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David Gillespie

Defence of the Realm: The 'New' Russian Patriotism on Screen

1 The war film was a staple feature of the Soviet film industry from the Second World War onwards, and continues to be of major significance in post-Soviet times. Films set during the Great Patriotic War of 1941 and 1945, especially those actually made during the War, established a set of parameters that were to remain more or less constant for the depiction of war up to and since the accession of Vladimir Putin to the Presidency of the Russian Federation in 2000. These parameters are: the demonization of the enemy (be they Nazis or Chechen 'terrorists'), the affirmation of war as a just cause in the defence of Holy Russia, and the ordinary Russian soldier as symbol of the honesty and integrity of the Russian soul. Indeed, of all cinematic genres that of the war film has been least resistant to change since 1991, although since 2000 it has adapted and refined its conventions to the new realities facing the Russian state.¹

The Great Patriotic War since 1991

2 An interesting, if hardly surprising, feature of post-Soviet film treatments of the Great Patriotic War is how little it differs from that of the Soviet period. Indeed, if anything, there is a keener sense of national pride, and the increased brutality allowed on screen in the 1990s and since 2000 stands as a bolder and more forthright testimony to the nature of the evil faced, and the self-abnegation and physical fortitude of the Russian soldier. Amid the mayhem and carnage, it is Russian soldiers who bleed and suffer, although it is now accepted that their wounds are very often caused by their own side.

3 Mikhail Ptashuk's *In August 1944* (2000) is a traditional Soviet war film in this respect. It follows a team of Soviet counter-intelligence agents as they track down Nazi spies masquerading as Red Army soldiers. Although undoubtedly exciting, with a gripping and explosive final gunfight, the film maintains the old ideological certainties: Nazis are bad, but even worse are those Soviet citizens who betray their country and work for them. The one concession to modern, post-glasnost' sensibilities is the criticism of the baneful influence of Stalin's secret police, the NKVD, on military operations, and their insistence on results at any cost, no matter how many lives are lost.

4 Nikolai Lebedev's *The Star* (2002) is the second screen version of a 1947 story by the respected war writer Emmanuil Kazakevich (1913-62). The earlier film was made in 1949 by Alexander Ivanov, but was released only after Stalin's death in 1953. Grigorii Mar'iamov explains why:

The demand to remake the picture based on E. Kazakevich's well-known novella *The Star*, about the heroic death of a group of reconnaissance troops operating in the enemy rear, can be labelled as nothing less than crude, arbitrary violence. Stalin did not agree with the tragic finale, considering that it might 'deter soldiers from becoming reconnaissance troops'. His demand boiled down to having the soldiers carry out their mission and return to base without loss. All arguments to the effect that such a dénouement destroys the authorial design, reduces artistic quality and subverts characterization, came to naught. As a result the director A. Ivanov tried to reconcile both conclusions, leaving an open-ended finale that allowed the viewer to decide the fate of the soldiers himself. The picture was saved.²

5 It is set in the Spring of 1944, when the Red Army is pushing back the German forces to the Soviet border. The 'Star' of the title is the name given to an elite Red Army reconnaissance unit that creates havoc behind the enemy lines. One by one they are picked off, until the final shoot-out against overwhelming odds when the remaining few die heroically, but not before warning their commanders of an impending German counter-offensive which is then

repulsed. Kazakevich's story hints that the soldiers prefer to die rather than return to base and face possible recriminations from the ever-vigilant NKVD, recriminations that could lead to accusations of desertion and cowardice, but this political dimension is missing in Lebedev's film.

6 Lebedev's film is standard fare about handsome, patriotic and bright-eyed Russian boys dying for their Motherland, the pathos of death and the anguish of the sweetheart Katia back at base foregrounded by rising orchestral music. There is no sense of the pernicious effect of NKVD activities in the rear. The bitter anti-Stalinist note comes only in the epilogue, when we learn that the 'Star' unit was for many years regarded as missing in action, and only in 1964 were all its members posthumously awarded medals.

