ARTICLES

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THE MYTH OF THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR IN POST-COMMUNIST RUSSIAN CINEMA:

CAUSES, EFFECTS, PERSPECTIVES

Abstract
This article is an original attempt to define the main features of the myth of the Great Patriotic War in post-Communist Russian cinema. By combining historical, cultural and film studies, the author defines the reasons for the appearance of the above-mentioned myth and its popularity, and indicates the effects of the ideologisation of an event which has been important for politics of history during the rule of Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin. The article will cite examples of films containing repetitive narrative elements that appear with varying intensity and regularity in the Russian political and public discourse on the Great Patriotic War. The author will also refer to how such films have been received, and will define a potential perspective for the further development of this theme.

Keywords: Great Patriotic War, Russia, Russian cinema, ideology, politics of history.

Russian Cinema Facing the Political Transformation

After the USSR collapsed in 1991, Russian cinematography found itself in crisis: the pauperisation of society resulted in a sudden drop in cinema attendance, and political and institutional problems led to the minimising of state subsidies and the quality of film productions being reduced. The Russian people found themselves in a situation of axiological chaos. The sudden, albeit predictable and inevitable loss of superpower statehood and the intense social and habitual changes in the second half of the 1980s prevented the smooth transfer of existing socio-cultural values. This created a space for creating cinematic narratives which could be truly innovative in terms of identity and creativity.

In the second half of the 1990s, members of the post-Communist film culture in Russia (mainly directors and representatives of the profession, new in Russia, of film producer) tried to define potential directions for the development of Russian cinema. Some of them decided that the new cinema should shape and strengthen the national identity of the Russian people. Sergey Selyanov, head of STV, one of the largest Russian film studios, argued that Russian cinema had lost its sacral function (he referred to Soviet directors as prophets and teachers, in whose films audiences of the time sought answers to questions that disturbed them) because the conditions restricting creative freedom, which had hitherto enhanced the directors' creativity, had now disappeared. The directors' creative activity was no longer stimulated by a top-down motivating force, which had inspired the higher political echelons to use the medium of film to create a new national idea (Selyanov 1999, pp. 43–46). In the late 1990s, the director Nikita Mikhalkov stated that cinema should be capable of shaping the consciousness of the social masses (Mikhalkov 1999, p. 50), and should represent an attractive model to follow while fulfilling a didactic function (Mikhalkov 1999, pp. 51–53). The director Aleksandr Mitta highlighted the enormous potential of Russian cinematography (among Mitta's films we may mention *Ekipazh* from 1979, one of the few Soviet disaster movies, and *Granitsa. Tayozhniy*

roman from 2000). Mitta believed that film production can be profitable when its content consolidates the different generations and is adapted to the rigid rules of the genre (Mitta 2011, p. 650). In passing, one may notice the relationship between ideological representations in film and the generation of profit. The absence of ideological and indoctrinal narratives in the media has long condemned them to a short lifespan and low efficiency.

When talking about film as a platform for the "distribution" of such content, it must be remembered that the foundation of the film industry's efficient operation is not merely support, such as from the state, during production, but also, most measurably, the public reception of the work. High attendance is usually the result of a good marketing campaign and proper distribution. This translates into material profit. It is impossible to assume that cinema could do without profits; I therefore believe that Mitta's observation that film must be profitable—as only then will it reach a wide audience, thus allowing "manipulation" at an ideological level to be carried out—can be justified. It is also worth adding that the issue of receiving or "not receiving" a work of film is related to the issue of consumer choice. Inappropriate content—in this case ideologically—will not be "bought" by the viewer, and so it cannot be conveyed. The director emphasised the mythopoeic function of cinema, declaring that the art of film should play the role of "ideological aid for the renaissance of a great nation" (Mitta 2011, p. 652). Lidia Kuzmina, a film critic and research associate of the Moscow Museum of Cinema (we should note that in addition to her education in film—she graduated from the screenwriting and film studies department at the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography—she also graduated from the history department of Moscow State University), writing for the prestigious *Iskusstvo kino* magazine, suggested that the films made during this period should be considered as a symptom of social awareness. They signal the condition of society, and indicate the "symptoms of its illness or recovery" (Kuzmina 2006, p. 280).

