34" v prokate zarabotal bol'she 2 mlrd za tri nedeli" [Fast and Furious on Tanks: *T-34* has earned more than 2 billion during three weeks in the box office], *Nakanune.ru*, January 1, 2019, www.nakanune.ru/news/2019/01/21/22530490/

aired across seven state-owned TV channels, 262 of which are shown on one of the main sponsors of the film, Russia One.²³ In her article for RBK Maria Istomina discusses the possible reasons for the success of the film *T-34*, through comparison with box office leader *Three Seconds [Dvizhenie Vverkh]* (2017, dir. Anton Megerdichev) which “are not only based on the quality of the pictures and their promotion on TV, but the economic inflation”.²⁴ The analysis predominantly praises the film, even if the introduction appears to be misleading, as ultimately it is the star producers, young audiences, and calculated promotional campaign that has made the film successful. At the same time in several instances, the film is referred to as an example of ‘patriotic cinema’, which is an interesting combination with the nickname of ‘Fast and Furious on Tanks’.

This dissonance can be explained as an example of the opposition towards the Hollywood blockbuster films usually dominating the box office. The fight against foreign productions began in 2015, with the Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinskiĭ installing a quota, where national productions should be 20% of the active screenings at theatres.²⁵ In media promotional material, Russian cinema is often compared to Hollywood, where the quality of the film depends on how close one could get to the American ‘standard’. The box office gains therefore transform into a symbolic battle space, where the success of a certain film would signify a win. The war genre film fits perfectly into the narrative of combatting Hollywood on the film production scene, therefore signifying a victory over the global West in the arena of entertainment. The constant comparison, where a Russian film would be rendered superior or equal to popular Hollywood pictures, became an essential part of

²³ Maria Istomina, “Pribyl’nyĭ tank: s chem svĭazany vysokie sbory kinokartiny “T-34”” [Profitable Tank: What Is the Cause of *T-34*’s high box office], *RBK*, January 21, 2019, www.rbc.ru/technology_and_media/21/01/2019/5c4087c19a7947e571882e4d

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ “V Rossii ustanovlena kvota na pokaz otechestvennogo kino” [The Quota on National Cinema Has Been Installed in Russia], *Meduza*, October 7, 2015, meduza.io/news/2015/10/07/v-rossii-ustanovlena-kvota-na-pokaz-otechestvennogo-kino

promotion and enhancement of the patriotic feelings amongst audiences. Fictional Russian soldiers defeating a German enemy is paralleled with a national production overcoming Hollywood picture at the box office, creating a sensation of victory over the West. At the same time, the constant vilification of the collective “West”, which forms a fundamental part of all regular news and political talk shows, further contributes to the creation of nationalist sentiment in the public.

While the extensive promotion on television and media outlets explains the patriotic sentiment of *T-34*, and its nationalistic subtext, the religious references can be traced to another sponsor of the film, the production company TriTe, founded and controlled by Nikita Mikhalkov. One of the most influential directors in the Soviet and post-Soviet cinema space and a major government official in the cultural sphere, Mikhalkov has also contributed extensively to the genre of blockbuster and war cinema, with such pictures as *The Barber of Siberia* [*Sibirskii Tŝiriul'nik*, 1998] and *Burnt by the Sun 2* [*Utomlennye Solntsem 2*, 2010], even though both have received many negative reviews from critics. Mikhalkov also has briefly engaged with remake culture, directing the film *12* (2007), a remake of Sydney Lumet’s *12 Angry Men* (1957), this time positioning the story in the context of the Chechen war. And despite the range of genres Mikhalkov works in, one thing remains consistent, the idealization and nostalgia of the pastoral, pre-Soviet Russia.²⁶ “Mikhalkov is uninhibited in his vision of a textual Russia explicitly traditionalist in its political orientation, Orthodox in its belief system, and patriarchal in its sexual order”, argues Condee in her discussion of the filmmaker.²⁷ Indeed, coming from a privileged Soviet intelligentsia family, Mikhailov appropriates imperial glamour and rejection of Soviet order as fundamental aspects of his artistic and political expression.

²⁶ Birgit Beumers, *Nikita Mikhalkov: Between Nostalgia and Nationalism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 64.

²⁷ Nancy Condee, *The Imperial Trace: Recent Russian Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 86.

In recent years Mikhalkov has completely devoted himself to the producer's role in big-budget mainstream cinema, through his company TriTe, particularly focusing on patriotic and national films, often dealing with historical events and classic literature, with extensive financial support from the Russian government. Perhaps one of the most significant examples of it is his film *Viking* [*Viking*, 2016], which was also sponsored by the First TV Channel and focuses on the emergence of Christianity in Kyivan Rus'. Despite extensive promotion on television and claims that the film is based on *Primary Chronicle*, *Viking* turned out to be full of historical inaccuracies, the most prominent of which was the absence of trials of religions, where different belief systems were tested to fit society. *Viking* avoids the mention of other religions and demonstrates pre-conversion pagan Russians as devoid of any human traits, for the most part, covered in dirt and uncivilized. After being baptized, however, the population miraculously gains grace and is happy to worship its new idols.

However, being a sponsor of religious biopics is not the only connection of Mikhalkov to religion and the construction of ideology. His most recent endeavor, a podcast-type of lecture program 'Besogon', which can be loosely translated as 'exorcist', perhaps reveals best the rhetoric behind his sponsorship choices. 'Besogon' mainly exists on YouTube and airs weekly on Mikhalkov's website, dedicated exclusively to his show.²⁸ The style of each episode is mainly Mikhalkov discussing political events, cinema, and the works of pro-Putin ideologists such as Aleksandr Dugin. Perhaps what is most interesting here is the set-up of the show, in which the director sits at his table surrounded by many icons and imperialist memorabilia; in addition to this, the title of the program is written in Old Slavonic. This grotesque representation goes along with Mikhalkov's slavophilic traditionalist political position, as he presents himself as an intellectual messiah that is preaching in a world corrupted by Western values. TriTe, being under the control of Mikhalkov, therefore

²⁸ "BesogonTV: Vse Vypuski" [BesogonTv: All Episodes], BesogonTV, besogontv.ru/videos/

transmits this ideology into the films it sponsors, as most of the pictures produced by the company are historical biopics that strive to enhance the feeling of patriotism amongst audiences. *T-34*, one of the latest products of TriTe's funding, while being primarily a war genre blockbuster, at the same time has a strong religious subtext, representing the protagonist not just a soldier, but a re-iteration of Jesus Christ.

Synopsis

The film *T-34*, released in 2019, was directed by Alekseï Sidorov, who is known for co-creating the cult bandit TV show *Brigada* (2002). Having the support of TriTe and the monopoly of Central Partnership in theatre distribution, *T-34* became the director's latest commercial success gaining a status as the second-largest box office hit in the country. Upon release the film received relatively positive reviews and currently maintains a 6.7 out of 10 on the Kinopoisk website. Such success can be explained through different factors: the positionality of the film as an upbeat blockbuster through the tagline 'Fast and Furious on Tanks', a star cast, particularly through the figure of Aleksandr Petrov, who has been involved in many successful projects such as Fyodor Bondarchuk's *Attraction* [*Pritiazhenie*, 2017], and finally, the timing of the release, which occurred during the New Year's holidays, one of the most profitable periods for cinema theatres.

There exist three versions of the film *T-34* that are currently available to the public: the theatrical release, which runs for two hours and twenty minutes; the extended version, which is three hours long; and finally, the United States DVD version, which is significantly shorter and runs for an hour and fifty minutes. The US version is fully dubbed in English has a different introduction segment: the action begins with the protagonist encountering German soldiers at crossroads. In the Russian theatrical release, there is a brief moment of exposition, which shows the aftermath of the battle and countless bodies of soldiers scattered around and

covered by a thin layer of snow. Another discrepancy is the ending credits: in the US version they roll by regularly, while in the Russian one, on the left side of the screen, the protagonists' post-war future is revealed. While there is no evident reason for such changes and alterations, it is significant that the Russian version chooses to include the lives of the protagonists after the action is finished, while the US one ends the narrative after the final battle. Perhaps one of the explanations could be the value that the US distributor and Russian one put into the narrative of the film. In the former, the value of the film is rooted in its genres of action and blockbuster, therefore there is no particular interest in learning about the fate of the characters later, as gratification from their presence in the action segment has been already achieved. In the latter, there is a more personal and emotional connection built to the characters, based both on the memory of the Great Patriotic War and active promotion of it in the media, as a part of the nation's collective history.

Regardless of these differences, the plot of the film remains the same through different versions: in winter 1941, a young soldier Nikolaï Ivushkin (Aleksandr Petrov) becomes a commander of the tank team that is supposed to delay the advance of German soldiers. During the ambush, Ivushkin encounters an equally skilled German commander, Klaus Jager (Vinzenc Kiefer), and two have a brief tank stand-off. After the end of the battle, Ivushkin and his surviving comrades end up being captured by the Nazis. The action of the film then skips several years forward: Ivushkin is now a prisoner at a concentration camp, where he once again encounters Jager, who assigns him the task of fixing the captured Soviet tank. The film creates a rivalry between the two soldiers. Both being extremely skilled in tank operations, seem to be more interested in defeating the other, rather than winning the war. Building his new team, and rescuing a Russian translator Anna (Irina Starshenbaum), Ivushkin escapes the camp on a tank. After a daylong chase, Jager and Ivushkin encounter one another in a final stand-off, where the Russian soldier ultimately defeats his opponent. The credits start to roll,

and the viewer finds out that Ivushkin and Anna survived the war, and happily come home to build a family.

Despite the praise on state-owned TV channels, the film has been extensively criticized for the historical inaccuracies or bizarre representation of the labor camp as a sterile and clean environment, where prisoners have freedom of mobility. In particular film-critic Evgeniĭ Bazhenov, popular on YouTube for his focus on commercial Russian cinema, brings out historical inaccuracies associated with the time and place of action, pointing out the artificial aspect of the representation of violence.²⁹ The depiction of the rival relationship between Jager and Ivushkin was also problematized by both critics and viewers on online forums, as many argue that their relationship as equals or even friendly rivals is not appropriate in the context of war and occupation that the story is set in.³⁰

Story Origins

The inspiration for the narrative of *T-34* can be traced to two instances, primarily the heroic act of the Soviet pilot Mikhail Deviatayev, who along with other pilots hijacked a German plane and escaped from a concentration camp in 1945. This event has also been recently made into a separate film *V2. Escape From Hell* [Deviatayev, 2021] by Timur Bekmambetov and Sergei Trofimov. The other and perhaps more influential source is the Soviet war genre film *The Lark* (1965) by Nikita Kurikhin and Leonid Menaker, which follows the story of Soviet soldiers escaping a German labor camp by hijacking a tank during a round of training. *T-34* is by and large considered a remake, or as one of the articles about

²⁹ BadComedian, “T-34 (Prizhazhenie Natsistov)” [T-34 (Attraction of Nazis)], Youtube, May 9, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BKQlqjBDF8Q&t=61s&ab_channel=BadComedian

³⁰ Mikhail Cherepanov, “Fil’m «T-34»: poleznaia istoricheskaia fantastika, osnovannaia na real’nykh sobytiakh” [Film *T-34*: Useful Historical Fiction, Based on Real Events], *Realnoe Vremya*, January 10, 2019, realnoevremya.ru/articles/125446-film-t-34-recenziya-ot-mihaila-cherepanova

the two refers to it, a ‘remix’ of the Soviet picture, as it follows the same plot, yet with certain ideological and narrative changes.³¹

The two significant differences between *The Lark* and *T-34* are the pacing and ending of the film. *The Lark*’s escape narrative takes place over a much shorter period, around two hours, and ultimately all of the Soviet characters get caught and executed by the Nazis. The film focuses predominantly on the desperate and hopeless feeling of being at war, where the soldiers, despite their heroic acts, are ultimately helpless in the middle of the enemy’s territory. Alternatively, *T-34* focuses on the success and invincibility of the protagonists, positioning them more as characters in a videogame, rather than exhausted yet determined soldiers.

The key to understanding the ideological differences in the portrayal of the same story is through looking at the positioning of German soldiers in relation to Soviet prisoners both in the original and the remake of the film. In *The Lark* the German generals are represented as void of any human emotion or empathy; they use Soviet soldiers as live targets, forcing them to drive tanks while simultaneously attacking them to test the capabilities of their weapons or the strength of their armor. Even at the end of the film, when the protagonist Ivan (Viacheslav Gurenkov) jumps out of the tank to save a child stranded in the way of his moving vehicle, one of the German soldiers sees an opportunity and shoots him, proceeding to laugh about it to the others. This grotesque representation, characteristic of other Soviet war genre films, here functions to demonstrate the inhuman nature of the enemy, contrasting it with the selfless Soviet soldiers. The concentration camp itself is represented as cruel and violent, particularly through the expositional sequence earlier in the film, where two men are hanged as a ‘lesson’ to the other prisoners. At the same time, Germans are represented as helpless and weak

³¹ “Kino o T-34 – remiks sovetsskogo fil’ma “Zhavoronok” [Film about Tank T-34 - the Remix of the Soviet Film The Lark], *AbsolutTV.Ru*, July 15, 2019, absoluttv.ru/13169-kino-o-t-34-remiks-sovetsskogo-filma-zhavoronok.html

without their weapons or the support of their army. When the Soviet escapees drive into a nearby town in the enemy's territory and go into a bar, the Nazi soldiers and German citizens freeze in fear of seeing a Soviet tank and armed soldiers. Rather than providing any resistance they scatter and give up their goods for the enemy. This, however, is not done to demonstrate the ultimate superiority of Soviet troops. Rather it shows that Nazis, when stripped of their privileged position, are ideologically weak and cannot provide any resistance, while the Soviet soldiers, despite understanding their dire situation, remain strong-willed and united.

The relationship between Ivan and the German general, also borrowed and changed by the authors of *T-34*, is far from the remake's friendly rivalry. As much as the general admires Ivan's skill in manipulating the tank, he is primarily interested in him as a tool, only keeping him alive because he is useful to the task at hand. He manipulates Ivan by showing the soldier the hanging of prisoners, and antagonizes him in front of the crew, presenting Ivan as the German's pawn. Ultimately the manipulation does not work; however, the significance of such details demonstrates the Soviet soldiers as trapped, yet still keeping their pride and dignity, rather than as all-empowered beings that are respected and feared by the enemy. Of course, one cannot deny a certain dramatic element to *The Lark*, specifically Ivan's death scene, which shows the complete inhumanity of the German soldiers. While *The Lark* integrates the notion of martyrdom, it does not deprive the characters of human emotions and flaws, demonstrating their gradual development into a team. *T-34*, while also employing the archetype of the martyr, does not allow its protagonist to appear weak; rather it presents the Russian soldiers as invincible and victorious, no matter the circumstances.

On the contrary, in *T-34* German soldiers are depicted as essentially helpless and irrational, always making contradicting decisions when facing Russian soldiers. The German soldiers in the film are for the most part incompetent and forgetful; however, the intention behind such representation is not done for the comedic effect. Rather, this contrast

demonstrates that the Nazis are a priori less intelligent or skillful than the overpowering Russian team. For instance, guards at the concentration camp simply overlook the weapons in the tank during their inspection, which allows Russian soldiers to hide them and escape on the tank in the plain sight, while in *The Lark* the characters create a disguise with smoke, leading the guards to believe they are dead or wounded, which gives them a chance to escape.

The rules and setting of the concentration camp in *T-34* are rather represented as pleasant, where the prisoners generally get treated with respect and are allowed to move freely within the camp and outside. The enemy is not given any particular value, as they resemble B-movie villains who stumble upon each other in an attempt to catch Russian soldiers. Ivushkin and his team are represented as invincible and almighty, as they navigate the camp and repair the tank without any supervision. Evgeniï Bazhenov, in his review, points out the bizarre historical inaccuracies associated with the position of the prisoners in the camp and the very possibility of the story occurring in the way that it has in the film. He particularly focuses his attention on the character of the translator, as she manages not only to steal the map from Jager's office but leave the camp freely because of a permission slip. The fact that she is the person who speaks German, therefore having some valuable knowledge, and is allowed to move around without any control from the authorities is a shocking mistake that not only appears bizarre but corrupts the atmosphere of the film as a whole.³² The Russian characters in the film are positioned as predisposed for success and victory, as regardless of the circumstances they will always come out on the winning side.

Finally, the fundamental difference between the original film and the remake is the relationship between Ivan and the general and Ivushkin and Jager. *T-34* positions the two as friendly rivals who settle their score in the arena of war, rather than two ideologically instructed soldiers. Their positions could be considered equal, if not for Jager's obsessive

³² BadComedian, "T-34 (Pritiāzhenie Natsistov)" [T-34 (Attraction of Nazis)], YouTube, May 9, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BKQlqjBDF8Q&t=61s&ab_channel=BadComedian

verbal praise of the skills and intellectual capacities of Ivushkin. To him, the Russian tank operator is not a trophy or a tool, but rather a master of the craft that he himself wants to perfect. In the ending scene of the film, after the final battle between Ivushkin and Jager, the two shake hands as the German commander falls from the bridge to his demise. This moment signifies the respect between the two, almost depicting them as two athletes who can return to their respectable teams with no harm done. This bizarre representation appears to be clashing with the very context of the film, where Jager is not simply on the opposing camp, but a part of the army that has destroyed and killed many of Ivushkin's comrades.

This is another aspect that considerably corrupts the atmosphere of the film, as Ivushkin is not represented as a human being, but rather a superhero who excels at everything around him without a second thought. Another alteration that has been made to the characters in the film is the replacement of the French soldier in *The Lark* by the shell-shocked soldier Serafim Ionov (Urii Borisov), who is often clueless about what is going on. The appearance of the French soldier in *The Lark* of course plays into positioning the Soviets as international saviors, where the helpless Frenchman is happy to follow and assist the brave Soviet troops. In *T-34* the status of international saviors is replaced by the all-encompassing superiority of the characters that do not in any way develop into heroes, but from the beginning are portrayed as capable of easily overcoming the enemy. The enemy itself is rather infatuated with Russian soldiers, either complimenting their skill or constantly acknowledging their wit, and in the moment of battle proves to be no rival for the invincible protagonists.