7 *The Star* has much in common with Andrei Maliukov's TV serial *Saboteur* (2004), also about a Red Army elite unit operating behind German lines, causing confusion among the enemy and thinking nothing of risking their own lives for the sake of Mother Russia. What distinguishes *Saboteur* from *The Star*, however, is that here the main enemy is not the Germans, but the NKVD, waiting to use any failed mission as an opportunity for repression and execution. Indeed, *Saboteur* creates the impression, confirmed by historians and writers, that during the war against Nazi Germany, Red Army soldiers were in more danger from their own side than the enemy.

8 This theme is developed in Nikolai Dostal's mammoth TV serial *Penal Battalion* (2004), by far the best and most honest Russian treatment to date of the Great Patriotic War either on screen or TV. The greater openness about the role of the NKVD during the War, encouraged since Gorbachev's *glasnost* of the late 1980s, here reaches its harrowing high point. The '*shtrafniki*' that Captain Tverdokhlebov is put in charge of comprise criminals, political prisoners (soldiers who had fought for the Whites during the Civil War, anti-Soviet agitators and Communist Party members imprisoned during the Purges), and army 'deserters', that is, Red Army troops who had lost contact with their units or been temporarily caught in enemy encirclement. What unites them is hatred for the Nazi enemy and a determination to defend their Motherland. As one of the criminals says: 'Besides Soviet power there is also our native land. The German is in charge there, and that for me is worse than a knife in the throat.' This intuitive patriotism proves to be their redemption, even though, as with most of the battalion, this will only be in death.

9 The conditions under which the penal battalion is forced to fight are not glossed over: clearing minefields with their own bodies, sent into suicidal diversionary tactics, flushing out enemy snipers in newly-liberated towns. All the while they are preyed upon by NKVD operatives, who are willing to cover up such serious crimes as the rape of a Russian girl by one of the '*shtrafniki*' in order to gain leverage over the workings of the battalion. NKVD units are also instructed to mount machine-gun positions and mow down all those who retreat from the battle, including the wounded. Tverdokhlebov is himself arrested, imprisoned and tortured, but he refuses to inform on his men, or to comment on whether any of them engage in 'political' discussion at base.

10 As in the literary works of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, captivity actually provides freedom to talk on topics such as the Revolution, the injustices of collectivization, industrialization and the murder of Sergei Kirov in 1934, an act that is seen to have provoked the purges that followed. But the common bond remains patriotism, especially the patriotism without Communism that the writer Vasilii Grossman tells us in his novel *Life and Fate* (written 1962-64, published in the USSR only in 1988) drove the Red Army on to defeat Nazi Germany. In *Penal Battalion* Tverdokhlebov captures the Vlasovite officer Sazonov, with whom he had earlier been in German captivity. Those Red Army soldiers who fought with General Vlasov, a former Red Army general, on the side of the Nazis were regarded with particular revulsion by Soviet citizens, but here Sazonov is allowed to put his side of the argument, insisting that he was

not fighting for the Nazis, but for a Russia without Communism. To the wrath of the NKVD, Tverdokhlebov leaves Sazonov with one way out, a loaded pistol containing one bullet, and Sazonov duly obliges with suicide.

- 11 By the final episode almost the entire penal battalion has been destroyed in a final climactic battle, with the only survivors Tverdokhlebov and Father Mikhail, a priest who had joined them out of patriotism and a need to defend his native land. The symbolism speaks to modern sensitivities, as the warrior-hero and the repository of Orthodox spirituality survive to build a better and more just Russia.
- 12 Other aspects of *Penal Battalion* deserve attention. The few Germans we see – the ‘tongues’ taken prisoner as sources of tactical information (*iazyki*) – are humanized, given names and personalities, and certainly pose no great threat when compared to that of the all-powerful and malevolent NKVD. The real heroes of the War are the ordinary Russian soldiers of humble background, who, unlike the manipulative and parasitic NKVD, are prepared to give their lives for Mother Russia.