These discussions about the potential paths for the development of Russian cinema took place among the more elite groups, or among émigrés, while most people were focused on the possibility of simply continuing the

profession of film-making in conditions of drastic economic and political changes. The opinions cited above show that one of the functions of the new Russian cinema was to create unified narratives of a community, while at the same time use recognisable genre codes to attract viewers to the screens. The dominant trend in the late 1990s was to reflect on cinema in terms of creating mythology and identity; however slightly earlier, in the first half of the decade, quite strong revisionist and deconstructive tendencies in Russian cinema had emerged, directly related to the socio-cultural issues of the time. I shall develop this idea in a later part of this text.

The Great Patriotic War: a New-Old Political Mythology

It is impossible to reflect on representations of the Great Patriotic War in post-Communist Russian cinema without taking the historical context into account. I shall apply the typical periodisation of the post-Soviet period: the presidency of Boris Yeltsin (1991–1999) and the era of Vladimir Putin (from 2000). Olga Malinova, whose text entitled "Political Uses of the Great Patriotic War in Post-Soviet Russia from Yeltsin to Putin" (published in *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, edited by Julie Fedor et al.) shall serve as the substantive framework for this chapter, has indicated the important role of the Great Patriotic War in building the post-Communist national identity of the Russian people. Neither the macro-ideas of the CPSU regarding the "unification" of a diverse society nor the dissidents' counter--narratives after the collapse of the USSR were relevant any longer; it was thus necessary to apply a selective approach to the past, so that on the one hand the creation of the new identity would be historically rooted, while on the other it would no longer be associated with the system (Malinova 2017, pp. 43–4).

Let me remind you that the Great Patriotic War in Russia (and most CIS member states) does not fully correspond to World War II, although these concepts often function synonymously. On the one hand, it is an obvious part of

the world-war process; on the other, however, the GPW has different time frames, sociopolitical conditions and scales of intensity. The GPW can also be seen as one of the ideological propaganda constructs that legitimise, firstly, the historical and cultural policy of the state (both in the former USSR and modern Russia), and secondly, the "us/them" dichotomy (= Russia/the West, "our" war/"their" war). In this context, the "World War II" suggests a greater variety of this historical process (it was a global, transnational, process, ambivalent from various perspectives), which lessens its ideological "usefulness" for particularist Russian historiography.

Malinova considers the Great Patriotic War to be the most politically useful element of Russian history as it has a high degree of public acceptance, is clearly institutionalised, and functions within the framework of spiritual and material culture without any problems (Malinova 2017, p. 45). Yeltsin's attempts to implement a democratic model required a radical revision of the Communist past, in particular the October Revolution (1917) and the Great Patriotic War. Malinova notes that the Revolution, the source of Soviet statehood and ideology, became a bone of contention between Russian liberals and Communists (Malinova 2017, p. 48), as evidenced by the August 1991 coup and the subsequent constitutional crisis. It should be noted at this point: Malinova and others often highlight a certain ambivalence. The Revolution can be seen as the interruption of Russia's fundamental imperial statehood, the political de-Europeanisation of Russia. At the same time, it was perceived as an act which founded the Russian national spirit, as it implemented "truly Russian" postulates based on an idea of collectivism derived from nineteenth-century Slavophilism and Orthodoxy (Malinova 2017, p. 49). The victory in the war in May 1945 was still unquestionably seen as a positive achievement of the Communist system (Malinova 2017, p. 48).

In the 1990s, however, the perception of the events of wartime changed significantly. Victory in war was already clearly defined as an achievement of the Nation, not of the Party. The government's exploitative approach to their own nation ("victory at any cost") was also criticised (Malinova 2017, p. 50). Changing the narrative about the war changed the way in which it was commemorated. The new formats for

honouring the memory of the victims and heroes allowed for the diminution of all connotations with Soviet traditions and symbolism. In the first half of the 1990s the ceremonies were not held at the famous Red Square, but at the new Victory Park on Poklonnaya Hill in Moscow (Malinova 2017, pp. 51–52). However, these new practices did not find wide recognition either among the general public or the ruling elite. For this reason, since 1995 (the 50th anniversary of the victory), the official ceremonies have been resumed on Red Square, and the Soviet flag has returned to favour as the banner of victory. It can be concluded that the memory of the war was used not only for national integration, but also to reduce the degree of political confrontation (Malinova 2017, p. 54), especially in connection with the growing tension in Chechnya, then tending towards separatism.