Religious subtexts

The changes made in the remake, however, are most revealing on the ideological level. While *T-34* takes the skeleton of *The Lark's* narrative, it drastically changes the personalities of the characters, creating a dissonance between the borrowed context of the film

and the new action, dialogue, and plot twists. Perhaps the most evident difference between the two is the introduction of the religious element, where the protagonist symbolically turns from an ordinary soldier into the re-iteration of Jesus Christ.

As discussed, Ivushkin is already presented as an all-powerful entity who cannot be defeated either by German soldiers or by the conditions of the concentration camp. However, the allusions to his sanctitude start much earlier in the narrative, during his first encounter with Jager. After his tank is hit, and one of his comrades dies, Ivushkin gets out of the vehicle and proceeds to attack Jager with a gun. The desperate motion, ultimately being unsuccessful, results in Ivushkin getting shot by the German officer and falling to the ground. The screen fades out, with a Church choir singing in the background. This episode signifies the rebirth of Ivushkin, turning him from an average soldier into a Holy figure. His survival is not explained by anything but God's miracle, assigning him, therefore, an essential mission that he must carry out. Indeed, while at the beginning of the film, Ivushkin appears to be just lucky at certain moments and is allowed to be momentarily defeated, after his symbolic death and rebirth he becomes invincible to any of the enemy's attacks. However, in order to achieve this state of grace, Ivushkin would have to go through a certain suffering.

The next time the viewer encounters Ivushkin is in the concentration camp. His appearance has significantly changed, as he transforms from a clean-shaven cadet into a long-haired, bearded man covered in some form of cloak over his head. He refuses to state his name and rank, for which he gets restrained and tortured by the German soldiers. In the montage sequence, Ivushkin is presented as tied to the ropes, with his hands stretched out, as the German soldier proceeds to whip him. The image of the long-haired, extremely thin man, in a crucified pose, invokes an allusion to Jesus Christ and his suffering for the believers' sins. Through Ivushkin, who symbolically represents the collective image of the soldiers in the Great Patriotic War, the film is equating the actions of Soviet troops to those of religious

martyrs, glorifying their participation in the war. The film draws a parallel between Jesus Christ dying for one's sins, and the soldiers giving their life to defend the motherland. Such an allusion positions war in the rank of religion, which then creates a completely different relationship with the topic.

Despite the torture, Ivushkin continues to hold his vow of silence, as for him enduring suffering is a way to atone for the 'sins' he believes he has committed. Being convinced that losing the fight against Jager at the beginning of the story is his fault, Ivushkin remains stoic in the face of violence, until Jager finds a way to manipulate him. When the translator Anna is threatened, the protagonist finally breaks his silence and reveals his identity to Jager. This moment is quite significant in Ivushkin's Christ figure journey, as he is finally capable of granting salvation, and as the story proves later becomes quite successful at it. From this point on, Ivushkin is coded as the prophet figure, where he possesses knowledge that nobody else does. When at the beginning of the film he had to convince the team to work under his command, now they acknowledge his status as leader without any discussion. He is now represented as superior not because of his skill, even if that plays a certain role, but primarily because of his spiritual allegiance. After they escape from the camp, Ivushkin and his team continue to transform, as they swim in the lake, which signifies a symbolic baptism. Now it is not only Ivushkin who is invincible but his comrades as well, as the later action sequences demonstrate their definitive superiority over the German troops. The whole team becomes blessed with supernatural luck, where the opponent miraculously misses the target in every attack. Ivushkin's team succeeds here not because of training, superior weapons, or knowledge, but because they are a priori positioned as more skilled individuals because of their Russian identity. Their acts of heroism are not attributed to their collective effort or endurance; rather they are explained by the divine powers that inhabit and support the characters. Even at the end of the film, Ivushkin shakes Jager's hand, before the latter falls off

a bridge, almost signifying the absolution of the sins committed by the officer. Ivushkin now has moved into the rank of saints, where he is not only invincible but can now pass judgment and repel one's misdoings.

The character of the shell-shocked soldier Serafim Ionov is another iteration of how religious subtext is expressed in the film, starting with the name, which references Seraphim of Sarov, one of the most renowned Russian Orthodox saints, and his coded appearance. His shell-shocked state, along with his shaved head and clueless behavior resembles a so-called archetype of 'blazhennyĭ' and could be translated as blissful. This usually refers to a person who is pious and is blessed by God and can communicate with him. Seraphim is the only character who expresses some form of religious allegiance by constantly praying or installing a stolen icon on the wall of the tank. And while he is the only one who expresses explicit faith, he remains a mere servant, both in the context of religion and in his position under the command of Ivushkin. In the ending credits, Seraphim is shown painting the walls of the Church, now in his priest attire, completing his goal in life. Ivushkin on the other hand, despite his spiritual superiority, appears to be happy with his marriage and mundane life. Seraphim remains a servant of God, while Ivushkin is in control of his own decisions, demonstrating superiority even on the quotidian level. The very significance of the character of Seraphim could most likely be attributed to TriTe involvement in production and their interest in involving spiritual reasoning in the narrative, as in the original *The Lark* there has been no involvement of religion. The stylistic decision of changing the character of the Frenchman to the pious individual indicates a step away from the transnational approach, into a traditionalist and nationalist discourse.

Conclusion

The abundance of special effects in *T-34*, combined with the total invincibility of the characters, surrounds a war-genre narrative by a video-game aesthetic, where characters become mere symbols for the message the film is supposed to carry. Through reviewing the narrative and character changes done by the creators of *T-34* in their recreation of *The Lark*, one can see how the context of war gets adapted to promote the agenda of the contemporary Russian government. The recent growth of imperialist and traditionalist values can be spotted through the Christ-like, all-mighty character of Ivushkin, who is feared and respected by the enemy, even though he is a prisoner himself. The Great Patriotic War in this context acquires a Holy status, and being a soldier is positioned as not simply fulfilling one's civil duty but most importantly a moral obligation, dictated by religious values. The film takes on the concept of a unique spiritual journey, replacing human effort in the Great Patriotic War with providence and God's blessing, at the same time demonstrating the superiority of the Russian person over anyone else.

The mainstream media sphere in Russia has consistently worked to position participation in the war as not only the responsibility of every Russian person as a citizen, but foremost as an Orthodox Christian. One of the latest projects of TV Channel 'Spas' titled *War and Bible* [*Voïna i Bibliiâ*, 2022] after the same-name book by Bishop Nikolaï Serbskiï (Velimirovich) meticulously analyzes through its 16 episodes the relationship between spirituality and war. The documentary series addresses the war in Donbas as the starting point and primarily focuses on the ongoing invasion and its rationalization through Orthodox Christian context. The conflict here is not one between two political entities, but the global forces of 'good' and 'evil', and the involvement of every Russian person in combat becomes necessary. This militarized spirituality, combined with intense propaganda from government

channels, finds its outlet in the fictional cinema, which in the case of *T-34* renders the protagonist an Orthodox superhero.

However, in Russian contemporary cinema space *T-34* by Alekseĭ Sidorov is not a solitary example of the canonization of military conflict through the religious subtext. In the same way, the recently released film *Maria. Save Moscow* [*Mariĭa. Spasti Moskvu*, 2022] by Vera Storozheva focuses on the impact of an Orthodox icon in the defense of Moscow. The protagonist, an atheist KGB agent, gets transformed from a heartless soldier into a believer, through the help of clairvoyant woman, a priest, and the Theotokos of Tikhvin icon. The success in defending Moscow here is attributed exclusively to the plane circling the city with an icon on board, which was permitted and ordered by Stalin – once again re-writing the heroic acts of Soviet soldiers through the prism of religious blessing and providence. In the next chapter, I will further discuss how contemporary Russian war-genre cinema adapts the iconic stories of Soviet film through the tools of special effects and current ideology, using the film *Zoya* [*Zoĭa*, 2020] by Leonid Pliĭaskin and Maksim Brius as a case study.

Chapter Two:

The Feminization of the Soviet Soldier in Russian War Genre Film

Introduction

Traditionally, in both film criticism and in public reception, the war genre film is often associated with the notion of masculinity, foregrounding the figure of a male heroic soldier who is either on the quest to protect his country or risks his life to save others. Beyond this, much of American cinema since the 1970s has also been dedicated to the psychological toll of the war on the young soldiers in Vietnam, thus frequently allowing for a critique of militarized masculinity. At the same time, the figure of the woman in Hollywood and British war cinema has continued to be constrained by the existing archetypes of civilians, either as a homefront worker, helpless victim, refugee, and/or romantic interest for the male lead. In her chapter for the book “Heroism and Gender in War Films,” Rochelle Sara Miller addresses the question of the erasure of female characters and perspective in Hollywood films of the 1940-50s, arguing that the demonstration of the bonded male community on the screen was one of the ways to boost the nation’s morale during its preparations for war.³³ The exclusion of women from the diegesis of the film was associated with getting rid of an emotional element that could signify male vulnerability and therefore corrupt the image of the invincible male community. As a result, women have been isolated from representations of war, remaining in the separate category as nurses or factory workers.³⁴ Rooted in the specific socio-cultural and economic conditions of mid-20th century USA, the role of women in the war genre was tied to propaganda films, either instructing them to remain on the homefront or return to a more

³³ Rochelle Sara Miller, “No Women! Only Brothers,” In: *Heroism and Gender in War Films*, ed. Ritzenhoff, K.A., Kazecki, J. (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), https://doi-org.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/10.1057/9781137360724_5.

³⁴ Ibid

‘traditional’ role upon the end of the conflict. Of course, a significant part of the films produced during the Second World War were so-called ‘women’s pictures’, which also followed archetype stories of missing lovers and fallen women who had to adapt to their position during wartime.

And while an argument can be made that these gender representations can only be relevant for the given historical moment of the past, I want to argue that the representation of women in Anglo-American (and, to some degree, European) mainstream war genre films remain quite limited to the already mentioned archetypes. *Dunkirk* (2017, dir. Christopher Nolan), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998, dir. Steven Spielberg), *Fury* (2014, dir. David Ayer), *1917* (2019, dir. Sam Mendes), and the latest popular installment to the genre *All Quiet on the Western Front* (2022, dir. Edward Berger) focus exclusively on the male experience of the battle, not to mention that they are all directed by male artists. Female characters are either non-existent or appear periodically in the roles of frightened civilians. The exclusion of women characters in these big-budget, mainstream, commercial films in this case is not dependent on the studio system or traditionalist approach; rather it serves as an example of how the canonical representation of the war genre is deeply rooted in the male perspective.

Of course, when talking about war genre films, limiting our discussion exclusively to the Western canon as the only point of cinematic reference dramatically limits the range of possibilities for the historical modes of the representation of gender in this context. For example, Arab cinemas, where the war genre has historically played an equally important role, have taken a different approach. And while the question of gender representation remains a complex issue in this cultural context, in many Arab films, from *Jamila, the Algerian* (1958, dir. Youssef Chahine), which centers on the iconic figure of the Freedom Fighter during the Algerian War of Independence, to *Leila and the Wolves* (1984, dir. Heiny Srour), which deals with role of the women in Palestinian and Lebanese resistance, the

women are represented as an active and essential part of the struggle. Such demonstrations of female empowerment in cinema were crucial for combating the colonialist Western preconception of ‘oppressed women’ in the Middle East.³⁵ In this chapter’s conclusion, I will return to the way their depiction of martyrdom, in particular, may serve as a relevant point of comparison with the (post) Soviet cinematic representational regime of gender within the war genre.

Focusing on the film *Zoya* [*Zoïa*, 2020] by Leonid Pliaskin and Maksim Brius, this chapter is going to demonstrate how the representation of the Soviet war hero Zoïa Kosmodem’ianskaïa and the female protagonist in the war genre film has changed within the contemporary Russian context.³⁶ However, the essential aspect of understanding the current question of gender representation is to look at the case study not from the perspective of Hollywood and the Western canon, but rather from the context of the legacies of Soviet cinema and its representational regime. Therefore, through analyzing the canonical female archetypes within Soviet war genre cinema and their re-interpretation in the contemporary Russian canon, I will argue that the modern iteration of the Soviet female soldier is depicted through dramatic feminization and the substitution of one’s ideological motifs with selfless religious martyrdom.

The Female Hero in Soviet Cinema

Contemporary Russian cinema relies heavily on the cinematic scope of its predecessor – the Soviet film industry. Often, the parallels between the two are drawn by critics to

³⁵ Kamran Rastegar, *Surviving Images: Cinema, War, and Cultural Memory in the Middle East* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015.), 67-93, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199390168.003.0004>.

³⁶ Due to the repetition of the name Zoya as a film title, character, and historical figure, I will refer to each as follows: when addressing the 2020 film I will use the English translation – Zoya; when addressing the character, I will use transliteration of the first name - Zoïa, and when discussing historical figure I will use full transliterated name – Zoïa Kosmodem’ianskaïa or only last name – Kosmodem’ianskaïa interchangeably.

demonstrate the decay in the originality, narrative structure, and characters in new films. Indeed, there exists a certain hierarchical relationship between Soviet and contemporary Russian commercial cinema, where the former often has a nostalgic quality to it, and the latter is considered as a parasitical entity on its legacy - particularly, because of the resurgence of sequels or remakes of Soviet classic comedies by Èl'dar Rîazanov, such as *Irony of Fate* [*Ironiia Sud'by*, 1975] or *Office Romance* [*Sluzhebnyï Roman*, 1977], in the mid 2000s. An attempt to re-invent or modernize the old stories turned out to be quite controversial. Both *Irony of Fate 2* [*Ironiia Sud'by 2*] (2011, dir. Timur Bekmambetov) and *Office Romance: Present Day* [*Sluzhebnyï Roman: Nashe Vremia*] (2007, dir. Sarik Andreasyan), despite large commercial profit, have gained a plethora of negative reviews from critics and audiences.³⁷ The same happened to the remake of the Soviet *Gentlemen of Fortune* [*Dzhentel'meny Udachi*] (1971, dir. Aleksandr Seryï), which came out in 2012 and has been crushed by critics. The main reason for such unpopularity of what Donovan refers to as “domestic-foreign remake”³⁸ is the transformation of lyrical comedy subgenre into the Hollywood-inspired romantic comedy, which disrupts the notion of nostalgia and collective cultural memory associated with Soviet cinema. The uncanny effect of witnessing an original cast, quotes, or references being replayed in a modernized Russian context not only signals to the lack of innovation in popular commercial cinema, but also demonstrates the drastic differences in ideological subtext of these films.

However, the area most affected by adaptations and rebranding is the war genre. Many of the big-budget films that are currently produced in some way rely heavily on Soviet cinema and its classics. Whether the connection is a direct remake, like in the case of *The Dawns Are*

³⁷ Victoria Donovan, “Soviet Comedies for ‘our time’ Cinematic remaking in twenty-first century Russia,” in *Ruptures and Continuities in Soviet/Russian Cinema: Styles, Characters and Genres before and after the Collapse of the USSR*, ed. Birgit Beumers and Eugine Zvonkine (First edition. London: Taylor and Francis, 2017), 24-34, <http://www.myilibrary.com?id=1056455>.

³⁸ Ibid.

Quiet Here [*A Zori Zdes' Tikhie* 1972 & 2015], or a new story inspired by an existing work, like the transformation of 1965 film *The Lark* into *T-34* (2019, dir. Aleksey Sidorov) discussed in the previous chapter. Therefore, the issue of gender representation in Russian war genre cinema and the differences between the present and past cannot be introduced without understanding its representation in both Soviet culture and media. Russian war genre cinema, as it merges Hollywood spectacle elements and Soviet narrative conventions, needs to be discussed primarily from the perspective of Soviet cinema, as it functions as the base, which later gets altered by the addition of special effects and the replacement or adjustment of ideology.

After the October Revolution, cinema became a form of propaganda and at the same time an ideological representation of both the ideal Soviet citizen and the ideal Soviet woman. As David Gillespie argues in his book, “Women’s newly established emancipated status was consciously identified with the causes of social progress and/or political struggle.”³⁹ Therefore, the popular image of the ‘proper’ Soviet woman emphasized the importance of simplicity and ordinariness in the visual element, combating in this way the capitalist tendency of consumerism.⁴⁰ The figure of the woman in cinema, particularly the war genre, is also an ideologically constructed one, often via the party, male guidance, and the general political state of the country. To begin with here, I will discuss the modalities of the representation of women in Soviet war genre cinema, particularly focusing on how the image of the female hero is constructed through the process of ideological interpellation.

What is of particular interest are the films produced during the Great Patriotic War, and the difference in representation in them from Western male-centric one. As Lynne Attwood argues, “The film industry was evacuated to Central Asia, where it was harnessed to

³⁹ David C. Gillespie, *Russian Cinema* (Harlow, England: Longman, 2003), 85.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

the production of tragic but inspiring tales of Soviet resistance. A large number of the protagonists were women and teenage girls”.⁴¹ Based upon the ideological moral standard that women symbolically represented, female protagonists in the war film had two most common archetypes: she could either be a maternal figure, who represents the established Soviet ideology and protects her ‘children’, i.e., the citizens of the country, or she could represent the product of ideology, the child of the Stalinist period, whose determination and moral standards are attributed to her upbringing by the established social order. In both cases, however, the figure of the woman is presented as primarily androgynous, demonstrating that transgressing her traditional feminine nature is the only way to succeed as a soldier and moral example for the rest of the population. The narrative of the films would be centered around the heroic acts of the female protagonist, who is an active participant in the conflict. Often the figures of women would be represented as partisans or guerilla fighters, who would eventually sacrifice their life for the benefit of the country.