Afghanistan and Chechnya

- 13 In Vladimir Khotinenko’s film *The Moslem* (1995), the values and traditions of Orthodox Russia are held up to scrutiny and found wanting, and a Russian populace is shown to be demoralised and increasingly nihilistic.³ Sergei Bodrov’s *Prisoner of the Mountains*⁴ (1996) juxtaposes Russian and Caucasian moral values and imperatives, and it is the Russians who emerge as the aggressive and guilty party, with the Caucasians cast in the role of the noble and dignified savage. Alexander Rogozhkin’s *Checkpoint* (1999) offers a sympathetic portrayal of a group of Russian soldiers manning an isolated outpost, but they remain alien occupiers in a strange, incomprehensible land, despised by the locals and exploited by their own commanders for personal prestige and gain.⁵
- 14 Many films of the immediate post-Soviet years also alluded to the prospect of civil strife as a metaphor for lost imperial status and identity, even if they did not focus on military issues (comedies, melodramas, gangster films). As social breakdown seemed to threaten, references to armed conflicts in other parts of the Russian Federation could be seen as metonymic symbols of a greater crisis. This was above all a crisis of masculinity, where men lost power and confidence, and male physicality was undermined. It has not taken long for male disempowerment to be replaced by a ‘new’ man, strong, aggressive and well-armed.
- 15 The empire, of course, never really lost its violent edge. Vladimir Bortko’s *The Afghan Break* (1991) can be viewed as a Russian version of Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* (1986). Russian soldiers die not for a sacred cause, as in films about the Great Patriotic War, but uselessly, even willing on themselves a futile death as a release. The effects of the Afghan War are seen through long shots of a wartorn landscape, bombed out buildings, the killing of civilians, inadvertent and otherwise, and the destruction of peaceful villages. The humdrum life of the barracks is enlivened only by vodka binges and casual sex with the Russian nurses stationed there. As in Stone’s film, it is a picture of wasted young lives, and the image of young men in the military hospital with missing limbs serves as a grim symbol of the damage done to the Soviet body politic.
- 16 Bortko treats the Afghans at least sympathetically, and the killing of civilians and bombing of villages are unreservedly condemned. Alexander Nevzorov’s *Purgatory* (1998), however, shows the Moslem enemy as evil and deranged, in specifically racist terms. In their cruelty and barbarism the Chechens and their foreign supporters are identified not only as the military foe, but also the enemy of Holy Russia and Christendom in general, committing gross atrocities on Russian soldiers with gleeful sadism.
- 17 It was the films of Alexei Balabanov that turned the Chechen wars into a Hollywood-influenced cinematic spectacle, and one geared to a mass audience. Both *Brother* films (1997

and 2000) show how the Chechen killing fields forge the perfect hitman in the shape of Danila Bagrov, who metes out justice dispassionately and efficiently in St Petersburg, Moscow and the United States. At heart, though, Danila remains a decent Russian boy who loves his mother and brother, and diligently protects the weak. Balabanov's *War* (2002), however, moved the Chechen war film into different territory.

18 *War* concerns a Russian soldier who enters Chechnya with an English friend to rescue Margaret, an English aid worker kidnapped by Chechen fighters. Chechens as a nation do not come out of this film with much credit: even the children and old men taunt their Russian prisoners, and all are motivated only by money and financial gain. Their leader gives his word that Margaret will not be harmed, but she is raped nevertheless. In other words, Chechens deserve the blood bath that awaits them when the vengeful Ivan and John descend on their camp (together with a Chechen mercenary).