On December 31, 1999, Vladimir Putin became acting president. Almost immediately the reconstruction of the concept of Russian statehood began. The main demands of the new Russia were included in a manifesto entitled "Russia at the turn of the millennium", published in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* on December 30, 1999. In it, Putin declares the inadmissibility of negating and devaluing Soviet achievements, but admits that the Communist experiment was unsuccessful and too costly (Malinova 2017, pp. 56–57; Putin 1999). The new Russia was to be based on three pillars: the idea of Russia, a strong state and an efficient economy (Putin 1999). This suggested a radical strengthening of state structures in exchange for a relatively stable standard of living, which would potentially lead to the political passivity and the patriotic activation of the Russian people.

At the beginning of the Putin era, the cult of the war became fundamental and universal. This thesis is confirmed by the official discourse on this event and the schematic nature of the practices of its commemoration. It is worth noting Malinova's analyses of the speeches given on Victory Day in the period 2000–2016. This list shows the way in which this event came to serve as a means of consolidation; its memory was intended to bind together a diverse society and reinforce the imperialist ambitions of the Russian government (the common history as a pretext for Eurasian integration) (Malinova 2017, pp. 59–63).

Victory Day has now become the most popular state holiday, and has become "carnivalised", as evidenced by the extreme, even grotesque spectacle of the celebrations of consecutive anniversaries, which borders on a profanation of the war victims' memory. This holiday is a catalyst for the contemporary Russian model of patriotism: it perfectly combines elements of free-market commerce (such as the production and sale of souvenirs, the premieres of national blockbusters during the period of the May holidays, and so on) with Soviet "ideals" (the primacy of the state, the ideological *diktat*, schematicity, demonstrativeness). In the Putin era (including the presidency of Dmitri Medvedev in 2008–2012), the process of institutionalising the war actually came to an end, and became an effective tool of propaganda.

The War on Russian Screens: Ideological Motives

Just as the post-Soviet national identity of the Russian people (who are the main addressees and audiences of the films discussed in this article) needed a foothold in the memory of the war, Russian cinema needed a universal myth that was both understandable and saleable to the domestic viewer. In parentheses, we may note that almost every post-Soviet country has developed its own model for presenting the events of the Great Patriotic War or World War II, taking the impact of the war on the public consciousness into account. For example, in the countries of Central Asia, the theme of the war has not been exploited as intensively for the creation of historical film narratives as it has in Russia or Belarus. Meanwhile in the cinema of the Baltic countries, the war is shown in a different way: everything depends here on the ideological position of the post-Soviet countries and the identity strategies they have adopted. These models often correspond with Russian cinema (after all, it is the largest film industry in this region), just as Russian cinema uses typically "Hollywood" narratives and strategies. However, analysing these circumstances is beyond the scope of this article.

In his considerations on the idea of national cinema, Andrew Higson, drawing upon the thoughts of Stephen Heath et al.,

wrote: "Cinema needs to be understood as one of the means by which it [nationhood] is 'gained'" (Higson 1989, p. 44). Creating a historical narrative through the medium of film is based on a process of selection, as a result of which certain issues are favoured while others are marginalised (Higson 1989, p. 44). This makes it possible to consider the interest of one particular social group as a representative interest for, to use Benedict Anderson's term, the entire imagined community (Higson 1989, p. 44). The motif of victory in the war, as well as the attempts to "appropriate" it, represent one of the pillars of contemporary Russian historical policy. The memory of this event has a function of consolidation, uniting a country that is diverse in terms of ethnicity and culture (Syska 2017, p. 22). To draw upon Higson, it can be said that the government recognised the war as a representative interest for the whole society.

This event is the foundation of Russian "cultural memory". This type of memory, as captured by the Jan and Aleida Assmans, is preserved in cultural records based on the created foundation myths of a specific community (Assmann 2015, p. 68). Cultural memory is usually constructed from the top down, and is responsible for the group's identity; it thus participates in the process of building a vision of its future. If communicative memory (being a form of bottom-up memory, generational memory) is passed on orally, then cultural memory is reproduced through codification and staging in media recordings (Assmann 2015, p. 71) such as images, words or films. This explains the enormous presence of the war in contemporary Russian culture, including film culture: after all, cultural memory is a tool for the institutionalisation and preservation of ideologically important narratives.

Cinema is a media platform that allows a policy to be pursued which both consolidates the mechanisms of collective memory and generates economic profits. Scientific reflection on the possibilities of representing historical events in the cinema allows us to believe that historiophoty can narratologically, and formally better than historiography, reflect certain aspects of historical events while complementing existing narratives (White 2008, p. 118). The visual media are also modern society's primary source of historical knowledge (Rosenstone 2008, p. 96).