The 1944 film *Rainbow [Raduga]* by Mark Donskoi is perhaps the most fitting example of the manifestation of the maternal archetype. The protagonist Olena is a captured partisan who gets tortured and killed by German soldiers, but does not reveal any secrets about the army’s whereabouts. Olena’s allegiance and determination are so strong that even when her newborn child is killed by the German general, she refuses to betray her comrades. The protagonist here is the ideal of the Soviet woman, who is morally and ideologically devoted to her country. By making a sacrifice as a biological mother, she in turn becomes a symbolic mother for the male soldiers and civilians. This film is particularly interesting as it focuses extensively on female characters, while Soviet men are absent or prove to be useless as they are too late to come to the rescue. At the same time, Olena is juxtaposed with the character of the collaborationist Pusya, who is in a relationship with a German soldier for

⁴¹ Lynne Attwood, and Turovskaiâ Maïia. *Red Women on the Silver Screen: Soviet Women and Cinema from the Beginning to the End of the Communist Era* (London: Pandora, 1993), 67.

financial benefit and some form of protection from the villagers, who despise her. Pusya's desire for urban luxurious clothing, stockings, and chocolate is most importantly a betrayal of Communist ideology. Through entering the relationship with the enemy, she also gets corrupted by consumerism and bourgeois values, which Olena rejects even after being subjected to torture. Pusya meets her end at the hands of her husband, who returns with the rest of the partisans in the final act of the film. When Pusya calls out to Kurt, her German lover, her husband responds, "And I thought your last word would be 'mother'" before shooting the woman. This remark once more signifies the differences between the two female characters. Olena, an idealized image of the Soviet woman soldier, constructed to resemble "The Motherland is Calling!" agitprop, remains stoic in her ideology despite torture and the murder of her child, while Pusya with her cowardly nature allows herself to be corrupted by foreign goods and a luxurious lifestyle.

The Soviet film *Zoya* [*Zoiã*, 1944] by Leo Arnshtam employs precisely the second archetype of coming into being as a hero and soldier. The film is structured as a flashback of *Zoiã*'s journey to becoming a national hero through employing heavy symbolism. Being born on the day of Lenin's funeral, she comes into her role as a Komsomol member and later soldier through the Soviet school system, and guidance of the older male figures. Her torture and death at the very end of the film is not a demonstration of her endurance as a human being, but rather as an ideological subject who is only capable of going through these hardships because of her allegiance to the Communist party and homeland. However, this is not the only way women have been represented in the Soviet war genre. Denise J. Youngblood in her study of Russian war genre film briefly explores the notion of homefront films that dealt with romantic relationships, depicting women in more 'traditional' roles.⁴² At the homefront Communist war-time androgyny is replaced by 'proper' romantic ideology,

⁴² Denise J. Youngblood, *Russian War Films: On the Cinema Front, 1914-2005* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 107-142.

where the moral standard of the protagonist was upheld by waiting for one's lover to return from the war. The opposite of that would be a woman who would not wait, and therefore cannot uphold the standards of the Soviet woman. Youngblood particularly uses the film *Wait for Me* [*Zhdi Meniá*, 1943] by Aleksandr Stolper and Boris Ivanov, where the dichotomy of Olena and Pusya is re-imagined in a more traditional setting of family values and morality, between Liza – the loyal wife – and Sonya – the one who finds a new lover to fulfill her financial needs. However, one thing remained static, women would have to endure certain hardships and suffering to either be canonized as a martyr, in the case of *Zoia* and Olena, or be reunited with their loved ones, like in the case of Lisa, who refuses to believe in her husband's death despite everyone telling her otherwise.

In the similar way, the lives of five female volunteer soldiers in *The Dawns Are Quite Here* (1972, dir. Stanislav Rostotskiĭ) become symbols of Soviet resistance against Nazi occupation. Released during the political period of 'stagnation', the film still employs an archetype of a young, determined Komsomol member who is guided and molded into a brave soldier. In this case, the role of the mentor is performed by an older Soviet general, who is telling the story many years after the events have occurred. Throughout the film he acts as a guiding figure, at the same time not overshadowing the impact of the female soldiers. Women themselves, however, are depicted in a more traditional feminine light. While dedicating their life to war, they are still preoccupied and vocal about things like family and children, assuming the temporality of their position as soldiers. Unlike Olena who is willing to sacrifice her newborn child to save the partisans, here one of the characters sneaks out to see her child, almost risking the success of the operation. The figure of the woman in the post-war era complicates the archetypical division of the female subject as either a martyred soldier or a home-front wife, while still demonstrating the ideological stoicism of the protagonists. This, however, will be actively changed in the contemporary remake of *The Dawns Are Quite Here*

(2015, dir. Renat Davlet'iarov) addressed in the next section, which creates an apparent gender division, between active and assertive general, and fragile and weak female recruits.

Melodrama and Female Fate in Contemporary Russian Cinema

In her chapter for the book “Film Studies: Women in Contemporary World Cinema,” Jane Knox-Voina explores the question of gender and sexuality through media of the late 1990s and early 2000s. In her study the scholar focuses on the shifts in representation of women in advertisements, ‘feminine spaces’ (i.e., beauty shops, hair and nail salons), and cinema, exploring the differences between popular culture of the Soviet Union and early post-Soviet Russian society. The sexually repressive culture seen in Soviet cinema, which established certain moral guidelines of behavior, has changed drastically, with the influx of Western products and media.⁴³ The rapid changes in the economy and the influx of the nouvelle-riche, the so-called ‘golden youth’, has given birth to many new archetypes and roles for women to fill in cinema. With the emergence of an urban woman more preoccupied with her looks, career, and financial success, a counter-figure has appeared in the Russian melodrama film and TV space to set up a new moral standard for contemporary audiences and in a certain way combat the commodification of femininity. Here, I would like to bring attention to the archetype of a kind and simple, yet resilient woman, who through enduring certain hardships achieves her traditional feminine happiness in a form of a family.

This archetype made its appearance in Russian melodrama TV shows and simultaneously gained extreme popularity by the early 2000s. The cause for such interest in locally produced shows can be explained by the previous interest in the South American telenovelas that flooded the market in the 1980s and 90s. Local Russian TV shows usually

⁴³ Jane Knox-Voina, “Myth of beauty and eroticism: female icons in recent Russian film, advertising, and popular journals,” in: *Film Studies: Women in Contemporary World Cinema*, ed. Jane Karriker, and Alexandra Heidi (New York: P. Lang, 2002).

follow relatively the same plot: a young woman either from a small town in Ukraine or Russia comes to the Russian big city in an attempt to find a job or fulfill her dream. She is usually betrayed multiple times and is cheated on either by a man or a female rival; however, she remains stoic, and it is her kind and caring nature that allows her to finally achieve the happiness she was hoping to find. These female-led melodramas are usually quite long, reaching over a hundred episodes, and are often produced in collaboration with the TV channel that would later air the said show. One of the most famous examples is *A Milkmaid from Khatsapetovka* [*Doiarka iz Khatsapetovki*] by Anna Gres, a 2006 mini-series which follows a story of a Ukrainian girl from a small town who comes to Moscow, gets robbed, and fails to enroll at the university. She eventually meets a man with whom she can finally settle and build a family after certain turbulence. The series has aired on TV-channel 'Russia', and was extended for two more seasons, directed by Pavel Snisarenko, finally ending in 2011. The reason why these melodramas are quite significant in this context is that they contributed to the creation of a new understanding of female roles in Russian society. While Soviet archetypes showed resilience as part of a moral and ideological standard, here the new end goal is becoming a successful unit of society via marriage.

One of the colloquial expressions, 'female share' (*zhenskaia dolia*), which springs from a poem by Nikolaï Nekrasov about life in a village, symbolizes precisely the notion of a woman being predisposed for endurance and suffering, going through which will allow her to succeed in life.⁴⁴ The archetype of these popular TV melodramas and films therefore adapts the notion of the peasant woman into a modern context, where the Russian woman who takes care of the household in the village setting gets transformed into a naïve young girl who has to battle with an urban setting. The popular understanding of a woman as someone who must carry emotional and physical labor for the benefit of others is not a new concept, as seen

⁴⁴ "Nikolaï Nekrasov - V Polnom Razgare Strada Derevenskaya..." *45-aya Parallel*, 45parallel.net/nikolay_nekrasov/v_polnom_razgare_strada_derevenskaya.html

through the examples of Soviet cinema. However, the modernization of Nekrasov's concept in contemporary Russian context, suggests that now the only successful goal for a woman who suffered is a financially stable marriage. Male characters at the same time exist on the periphery as a form of reward that the woman has to grow and work for to achieve. This, despite, certain empowerment elements that can be found in this type of melodrama, still reinforces the notion of traditionalism, where the woman's existence revolves around finding a husband and settling down. This rhetoric, however, did not stay contained within the borders of the genre of melodrama, and I will further explore how it translated into contemporary Russian war films that center around a female protagonist.

Unlike Soviet war genre cinema, Russian productions rarely focus on the figure of women in their narratives. Female characters are by and large represented as either civilians in need of rescue or side characters that do not attribute any significance to the battle, serving simply as an aid to the male leads. There are several examples of women's stories being told in the current context; however, the representation of femininity and women's effort is drastically different from their Soviet equivalent. Here, I want to take a look at two examples, comparing the synopsis of the films *The Dawns Are Quiet Here*, the original 1972 and 2015 versions. Both films are based on the eponymous novel by Boris Vasil'ev published in 1969 and follow an identical story: a group of five young women under the command of a male general must destroy a strategically important point. However, the plot description for each of them on the website film.ru, an IMDb-type of source which provides trailers and information about films, is quite different. While the comparative analysis of the two films would provide a more expansive view of the differences in gender representation, what I demonstrate here are the changes in the very perception of gender dynamics in the promotional material between the Soviet and contemporary Russian war genre canons. In the case of the Soviet version, the synopsis reads as follows: "These girls dreamed of great love, tenderness, family

warmth - but a cruel war fell to their lot, and they fulfilled their military duty to the end ...”⁴⁵

The writing does not mention the male general, as it rather focuses on the new fate of the female soldiers and the cruelty of the circumstances. The description of the 2015 version projects a different attitude towards the female soldiers, by asking a question: “Can the sergeant major and his fragile recruits prevent Nazi sabotage, and at what cost?”⁴⁶ The emphasis of the remake on the fragility and femininity of the characters demonstrates the difference in the story’s perception. In both films, the general plays a significant role in both narrative and character development; however, in the promotional synopsis of the Soviet film he is omitted, while the Russian remake puts his contribution at the forefront of the story.

The Corridor of Immortality [Korridor Bessmertiiā] (2018, dir. Fëdor Popov) is another war genre film which addresses the topic of women during war time through the figure of a young high school graduate Maria, who, by risking her life, must deliver cargo and ammunition to Leningrad. This is how the synopsis of the film is presented on the same website: “*Corridor of Immortality* is a film about the fate of girls with pigtails and courageous guys against the backdrop of the largest battle of the Second World War, which was the defense of Leningrad.”⁴⁷ The female soldiers here are simply ‘girls with pigtails’, which both infantilizes them, as well as diminishes any of the efforts the characters would put in during the narrative. The male soldiers, on the other hand, are labeled as courageous, which once again creates a division between genders, where women must constantly overcome their ‘fragile’ nature, while men are predisposed to success from the beginning.

⁴⁵ “A Zori Zdes’ Tikhie (1972)” [The Dawns Here Are Quiet... (1972)], Film.ru, www.film.ru/movies/zori-zdes-tihie

⁴⁶ “A Zori Zdes’ Tikhie (2015)” [The Dawns Here Are Quiet... (2015)], Film.ru, www.film.ru/movies/a-zori-zdes-tihie

⁴⁷ “Koridor Bessmertiiā (2018)” [Corridor of Immortality (2018)], Film.ru, www.film.ru/movies/koridor-bessmertiya

Similarly to the romantic interest in melodrama TV shows, here the male soldier's presence in the narrative is enough to be proclaimed courageous, while female characters constantly have to endure certain challenges to achieve recognition. The modernized archetype of a kind and resilient woman who is willing to sacrifice herself for the benefit of the other has transcended from melodrama into the war film, reinforcing the connection between femininity and fragility. The case study of this chapter, the film *Zoya* (2020) represents exactly the collaboration between the genres, as the film about a real-life female hero still maintains the conventions of a low-budget TV show, transforming Zoïa Kosmodem'ianskaïa from a determined soldier into an emotionally unstable, yet kind woman.

Sponsorship and production

The film *Zoya*, directed by Leonid Pliashkin and Maksim Brius, was released in 2020 and quickly received many negative reviews from critics and audiences, despite the efforts of the authors to label the film as historically accurate and based on documents and testimonies of witnesses. It currently has a rating of 4.2 out of 10 on Kinopoisk, and a variety of reviews state that the film is either too political or not political enough in its depiction of the war and the Soviet government's response to it. Many viewers on Kinopoisk, also have pointed out issues with casting for the role of the protagonist, arguing that the lead actress Anastasia Mishina barely resembles the historical figure.⁴⁸ However, the main issues of the film came from its content, particularly the abjectness of the extended torture scenes and the humiliation of a national hero. For instance, in one of the earlier moments of the film, Zoïa is forced to hide behind the trenches while a German soldier urinates on her.

The main sponsor of the film is the Russian Military Historical Society (RMHS), which is currently headed by Vladimir Medinskiï, who used to be a Minister of Culture and

⁴⁸ "Retsenzii" [Reviews], *Kinopoisk*, www.kinopoisk.ru/film/1289029/reviews/ord/rating/

has paid significant attention to the resurgence of government-sponsored war genre cinema, as well as a quota on national productions. This organization was established by Vladimir Putin in 2012 to preserve and popularize the military history of the country.⁴⁹ However, the roots of RMHS trace back to 1907, when the organization was titled the Imperial Russian Military Historical Society and was headed by Czar Nikolaï II. It had relatively the same function concerning the research and preservation of war history to use the information for contemporary political contexts until it was disbanded after the October Revolution. The preservation of war history now primarily focuses on the topic of the Great Patriotic War and assigning it the status of an institutionally protected artifact. During its existence, RMHS has opened over 200 monuments, organized patriotic events across Russia, which had the goal of teaching the importance of the Great Patriotic War, and actively engaged with youth through specialized summer camp programs.⁵⁰ It has also been involved in film funding, which includes the subject of this chapter, *Zoya*, as well as First World War and Great Patriotic War films, both fiction and documentary.⁵¹ While on one hand, RMHS provides a platform for new directors with its generous funding, on the other, it actively contributes to the canonization of war and re-writing of history. The very existence of this fund signals the revival of imperialist tendencies in a cultural context, done through glorifying the military potential of the past and projecting it onto the current political status of the country.

Despite support from the government, the final number at the box office, \$955 334, did not even cover the costs of the film, approximately \$978 000, and while there is no information available on the marketing costs,⁵² the film was actively promoted through

⁴⁹ “RVIS Zadachi” [RMHS Tasks], RVIO, rvio.histrf.ru/activities/tasks

⁵⁰ “RVIO Monumental’naïa propaganda” [RMHS Monumental Promotion], RVIO, <https://rvio.histrf.ru/projects/monumental-promotion>

⁵¹ “RVIO Fil’mi i Knigi” [RHMS Films and Books], RVIO, <https://rvio.histrf.ru/activities/projects/fil-my-i-knigi-rvio>

⁵² “Sbory” [Box Office], Kinopoisk, www.kinopoisk.ru/film/1289029/box/

interviews with the crew and actors.⁵³ The directors, writers, and producers of the film before their feature debut were mostly involved in the creation of low-budget TV shows and films, which for the most part were comedies and detective films that dealt with police structures. What is significant about the production of this film is that Maxim Brius, a co-director of *Zoya*, released a film a year later titled *Hotsunlight* [*Solntsepëk*, 2021], which tells the story of an Afghan war veteran involved in the conflict in Luhansk, which is a part of currently occupied territories of Ukraine. The protagonist, after losing his family, joins the resistance to fight Ukrainian soldiers, and ultimately the day is saved by the Wagner Group private military company.⁵⁴ The film was sponsored by Evgeniï Prigozhin, the former head of this private military company, and reflects the political rhetoric of the current government, where the Russian soldiers act like saviors, while the Ukrainian side destroys their cities and people. However, this is not the only connection the film *Zoya* has to the Wagner Group. In her interview with Popular Politics Ol'ga Romanova, the head of the non-governmental organization Russia Behind Bars, described the process of recruitment of prisoners to the war in Ukraine by Wagner Group.⁵⁵ Female prisoners, as the journalist states, are very limited in their access to the news and information from the outside world, and the only film available to them was *Zoya* (2020) by Leonid Pliashkin and Maksim Brius. As Romanova argues, while for men the option of early release via participation in war is a way of feeling needed, women

⁵³ I. Akimov, “V kinoteatrakh vykhodit fil'm «Zoia» o podvige Zoi Kosmodem'iianskoï” [The Film ‘Zoya’ about the Feat of Zoia Kosmodem'iianskaia Is Being Released in Cinemas], *Gazeta.Ru*, January 27, 2021, www.gazeta.ru/culture/news/2021/01/27/n_15507386.shtml

⁵⁴ The Wagner Group is a Russian private military company established in 2014 by Evgeniï Prigozhin, who has been assassinated in 2023, after his failed attempt at a military coup. The soldiers from the group took part in the conflict in Donbas in 2014 on the side of Russia and have actively participated in the ongoing war in Ukraine, as well as certain conflicts in African countries. Amongst hired soldiers, their recruitment process includes men and women incarcerated in Russian prisons. People who have joined Wagner Group, upon return from the military operation, are granted pardons from their crimes and are released from prison.

⁵⁵ Populiarnaia Politika “Romanova — ob osobom rezhime dlia Naval'nogo i politzakliuchënnnykh v Rossii [Chestnoe slovo” [Romanova - about the Special Regime for Navalny and Political Prisoners in Russia | Honest Word], YouTube, August 7, 2023, www.youtube.com/watch?v=RJ7KW70LyyA

have patriotic feelings of defending the motherland, which encourages them to join the Wagner group.⁵⁶ Of course, it would be bold to claim that solely screening *Zoya* would radically manifest this opinion, as this radical patriotism is by and large influenced by political talk shows; however, it is important to acknowledge how mainstream cinema plays an essential role in mobilizing the population.