19 Balabanov's *War* encourages the audience to believe that if the Chechen problem can be solved, Russia itself will be unified again. Nikolai Stambula's *Forced March* (2003) has a similar agenda. Here the Chechen fighters are aided by foreign Islamic militants, in accordance with Russian government assertions, and so Russian State aggression against Chechnya can be easily condoned as part of the post-September 11th global war on terror. The vilification of Chechens is complete when they shoot those of their own people who want peace with the Russians. These Chechens are merciless, violent and committed to ridding Chechnya of Russian troops. The Russian army is here as one, the ordinary soldiers and officers fighting for a common cause. Victory is assured through the enhanced masculinity of the hero Sasha, a true, honest Russian boy who not only kills the Chechen enemy, but also uses his king-fu skills to teach a lesson to the young Russian would-be mafia thugs back home. As a reward he gets the girl (blond, blue-eyed, and mini-skirted). No mercy is shown to the Chechen fighters and their Arab friends, but the blood and gore is reserved to show the suffering of Russian troops wounded or killed in battle.

20 Stambula's film can be distinguished from Balabanov's in that it seeks to show that there is a considerable section of the Chechen population that does not want war with Russia, Chechen fathers just like any others love their children and there are innocent victims of Russian military aggression. The film also continues one of the traditions of the World War Two film, whereby the traitor who betrays his country for money is damned more than the actual enemy. But this is above all a film about Russia as victim of war, with the backdrop of cupola-peaked churches and a choral soundtrack accompanying the frequent bouts of soul-searching, and the final dedication: 'To those who have stood, who stand and will stand in defence of the Motherland'.

21 *War* is in many respects as racist a film as *Purgatory*, and, like that film, purports to be based on actual events. Balabanov's film also chimes with uncompromisingly belligerent official government announcements regarding the Chechens as a race that followed after the 1999 apartment bombings. By contrast, Andrei Konchalovskii's *House of Fools* (2003) is also inspired by actual events in the Chechen capital Grozny, but is shorn of any nationalistic/militaristic overtones. Indeed, as a remake of Miloš Forman's 1975 *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, it posits a vision of society where the asylum inmates are more sane than the so-called normal people killing each other outside. Certainly the Chechens are human and humane, and only when the hospital is over-run by Russian troops towards the end of the film do chaos and true insanity threaten.

22 The big budget *Countdown* (2004) can be viewed as a Russian riposte to the British SAS-inspired thriller *Who Dares Wins* (1982), and offers a grim echo of recent tragic events. Both films contain a jingoistic glorification of their nation's special forces, and their brutal efficiency is justified by the barbarity of the terrorist foe. There, however, the similarities end. Ian Sharp's film is based on the successful operation mounted by the SAS in London in 1980 to free the Iranian Embassy after it was seized by terrorists. In *Who Dares Wins* the Embassy

is American, and the terrorists are wiped out with minimal casualties among the hostages. *Countdown* views like a revisionist take on both the Beslan school siege of September 2004 and the Moscow Dubrovka theatre siege of October 2002, where hostages were freed by Russian troops but with great loss of life. In Lavrent'ev's film, however, the Spetsnaz free the hundreds of hostages held in a circus and kill all the Chechen terrorists with no civilian casualties. If only life could imitate art. Oh, and Russian special forces also save the Western world by foiling an attempt to drop a nuclear 'dirty bomb' over Rome. *Countdown* not only celebrates the skills and macho bravery of Russian special forces, admired as they are by the Americans, but also serves to reassure the Russian viewing public that they are equipped and prepared for any national or international emergency.