The generational changes and the distance of the war in time mean that the Russian government can now deliberately create a new image of it and reproduce the myth of the great victory, while adapting it to their own ideological needs. Boris Dubin, writing about the contemporary meaning of the victory, notes that the mass media have become the main tool of the systematic ideological work that is the formation of the collective identification of new generations of Russians. The war narratives are being encrusted with imperial and Orthodox symbolism, but are also being characterised by Hollywood-level spectacle (Dubin 2004). In this way, ideology is associated with prosperity. The product must not only reach the recipient, but also convince him ideologically.

The 1990s

After 1991, film production in Russia dropped drastically, from 112 full-length films in 1992 to 28 in 1996 (Lewicki 2014, p. 197). The beginnings of the new Russian cinema, dating back to the Gorbachev period of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, are associated with the brutal, grimly hyper-realist *chernukha* style, as well as amateurish production values which enjoyed little real popularity. Narratives on contemporary topics prevailed: the traumatic war in Afghanistan, the growing tensions in the Caucasus, *dedovshchina* (the hierarchical, ritual system of hazing new army conscripts), organised crime, and so on. These trends led to the above-mentioned polemic in the Russian film world on the need to create a new mythology.

Birgit Beumers points out that the process of rewriting history accompanying the disintegration of the USSR and the first years of the post-Communist era stimulated new artistic reflections: for example, the narratives of Stalinist terror, which had hitherto been effectively erased, were restored; these became perceived as the historical and axiological equivalent of the theme of the Great Patriotic War (Beumers 2000, p. 171).

Beumers also mentions that the 1990s were a time which saw the demythologisation of the Communist past, which was particularly visible in the context of the ongoing armed conflicts around the former USSR (Beumers 2000, p. 171). It can therefore be assumed that this is one of the reasons why

The poster of Andrey Malyukov's film "Ya – russkiy soldat" ("I am a Russian soldier") (1995). Source: kinopoisk.ru website

the subject of the Great Patriotic War was rarely examined in the Russian filmography of the time. The state no longer saw cinema as an ideological tool. As a result of the loss of strict control and the disappearance of the Communist subsidies, filmmakers focused on topics that were more in keeping with the spirit of the times and their own creative ambitions. If there had previously been a Party need for specific narratives, the production of which was controlled at every stage, then the 1990s saw a previously unknown creative freedom. The subject of the war clearly predominated in film narratives produced in the USSR, which in a certain sense reduced its attractiveness after the dissolution of the state.

In line with the artistic trend of the times, cinema also retreated from presenting macro-narratives affirming the ideas of Communism. The focus was on the individual functioning within an oppressive system; his psyche and morality were explored, which may be an interpretative key to analysing the war movies made in this decade. 1992 saw the premiere of the biographical film *General*, directed by Igor Nikolaev, a former front-line soldier. The film about Aleksandr Gorbatov, a military commander and Hero of the Soviet Union (played byVladimir Gostyukhin), was made in the post-*glasnost* spirit; it defies the Communist schematics for portraying the war. Critically, the film presents the low level of organisation and frustration within the Red Army during the first months of fighting, which led to numerous casualties. In this film, the war is removed from the sphere of the sacrum; it portrays a series of personal tragedies resulting from the ignorance of the totalitarian dignitaries. Many historical figures appear in the work (for example, Marshal Georgi Zhukov, Marshal Konstantin Rokossovsky, Boris Pasternak, Nikita Khrushchev and others). The plot of *General* also refers to the pre-war period of the hero's life; the motif of the Stalinist repression is referred to (after 1937 Gorbatov was tried for "counter--revolutionary crimes" and tortured many times).

Boris Vasiliev's 1974 novel *V spiskakh nie znachilsya* [Not found in the records] was adapted in 1995 as *Ya – russkiy soldat* [I am a Russian soldier], directed by Andrei Malyukov. The action revolves around the fictional character of Lieutenant Pluzhnikov (played by Dmitri Medvedev), modelled on an unknown soldier defending the Brest Fortress until the spring

of 1942. The film is an interesting product of the ideological changes of the mid-1990s: it combines elements of gloomy aesthetics with patriotic mythology. The protagonist, who is an eyewitness to the drama of war, hides in the basement of the fortress with a Jewish woman, Mirra (played by Milena Chovreb-Agranovich; the film features "commercial" romanticism as well as a Jewish thread, the latter something unusual for Russian cinema) and bravely fights the enemy, losing his companions in arms.