What is quite interesting in this context is the genre of the film *Zoya* and the location of its premiere. While the team behind the picture was mostly involved in blockbuster, action, or comedy, it seems like the case study here is resemblant more of festival art cinema, or at least this is what the directors strived to achieve. The film officially premiered during the closing of the festival ‘Window to Europe’, which positions it differently amongst other war genre films, which usually go the mainstream commercial route. Despite its failure, the film’s intention is not to entertain, but rather an awkward attempt of recreating the atmosphere of Kantemir Balagov’s *Beanpole* [*Dylda*, 2019] – which is an example of combating the male-centric representation of the Great Patriotic War. *Zoya* is a unique example of an art film that is at the same time circulated and promoted on the same level as mainstream cinema. The reason for such an approach is the very topic of the film, which does not allow for a blockbuster narrative.

Zoïa Kosmodem’ianskaïa as a Cult Figure

The reason for the significance of the film *Zoya* in the context of this analysis lies not only in the fact that it is one of the few contemporary Russian war genre films that centers a female perspective but also because it depicts the story of one of the most famous heroines of the Great Patriotic War – Zoïa Kosmodem’ianskaïa. During the war Kosmodem’ianskaïa was a member of a partisan group which had the mission of burning down villages and

⁵⁶ Ibid.

infrastructure to delay the advancement of German troops to Moscow in 1941. Captured during one of her missions, she was tortured and then killed by German soldiers in the village of Petrishchevo. She posthumously became a hero and symbol for the endurance of the Soviet troops, earning the Hero of the Soviet Union award, the first woman to receive it.⁵⁷

In 2008, on the eve of the 85th anniversary of Zoïa Kosmodem'ianskaïa's birth, a professor from the University of Tambov – Vladimir D'iachkov has called on the Russian Orthodox Church to canonize Kosmodem'ianskaïa as a saint.⁵⁸ In his address, D'iachkov referred to the woman as a martyr, which is an interesting connection of religion with war. As discussed in the previous chapter, the canonization and sanctification of war is a common trope; however, here it is not done figuratively through the medium of cinema, but through the initiative of a citizen. The main argument against it, of course, is that Kosmodem'ianskaïa was an atheist as a member of Komsomol, and a very avid believer in the Soviet system. However, the very gesture is quite significant in understanding the current perception of the Great Patriotic War, not only as a national tragedy but as a holy entity that needs to be protected, as well as the people who participated in it.

Zoïa Kosmodem'ianskaïa's name and story have become almost a cult element that has been adapted into literature, media, and of course film. Kosmodem'ianskaïa herself became one of the symbols of the Great Patriotic War, with monuments all over the country, and her name in the title of some streets. There are in total three Soviet/Russian films about Zoïa Kosmodem'ianskaïa, one from 1944, one from 2020, and the final one from 2021. All of the films have the title as the name of the heroine, and of course, all focus on her heroic act, even if they approach it from different perspectives. The Soviet film focuses on the life of the

⁵⁷ Maria Tumarkin, "Productive Death: The Necropedagogy of a Young Soviet Hero," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, no. 4 (n.d.): 885–900. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-1382303>.

⁵⁸ "'Zoïa Kosmodem'ianskuiû khotiat kanonizirovat?'" [Do They Want to Canonize Zoïa Kosmodem'ianskaïa?], *Vrn.Kp.Ru*, September 21, 2008, www.vrn.kp.ru/daily/24167.5/379847/

soldier, limiting the torture and death to a minimum; *Zoya* from 2020 focuses almost exclusively on the torture of the heroine, with a brief exposition and inserts from occupied Moscow; *Zoya* from 2021 is perhaps the most original, as it approaches the question from the perspective of an investigative journalist who uncovers the story to then tell it to others and therefore demonstrates how the symbol of Kosmodem'ianskaia became what it is at the current moment.

Fragile femininity

Contemporary Russian war genre cinema by and large remains dependent on Soviet cinema narratives and style, often attempting to merge classic stories with elements of the Hollywood blockbuster. And while the genre can be successful financially at the box office, one thing that often brings critique to these films is the absence of Soviet linguistic elements and atmosphere. *Zoya* (2020) is no exception, although the directors added Joseph Stalin and the word 'comrade', the characters often speak in a more modern Russian or awkwardly written Soviet 'accent'. At the same time, the story of Kosmodem'ianskaia is modernized through the addition of a romantic interest, which not only turns the well-known narrative of heroic sacrifice into one of melodrama, but also emphasizes the fragile, romantic nature of the protagonist.

While it is true that the Soviet version of the film also has a romantic interest present in the narrative, the male character there is rather portrayed as a distraction who stands in the way of Zoia's ideological advancement. The romantic interest in the Soviet film is there to demonstrate the strength of the character, as the protagonist does not allow emotions to corrupt herself, as she is more determined to be a soldier and partisan rather than a wife. Zoia, especially with her short haircut, is an androgynous product of the Stalinist period, an ideal Soviet woman who is willing to give up her life for the country. The Russian version, on the

other hand, pays significant attention to the romantic aspect of the story. The film begins with a dancing sequence during a graduation ball; the camera spins around young people, with Zoïa laughing happily with her partner Zheniā (Mikhail Grishchenko). When the man kisses the protagonist, she quickly becomes flustered at such a show of affection; however, she does not reprimand him for an unnecessary gesture. On the contrary, she gives in to the romance, which is interrupted by their friends bumping into the couple. When the characters begin to jump in a circle in slow motion, the background music transitions into Yuri Levitan's infamous radio broadcast about the beginning of the Great Patriotic War. Zoïa's face fades from a happy smile to a solemn expression, as if she can sense that disaster is coming.

From the first moments of the film, the protagonist is shown as a fragile woman whose motivation to join the cause comes not from ideological conviction, but from a need to follow the path of her lover. When Zoïa finds out Zheniā is about to join the army, she chases after the car that leaves for the front line, stumbling and falling on her way. During their goodbye, the lovers kiss again, and Zheniā departs to the front, only to be declared dead sometime later. From the beginning, the film positions Zoïa as a naïve young woman in love who is trying to stay strong for her lover to comfort him. And while this manner of representation could have been turned around by demonstrating drastic character development from an innocent student into a strong soldier, the film fails to do so, locking Zoïa into a melodramatic stereotype. In her study of changes in Kosmodem'iānskaïa monuments from Soviet times to the present, Adrienne M. Harris concludes that upon the change in political regimes, the hero's physical form in sculpture transformed from an ideologically androgynous symbol of the Soviet regime into an infantilized and feminine image.⁵⁹ And the film discussed here sets this image in motion, changing the cultural memory of Kosmodem'iānskaïa from an individual who

⁵⁹ Adrienne M. Harris, "Memorializations of a martyr and her mutilated bodies: Public monuments to Soviet war hero Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, 1942 to the present," *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 5:1, 73-90, (2012) doi:10.1386/jwcs.5.1.73_1

through ideological education and growth became a national hero into a religious martyr who remains static in her fragile feminine state throughout the film.

In the 2020 version Kosmodem'ianskaia is rendered hyper-feminine; she is weak and hysterical in most scenes she is in, practically unable to demonstrate any resistance on her own. While the men in the film carry out operations, succeed, and create clever disguises and plans, Zoia's significance is in remaining silent and enduring suffering. Either in the training camp, on her first mission, or during the operation during which she gets caught, Zoia appears to be clumsy, helpless, and constantly in a state of distress. Her femininity is also enhanced through a scene of sexual violence where she is thrown down the cellar to a group of German soldiers. The absence of this sequence in the original Soviet film does not signify Soviet censorship or some kind of protection of the hero's figure; rather, it demonstrates the key differences between these ideological representations of Zoia's character. In the 2020 version, she is just a girl who got caught in a horrible situation while trying to follow her dreams. She is not a hero, but a punching bag for the sake of antagonizing the enemy. Her character is that of another Jane Doe in countless TV melodramas where the viewer worries and sympathizes with her difficult role as a woman. Unlike male characters who use their force or wit, Zoia succeeds not through hard work, but through her inhumane endurance of violence, which creates almost a superhero-like figure, except it is limited by the author's conventions of gender.

The film particularly exploits Kosmodem'ianskaia heroic endurance through mobilizing viewer's emotions: the shots of Zoia's mother knitting her gloves for winter are juxtaposed to Zoia being led barefoot through the snow as the method of torture. The depiction of violence here does not lead to anything but the creation of animosity and anger, and then receiving gratification from the brief verbal demonstration of her will at the very end of the film. The film's narrative focuses almost exclusively on the scenes of Zoia's torture,

emphasizing the extent of suffering the protagonist goes through. This sadistic approach to the representation of a female national hero is not only exploitative of real-life events but is reflective of how the coding of female and male martyrs are drastically different in the cinematic space. The protagonist of *T-34* Ivushkin, discussed in the previous chapter, becomes a superior version of himself through enduring torture at the beginning of the film. In Zoïa's case, suffering, which is the central aspect of the narrative, is a foundational part of her posthumous heroic legacy. The film glorifies the protagonist's pain and, through demonstrating her inability to assist during missions, creates value solely in Zoïa's endurance capabilities.

With this disturbing portrayal of the national hero, one may wonder how the film redeems Zoïa's character apart from her final monologue, as visually the film continuously demonstrates her insignificance and incompetence, which clashes with the local audiences' knowledge about historical figure and her acts of bravery. Here, is where the character of the German general Erich Sommer (Wolfgang Cerny) comes into the picture. Sommer provides an opposite to the brute German soldiers who torture and kill their prisoners. Unlike them, he does not believe in physical punishment; rather, he focuses on psychological pressure, which eventually gets him the needed results from Zoïa's comrade. Throughout the film, Sommer is enamored with Zoïa; he praises her unique intellect and skills both in front of her and other soldiers. He forbids torture, explaining it by the statement 'we are all humans here', and when he finds out that Zoïa has been sexually assaulted he breaks down and calls his German soldiers 'crazy fanatics'.

This flattering representation of a German general, while appearing surprising at first, is in fact quite typical for the contemporary Russian war genre film. For instance, Commander Jager in *T-34* (2019, dir. Alekseï Sidorov), addressed in the previous chapter, engages in similar fanatical behavior with his Russian rival Ivushkin. Here Sommer is equally obsessed

with Zoïa's abilities and mind, which he constantly mentions during the interrogation. He despises his country's ideology, but at the same time remains a firm believer in its goodness. And as in *T-34*, he exists solely to protect and uplift the image of the Russian soldier. Even though Zoïa is seemingly incompetent and weak (she is the only one from her group who fails to light up a shack and gets caught) Sommer respects her, even offering her a place in the new world he believes the German army will build. Sommer's obsession with Zoïa is almost romantic, tapping into the stereotype of a dangerous but attractive male romantic interest in the melodrama genre. Luckily, romance does not spark between the two; however, the question of why Sommer is written like this still remains.

One way I would like to answer this question is by suggesting that the character of Sommer functions here is to emphasize Zoïa's remarkable qualities. The directors want to demonstrate that even though they are on opposite sides, Sommer is so impressed with her abilities that he is willing to accept Zoïa in his ranks, thus demonstrating the universal appeal of the Russian (female) character, which cuts across ideological or political divides. The issue with this strategy is that it creates a dissonance with the rest of the film, as Zoïa is never shown actually performing any heroic tasks, except for lecturing her comrade about patriotism and giving a final speech at the gallows. Zoïa here is transformed into a character out of TV melodrama, where she is weak physically and cannot compete with men around her, yet she remains kind and determined through all the suffering and mistreatment that is inflicted upon her. The film positions Zoïa's suffering at the forefront of the narrative, therefore memorializing the national hero as a weak woman who was humiliated, raped, and killed by the Nazis.

This form of representation is not aimed at boosting morale or commemorating the figure of Zoïa Kosmodem'ianskaïa; rather, it creates a dichotomy of them and us, feeding into the rhetoric of Russianness being in danger of destruction. Another quite significant way in

which the character of Zoïa gets uplifted in the film is through the appearance of Joseph Stalin. First, the viewer is introduced to the leader in his office when he is planning the operation of Moscow's defense. Stalin is represented as remorseful about burning down people's houses, being concerned about their well-being, and ultimately agreeing to the plan because of pressure from other government members. Stalin in the film is a kind and thoughtful leader who meets Zoïa during her training and becomes fascinated with the young soldier and her spirit. The film later states that Stalin personally wanted to avenge Zoïa's death and has given a 'secret order' to not take the Germans from the 332nd division as prisoners but to execute them. This positioning of Stalin as a wise and compassionate man signals certain favoritism that is not often common for contemporary Russian war genre cinema, which usually prefers to show Soviet generals and the government as standing in the way of the protagonist's goal. However here the appearance of the dictator does not necessarily signify communist sympathies; rather, it is a continuation of imperial rhetoric where the leader of the country is treated as the most influential paternal figure who cannot be doubted.

Conclusion

The figure of Zoïa Kosmodem'ianskaïa undoubtedly became one of the symbols of the Great Patriotic War and the resistance against the enemy. Her heroic act made her into a martyr figure, however not in the same way as one normally perceives this archetype. In the Western canon, the notion of the martyr is often associated with religious sacrifice, and this is how Zoïa can be interpreted – now, for instance, with the mentioned petition of turning her into a saint. The question of martyrdom, however, is not exclusive to its religious connotation. Often in the context of Arab cinema's depiction of political resistance, for example, the figure of the martyr is the person who is interpellated and constructed as the product of socio-

political context and current ideology. Here in conclusion, I want to briefly compare the creation of Zoïa as a religious martyr through the depiction of sexualized torture with the figure of the martyr in the 1958 Egyptian film *Jamila, the Algerian* by Youssef Chahine. Interestingly, in both these films the depiction of a suffering female character references Joan of Arc: while in the case of *Zoya* the relationship is symbolic, *Jamila* actively borrows the aesthetic of Dryer's 1928 silent film *The Passion of Joan of Arc*.

The film *Jamila, the Algerian*, despite being an Egyptian production, focuses on the story of a young girl Jamila who joins the Algerian national liberation front (FLN) after witnessing the inhumane treatment of her friends by French soldiers. The narrative of the film primarily focuses on the ideological interpellation of Jamila and her role in the operations carried out by FLN. Even though it can be argued that the film demonstrates her ideological and revolutionary activity as by and large guided by men who surround her, Jamila still remains a central element of the narrative, along with other female resistance soldiers. The structure of the film is more resemblant of the Soviet version of *Zoya*, where the scenes of the capture and torture of the protagonist, while being an important part of the narrative, are not positioned as the defining quality of her character. Rather, during the torture sequences, the camera focuses either on the face of the perpetrator, evading the voyeuristic gaze on the suffering body, or on the face of Jamila, demonstrating her stoicism. Instead of explicit details, the viewer is presented with the consequences of the violence carried out by the French soldiers: Jamila's exhausted, weak stature, short hair, and disfigured right hand she can no longer move. The central aspect here is not the very fact of torture or Jamila's endurance capacity, rather it is the circumstances of colonialism one has to operate under, with French forces being in complete control of both executive and judiciary systems. Jamila's martyrdom then is a conscious decision that comes out of specific socio-political context, making her an active subject of resistance rather than a passive object of oppression.

Jamila the young girl must first become *Jamila the resistance fighter* to be caught by the French military and undergo torture. Her death then symbolizes much more than the cruelty of the colonialist regime, but a dedication to the liberation cause, which brings with it grave consequences.

This contrast between ideological and religious martyrdom is essential to understanding why the 2020 film *Zoya* fails to represent the protagonist as a heroic soldier. Rather than positioning Zoïa as politically determined, the film focuses on her femininity and weakness, symbolically turning a national hero into a religious figure. By depriving Zoïa of humane qualities and agency, the film demonstrates achieving bliss through extensive suffering, creating an Orthodox Christian saint archetype. The plot of the film creates an allusion to Christ's temptations, where Zoïa is tortured and finally executed in front of the soldiers and villagers. Even before her final walk to the gallows, Zoïa's feet get washed by one of the villagers, another symbol of religious martyrdom.

Finally, at the end of the film, a musical composition titled 'Zoïa' by Dmitriy Donskoy starts playing; the lyrics describe a 'young girl who walked to the Russian calvary of Golgotha', locking in the association of Zoïa with a Christ figure. The alternative title of the film, *Passion of Zoïa [Strasti po Zoe]*, confirms this interpretation. The female protagonist is no longer a soldier with patriotic dedication, but a pawn in the theological network. In his interview with Russia TV and radio, Maxim Brius states, "In some way, she [Zoïa] can be called a saint, because she died for her faith, for her ideals."⁶⁰ The distinction here is between understanding the figure of Zoïa as a politically determined, ideologically interpolated product of her circumstances and her figure as the result of divine intervention. The latter does not attribute heroism to her actions but rather signifies her superiority and predisposition to success because of her spiritual element. Therefore, the film about the first female hero of

⁶⁰ "V Kostrome startoval prokat fil'ma «Zoïa»" [The Distribution of the Film 'Zoya' Has Started in Kostroma], GTRK, January 29, 2021, gtrk-kostroma.ru/news/v-kostrome-startoval-prokat-filma-zoya/

the Soviet Union becomes a melodramatic remake of *The Passion of Christ* (dir. Mel Gibson, 2004), where the figure of Zoia Kosmodem'ianskaia becomes hysterical and fragile entity whose value can only be understood through the demonstration of her suffering.

Chapter Three:

National Identity and Slavophile Nativism in Russian War Comedy Film

Introduction

Debates of the concept of national cinema frequently underscore the crucial role played by the war genre in constructing historical or contemporary identity through film. Frequently adapting real events into the fictional blockbuster format, where heroic soldiers liberate cities, destroy enemies, and win the war, invoke the sensation of patriotism. This becomes especially effective when situated in the necessary promotional context, creating a symbolic connection between the heroes on the screen and the audiences in the theatre. Continuous discussion and canonization of the Great Patriotic War in Russian media and the facilitation of its cultural memory through popular commercial cinema contributes greatly to the process of merging one's identity with the events and heroes from the past. Part of this process consists in attributing military successes and ultimate victory onto the contemporary context, i.e., constructing one's identity as directly responsible for upholding and repeating the victories of the past in a new socio-cultural milieu. One of the many symbols of the 9th of May, Victory Day in Russia, is a bumper sticker that states, "We can do it again!" (*Mozhem Povtorit'!*), referring to the defeat of the Nazi troops and the success of the Soviet army. This expression, which implies repetition in the future tense, precisely projects the victory of the past onto a radically different present and future. National identity here gains a position of superiority over the global West, via the past victory over Nazi Germany. This understanding of one's national identity as a current iteration of the past historical victory is dependent not only on the war genre films, systematically produced in Russia, but, more broadly, on a new ideological order that is meticulously installed into the population through media.