The Chechen War As Seen on TV

- 23 The new millenium has seen a flourishing of TV series that take their inspiration from the Chechen war, at least in quantity if not in quality. Andrei Maliukov's *Spetsnaz*, broadcast in 2002, shows an elite team of Russian soldiers defeating not only Chechens but also their foreign Islamic allies, who attempt to obtain a nuclear device and who wage war not only against Russia, but the whole of the Western world. Russia's role in the fight against terrorism, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the other major powers, is thus affirmed.
- 24 Georgii Nikolaenko's *Code of Honour* (2002-03) revisits much of this ground, concentrating on the adventures of a group of elite Spetsnaz operators drummed out of the army for apparent misdeeds in Chechnya, but who regroup to right wrongs in the new Russia, and even beyond its borders. Their targets are the Russian mafia, drug dealers in Poland, Germany and Estonia, and gangsters' supporters in the Defence Ministry. There is a clear distinction here made between the true and honest soldiers fighting for their Motherland and the desk-bound cynical manipulators in Moscow, seeking only their own fortune and prepared to sacrifice Russian soldiers for it. *Code of Honour* is generally a thick-eared series with a gunfight approximately every ten minutes, lots of explosions, a body count usually in double figures per episode, and improbable plot developments that aficionados of such British action series as *The Professionals* (1977-78) and *Ultimate Force* (2002-05) will recognise. Over sixteen episodes, the viewer is encouraged to keep watching as the team is gradually reduced in number, our emotions roused when a familiar and well-liked member of the team is killed. Just like his counterpart Tverdokhlebov in *Penal Battalion*, Captain Pastukhov survives, a solid and reliable presence whose honour and conscience remain intact, and who never considers the lucrative possibilities on offer before him, be they drugs, money or fast cars. The Russian soldier remains the true son and protector of Mother Russia.
- 25 Vladimir Bortko, the director of *The Afghan Break*, is one of the producers of what is by far the most professionally made and engaging TV series about Chechnya. *The Honour is Mine* was shown in four episodes in 2003-04, and has very good production values, acting and locations and an authentic feel for combat. Again the hero is an officer, Captain Chislov, and he, too, represents the honour and conscience of Russia.
- 26 Chislov not only battles against a ruthless and implacable Chechen foe, but also against the Russian military machine that prevents his men from being withdrawn during a dangerous combat encounter because OSCE observers need their helicopter at that precise time. Real male-male relationships are therefore forged at the front. Chislov's masculinity is further enhanced when he beds an affluent business woman in St Petersburg, sent there to attend a soldier's funeral. Katia is apparently emancipated and self-assertive, but she sees nothing wrong in doing business with Chechens. 'You're stabbing me in the back,' he says to her as he leaves.
- 27 Katia and her spacious, luxurious apartment, bedecked with paintings and expensive furniture, is contrasted to Nastia, a girl Chislov accidentally meets on a dark street and accompanies

home. She is a schoolteacher, like Zhilin's mother in *A Prisoner of the Mountains*, therefore inherently 'good' and 'moral', interested more in spiritual values than the outward trappings of material success, and as they part (chastely, again in contrast to the rather sordid circumstances of Chislov and Katia's rancorous separation), they agree to correspond with each other in future.

28 What really gives *The Honour is Mine* its social relevance, however, is the finale. After most of his team is killed off, Chislov gets an apology from his commanding officer. Chislov's men had been heavily outnumbered in a face-off with heavily armed Chechens, but this intelligence had been ignored by his superior officers. In other words, just as in the Great Patriotic War, individual soldiers do not matter, they can be sacrificed for the sake of an overall strategic aim, even an erroneous one. Russian military practice has not developed in over fifty years, even longer. 'We will wage war in a different way, we will live in a different way,' says Chislov's commander, offering at least a glimpse of a better and more humane future. In other words, the structure, status and role of the army reflects that of society as a whole, and democratization of both is a requisite for any progress. Russian soldiers die for their Motherland, but not so much through the actions of the enemy as through bureaucratic incompetence and corruption back in Moscow. 'What does your Motherland look like?' asks one soldier of another, aware that back home they have nothing to return to, neither a home, a family nor a job. The hope and honour of the nation resides in the battlefield officer class and the soldier prepared to risk everything, whose morality is forged and maintained in the harsh conditions of combat, and who know the true value of loyalty and comradeship.

29 *The Honour is Mine* is also significant in that it not only upholds the army as the nation's moral bastion, but also seeks to appease contemporary unease about the conduct of the war. Chislov visits the mother of one of his men killed in battle, and her grief is foregrounded to quite unsettling effect. By emphasizing the mother's visceral pain, the film registers its engagement with soldiers' mothers groups across Russia who have opposed the war since its outset in 1994. Casualties in war are inevitable, and are to be lamented, but they are a high if necessary price for victory and the integrity of the Russian state.