The main character resembles a "canonical" Russian soldier, an uncompromising patriot. This mythical model of a great, noble Russian resembles the heroes of period cinema about the GPW. For example, in one scene Pluzhnikov decides to kidnap a German from a security battalion as a prisoner--informer, but nobly allows his defenceless enemy to escape. In the last scene, physically and morally exhausted, Pluzhnikov "comes to the surface"; when asked by a German general about the name and rank of the soldier, he replies: "I am a Russian soldier." The general and the German officers and soldiers surrounding him, after hesitating for a moment, stand to attention and salute as a sign of respect.

The Czech comedy *Život a neobyčejná dobrodružství vojáka Ivana Čonkina* [The life and unusual adventures of the soldier Ivan Chonkin] (director: Jiří Menzel, 1994), based on the satirical novel of the same title by the Russian dissident Vladimir Voynovich, is another interesting case. The comedy shows the adventures of the clumsy Chonkin (who resembles Jaroslav Hašek's anti-hero Švejk) at the beginning of the war. The context of this production is interesting; the film is a typical transnational co-production, in the modern understanding of this model of cooperation. Production companies from the Czech Republic, Russia, Great Britain and other countries, a Czech film crew and a predominantly Russian stable of actors took part in the production.

The above-mentioned films were selected at random: I have briefly indicated the key to their interpretation. My choices were also dictated by the fact that other films from the period in question are either unavailable or do not fit the subject of this text. I consider these examples to be representative because they signal certain trends and changes that were taking place in Russian cinematography in the 1990s. These films

are not necessarily masterpieces of Russian cinematography; moreover, another researcher might notice other, equally important elements of war mythology in the same or different films. It is worth noting that few films about the GPW were being made at that time, because there were many other topics that were more current, more "painful" than the war, which had already been examined in many ways in Soviet cinema. It is also relevant that there was not enough funding at that time to create large-scale films about the war, a theme which is inevitably associated with blockbuster movies and their huge production costs.

The Image of the War after 2000

After Putin came to power, the practice of making films on government orders (*goszakaz*) was revived. This period also saw the return of non-political censorship aimed at keeping morality in art. An implicit division into "harmful" and "beneficial" movies was made. The Russian Ministry of Culture and *Fond Kino* (the Cinema Fund) were more ready to support productions focused on "beneficial" themes, but this kind of "agitprop" rarely became popular with viewers (Dolin, Kuvshinova 2016, pp. 71–73).

After 2000, Russian cinematography took on the qualities of an industry. The government began systematic work aimed not only at the economic stabilisation of Russian cinema, but also at creating demand for its products. A simplified model for subsidies encouraged many young filmmakers to begin their own projects, which increased the number of films produced: since 2015 at least 120 Russian productions have been distributed in cinemas every year (Sedykh 2017, p. 15; Leontyeva 2019; Belikova 2019). Thus, the film industry once again became both economically and ideologically dependent on the state, although of course the scale of this dependence is much smaller than it was during the Communist period. The war quickly became a "beneficial" topic, and victory became a historical entity of a timeless, mythical nature.

Since 2000, the subject of the war has remained one of the predominant historical themes in Russian cinema. The stabilising political and economic situation favoured

the production of more and more expensive films, many of which can be considered typical blockbusters. In analysing the genesis and functions of Soviet and Russian blockbuster cinema, Beumers wrote that in key historical moments this kind of cinema acts as a non-political, entertaining distraction, although it also ensured stability by following accepted genre conventions (Beumers 2003, p. 443). In addition, Beumers writes, the genre conventions on which blockbusters are based draw upon recognisable literary structures, cultural conventions and national traditions; these transform genre patterns into myth, and bestows upon the genre the function of establishing harmony during a time of conflict (Beumers 2003, pp. 444–5). Beumers' reflection on this subject resembles that of Charles F. Altman (Rick Altman) on the film genre; on the one hand, he attributed features such as axiological dualism, repeatability, cumulative character and predictability (which corresponds to the ritual function of blockbusters) to genre cinema, which on the other hand is also distinguished by a nostalgic character, symbolism and social functionality (which gives these blockbusters their ideological function) (Altman 1987, pp. 21–22).