In this chapter, I am going to explore this new understanding of Russian national identity by first looking at its initial iteration in popular comedies, and then focusing on how this cinematic construction translates into the war genre by using the film *To Paris!* [*Na Parizh!*, 2019] by Sergeĭ Sarkisov as my main case study.

I will start by discussing the scandal that occurred in the national film and media space in September 2014 as a perfect way to contextualize how Russian identity and its representation has been (re)imagined in the mainstream cinema and discussed in public discourses. When the film *Leviathan* [*Leviafan*, 2014] by Andreĭ Zvyagintsev was chosen to represent Russia for that year's 87th Academy Award's Best Foreign Language Film category, the protests against this selection emerged not from the government or film critics, but from the producers of another contestant for the Oscar nomination, the film *Kiss Them All!* [*Gor'ko!*, 2013] by Zhora Kryzhovnikov. The two producers, Il'ia Burets and Dmitriĭ Nelidov posted an open letter to persuade the team behind *Leviathan*, particularly the film's producer Aleksandr Rodniĭanskiĭ and the Russian Oscar committee, to postpone *Leviathan*'s nomination till the next year and let *Kiss Them All!* represent Russia instead.⁶¹ Their attempt was ultimately unsuccessful; however, it created a lot of debate in the cultural sphere of what national cinema is and how it should represent the country to the global audiences.

Burets and Nelidov had two issues with *Leviathan*'s nomination, primarily the timing of the film's release and the time period it had remained at the box office. *Leviathan* was released in October 2014, which allowed it to compete either in the 2013 or 2014 Oscars, while *Kiss Them All!*, which had been released exactly a year prior, could only participate in 2013 nominations. While *Kiss Them All* proved to be extremely popular and successful amongst audiences, gaining over \$25 million at the box office and remaining in theatres for a

⁶¹ "Sozdateli fil'ma "Gor'ko!" ne soglasilis' s resheniem Oskarov" [The Creators of the Film Gorko Disagreed with the Oscars' Decision], *Delovaya Gazeta Vzglyad*, September 29, 2014, vz.ru/amp/news/2014/9/29/708029.html

year, *Leviathan* had only one week of theatrical release and gained a little over \$1 million in revenue. Burets and Nelidov, in their address, pointed out that *Leviathan* was only given a national release nominally to comply with the Oscars rules and qualify for the nomination, while *Kiss Them All!* was organically successful on its own.⁶²

The second issue with the film was more of an ideological nature and can be described directly through the producers' quote:

“The film (*Kiss Them All!*) perfectly reflects the national character and identity of the Russian people, and, unlike many domestic films made for the festival circuit, it was made not with disdain or even contempt for them [the Russian people], but with sincere sympathy and love.”⁶³

Both Il'ia Burets and Dmitrii Nelidov claimed that the committee was unfair towards their film, which in their minds most accurately represented the Russian people. The “disdain or even contempt” of the festival cinema is no doubt a reference to Zvyagintsev's work, as by the time of *Leviathan*'s release he was a well-established figure on the European festival circuit. This demonstrates that at the core of the debates were not the competition's formalities but the fundamental differences in understanding one's national identity and its representation in media.

While at first glance these two films may appear as complete opposites – after all, *Kiss Them All!* is a light-hearted comedy and *Leviathan* is an existential drama – in fact they have much more in common with each other. Both films focus on inhabitants of a provincial Russian town and their responses to challenging events. *Kiss Them All!* tells a story about a

⁶² N. Barinova, “Prodiusery fil'ma "Gor'ko!" sobiraitsia osparivat' reshenie Rossiiskogo oskarovskogo komiteta” [The Producers of the Film Gorko Are Going to Challenge the Decision of the Russian Oscar Committee], *TASS*, September 29, 2014, tass.ru/kultura/1474547

⁶³ Ibid.

wedding, where the protagonists must mediate between their more sophisticated urban friends on the one hand, and their eccentric provincial relatives on the other, as the celebrations of the couple's union that were originally meant to take place as two separate events get moved to the same day. The film also depicts a conflict between generations, and engaged familiar archetypes: the village-folk relatives, an alcoholic uncle, and a fresh-out-of-prison brother, juxtaposed with the leading couple who represent the more metropolitan elite of a small town. *Leviathan*, similarly taking place in a provincial setting (a desolate sea town), also represents the protagonist's family and their friends via well-known Russian archetypes, such as an alcoholic policeman, a corrupt deputy, and a privileged lawyer friend from Moscow. However, unlike in the former film, their actions and behaviors, which intentionally reference the very specific socio-cultural state of a small provincial town, are explicitly critiqued via the consequences they bring onto the protagonist and his family. The fearless threats that Moscow lawyer makes to the politician result in him being attacked and forced to leave town to save himself from imprisonment or death.

Kiss Them All! which employs a faux-found-footage style, uses such archetypes to enhance the seemingly documentary qualities of the film and produce comedic elements by referencing real and widely familiar cultural phenomena, such as the alcohol-infused disarray inevitably accompanying traditional Russian weddings. For instance, when the former-prisoner-brother attacks another man, a DJ who refuses to play a song for his girlfriend, the action is represented with violent realism. And yet, equally representative is the reaction of a woman observing these events, remarking in a blasé way merely that 'he has had enough'. The brother's out-of-control behaviour, which remains a running trope throughout the film, is justified and almost glorified by the fact that he does so "for his girlfriend" – thus demonstrating his reactive, yet chivalrous nature. (Ironically the sequel of *Kiss Them*

All! opens with this character trying to drown her for allegedly cheating on him, which is represented in an equally normalized and comedic manner.)

By the end of the film, *Kiss Them All!* reaches an utter state of chaos. The character's brother threatens to shoot people around him in an alcoholic haze, and the bride sets herself on fire in an attempt to de-escalate the situation. The appearance of the police, however, saves the day, and the family is reunited after spending the night in a van and sobering up. The police have a socially unifying function in the film, bringing an end to the criminal activity of the protagonists, which will presumably go unpunished, as the film ends on a happy note of families bonding with each other despite all the hateful things said and done earlier in the film. The conflict between generations that is declared in the beginning of the film is resolved, and the family truly comes together by singing the song *Natali* by Grigoriĭ Leps. Despite the portrayal of Russian weddings as a grotesque world of excessive alcohol consumption and violence, the film positions the crew, characters, and audiences as equal elements brought together and united by the genuinely kind-hearted, if unruly, Russian nature depicted in the film. The documentary quality of *Kiss Them All!* and Kryzhovnikov's claims of the film's authenticity⁶⁴ facilitate this understanding of identity, which despite being quite unflattering, at the same time invokes an emotion of pride among national audiences.

Leviathan, on the other hand, employs some of the same tropes to demonstrate instead the staggering inequality between the ordinary masses and the people in power; an imbalance further underscored by the police's actions. Alcohol is also present in the film quite often to signify the protagonist's growing despair, or to highlight the antagonistic nature of the politician who arrives at his house late at night, intoxicated, and proceeds to make threats. Alcohol does not act as either a cause or an objective; rather it is the last resort for the protagonist after he realizes that he has lost everything, including his family. The negative

⁶⁴ V. Lyashenko, "Gor'ko" — absoliutno avtorskoe kino" [Gor'ko Is an Absolute Auteur Film], *Gazeta.ru*, October 30, 2013, www.gazeta.ru/culture/2013/10/28/a5728049.shtml

elements, such as substance abuse, domestic violence, or simple arguments that occur between the characters, are represented from a certain distanced, critical position, betraying a detached, almost anthropological approach to life in a provincial Russian town. While working with extremes, the film creates a certain distance between the audiences and the characters in the film, which can, indeed, invoke a feeling of disdain towards them – as well as, by extension, to such a portrayal of Russian identity.

As the examples here demonstrate, the question of national representation, therefore, is not simply a question of country of origin or financing, but that of patriotism, which has increasingly come to be expected from Russian cinema. Criticism or negative iterations of national character – especially when these films are meant to project the nation abroad - are not considered to be acceptable ways of rendering it. The conflict between *Leviathan* and *Kiss Them All!* is further complicated by their respective directors' backgrounds and the film's class differences. Zvyagintsev, a West-oriented festival filmmaker, operates within a certain mode of representation that produces elitist 'chernukha' for foreign festival audiences. Therefore, his choice of focusing on the negative representation of provincial Russian reality, while demonstrating oppressive power structures, is ultimately deliberately disconnected from the general sentiments of the population it represents. Kryzhovnikov, instead, in his representation of the 'nation' as unruly, but kind-hearted people, almost appeals to the nostalgia for Soviet lyrical comedy. The positive representation of alcohol, violence, and power structures here not only offers a more favorable narrative for Putin's regime, but more generally assembles an identity that does not deny but glamorizes its commonly known flaws. In the following section, I will further explore how this new portrayal of Russianness functions in the comedy genre and creates a feeling of patriotism amongst the population.

Comedic Nationalism

The concept of national cinemas has been of interest to scholars for a long time, whether looking at it from a historical perspective, tracing the socio-political changes in the country, which the very emergence of the national cinema indicates, or exploring it as an alternative to Hollywood monopolization. Of course, looking at cinema in the category of the national can also cause certain problems as it hinders the collaborative aspect of filmmaking, sometimes creating erasure of certain countries, like in the case of co-productions. One of the most telling ways of identifying a mode of representation of national identity in contemporary Russian cinema is by looking at the genre of comedy and the specific portrayal of Russianness within that context. Historically, the relationship between the local comedy genre and audiences has been quite tense, as it was operating on remake culture, translating either Soviet or foreign productions onto Russian realities. Many filmmakers attempted to adapt and remake American romantic comedies,⁶⁵ for instance the *Lyubov-Morkov* (2007-2011) film series or *Beremenniy* (trans. *The Pregnant Man*) (2011) by Sarik Andreasian, however the scene lacked content that would a) encompass different age, ethnic, and gender categories and b) represent national identity without the help of external circumstances.

An attempt at it has been made with the franchise *Yolki* [*Ėlki*, 2010-2022]), which became a running symbol of the country's unity on New Year's Eve. The premise of the series is that people across the country are connected through six handshakes, and the characters of different novellas must help each other before one of the biggest national holidays. The plot would take place in different regions and time zones, showing people from different social and class backgrounds, ultimately demonstrating how similar they are in surprising ways. While it can be argued that the symbolism of the New Year makes the *Yolki* series enough of a

⁶⁵ Donovan, Victoria. "Soviet comedies for 'our time' Cinematic remaking in twenty-first-century Russia" in *Ruptures and Continuities in Soviet/Russian Cinema : Styles, Characters and Genres Before and after the Collapse of the USSR*, eds. Birgit Beumers, and Eugene Zvonkine (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 24-36.

national film, the narrative is still dependent on the pre-existing external event. The core of the film and its stories can only occur at a specific time of the year, which creates a certain temporality in showcasing one's identity and unity between the parts of the country. The characters are not connected because of some encompassing cultural traits, but rather through a holiday that inherently performs a unifying function. Even more, the Soviet classic lyrical comedy *Irony of Fate [Ironiia Sud'by, 1975]* by Èl'dar Rîazanov, which became a cultural symbol of the holiday and is traditionally broadcast on TV channels every New Year's Eve,⁶⁶ could hardly be replaced by Timur Bekmambetov's new franchise, even if it tried to compete with its popularity. Therefore, the niche for national comedy within the contemporary Russian context has been empty for quite a while. It was also influenced by the prejudice of the local population towards Russian cinema, specifically, the comedy genre, which often failed the viewer in expectations because of its below-the-belt humor and low-quality production.

Therefore, the emergence of Zhora Kryzhovnikov as the comedy-genre director created quite a stir in the Russian filmmaking scene. Kryzhovnikov based his films not in the urban centers of Moscow or St. Petersburg, but in the smaller cities in the country, at the same time avoiding the national holiday trope. The positionality of the director as one of the masses also aided in his rapid popularity, as unlike many well-known figures, such as Mikhalkov or Bekmambetov, Kryzhovnikov assumed a quite humble position of being one of and for the people, at least earlier in his career. Another thing that separated him from other comedy-genre filmmakers, is the avoidance of remaking Hollywood films. His feature debut *Kiss Them All!*, the subject of the conflict described at the beginning of this chapter, was granted the status of a national film by both audiences and critics. Anton Dolin, one of the most influential film critics in Russia, in his review, claimed *Kiss Them All!* to be "the first truly

⁶⁶ Ibid.

talented, funny and radical comedy of the post-Soviet era.”⁶⁷ This spurred the production of the sequel, *Kiss Them All Two*, which now told the story of a fake funeral, yet employed the same caricature characters and chaos as the form of plot development.

His third film, the karaoke-comedy *Best Day Ever* [*Samyĭ Luchshii Den'*, 2015] (which Kryzhovnikov claims is the first karaoke-comedy in Russia),⁶⁸ follows the story of an alcoholic policeman who has to navigate his romantic relationship through the conflict between an urban and rural way of life. Once again, the film has been positively received, getting five times its budget at the box office.⁶⁹ The police officer cheats on his soon-to-be wife with a rich Moscow singer and gets trapped between the provincial but comfortable life, and the eccentric dream of the capital, promising riches. The film once again employs alcohol as a plot development tool and presents the characters as caricatures, yet here much more dangerous both to themselves and the environment. The protagonist is after all a member of the government structure, who, being quite pathetic in the beginning, once having consumed alcohol starts shooting at people and objects from his service weapon. This ‘friendly’ and stereotypically pathetic image of the police officer, which is present not only in Kryzhovnikov’s works but also the comedy franchise *Policeman from Rublyovka* [*Politsēiskii s Rublĕvki* 2016-19] by Ilya Kulikov, is a result of a continuous effort to improve the public image of law enforcement started by Dmitriĭ Medvedev’s police reform in 2011.⁷⁰ Instead of the oppressive and limiting functions of the system, the films eagerly embrace corruption, violence, and lawlessness as comedic elements, positioning police officers as either fun and

⁶⁷ A. Dolin, “Novoe russkoe kino «Gor’ko!»: pervaiâ rossiĭskaia komediia, pokhozhaia na pravdu” [New Russian cinema Kiss Them All: The First Russian Comedy That Resembles the Truth], *Afisha*, October 24, 2013, daily.afisha.ru/archive/vozduh/cinema/gorko-pervaya-rossiyskaya-komediya-pohozhaya-na-pravdu/

⁶⁸ A. Ryumin, “Rezhisser Zhora Kryzhovnikov: zadacha kino - udivliat’ zritelĭa” [Director Zhora Kryzhovnikov: The Goal of Cinema - Is to Surprise the Viewer], *TASS*, December 24, 2015, tass.ru/kultura/2551073

⁶⁹ “Sbory” [Box Office], Kinopoisk, www.kinopoisk.ru/film/843784/box/

⁷⁰ D. Astahov, “Reforma MVD” [Russian Police Reform], *TASS*, February 6, 2016, tass.ru/info/2644901

unruly like the rest of the population, or constantly abused and disrespected by their superiors and citizens.

Kryzhovnikov even managed to direct one of the installments of *Yolki* in 2017, titled *Yolki 6* or *New Yolki* [*Ėlki 6, Novye Ėlki*], bringing him onto a completely new level of influence and popularity, putting him in the same ranks as Timur Bekmambetov. The through-line of Kryzhovnikov's films therefore is showcasing Russianness as an easy-going, party-loving identity, which despite the violence and chaos it creates gets either forgiven, like in *Best Day Ever*; or simply goes unpunished, like in the *Kiss Them All* series. The films create pride in such representation, where sexist humor and inconsiderate protagonists, who are labeled as authentic, are not an object of criticism but positive models for audiences. Another quite common trope that emerges among these comedies is their male-centrism. On one hand, the male protagonist represents the image of a certain failed masculinity; he is often a deadbeat, borderline alcoholic, and unable to provide for his family. On the other hand, he is also a figure of ultimate authority, as the story is usually contracted and carried out through his perspective. The failed elements are usually compensated for by having the protagonist win a physical fight, demonstrating his brute force, and getting into a sexual relationship with a female secondary character. The image of masculinity is, therefore, constructed via this combination of flaws and strengths that eventually render the protagonist a positive role model, as despite his limitations he still will succeed with the task at hand.

The rapid influx of films involving national identity, however, was not only triggered by the popularity of Kryzhovnikov's *Kiss Them All!* in 2013. A year later, when another patriotic comedy, *Express Train: Moscow-Russia* [*Skoryĭ: Moskva - Rossiia*, 2014] by Igor' Voloshin, hit the national screens, the Russian government annexed Crimea under the guise of reuniting the scattered Russian population. While this may seem like a coincidence, the need for the construction and promotion of the 'new' Russian identity and unity, is closely linked to

the government's politics towards Ukraine and the region of Donbas. Another film released around that time was an installment of *Yolki – Yolki 1914* [*Ėlki 1914*, 2014], which this time brought the narrative a hundred years back, into Czarist Russia. The film actively promotes the idea of national unity through the Imperial narrative and the return to the pre-Soviet past as an idealized version of Russia.