30 A final word should be reserved here for the portrayal of the Chechens. They may be similar to the bad guys that we have seen in other films and TV series, but their military prowess is never in doubt, even, in some cases, respected by the Russian troops. An ironic twist is provided at the end of the film, where the one positive Chechen, an Italian opera-loving schoolteacher, the apparent civilised hope for the nation, is killed in action after he is forced to fight. Russians attempt to bring European culture to this otherwise backward nation, but it will be a long struggle.

31 Another series with similar muscle but more geopolitical ambition is *Sarmat*, directed in twelve one-hour episodes in 2004 by Igor' Talpa. 'Sarmat' is the nickname given to the main character, Sarmatov, whose Don Cossack childhood is shown in a series of flashbacks. Sarmatov is a professional soldier who had served the Soviet Union in Nicaragua, Angola and Afghanistan. There is no attempt to justify Soviet foreign policy in these lands, simply to relate a soldier's story as he does his duty.

32 Sarmatov takes prisoner and then befriends an American officer in Afghanistan, and it is through the American George that some unsavoury truths about Soviet military values are articulated. Sarmatov says to him: 'I serve my Motherland, Russia is a great country with a past and a future,' but, as he and Sarmatov are both encircled and threatened by Afghan rebels, George the American highlights the inefficiency of the Soviet military machine as it fails to mount a rescue mission. Both are left to save themselves, and each other.

33 Sarmatov is next seen in hospital in Pakistan, recovering from paralysis and amnesia. We are now in the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and one of Sarmatov's former comrades in Afghanistan pays for his affluent lifestyle through crime and murder. George finds

Sarmatov, and brings him back into the real world. Sarmatov makes his way back to Russia via Tahiti and Marseilles, and is immediately arrested and imprisoned. He is released only on 31 December 1999, that is, the day when Boris Yeltsin resigned as President, to hand over to Vladimir Putin. The message is clear: with a new President, and with a liberated Sarmatov, a true son of Russia and the pride and strength of the nation, a new age dawns for the country, one where respect comes with strength, the honour of the nation can be restored, and the years of paralysis and amnesia are consigned to the past.

34 Yet *Sarmat*, for all its intricate plotting and strong characters, leaves an unsavoury taste in the mouth. As in Soviet films set during the Cold War, Russian émigrés in the 1990s yearn for their homeland and are consumed by self-loathing. Sarmatov's former Afghan veteran comrade survives and emigrates with his mistress, albeit full of self-disgust, but we have seen him carry out and get away with at least one cold-blooded murder in the course of the series (an inquisitive American journalist, so perhaps condoned by the powers-that-be). General Tolmachev, who has orchestrated the mayhem and killings, is left in post, even welcoming back Sarmatov with the offer of work to be done (i.e. killing). But the democratically elected if corrupt Duma deputy wallows in self-pity, drinks to excess and eventually shoots himself. In other words, the old structures survive, Parliamentary democracy does not work, 'new' Russians are weak and cowardly, and true patriotism is the preserve of those who are strong, determined and well-armed.

Conclusion

35 Contemporary Russian film is engaged in a search for identity through self-assertion, exploring male-male relationships and consequent notions of power. The war film has always concentrated on the relationship of the individual and the state, whereby the bond between them explains why the soldier must be prepared to put his life on the line for the greater collective. Recent films about the Chechen conflict show that this bond has been broken, but nevertheless Russia must have above all a strong, unified state. This has become especially apparent in Vladimir Putin's presidency, as Irina Isakova notes:

Since coming to power at the beginning of 2000, in response to growing concerns about the weakness of the Russian state, instability and conflict on Russia's periphery and Russia's declining international status, President Putin has sought to consolidate central control over the military and the other institutions of state power as a means of rebuilding the Russian state.⁶

36 The Russian state's 'new' self-image as strong, confident and ready to rebuff its perceived enemies is reflected and even enhanced in recent film and TV offerings, rather like Reagan's aggressive American foreign policy in the 1980s became embodied in films such as the *Rambo* and *Missing in Action* series. What distinguishes Russian attitudes, however, is the continuing meta-narrative of tortured national identity at its heart. Might is right, but it hurts.