I will consider a few more recent examples of movies that can be located both in the domain of the blockbuster and of the myth-making construct perpetuating ideological narratives. Blockbusters (superproductions), which fall within the genre of cinema, are profit-oriented (like all such films); however, the stability of the narrative framework used in these films allows them to encompass ideologically marked content, and present it in a way which to some degree is genuinely entertaining. Nikita Mikhalkov's film *Utomlyonnie solntsem 2* [Burned by the sun 2, 2010] is a kind of sequel to the Oscar--winning film *Utomlyonnie solntsem* (1994) presenting the fate of the soldier Sergei Kotov (played by the director in both films) during the purges. The film's narrative incoherence is compensated for by its spectacularity and naturalism, which "borders on revelling in the violence and general emotional hysteria" (Larina 2010). In his film, Mikhalkov constructs an authoritarian version of the myth of the Great Patriotic War and the victory, arbitrarily and deliberately imposing the way in which the work will be received, offering the viewer content that does not require deep reflection (Bronsky 2011).

The director clearly indicates the key to interpreting his work. Apart from showing (quite conventionally) the atrocities of war, the film also shows the evolution in the "Russian" heroes of their faith in God; this transforms the group, which is disunited at the beginning of the film, into a unit that is religiously and nationally consolidated, and bravely resists the invaders. In this way Mikhalkov indicates that the almost total ejection of religion from social life during Stalinism was one of the greatest wrongdoings of Communist totalitarianism, because—in accordance with the Putinist trend—it is actually one of the building blocks of Russian national identity.

A model example of the new narrative about the war is the international blockbuster *Stalingrad* (directed by Fyodor Bondarchuk, 2013). The historical background of the film is the famous Battle of Stalingrad (August 23, 1942 – February 2, 1943), which is an important topos of official Russian historiography, symbolising the heroism and solidarity of the Russian people. The historical narrative of Stalingrad is a collage of recurring genre codes (war movie, melodrama, psychological drama, and so on). There is an overarching narrative that duplicates the above-mentioned supremacist myths: Russian rescue workers help the Japanese (let us not forget, Russia is still at loggerheads with Japan over the Kuril Islands today) to eliminate the consequences of a series of earthquakes. Among the rescuers is Lieutenant Astakhov (Sergei Bondarchuk Jr.), who tells the life story of his mother Katia, who was found under the rubble, to a tourist from Germany.

Katia (Maria Smolnikova), the film's main protagonist, lives in a tenement house occupied by the remnants of Red Army platoons, and defends the house shoulder to shoulder with the soldiers. Surrounded by five men, the protagonist enters into asexual relationships with each of the heroes. She is "the perfect Russian woman": a brave patriot, a caring matron, as well as a subtle woman. The B-plot shows the perverse relationship between young Masha (Yana Studilina) and the German Captain Kahn (Thomas Kretschmann), in a way which reinforces the patterns of "true Russianness": the noble, self-respecting Russians are pitted against the perverted, cruel Germans, and (ideological) traitors like Masha will be punished.

Stalingrad is a coherent film (which is a significant virtue in this genre) while at the same time portraying an overly simplified narrative. The battle is only a pretext for the development of the plot; it is a macro-narrative that hangs over the characters and builds the dramatic tension. The viewers' attention is directed to the individual characters and their relationships. To an extent such simplifications are necessary—this film was intended to "win over" a non-Russian audience as well. The film has a clear structure based on archetypes and simple characters, which means that it can be understood by a historically incompetent viewer. The simplifications, however, are more than compensated for by the iconography and ideologisation of the message, which recalls a fundamental "Russianness"; the simplicity, then, does not eliminate the national character of the work. This film is a typical blockbuster film, and a co-production with an international cast and production team; at the time, this somehow suggested that the film could go beyond the borders of the country of its creation and function in international distribution. This is another reason for the simplifications—they were carried out so that foreign viewers in the "ordinary" world can understand this film without having to read through Russian history before watching it. It is, one could say, a national and transnational work at the same time. In this case, the genre and conventionality of the film may also fit within the genre of national cinema.

The symbolism of the house is important in this work. The tenement in which the heroes hide recalls peacetime, and "conserves" its elements. It is a symbol of the USSR (and implicitly Russia; the transnational context of the victory is erased) during its collapse, where a group of diverse, but united and spiritually strong citizens are hiding, while bravely fighting the onslaught. Exploiting the archetype of the house testifies to the patriotic dimension of the narrative, even though it became somewhat grotesque due to its translation into the blockbuster model. The prototype of the tenement house is what was known as "Pavlov's house", which became a fortress for Soviet troops during the battle. *Stalingrad* is an example of a film in which the historical narrative is appropriated by a jingoistic ethos, which then turns into a celebration of Russianness and the "traditional" values being promoted by the current Russian state.