This notion of the idealization of the imperial Russian past is the fundamental element of understanding the new construction of Russian identity in Putin's government rhetoric, not as the product of the Soviet time and the cultural influence of the West, but as the return to its 'original' form of Slavic imperialism, primarily through the reconstruction of geographical borders. One of the connoisseurs of this return to the pre-Soviet past, actor, director, and cultural worker Nikita Mikhalkov has consistently employed an idealized and nostalgic image of imperial Russia to reimagine and critique the Soviet era.⁷¹ Often working with the transitional period between the imperial and the communist, Mikhalkov shows apparent favoritism towards Russia as orthodox, imperial, and traditionalist, while depicting the Soviet as an era of decay and stagnation. For the director, the creation of the Soviet Union is not simply a change in political rhetoric, but also a destruction of Russian 'true' identity, which now has to be rebuilt in the contemporary context. This sentiment, however, is not unique to Mikhalkov's ideological canon, as the contemporary Russian war genre plays actively into this narrative of division between the Soviet and the Russian-Slavic, demonstrating the Soviet structure as inherently repressive, while the protagonists, who are deliberately coded as Russian, must succeed against it.

⁷¹ Nancy Condee, *The Imperial Trace: Recent Russian Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

Victory as Comedy

While many Russian war genre films have comedic elements in them throughout the plot, usually represented by genre actors such as Anton Bogdanov or Victor Dobronravov, the very premise of the film remains a serious matter and is intended to be taken as such. And since most war genre films are operating within a blockbuster canon, the plot ends once the war has been won, the target captured, and the city liberated. However, there are not many films that deal specifically with Victory Day or the immediate post-war period, except for brief flash-forwards as an element of narration which appears either at the very beginning or ending of the film. Therefore, when the film *To Paris!* (2019) by Sergeĭ Sarkisov premiered on Victory Day itself and promised a comedic story about the aftermath of the war in the form of a road-musical, it was actively taken up and promoted through different news outlets. The film was also supported by the star cast of Dmitriĭ Pevtsov, Sergeĭ Makovetskiy, and Renata Litvinova, which combined with the over-used based-on-a-real-story narrative promised something new to the genre. However, the film failed at the box office; with a budget of approximately \$2 million it has only gained \$143 000 back, along with many negative reviews from viewers and critics.

The film was sponsored by both the Russian Ministry of Culture and the Russian Military Historical Society (RMHS), as well as the government of the Kaliningrad region, where the filming of *To Paris!* took place. However, the connection to the Russian government does not end here; the role of the protagonist is performed by an actor and member of the State Duma Dmitriĭ Pevtsov. Being an avid Putin supporter, Dmitriĭ Pevtsov spoke about the president on multiple occasions, even comparing him to Nikolaĭ II, the last Emperor of Russia.⁷² Pevtsov also has expressed his approval of the invasion of Ukraine in

⁷² T. Ulanova, "Dmitriĭ Pevtsov: Zhalko tratit' vremia na s'emki!" [Dmitriĭ Pevtsov: It's a Pity to Waste Time Filming!], *Sobesednik.Ru*, October 2, 2022, sobesednik.ru/kultura-i-tv/20161008-dmitriy-pevcov-zhalco-tratit-vremya-na-semki

2022, appearing at public rallies and concerts that relate to the annexation of territories.⁷³ His other hobby – acting – was also tainted by political involvement, as in 2021 Pevtsov actively called for the installment of censorship in both theatre and film productions that would protect the moral standard of art.⁷⁴ He suggested creating a committee that would control and maintain government-sponsored pictures and shows, would uphold a moral and religious standard, and would protect children from consuming potentially harmful information.⁷⁵

However, this already had been done to an extent several years earlier in 2014 when films or theatre productions with obscene language could lose their distribution license or not be accepted for the box office in the first place.⁷⁶ The organization Roskomnadzor (RKN), established in 2008, has from then on continued to supervise the following of this law, and has also spread into the internet sphere, where certain media outlets and videos were banned because of ‘extremist content’. The obscenities law, however, worked exclusively for the ban of foreign films, such as *The Death of Stalin* (2017) by Armando Iannucci, or local films that challenged the government’s narrative of history, such as *Matilda* (2017) by Alekseĭ Uchitel’ and plays by Kirill Serebrennikov. While contempt towards *The Death of Stalin* can be understood – after all, it is a foreign and ahistorical dark comedy – the ban of *Matilda* has been done on the grounds of the defamation of Nikolaĭ II, as the film focuses on his affair with the ballerina Matil’da Kshesinskaĭa. The call for the protection of the emperor’s image here is not a preservation of a certain cultural and historic memory of the monarch, but

⁷³ “Na kontsert vos’miletiĭa aneksii Kryma prishli 200 tysiach chelovek” [200 Thousand People Came to the Concert Marking the Eighth Anniversary of the Annexation of Crimea], *Sever. Realii*, March 18, 2022, www.severreal.org/a/na-kontsert-vosmiletia-aneksii-kryma-prishlo-200-tsyach-chelovek-mvd/31759729.html

⁷⁴ “Pevtsov: “Nel’zia tratit’ narodnye den’gi na merzosti v kino i teatre” [Pevtsov: ‘You Can’t Spend People’s Money on Abominations in Cinema and Theater], *RIA Novosti*, July 8, 2023, ria.ru/20230708/pevtsov-1882640553.html

⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ “V Rossii s 1 iulĭa zapreshcheno materit’sia v kino i na stsene” [From July 1, It Is Prohibited to Swear in Films and on Stage in Russia], *RIA Novosti*, March 2, 2020, ria.ru/20140701/1014212806.html

primarily a preservation of his religious persona, as the Romanovs were canonized by the Orthodox Christian Church after their death. Therefore, a film that shows the infidelity of Nikolaï II as an individual simultaneously attacks him as a canonized saint, offending the values and belief system of the Church, which are legally protected by the Blasphemy Bill introduced in 2013.

One of the people who spoke up actively against these two films was Nikita Mikhalkov, and while he has consistently positioned himself as the guardian of moral values and traditionalism, his own films have actively violated censorship laws with no legal repercussions. His film *Burnt by the Sun 2* [*Utomlennye Solntsem 2*, 2010], which contains not only an extreme amount of nudity, but also obscene language, got the rights for a wide release across the country with just a “18+” mark. The same happened with the film at the center of our discussion here – *To Paris!* – which contains both nudity and obscene language, and yet was allowed wide release both in theatres and on television. Moreover, the film was proudly screened to veterans of the Great Patriotic War across the country.⁷⁷ This case is further complicated by the public persona of Dmitriï Pevtsov, who despite his active political position as a “traditionalist”, plays a character named Voronin in the film who could hardly be described as a bearer of moral values, as his promiscuous nature is the main motivation for the plot.

To Paris! follows the story of Voronin, a tank operator, who finds out about the Soviet victory while being hospitalized in a war clinic. He escapes the hospital, steals a car from a German general, and together with his friends sets off to Paris to celebrate their victory. On their way to the foreign country, they encounter American soldiers, located in the US-occupied zone, who let them through after sharing a bottle of whiskey between each other. Later in their trip, they get apprehended by a young German boy, who puts a gun to their

⁷⁷ “Fil'm "Na Parizh!" pokazhut veteranam po vseĭ Rossii besplatno” [The Film ‘To Paris!’ Will Be Shown to Veterans throughout Russia for Free], *M24.Ru*, May 8, 2019, www.m24.ru/articles/kultura/08052019/155501

backs; however, murder is avoided, as the characters disarm a child and let him go. The group's adventure ends in a small French town, where they come across a brothel and purchase the services of the sex workers there in exchange for vodka and Russian delicacies, as the owner of the establishment turns out to be Russian as well. Voronin also gets involved in a physical fight with a local Frenchman when the latter hits one of the sex workers. This concludes the first half of the film.

The morning after the party the protagonists get busted by an NKVD officer, who after receiving a report from the French police, comes to collect the stray soldiers and bring them to justice. The second half of the film is the journey back to the Soviet Union, which is drastically different in style and representation. The previously bright colors now appear diluted, the music is somber, and the soldiers are no longer their cheery selves. Voronin and the NKVD general have discussions about life, morals, and the motherland, constantly clashing on ideological grounds. While passing by the wall, where the characters were apprehended by the German boy earlier in the film, Voronin recalls the story to the general. The Soviet general's reaction is to put the soldiers to the wall and threaten them with execution. The film replicates the shot identically, in this way equating Nazi forces with Soviet ones. Upon arrival in the Soviet Union, the general decides to let the soldiers go, understanding the corruption of the system. Voronin, upon surrendering the stolen German car to the higher commander, receives a medal and reunites with his love interest from the beginning of the film.

Throughout the film the characters of Russian soldiers are represented as light-hearted, noble, and relaxed, wanting to have the time of their life before returning to the depressing reality of the Soviet Union. The film employs the same plot-advancing tactics of alcohol and parties found in regular comedy genre films, where the goal of the protagonists is to have sex with women and let loose without any consequences. Since *To Paris!* is a

combination of comedy and war, some of the characters' unlawful actions, such as abandoning one's military post or resorting to violence, can be understood as simply following the genres' canons. However, the issue here is not with the actions themselves but their positionality that differs based on the national identities of the characters. The disorderly behavior of Russian characters here is justified by their allegedly kind nature and intentions. After all, they are the ones who intercede when the sex worker gets hit, and they do not kill the German child who put the gun on their backs. Despite their desire for a party, they are at the same time positioned as the ones who restore order and uphold moral values, unlike the other characters in the film.

An American soldier at the military block post appears fascinated with the protagonists, envying their ability to go to Paris. When drinking together, the soldier also remarks how big of a sip one of the characters takes, re-enforcing the stereotypical portrayal of a Russian man as friendly, strong, and able to consume alcohol in enormous quantities. While this moment may appear as insignificant comedic relief, it once again signals the new understanding of Russian identity as unruly and strong. Another foreign character in the film, the French man, is violent and disrespectful towards women, which then urges Voronin to physically assault and throw him out of the brothel. Through this altercation, the film symbolically associates order with the presence of Russian force. The protection of women here, however, is not a simple signification of moral values; rather its roots are very similar to the ones of the friendly policeman's behavior I discussed earlier. Here, it is related to the decriminalization of domestic violence that occurred in 2017 and caused quite a debate in the public sphere, as the new bill only presumed a criminal penalty after the second instance of physical abuse, while the first assault would only be punishable by fine. The depiction of Russian men who are being applauded by sex workers, in contrast with a foreign man who abuses a woman, positions Russian masculinity as not only harmless but most importantly

carrying a protective function others lack. The introduction of the bill that has ‘solved’ the problem of domestic abuse is further supported here by a positive portrayal of masculinity, denying any potential criticism of the issue of gendered violence.

The uplifting of Russian men, however, is not limited to gender questions, as it is primarily fueled by xenophobia. Later in the film when Voronin finds out that the French man was the one who leaked their location to NKVD, he curses him out, discrediting his position as a member of the Resistance during the occupation of France. Voronin, states that “We know their kind. They sucked up to Germans, and now that the war is over, they are all heroes”, factually discrediting any effort in the war, except for that of the Soviet Russian forces. This statement, if taken out of context, would usually be attributed to the negative portrayal of the character; however, here it is to be taken as the truth that Voronin, as an ambassador of free speech, tells both the other characters and the viewer. However, the most shocking moment of xenophobia appears when one is introduced to the Chinese sex worker at the brothel, who is referred to by the madame as a ‘monkey.’ This ‘joke’ is repeated several times throughout the interaction and does nothing but highlight the xenophobia explicit nature of the film.

The presence of the antagonistic depiction of the Soviet forces in opposition to the kind-hearted Russian protagonists, while not directly referring to the idealistic depiction of pre-Soviet imperial Russia, relates closely to the understanding of contemporary Russian identity as anything but Soviet. The applause of the sex workers when the Russian soldiers get escorted out of the brothel and their shaming of the NKVD officers is another driving distinction: the former are praised as they conquer, and the latter are shamed for installing the law. Even the French women are willing to surrender themselves to the phallic weapons of the Russian force, highlighting their skill and superiority over the local men. The title of the film continues the idea of conquest by mimicking the expression ‘To Berlin’ which was written on Soviet tanks during the war and now can be often purchased in sticker form to be installed on

a vehicle. Here, 'To Paris' symbolizes a different, new kind of conquest of territory that happens after the events of the Great Patriotic War. The effort or involvement of other countries, in this case the US and France, is disregarded in favor of demonstrating Russian superiority. The xenophobic element of the film works alongside this, once more highlighting national and racial differences between the characters, with apparent favoritism towards the Slavic ones.

The main conflict of the film rests on the opposition between the freedom-loving, alcohol-motivated, and patriotic Russian men, and, on the other, the corrupt, violent, and villainous Soviets, who betray and kill each other at any opportunity. The general has a scar on his back from one of his soldiers who wanted to abandon the battle and lashed out against him. Being now presented in the form of a war film, the comedic elements remain the same as in the works of Kryzhovnikov or *Express Train: Moscow Russia*; the protagonist is a traditional Russian man who through consumption of alcohol, violence, and xenophobia successfully reaches his goal and receives no punishment for his wrongdoings. Voronin, while being a party-loving womanizer, at the same time symbolizes the image of the Russian soldier, a military force that is always ready to come and install order in the Western world. While the soldiers have been returned home and contained by an oppressive Soviet force, the film almost does enough to showcase their potential, if and when they are free from communist constrictions.

War as Comedy

A drama based on or inspired by real events, or an upbeat blockbuster, is the most prominent example of war genre cinema available in the contemporary Russia scene. While in the previous section I have addressed the success of the comedy film genre, here, I would like to discuss comedy as a sub-genre of the war film, using *Hitler Goes Kaput! [Gitler Kaput!]*

(2008, dir. Marius Vaisberg) as an example and addressing how questions of national identity get showcased through the merging of the two. In Soviet cinema, a comedy about the Great Patriotic War was not a rare occurrence; indeed, some filmmakers would attempt to find an outlet in the horror and trauma that the country has experienced. One of the most famous examples is *Celestial Sloth* [*Nebesnyĭ Tikhokhod*, 1945] by Semën Timoshenko, a film where a male pilot Bulochkin gets commissioned to be a part of an aviation squadron which mostly consists of female pilots. Denise Youngblood argues that the film is “retrograde in terms of its gender politics” compared to other Stalin-era depictions of stoic female fighters.⁷⁸ Its comedic value, partially expressed through gender stereotypes, overcomes the depressing reality of war, providing an escapist emotional outlet through its focus on the romantic games played by the main character and his friends.

Another way of distracting – or emotionally detaching – from ongoing or past violence would be employing parody techniques. Hollywood pictures about the Second World War thus frequently depicted Nazi generals and Hitler in a comedic way, presenting a completely unrealistic setting of concentration camps or occupied territories. By doing so, the films were contrasting American soldiers with an incompetent and ridiculously unintelligent enemy. For instance, *To Be or Not to Be*, a 1942 comedy by Ernst Lubitsch taking place in occupied Poland, presents the enemy in an absurd way, where yelling ‘Heil Hitler’ is enough to distract and confuse a Nazi general. While there could be certain ethical concerns associated with such a representation, the context of the film’s release, intended to provide moral support to a population, shifts the power balance in favor of the occupied nations, no matter how grim the reality might have been. Another example, *Stalag 17* (1953, dir. Billy Wilder) explores comedic value through the addition of an eccentric guard and representing a POW camp as a leisurely space of confinement rather than a horror of war. The representation

⁷⁸ Denise J. Youngblood, *Russian War Films: On the Cinema Front, 1914-2005* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007).

of Nazi soldiers and generals in both these examples is taken to the level of absurdity, making their actions and behavior comedic because of its improbability and unrealism.

And while this portrayal of German troops and Nazi commanders as incompetent, clumsy, and stupid works within the genre of comedy, when looking at the ‘serious’ Russian films about the Great Patriotic War this ever-present trope has a completely different ideological subtext. The German opponent in such a film is often also an admirer of the Russian nation or the protagonist in particular. The Nazi soldiers are all awkward and easy to trick, but at the same time, they are to be taken seriously as opponents. While being enamored with the skills, looks, and behavior of the Russian and Slavic characters, Nazi soldiers are presented as inherently weaker than the protagonist; therefore their ultimate defeat is not a hard task for a skilled and trained Russian soldier. Jager in *T-34 [T-34]* (2019, dir. Aleksey Sidorov) and the German general in *Zoya [Zoia]* (2020, dir. Leonid Plyaskin and Maksim Brius) are both obsessed with the film’s protagonist and through verbal and physical language continuously uplift their significance to the audience. This, along with their easy defeat, creates an impression of the Russian soldier as superior, which then gets translated into the contemporary understanding of national identity as not only superior over the West in the past but in the present moment, as characters are distinctly coded as Russian, not Soviet.

I have previously discussed the genre of comedy as the site for manifestation of Russian identity; therefore, here I want to address how this national identity is projected when comedy meets the war genre. While *Hitler Goes Kaput!* by Marius Vaysberg was dismissed by the critics as belonging to the B-movie category, it points out an essential element of how contemporary ideology invokes an understanding of Russian identity, not as a product of Soviet ideology and/or modern Western-influenced Russia, but rather as an idea of going back to its imperial roots, the Czarist period.

Hitler Goes Kaput! is a parody comedy, which borrows its style from such franchises as *Scary Movie* and the connective tissue of *Meet the Spartans*. The film bases its plot around the TV series *Seventeen Moments of Spring*, a Soviet classic about a spy under the code name Stirlitz that invades the Nazi ranks in the middle of the war. The figure of Stirlitz became a canonical element of pop culture, being a subject of anecdotes and jokes. The character of *Hitler Goes Kaput!* is a re-iteration of this story, which plays precisely on the legacy of the anecdotes at the same time attributing a new notion of Russianness to the character. Here, the protagonist's name is Shura Osechkin; however, he still has the same mission of infiltrating the high ranks of Nazi Germany. The film employs below-the-belt humor, superficial jokes, and sexualization of any female character present on screen. Even though it was poorly received by the public and critics, *Hitler Goes Kaput!* received a profit double its production value at the box office. The film eventually frequented the TV channel TNT, which is infamous for screening mature content, and would be considered a place for horror films and R-rated comedy. *Hitler Goes Kaput!* updates the canonical Soviet TV series, *Seventeen Moments of Spring*, by representing Hitler as a psychotic, sex-obsessed, and perverse man, while the protagonist must uphold his fake persona and navigate the world of Nazi Germany. The world of the film is constructed as intentionally superficial and staged, with the comedic element derived from the demonstration or hint at sex, as well as the physical aspects of the actresses Anna Semenovich and Evelina Blédans. And while this type of film usually gets ignored by academia as some form of 'pulp fiction', it showcases a quite valuable understanding of coding Russianness through the character of Osechkin.