37 Post-Soviet screen treatment of the Great Patriotic War remains vibrantly consistent with that of its Soviet counterpart. Admittedly, as with *Penal Battalion*, previously forbidden areas of historical enquiry have been opened up and a greater frankness about Soviet injustices and crimes is there for all to see, but the narrative of a nation fighting for its very survival against an irredeemably evil enemy remains definitive. War against a non-Christian foe provoked contemplation of Russia's own post-imperial identity in the immediate post-Soviet years. This war since 1999 can be justified, in line with government pronouncements, as the defence of territorial integrity and national pride, notwithstanding the need to appease public disquiet about its conduct. Only a few voices, such as Konchalovskii's, offer a different viewpoint.

38 In a recent paper Ewa Thomson bemoaned 'the absence of memorial responses to Russia's colonial conquests', whereby 'Russian collective memory is still at the stage of denial and trauma: it has memorialized Russian suffering but not that of nations harmed by Russia'.⁷ No tears are shed for the enemy. Screen offerings since 2000 have largely emphasized the return

of the strong man, the re-flexing of the imperial muscle, and the reassertion of honour and patriotism through armed conflict.

39 Films and TV series, as David MacFadyen notes in his comprehensive and perceptive analysis of post-Soviet TV drama, perform an important function in accommodating the individual and the State, the personal and the historical.⁸ The various treatments of war outlined in this paper show that history and current policy can be easily made digestible to the masses. TV series, in particular, speak to a national audience on contemporary issues of burning concern, and in post-Soviet Russia socialization through TV goes hand-in-hand with political legitimization. Consequently, the aestheticization of violence has become an accepted part of Russian visual culture under the Presidency of Vladimir Putin.

Annex

List of films consulted

- Brother* ('*Brat*'), dir. Alexei Balabanov, 1997
- Brother 2* ('*Brat 2*'), dir. Alexei Balabanov, 2000
- The Checkpoint* ('*Blokpost*'), dir. Alexander Rogozhkin, 1999
- Code of Honour* ('*Kodeks chesti*'), dir. Georgii Nikolaenko, 2002-03 (16 x 45 minute episodes)
- Countdown* ('*Lichnyi nomer*'), dir. Evgenii Lavrent'ev, 2004
- Forced March* ('*Marsh-brosok*'), dir. Nikolai Stambula, 2003
- House of Fools* ('*Dom durakov*'), dir. Andrei Konchalovskii, 2002
- The Honour is Mine* ('*Chest' imeiu*'), dir. Viktor Buturlin, 2003-04 (4 x 1 hour episodes)
- In August 1944* ('*V avguste 44-ogo goda*'), dir. Mikhail Ptashuk, 2000
- The Moslem* ('*Musul'manin*'), dir. Vladimir Khotinenko, 1995
- Penal Battalion* ('*Shtrafbat*'), dir. Nikolai Dostal', 2004 (11 x 1 hour episodes)
- Prisoner of the Mountains* ('*Kavkazskii plennik*'), dir. Sergei Bodrov Sr., 1996
- Purgatory* ('*Chistilishche*'), dir. Alexander Nevzorov, 1997
- Saboteur* ('*Diversant*'), dir. Andrei Maliukov, 2004 (4 x 1 hour episodes)
- Sarmat* ('*Sarmat*'), dir. Igor' Talpa, 2004 (12 x 1 hour episodes)
- Spetsnaz* ('*Spetsnaz*'), dir. Andrei Maliukov, 2002 (3 x 52 minute episodes)
- The Star* ('*Zvezda*'), dir. Alexander Ivanov, 1949
- The Star* ('*Zvezda*'), dir. Nikolai Lebedev, 2002
- War* ('*Voina*'), dir. Alexei Balabanov, 2002

1 I have examined the treatment of war in film of the 1990s in 'Confronting Imperialism: The Ambivalence of War in Post-Soviet Film', in S. Webber and J. Mathers (eds.), *The Military and Society in Post-Soviet Russia*, Manchester University Press, 2005, pp. 80-93.