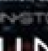
The poster of Fyodor Bondarchuk's film "Stalingrad" (2013). Source: IMDb website

HIGHEST GROSSING RUSSIAN MOVIE OF ALL TIME!

THE EPIC BATTLE
THAT TURNED THE TIDE
OF WORLD WAR II

STALINGRAD

IN 3D AND IMAX 3D



COMING SOON

STALINGRADMOVIE.NET

In 2018, the film *Sobibor* (directed by Konstantin Khabiensky) was released. The plot is based on the uprising of prisoners in the German Nazi extermination camp at Sobibór in 1943, under the leadership of a former Red Army officer, Lieutenant Aleksandr Pechersky (played by the director himself). The directing debut of this famous Russian actor was an attempt to restore historical justice, and also to pay tribute, to Pechersky, who was little present in Communist historiography. The film's narrative resembles the scheme known from so-called superhero cinema: we observe how the film's Pechersky, thanks to his intelligence and charisma, unites the representatives of the multinational camp community around him, gathers together the "victorious crew", and leads the uprising, which ends in success. This creates the basis for the mythologisation of the figure of Pechersky—into something familiar, a recognisable schematic which includes elements of the biography (or the biographical legend) of the actual person. The Russian is presented as a natural leader without whom the uprising would not have been successful. The film's side plots do not serve to build dramatic tension or construct a credible historical narrative, but rather to reveal new features of the "true Russian" Pechersky. In *Sobibor* there are visible accretions of exploitation cinema expressed in the escalations of violence (for example the scene of the Nazis' cruel "evening gala"), as well as elements typical of popular genre conventions (for example the romantic relationship between the protagonist and the female prisoner).

Aside from the above-mentioned examples, it is also worth mentioning the Russian-Belorussian co-productions *V avgustie 44-go* [In August '44], directed by Mikhail Ptashuk, in 2000/2001, and *Brestskaya krepost* [Brest Fortress], directed by Aleksandr Kott in 2010. These were ideologically marked films confirming the pan-Slavic ambitions of the Eastern European autocracies, based on the consolidation of the wartime experience (with Russia's clear supremacy—the idea of "Russia as an older brother"). Another interesting example is the film *Yedinichka* [Number One], director Kirill Belevich in 2015, in which Red Army soldiers deployed by the ruins of a Polish monastery in 1944 try to save the children who are there. The image of Poles in

The poster of Konstantin Khabiensky's film "Sobibor" (2018). Source: IMDb website

ПОДЛИННАЯ ИСТОРИЯ
ЕДИНСТВЕННОГО
УСПЕШНОГО ВОССТАНИЯ
В ЛАГЕРЕ СМЕРТИ

КОНСТАНТИН ХАБЕНСКИЙ

СОБИБОР

ОСНОВАНО НА РЕАЛЬНЫХ СОБЫТИЯХ

2017

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Т-34

ФИЛЬМ АЛЕКСЕЯ СИДОРОВА

ТАКЖЕ В IMAX

РОССИЯ 1

ПРАВДА

ДЛЯ ЗРИТЕЛЕЙ СТАРШЕ ДВЕНАДЦАТИ ЛЕТ

this work is negative: it is an implementation of the concept of the "Russophobic West" promoted in the official Russian media. It is interesting that the film was made during the preparation of the act to de-Communise the public space in Poland, which the Russian government perceived extremely negatively. In 2019, the film *T-34* (directed by Aleksey Sidorov) was premiered; it presents the story of a Soviet tank crew escaping from the Ohrdruf concentration camp. Critics note that the film has almost no ideological or propaganda ideas, and is entertaining in nature (formally, it is a typical commercial blockbuster). At the same time, its schematic nature is disappointing; the emphasis is on glorifying the media-created national character of the Russians (Dolin 2018)—they are presented as brave, clever, courageous, but also irrational and ruthless.