Even though the action of the film takes place in the mid-40s, the surreal nature of the film allows for the merging of different types of technology and periods. For instance, while the cars are mid-20th century, Osechkin watches weather forecasts on a plasma display TV, while the pictures in the newspaper turn to holograms when he looks at them. This temporal

mix and nature of the film is precisely what creates the site for the construction of a new national identity. The Russianness in the film is represented on several different levels, the names of the streets are altered to make them look and sound more like the ones in Moscow, and Osechkin can access the motherland through a portal in his apartment, where Russia is represented in the pastoral, Tolstoy tradition. At the end of the film, when Osechkin and his spy comrade and lover escape Nazi Germany, they are detained at the block-post by supposedly Soviet KGB agents who begin attacking the couple. Trying to escape from both Soviet and German soldiers, the couple jumps into the portal and ends up in the pastoral setting from earlier, avoiding death or repression. The demonstration of Osechkin, not as a Soviet, but most importantly as a Slavic Russian man, is one of the most significant elements in the film. The 'dream' Russia here is not the Soviet space but the village of Czarist times, where the character, who is supposed to represent Tolstoy, is enjoying his life amid the field and haystacks. Osechkin himself is constructed as closely connected with tradition; he swims in icy water, is religious, and is quite different from the original Stirlitz, who is a model Soviet man, an avid Communist willing to sacrifice his life for the party. The Soviet Union is rendered as a repressive and violent space, almost equating them with German troops, where the protagonists eventually must escape from both. The dreamland of pastoral Russia is then not only a narrative escape of the characters but also an idealized version of the country. The ideological subtext of Russian essence as pre-Soviet idle village life is quite significant in understanding the anti-Soviet element that is consistently present in the war genre cinema.

Conclusion: Slavophile Nativism

Both comedy and war genre cinema became to the population of Russia what Benedict Anderson would refer to as the symbolic representation of nationhood in his book *Imagined*

Communities.⁷⁹ Therefore, in commercial government-sponsored cinema the popular understanding of Russian identity is often a Russian Slavic masculine figure who through his system of traditional values installs symbolic order either locally, like in the comedy genre, or internationally, like in war films. While this figure is often unruly, it simultaneously exudes superiority in a literal or symbolic sense. This is often done through the xenophobic representation of others, or via the enemy's infatuation with the protagonist. An essential part of this identity is also its inherent opposition towards 'the Soviet'; contemporary Russian identity exists in conflict with the Soviet past, often being represented as oppressed or hindered by the communist system. At the same time, this identity is radically opposed to the global West, rejecting primarily American influence on culture. I label this symbolic and ideological longing for the past as Slavophile Nativism, which in this case presumes the idealization of imperial Russia and the desire to establish the same geopolitical order within the contemporary political sphere. The inspiration for this new understanding of Russian national identity comes primarily from the works of philosopher Ivan Il'in, who has been recently popularized along with his nationalist rhetoric.

The resurgence of Ivan Il'in in the Russian media and intellectual space started in 2005, when the ashes of the philosopher were repatriated, along with the remains of Anton Denikin, a commander for the Whites in the Civil War.⁸⁰ This surprising act of return had been initiated by Vladimir Putin and mediated by the Russian Cultural Fund and Orthodox Church, with the help of Denikin's daughter Marina Denikina.⁸¹ Ivan Il'in fled the Russian

⁷⁹ Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Revised edition. London: Verso, 2006).

⁸⁰ "Na Rodinu vozvrashchen prakh Ivana Il'ina i Antona Denikina" [The Ashes of Ivan Il'in and Anton Denikin Have Been Returned to Their Homeland], *I tv.Ru*, October 2, 2005, www.1tv.ru/news/2005-10-02/229279-na_rodinu_vozvrashchen_prah_ivana_ilina_i_antona_denikina

⁸¹ "Prakh Denikina vernulsia v Rossiia Perezakhoronenie ostankov belogo generala v Moskve stalo simbolom primireniia" [Denikin's Ashes Returned to Russia The Reburial of the White General's Remains in Moscow Became a Symbol of Reconciliation], *Lenta.ru*, October 3, 2005, lenta.ru/articles/2005/10/03/denikin/

Empire before the October Revolution, and while his main zone of expertise was law, he wrote and published a lot of articles concerning the Bolsheviks and the destructive impact they had on the country. The arrival of the ashes back home was a televised event on the First channel, along with the return of the collection of articles and writings of the scholar. The channel labeled Ivan Il'in "The Greatest Russian thinker of the 20th century", especially for his writing during and about the Second World War, arguing that the author "prophetically predicted its (Russia's) current social structure" in his early works.⁸² The obsession with Il'in has spread further, with numerous documentary films being made, including one by Nikita Mikhalkov in 2011, titled *Russian Philosopher Ivan Il'in*. Even Vladimir Putin has claimed that Il'in is one of his favorite thinkers in one of his interviews for the government channel.⁸³

Indeed, Ivan Il'in was very influential in his writing about Russia during the early Soviet period and the Great Patriotic War. He was openly anti-Bolshevik, religious, and monarchist. For instance, he calls the White Army the bearers of the holy mission and spirituality to battle the evil of the communist troops. The ideas of Il'in, who has published over 300 works, revolved around the notion of re-creating Russia after the Soviet system collapsed and speculating on what an ideal version of the country would be. Being an active opposer of the Bolshevik regime, and communism in general, Il'in momentarily even sided with Hitler's ideas; however, after political persecution he was forced to flee Germany and reside in Switzerland until his death. Patriotism and nationalism for Il'in signify the inherent condition of the Russian Orthodox person, and his understanding of the political and social climate in the country is inherently dependent on a theological perspective. The essential

⁸² "Arkhiv Ivana Il'ina vozvrashchaetsia na Rodinu" [Ivan Il'in's Archive Returns to His Homeland. News. First Channel], *I tv.Ru*, May 23, 2006, www.1tv.ru/news/2006-05-23/221328-arhiv_ivana_ilina_vozvrashchaetsya_na_rodinu

⁸³ M. Gorozhanko, "Putin rasskazal molodym ekologam o smysle zhizni vo vremia voiny" [Putin Spoke to Young Ecologists about the Meaning of Life during War], *Agenstvo*, September 5, 2022, www.agents.media/ilyin/

component of a Russian person is their Orthodox belief, which connects to the iconic idea of the imperial 19th century scholar Sergeĭ Uvarov about “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality” as the fundamental elements of the Russian Empire. The connection of patriotism is through some form of spiritual understanding between the Russian subject of the country and the country itself. This symbiotic relationship in Il’in is primarily expressed through religious elements, making a Russian person, above all, an Orthodox believer.⁸⁴

In recent years Il’in’s works and ideology began to actively infiltrate Russian popular culture, for instance through such performers as Vika Tsyganova, who calls for the re-installment of the Russian Empire under the concept of the Triune Russian Nation, which includes the countries of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. She and her husband, Vadim Tsyganov, actively support the current invasion of Ukraine by performing and donating to the front lines, specifically the Wagner Group. They have also written a hymn for the private military company, which in the lyrics assign soldiers a holy function and ‘bless’ them for their upcoming battles. In one of their recent interviews with Yuri Dud, the couple referred to Il’in’s works as being very important tools in understanding the current political situation, specifically from Orthodox Christian and Russian perspectives.⁸⁵ While their political allegiance may appear eccentric and radical, they are very much representative of how the philosophical works of Il’in get translated and adapted through contemporary mainstream media formats. A soldier fighting on the side of Russia is not simply a citizen of the country or a hired individual; rather, he is part of the holy mission to restore theological symbolic order and he can do so because of his identity as Russian, which predisposes one to success.

⁸⁴ Ivan Il’in, *O Rossii. Tri rechi* [About Russia. Three Speeches], (Rossiĭskii Arkhiv, 1995).

⁸⁵ Vdud, “Vika i Vadim Tsyganovy, kotorye podderzhivaiut armiiu Rossii (Eng subs)” [Vika and Vadim Tsyganovy Who Support Russian Army (Eng Subs)], YouTube, October 27, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjmBHn1bUBI&ab_channel=%D0%B2%D0%94%D1%83%D0%B4%D1%8C

The influence of Il'in in the cinematic space has also been addressed by the film critic Evgenii Bazhenov, who in one of his last videos on YouTube extensively explored the philosopher's theory and contribution to the negative portrayal of Soviet troops in the war genre film. Using the film *Maria. Save Moscow* [*Mariia. Spasti Moskvu*, 2022] by Vera Storozheva, Bazhenov explores the division between atheist immoral Soviets and spiritual Russians that became a common trope in the war genre.⁸⁶ And while the influence of Il'in in cinema is not as direct as in Mikhalkov's weekly show *Besogon*, it is an omnipresent rhetoric that contributes to an understanding of the new Russian identity. The protagonist of the war film, therefore, becomes a Russian (Russkii) Orthodox man who must not only battle Nazi soldiers but also be constantly oppressed by the Soviet commandment. And while Nazi soldiers are at least enamored and fascinated with the 'mysterious Russian soul', Soviet generals have no spirituality or compassion in them. Ironically, this is not only an element of the war film, but often historical dramas. *Three Seconds* [*Dvizhenie Vverkh*, 2017] by Anton Megedichev – the story of a 1972 Olympic basketball match – employs the complete demonization of the Soviet Union, while characters play for the abstract motherland that is represented by their family or childhood home, in a quite pastoral and dreamy sense. Similarly, the film *Temporary Difficulties* [*Vremennye Trudnosti*, 2017] by Mikhail Raskhodnikov demonstrates the corruption of the Soviet system when the protagonist, a disabled boy named Sasha, gets refused entry to the Artek international summer camp by the director, as admitting him would damage the image of the country. The Soviet, therefore, in the eyes of the commercial filmmakers equals only repression, religious persecution, and corruption; in return, the one who commits heroic acts always does so against the Soviet commandment, which differs from Russian.

⁸⁶BadComedian, "V boi idut odni ekstrasensy (Il'in i Medinskiĭ protiv natsistov)" [Only Spirit Mediums Are Going into Battle (Vladimir Medinskiĭ against the Nazi)], YouTube, August 11, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-xjudFfgBU&ab_channel=BadComedian

Amongst more than 300 articles and countless works that were published under a pseudonym, one essay has caught the attention of both the Russian government and controlled media outlets. “What Dismemberment of Russia Entails for the World” [*Chto sulit miru raschlenenie Rossii*] was written in 1948 and predicted the fall of the Soviet Union simultaneously giving instructions on how to keep the national integrity of the country.⁸⁷ The text talks about the idea of maintaining the territorial unity of Russia, as its dismemberment by Western countries will bring its ultimate demise as many minority groups, instructed by the global West, would want to separate. Il’in pays significant attention here to the question of Ukraine, arguing that its separatism was instigated by Germany during the Second World War. This work, as addressed by many journalists and scholars, is a fundamental element in the current imperial ideology of Putin’s government and the basis of propaganda from national news outlets. Both for Putin and Il’in the disbandment of the Soviet Union and the separation of different republics is the catastrophe that weakens the position of Russia in the political arena, leaving it vulnerable in the face of the West. The Soviet Union in its creation hindered the development of Russian identity in its traditional, Orthodox, and imperial forms; at the same time its disbandment compromised the territorial integrity of imperial Russia. This issue, therefore, is combatted on two levels, ideological via rebuilding a Russian identity as pre-Soviet and anti-Western and militarily via the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Both of these levels, however, require Russian culture and identity to be positioned as under the threat of extinction, which is done not only through political propaganda on television but also through commercial war genre films that position their Russian-coded protagonist as a victim of both Nazi soldiers and Soviet commandment.

The new archetype of an unruly yet morally justified and determined Russian masculine figure that gradually migrated from comedy to the war genre is the best

⁸⁷ I. Il’in, “Chto sulit miru raschlenenie Rossii” [What the Disbandment of Russia Promises the World], *Libcat.ru*, libcat.ru/knigi/nauka-i-obrazovanie/politika/426653-ivan-ilin-chto-sulit-miru-raschlenenie-rossii.html

representative of the current political situation in the country. To draw parallels between the topic of this chapter's film *To Paris!* and contemporary Russia, while Voronin himself abandons his posts, drinks, and causes chaos, he is in the right to punish others and bring order when he thinks it is appropriate. Similarly, Putin's government's invasion, which has claimed to save the Russian population from persecution in Ukraine, actively ignores the internal affairs of the country, such as domestic violence or police brutality, either painting them as cultural norms or using them as a mechanism of control over the population. By attributing moral and spiritual functions to the soldiers, either in a war film or reality, Russian identity transforms from the realm of Rossiiskii, which implies citizenship into Russkii, meaning ethnic and cultural allegiance to a Slavophilic imperial past. Unlike Rossiiskii, Russkii has a status of theological superiority that allows and encourages it to bring 'salvation' to others. This new Russian identity, therefore, needs to be protected and maintained as it is sought to be destroyed by either Nazis, Soviets, or the Global West, depending on the context. The criticism of it is perceived as not simply a criticism of political actions, but rather as an attack on Russianness as a whole.

Coda:

Special Military Cinema

Throughout this thesis, I have addressed several commercial war genre films that were directly sponsored, in one way or another, by the Russian government through branch organizations, such as state-owned TV channels, the Russian Military Historical Society, or the Russian Culture Fund. These films, despite having independent directors who actively promote their pictures, demonstrate allegiance with government rhetoric in the representation of historical events, which in part can be attributed to the funding mechanisms in place. Looking at the three case studies through the larger topics of religion, gender, and nationalism I have connected them to the socio-cultural state of the country and the dominant rhetoric of the government that these films represent. The canonization of the war through the Christ figure in *T-34*, the melodramatic feminization of the Soviet soldier in *Zoya*, and finally the Slavophile nationalist sentiment in *To Paris!* represent the current imperialist Orthodox traditional ideology that is based on memorializing the history of the Great Patriotic War and attributing it to the contemporary context. While in this thesis I have analyzed the films that deal with the past, in this concluding chapter I want to bring attention to a new format of war genre film that has emerged in the past several years. These films are not based on government funding but come from independent groups that have actively spoken in support of Putin's government and international politics. Through analyzing the film *Vnuk* (trans. *The Grandson*, 2022) by Timur Garafutdinov and Wagner Group films I will demonstrate how the role of the government is erased in the new iteration of war genre films in favor of individual and extra-state organizations.

Vnuk was released in Russia on June 22nd, 2022, four months after the beginning of the war in Ukraine. The original title of the film in the Cyrillic alphabet replaces the first letter

of the word grandson (внук) with the Latin V, falling into the newly established stylization of war slogans in Russia, for instance, *Za Pobedu!* (trans. *For Victory*, the first Cyrillic letter ‘з’ is replaced by Latin ‘Z’) and *Sila V Pravde* (trans. *Power in the Truth*,⁸⁸ the preposition ‘в’ is replaced by Latin V). The choice of adapting the film’s title to the current socio-political climate of the country overtly demonstrates the political allegiances of the filmmakers, which connect the pre-war narrative of the film with the current context of invasion via this linguistic similarity.

The interesting timing of the film’s release, however, is not only connected to the ongoing war but to the Hungarian film *The Grandson* by Kristóf Deák released only five months prior in January 2022. Both films are revenge stories which focus on a young protagonist who must avenge his grandfather, wronged by a dangerous group of people. In the case of Hungarian production, the grandson sets off to punish phone scammers who take advantage of his elderly relative. In the case of the Russian film, the grandson sets off on an adventure to capture and bring back the resurfaced former SS soldier who almost killed his grandfather during the Great Patriotic War. *Vnuk*, however, is not acknowledged as a remake of the Hungarian film: the director, writer, and main actor of the Russian film Timur Garafutdinov has claimed that the story is inspired by his personal experience of watching a news report of an SS-parade on one of the state channels, Russia-One, and being so emotionally distraught that he decided to make a film about it.⁸⁹ There is no definite proof of whether the similarities between the Russian and Hungarian *Grandson* are a simple coincidence or deliberate attempt at adaptation on the part of Garafutdinov. However, the

⁸⁸ The iconic quote from Balabanov’s *Brat*, which has been popularized and adapted into the political and military discourse, further discussed on pp. 92-93

⁸⁹ “When Filming about War, You Need to Be as Responsible as Possible about What You’re Doing,” TessTimFilms, last modified April 22, 2023, www.tesstimfilms.com/news/snimaya-filmi-pro-voinu.

comparison between the two brings forward *Vnuk*'s lower quality of production, and poorly executed revoicing of most of the characters.

Low ratings and negative reviews from the viewers on Kinopoisk, however, did not stop the team behind *Vnuk* from actively promoting their picture via social media and the director's music label TimBigFamily, even organizing screenings internationally at film festivals in Greece, Argentina, India, Turkey, and Brazil.⁹⁰ With all its technical flaws, *Vnuk* could have remained a failed film debut of the former member of a dating reality show Dom-2 turned rapper, Timur Garafutdinov. However, the apparent speed of its production, which in other circumstances would be simply labeled an unsuccessful attempt at filmmaking, seen in the context of the current political agenda demonstrates that the film's cultural politics are much more complex than they appear at first.