2 G. Mar'iamov, *Kremlevskii tsenzor: Stalin smotrit kino*, Moscow: Kinotsentr, 1992, p. 112. Kazakevich's story remained very popular for over 40 years, with its authentic feel for battle – Kazakevich had fought himself – and its up-lifting picture of self-sacrificing Red Army soldiers. Grigorii Svirskii described in 1979 why Kazakevich's original novella so frightened the literary bureaucracy in 1947: 'The book carried in its depths, as a ship in its deep holds, the terrible truth of the Stalinist period, noted and only partly understood by the whole world today, after the appearance of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*.' See Grigorii Svirskii, *Na lobnom meste: Literatura npravstvennogo soprotivleniia (1946-1976 gg.)*, London, Overseas Publications Exchange, 1979, p. 33.

3 Birgit Beumers remarks: 'There is no ideal to fight and die for; no father figure in the political or military leadership; if such an ideal is to be found, it is more likely that this would be in the culture of the enemy, the victim. Yet there is no choice about the war, only about the individual's behaviour, his moral values. Ideas may be the cause of the conflict, but the lives of individuals are more important in a society that has lost its values, in a country that has lost its ideals.' See Birgit Beumers, 'Myth-making and Myth-taking: Lost Ideals and the War in Contemporary Russian Cinema', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, vol. 42, nos 1-2 (March-June 2000), pp. 171-89 (p. 181).

4 The original title of the film is "*Kavkazskij plennik*", - , Prisoner of the Caucasus - , a reference to Leon Tolstoï novel of the same name [Editor's note].

5 Birgit Beumers again (p. 188): 'Bodrov, Rogozhkin and Khotinenko have portrayed the "enemy" side and its cultural and national heritage with as much compassion as the Russian characters. Bodrov and Rogozhkin have both chosen to focus on young soldiers at war who do not even know what they fight for and are expected to die for, who are still children and largely untrained in military matters. This reduces man to a tragic victim not of history, but of circumstance, and – deprived of the myth of a higher ideal that guides the state which sends its soldiers to the war – this makes their deaths even more tragic, because avoidable.'

6 Irina Isakova, 'The Evolution of Civil-Military Relations in Russia', in Andrew Cottey, Timothy Edmunds and Anthony Forster (eds), *Democratic Control of the Military in Postcommunist Europe: Guarding the Guards*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave, 2002, pp. 215-32 (p. 231).

7 Ewa Thomson, 'Discourse, Empire and Memory in Postcommunist Russia', *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, vol. 37 (2003), 155-64 (p. 164).

8 'Romantically or sentimentally-driven historical serials, by providing connections between then and now, help to stabilize the passage of time. That stability is not contingent upon a well-funded ability to show the past, but a well-intentioned ability to empathize with it.' See David MacFadyen, 'Literature Has Left the Building: Russian Romance and Today's TV Drama', *www.kinokultura.com*, no. 8 (2005), p. 12 (of 38).

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Abstract

This paper examines the war theme in Russian film since the collapse of the Soviet Union, with special reference to the ongoing conflict in the Caucasus. It will explore the tension and

seeming contradiction between the military machine as faceless bureaucracy, and the ordinary soldier, seen as the honest and true face of Mother Russia. Through an analysis of both TV and feature films, it will also explore the evolution of attitudes towards the 'new' Putin-era reality, where business and capitalism are condemned as helping the 'enemy', at the expense of the Motherland. Films to be discussed include *Chest' imeiu*, *Gospoda ofitsery*, *Blokpost*, *Marsh-brosok*, *Voina*.

Keywords : Russia, Chechnya, Films, War Films, Chechen War, Great Patriotic War, Afghanistan War

Research Fields : Sociology

Countries : Afghanistan, Caucasus

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