Reception and Perspectives of the Wartime Theme

Narratives about the Great Patriotic War can be considered as a form of foundation stories, which Jan Assmann identifies with semiotisable myths that have an indicative, normative and formative function (Assmann 2015, pp. 90–91). War as a historical process, in the case of the GPW, has been conventionalised and mythologised. This means that the GPW is not only a historical event, but also a set of specific narratives that act as a landmark for subsequent generations of Russians. It is also an ideological tool that legitimises certain measures taken by the authorities. The construction of the modern war myth is reminiscent of the old Communist macro-narratives. The main difference is that since the 1990s, the victory in the war has come to be seen not as an undisputed achievement of the Communist Party, but as the result of individual acts of heroism. Moreover, the transnational dimension of this event has gradually been somewhat flattened out in Russia: the action has been focused more on figures identifying as Russians, and the role of other nationalities has been marginalised. In post-Communist Russian cinema, the mythology of the GPW has undergone a certain evolution: whereas in the 1990s there

The poster of Aleksey Sidorov's film "T-34" (2018).
Source: IMDb website

were revisionist trends in relation to the past (including the war), since 2000 an affirmative approach to top-down versions of history has become noticeable. Thus, the following can be distinguished as the basic components of the "cinematic" GPW myth: the heroisation of individuals; the supremacy of Russians and Russianness; the sacralisation of the battles; and a hypertrophic patriotism, going hand in hand with Russian Orthodoxy. The deployment of this myth within the framework of genre cinema, a frequent phenomenon in contemporary Russian cinema, favours its stabilisation and endurance, and increases its social significance (this is confirmed in the above-mentioned reflections of Altman and Beumers).

The films about the war are based on the juxtaposition of the Russian collective "I" against the usually extremely negatively portrayed enemy. The image of the enemy is more expressive than the identity of "our side" [*svoi*, *nashi*]. The identity problems of the "protagonists" in films, characteristic of liminal periods (such as wars), are transformed into an ecstatic declaration of belonging to a community, or into a repetitive display of national symbols (Lipovetsky 2008, p. 737). This can be treated as the result of the involution of socialist realism (Lipovetsky uses the term "post-soc" to denote the ideological and artistic constructs resulting from the re-actualisation of socialist-realist discourse in line with the process of late postmodern myth-making: Lipovetsky 2008, p. 752), and a hallmark of the crisis of the Russian state (Gorlewska 2017, p. 13).

Using the theme of the war and the victory in it, a simplified archetype of the Russian fight against the enemy is created; this in turn is blended into the frames of various film genres, and comes to function in different space-time conditions. The wartime myth created in Russian cinema and the belief that there is a constant external threat are also symptoms of the militarisation of contemporary Russian culture (Syska 2017, p. 23). The widespread representation of this myth in cinema and public discourse accustoms the Russian people to perceive war as a norm, and is perpetuates the conviction that the constant struggle with an (often undefined) enemy is a meta-level event driving the country's history (Lipovetsky 2008, p. 738).

However, the growing popularity of Russian cinema within the country has not translated into the growing popularity of the narrative about the Great Patriotic War. Official statistics for the period 2015–2020 (the data for 2020 refer to the period from January 1 to September 1 of that year) indicate that Russian films are increasingly figuring in the 20 most popular annual productions (in 2015, there was 1 [an animation]; in 2016, 2 films; in 2017, 4 films; in 2018, 4 films; in 2019, 3 films (including the above-mentioned *T-34* in third place), and in 2020, as many as 10 Russian films) (EAIS 2015–20). Comedies (including romantic ones), animations, adventure and sports films prevail. There are surprisingly few historical films, especially those related to the subject of the war; these tried (unsuccessfully) to imitate the common patterns that would make their narrative more attractive.

The Great Patriotic War, although still a fundamental element of Russia's historical and identity policies, is gradually giving way in popularity to other media-promoted (and, importantly, topical) subjects (the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, the annexation of Crimea, the intensity of the political confrontation between Russia and the West, and so on). The growing dissatisfaction with Putin's policies and rule makes considerations of a post-Putin Russia more relevant. It seems that the myth of "great Russia and great Russians", which is a template for Russia's other foundation stories, is becoming less and less effective. The unprecedented protests in Khabarovsk in defence of the arrested governor Sergey Furgal in 2020, and the opportunist position the Russian president adopted with regard to the peaceful protests in Belarus, all testify to the crisis of the Putin system, which has for years invested in itself and similar systems—and nothing more—with the sole aim of supporting itself.

The model for commemorating the events of the war consists in creating artificial (and costly, which is perceived negatively in the face of the economic crisis) historical events of a total, all-encompassing nature. It is the totality, the ubiquity of the wartime theme that significantly weakens its identity and creative power, and which is causing the existing narratives to be revised and radically changed. It seems, then, that Russian filmmakers will be forced to search for new, more attractive historical themes for their films.

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