Ūra, a protagonist of *Vnuk*, performed (and evidently modeled on his on-and off-screen persona) by Timur Garafutdinov himself, is an ordinary self-made Muscovite. During his daily life, he helps a neglected child quit smoking, works out, raps, and dreams of proposing to his girlfriend. His idyllic life, however, starts crumbling in a blink of an eye. Right before he is about to propose, he finds out that his girlfriend has been cheating on him with a rich older man. This leads to much time spent in bars, and several attempts at abusing or assaulting women around him, which we can assume is intended as "humanizing" his way of dealing with grief. Then, he finds out that drug dealers have killed one of the parents of the child he saved, so Ūra has to avenge the boy by destroying the laboratory and punishing the criminals. Finally, his grandfather has a heart attack after seeing his enemy from the Great Patriotic War marching in an SS-parade in Latvia. After tracking him down, it turns out that the perpetrator still resides in Germany, free of any criminal charges. Being a good grandson, Ūra is now presented with a new complex task: he has to go to Nuremberg and find and bring

⁹⁰ "News," TessTimFilms, last modified October 20, 2023, www.tesstimfilms.com/news.

the former Nazi soldier back to his grandfather so they could settle the score. What is significant about this development is that the film spends a long time through his actions constructing Ūra's idealized image of a morally just savior; therefore his decision to avenge the grandfather does not appear as absurd as it may seem at first. However, the fictional task as well as the creation of the film itself would not be possible without a certain group of people – the bike club The Night Wolves [*Nochnye Volki*].

The Night Wolves is a Russian motorcycle club, founded over 30 years ago with chapters all over the world. The significance of this group is their avid support for the Russian government, the annexation of Crimea, and the current war in Ukraine. They are actively involved in the celebration of the 9th of May Victory Day, Orthodox Church holidays, and pilgrimages to holy sites, often appearing as a column with their distinct emblems and symbols.⁹¹ The head of the group Aleksandr Zaldastanov, also known as 'The Surgeon' (rus. Hirurg), even makes a cameo in the film, connecting the protagonist with the Night Wolves chapter in Germany. However, this is not the first time Zaldastanov has engaged with filmmaking; his debut film was a thirty-six-minute documentary *Russian Reactor* [*Russkiĭ Reaktor*, 2018], which told the history of Russia from the October Revolution to the present, focusing on the unity and strength of the Russian nation.⁹² While the involvement of the Night Wolves in the politics of the country is not a new phenomenon, after all, they have been quite close to Putin's regime for years, with the president attending and participating in bike shows,⁹³ their participation in 'patriotic' filmmaking demonstrates a new level of media production that extends far beyond the government's structures. The Night Wolves become an

⁹¹ A. Prokhanov, "Russkie Gonki 'Nochnye Volki' v Gostiakh u 'Zavtra'" [Russian Racing 'Night Wolves' Visiting 'Zavtra'], *Gazeta Zavtra*, May 23, 2013, zavtra.ru/blogs/russkie-gonki

⁹² "Fil'm 'Russkiĭ Reaktor'" [Film Russian Reactor], *Mezhdunarodnoe Baĭk-Shou*, last modified November 5, 2019, bikeshow.ru/film-russkij-reaktor/

⁹³ A. Mil'chenko, "Priekhal Na «Urale»: Putin Posetil Baĭk-Shou «Nochnykh Volkov»" [Arrived on 'Ural': Putin Visited the Night Wolves Bike Show], *Gazeta.Ru*, August 10, 2019, www.gazeta.ru/politics/2019/08/10_a_12570325.shtml?updated

order-establishing replacement in the film, signaling that since the government itself cannot reach out to the foreign country, they will, as they are the ones helping \widehat{U} ra to get to Germany, locate the former Nazi, and get him out safely. In a similar way to how \widehat{U} ra solves the problem with drug dealers earlier in the film, the new understanding of social justice comes as an initiative from below, without any help from the police or state structures.

Once arriving in Germany, \widehat{U} ra continues his morally-just behavior, rescuing a girl from being raped by the Nazi sympathizer, which earns him an overnight stay at her apartment. Surprisingly it turns out that her grandfather is the former SS officer he was looking for all along, and when everyone falls asleep, he abducts the old man, making his way through borders undetected, primarily because of the Night Wolves' protection. The issues surprisingly arise when the character tries to cross the Russian-Ukrainian border, after being guaranteed safe passage at a repair center. He is stopped by the corrupt Ukrainian border patrol, who demand money to cross the border and put a gun on \widehat{U} ra, after making some xenophobic jokes and refusing to speak Russian to him. In contrast, a Russian border guard, upon finding out that the person hidden in the backseat is the former Nazi soldier, confesses that his grandfather died in the war and lets the protagonist pass with no issue. \widehat{U} ra reunites the two old men, which drives the former Nazi insane causing him to escape in the forest and almost drown in a river. The absence of actual revenge or physical punishment here is a significant element in understanding the morally just nature of \widehat{U} ra, as he simply wants to 'make things right' without resorting to violence, unless it is necessary. \widehat{U} ra's foreign road trip can be understood as the projection of soft power, demonstrating how easy it is for a Russian person to trick Western European countries and their populations. This trope, however, is not something that is taken from the war genre but rather is connected to the current nationalist and imperialist rhetoric in the Russian media space.

In the rise of militarization in the country, many have paid attention to the adaptation of quotes from Aleksey Balabanov's iconic *Brother* [*Brat*, 1997] and *Brother 2* [*Brat 2*, 2000] into patriotic war slogans, such as "Russians do not abandon one of their own" [*Ruskiye svoih ne brosayut*] and "Danila is our brother, Putin is our president" [*Danila nash Brat, Putin nash President*]. This obsession with the director, combined with a retrospective of Balabanov's films that occurred as the result of sanctions that pulled most foreign films from the box office,⁹⁴ has been discussed by Maria Kuvshinova, one of the most influential scholars who has written about the director. In the process of re-contextualizing the works of Balabanov in the context of the Russian invasion, Kuvshinova argues that *Brother 2* plays with imperialist rhetoric through its plot of a Russian man coming to a foreign country to install peace, take revenge, and leave home, rescuing a Russian woman in the process.⁹⁵ Here I will argue that *Vnuk* and its protagonist Ūra is a contemporary (albeit largely failed) attempt to offer a new version of *Brother 2* and Danila Bagrov's cult character. Evil capitalist Americans are reimagined here as a new wave of Nazi supporters that has corrupted the West; the Russian sex worker gets split in two, becoming a German granddaughter and a nurse that takes care of the grandfather. One thing, however, remains static – evil Ukrainians that stand between the protagonist and his version of justice. Classic rock bands are replaced by entrepreneur rap culture, which Timur Garafutdinov produces himself. The new Danila Bagrov is no longer a person traumatized by war with a flawed moral compass; rather, he is morally just and needs to install this justice as a way of repaying the heroes of the past, now not with the help of his compatriots in the foreign land, but a nationalist religious bike club

⁹⁴ "V Peterburge v Kinoteatre 'Avrora' Otkroetsiâ Retrospektiva Kartin Alekseia Balabanova" [A Retrospective of Alexey Balabanov's Pictures Will Open in St. Petersburg at the 'Avrora' Cinema], *TASS*, October 13, 2022, tass.ru/kultura/16051725

⁹⁵ M. Kuvshinova, "Poka imperskiï zariâd ne budet obezvrezhen, rossiiskaia kul'tura ostaetsiâ opasnoï dlia sosedei" [Until the Imperial Charge Is Neutralized, Russian Culture Remains Dangerous to Its Neighbors], *Holod*, August 9, 2022, holod.media/2022/03/24/kuvshinova_balabanov/

Night Wolves. One significant detail about $\widehat{\text{I}}\text{Ura}$ is that, despite his skill, he is still not constructed as a James Bond or Jason Bourne type of character. He is distinctly not commissioned by the government; rather, he is a symbol of the government's limitations. The police cannot do anything about drug dealers, but $\widehat{\text{I}}\text{Ura}$ can; officials cannot stop Nazi sympathizers in the West, but $\widehat{\text{I}}\text{Ura}$ does. The government, as the order-installing entity, here is replaced by the Night Wolves, whose members outside of the country join the group not because of their nationality, but out of respect and belief in their ideology.

Despite *Vnuk*'s lack of popularity with audiences, in his film *Garafutdinov* engages the commonly loved archetype of an underdog warrior of justice who goes against conventional and legal ways to install peace. However, this is not the sole example in contemporary Russian cinema where this archetype is invoked; one of the most interesting cases are films sponsored and produced by the infamous Wagner Group, a private military company (PMC) until recently headed by Evgenii Prigozhin. Wagner actively participates in the ongoing war in Ukraine, and in the past has been involved in the military action in Donbas, as well as some African countries, such as Sudan, Central African Republic, Mali, and Libya.⁹⁶ Until the invasion of Ukraine, Wagner was of interest predominantly to oppositional and Western journalists; however, now the name is known colloquially amongst the population. This has required certain image building which was done through the use of symbolism (sledgehammer,⁹⁷ *Cheburashka*⁹⁸) and primarily through the figure of the eccentric Evgenii

⁹⁶ Kimberly Marten, "Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces: The Case of the Wagner Group," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2019): 181–204, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2019.1591142>.

⁹⁷ I. Nekrasov, "Ot Orudiiā Kazni Do Simvola ChVK: Kak Poiāvilas' Kuvalda «Vagnera»" [From an Execution Weapon to a PMC Symbol: How the Wagner Sledgehammer Came to Be], *NGS*, August, 24 2023, ngs.ru/text/incidents/2023/08/24/72634856/

⁹⁸ *Cheburashka* is a fictional character from a Soviet cartoon *Gena the Crocodile* (Roman Kachanov, 1969) and the story by Eduard Uspensky, that has been recently made into a new film by Dmitrii Diachenko in 2023. Because of its release during the war, the character has been taken up by the Wagner Group and the Russian military as the mascot of the invasion, often appearing dressed in a military uniform and bearing a weapon.

Prigozhin, who actively communicated with his audiences via his Telegram channel until his death in August 2023.

Wagner's consistent activity in media and social networks has also created a certain favoritism among the war-supporting population towards the group. The attempted coup in June 2023 only proved the growing sympathies of the population towards the PMC, where people would be happily greeting the column of soldiers on their way to Moscow.⁹⁹ This appeal of the PMC can be explained in one way: the government's official conscription, which primarily affects lower class households and deprives the families of their primary source of income – the male figure – created a certain disdain amongst the population, which has been recently expressed in the waves of protests of wives and mothers of mobilized men. Wagner, on the other hand, provided families with an option of being reunited through the PMC's recruitment scheme. Many of the Wagner's soldiers have been taken from the prison system, where an individual would be sent to combat for some time and then released without having to finish serving his sentence. Unlike forced conscription, this scheme is much more convenient to prisoner's relatives, as the man would return home not simply as a reformed criminal, but a war hero.¹⁰⁰ The coup and mysterious deaths of Wagner's leaders of course ruined the reputation of the Group, as the soldiers and troops have been under the control of the Russian government since. However, before their demise, the Wagner PMC had another image-building venture, the production of films.

Overall, the Wagner Group has sponsored three films to date: *Hotsunlight* [*Solntsepëk*, 2021], *Tourist* [*Turist*, 2021], and *Best in Hell* [*Luchshie v Adu*, 2022], which deal with three

⁹⁹ “Voïna Chetyresta vosem’desiāt piātyī den’”. Onlāin “Meduzy” [War Four Hundred Eighty-Fifth Day. Online “Meduza”], *Meduza*, June 23, 2023, meduza.io/live/2023/06/23/voyna

¹⁰⁰ On the recruitment of prisoners by Wagner PMC: “Oni vozvrashchaiŭtsiā. Zakliŭchennye iz "ChVK Vagnera" vykhodiāt na voliŭ” [They Are Returning. Prisoners from Wagner PMC Are Being Released], *Radio Svoboda*, January 30, 2023, www.svoboda.org/a/oni-vozvrashchayutsa-zaklyuchennye-iz-cvk-wagnera-vyhodyat-na-volyu/32246049.html

respective conflicts the private military company was involved in: the 2014 War in Donbas, the military coup in the Central African Republic in 2020, and the siege of Mariupol during the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In all of these films, the main focus is on combat and action elements, with real Wagner soldiers taking part in the acting process. Surprisingly, all of the films have gained quite a high praise from audiences, averaging at 7 out of 10 at Kinopoisk, a Russian version of IMDb. There is no information about the budget or box office of the films, perhaps because they never had a theatrical release. Rather, the films have been shown on Russian TV channels or are available on local online streaming platforms. And for the most part, the production is kept in secrecy from the press, especially in questions of financial funding. The directors of the films, Maxim Brius (*Hotsunlight*) and Andreï Sherbinin (*Tourist, Best in Hell*), for the most part previously worked with low-budget TV shows and production; however, Brius had a large break when directing the film *Zoya* in 2019, the topic of this thesis's second chapter. What is most interesting is that in the case of *Best in Hell*, a producer of the film, Aleksey Nagin, was been killed in the war in Ukraine before the film's premiere. The trailer of the film even addresses it, stating that "Nagin died protecting the interests of Russia".¹⁰¹

Hotsunlight and *Tourist* both focus on the stories of individuals who with the help of Wagner Group soldiers deal with complex military situations. The protagonist of *Hotsunlight* Vladislav (Aleksandr Buharov), an Afghan war veteran and now an ambulance driver, witnesses an attack by Ukrainian soldiers who kill his family and relatives. In an attempt to avenge them, he joins Luhansk's group of separatists in their fight for liberation. At the end of the film, the situation is resolved via the Wagner Group's involvement, as they destroy the Ukrainian military and pass the territories under the control of the separatist group. *Tourist*

¹⁰¹ Kinoman, "Luchshie v Adu — Ofitsial'nyĭ Treĭler (2022)" [Best in Hell - Official Trailer (2022)], YouTube, September 22, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcPA70hi9xI&ab_channel=Kinoman

focuses on the former policeman protagonist Grisha, nicknamed ‘Tourist’ (Vladimir Petrov), who goes to the Central African Republic as part of an instruction group to teach the local military named FACA certain combat tactics. The training is interrupted by the civil war unraveling in the country, and the protagonist and the rest of the Russian soldiers get dragged into the conflict. The participation of Wagner is not as explicit as in *Hotsunlight* but the vehicles, and private plane of Prigozhin, as well as some soldiers make a cameo in the film.¹⁰² With the help of the Russian soldiers FACA manages to suppress the rebellion, and Grisha ‘Tourist’ comes back to Russia. However, realizing the complete corruption of the police system, he goes back to Africa to continue to uphold justice in the military setting. Once again, these two films demonstrate the complete limitation and failure of government systems, *Hotsunlight’s* Vladislav and his separatist group get rescued by Wagner Group, while Grisha in *Tourist*, through encountering the flaws of the police system, prefers to continue his work in the PMC.

The last Wagner Group film, *Best in Hell* completely abstracts the idea of politics, erasing the geopolitical aspect from the narrative. While there is a clear understanding of what the film is supposed to represent – a 2022 siege of Mariupol in Ukraine – the two sides are simply labeled as ‘whites’ and ‘yellows’, without any distinct language or national identifications. Even though, at the very end of the film, when the commanders of respective groups do a little speech in parallel montage, the ‘yellows’ respond with ‘Glory to the Heroes’,¹⁰³ situating them as soldiers for the Ukrainian side. The film presumes a certain prerequisite knowledge about war and support for the Russian side to create an emotional

¹⁰² L. Yapparova, “Kak vyiasnila «Meduza», biznesmen Evgenii Prigozhin prosponiroval s”emki fil’ma «Turist» — o rossiiskikh voennykh v Afrike. V nem snialis’ nastoiashchie naemniki iz ChVK Vagnera” [As Meduza Found out, Businessman Evgenii Prigozhin Sponsored the Filming of the Film ‘Tourist’ - about the Russian Military in Africa. It Starred Real Mercenaries from Wagner PMC], *Meduza*, May 19, 2021, meduza.io/feature/2021/05/19/amerikantsy-za-demokratiyu-boryutsya-a-my-za-spravedlivost

¹⁰³ The chant “Glory to Ukraine”, and its response “Glory to the Heroes”, is one of the symbols of Ukrainian self-identification.

connection to the ‘white’ soldiers due to the absence of political and historical context in the film. The characters then, instead of fighting for ideology or a certain government, fight for a specific idea of justice, as explained in the ending credits of the film. The title cards read: “We have a contract, contract with company, contract with the motherland, [contract] with consciousness”. Remarkably, the government is not present in this equation, rather it is split into two: company – meaning Wagner PMC and motherland – and an abstract understanding of Russia. But what is most important here is the contract with consciousness [*sovest’*]. Participation in this military mission is not understood as a forced conscription on the part of the government or a patriotic initiative of the citizen; rather it is a moral obligation, a way to install a version of justice.

This idea of self-inflicted moral justice is what unites Garafutdinov’s *Vnuk* and Wagner Group films and singles out this newly popularized filmmaking practice. The protagonist is no longer a soldier, an extension of the government’s ambitions; rather, he (and it is always a masculine figure) is a self-determined person who sets off to fix imbalance in the world. Invoking the iconic appeal of Balabanov’s Danila Bagrov, this new protagonist is instructed not by ideology or political convictions, but rather by his moral compass that he wishes to uphold in the form of justified violence. This unruly outcast figure creates a point of identification for audiences which exists in opposition to the idealized Great Patriotic War soldier. Mimicking the crisis of the 90s post-Soviet Russia in this modern-day representation, government once again is completely erased from the picture or proves to be inadequate in solving the problem at hand. Ūra in *Vnuk* does not go to the police or military for help, rather he finds it in the Night Wolves chapter, which has more leverage internationally. Similarly, *Hotsunlight*’s Vladislav can only rely on the separatist movement or Wagner group to avenge his family, and Grisha in *Tourist* demonstrates the corruption of police altogether, deciding to stay with Wagner to uphold his justice. The ambiguous ‘yellows’ and ‘whites’ in *Best in Hell*

are focused on their contracts with consciousness, rather than any geopolitical gains. The emergence of this trope challenges the government's control over the war narrative, offering the audiences an alternative version of events some might find even more appealing. While commercial mainstream war genre films about the Great Patriotic War re-situate Soviet media and history within a contemporary context, Garafutdinov's *Vnuk* and Wagner Group's films reflect on the current turbulent state of the country, aligning themselves with the collective population rather than with the government. While certainly these films present a version of Putin's militarized nationalist discourse, these new war genre films challenge the monolithic understanding of the connection between the government and the people. The centralization of moral justice and consciousness appeals to populist sentiment further demonstrate the power of nationalist ideas present in current Russian socio-political milieu.

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