

## Great Patriotic War Narratives in the Russian Cinema: Collective Self, Internal Others, and Dislocations of Identity

By Andrey Makarychev

### Abstract

This article examines how recent Russian films about World War II play with traditional Soviet narratives of the war. Rather than simply repeating themes of the victorious Soviet Union and the defeated aggressor, the films examine topics with much greater nuance, including an Orthodox priest who is forced to collaborate with the Nazis, young Russian criminals coerced into fighting, and people who fall in love with someone from the other side. Ultimately, these films shed light on a complex and evolving post-Soviet Russian identity.

### Recent Russian Films

Post-Soviet Russia has inherited from the Soviet Union the heroic narrative of the Great Patriotic War as a key identity-building instrument. This narrative, grounded in a stringent distinction between the victorious Soviet Self and the defeated aggressor, played a primordial role in ideological mobilization under the Communist regime, yet nowadays it undergoes various transmutations that saturate the war memories with more subtle, nuanced and variegated meanings. Not all of them can be conveyed through—and inscribed in—the hegemonic political discourse orchestrated by the Kremlin that seems to borrow from its Soviet predecessors the assumption of the alleged homogeneity of the victorious “Soviet people”, instrumentalized today as a precondition for the much needed—yet still imaginary—integrity of post-Soviet Russian identity. In contrast with the “old” Soviet war narrative that presumed purification of the heroic Self from negatively marked deviations, the “new” Russian discourse—introduced basically through cinema—deconstructs and decomposes the previously unquestioned collective Self, thus showing meaningful ruptures and dislocations within it. This alternative discourse focuses on situations void of direct military clashes between the Soviet Army and the Germans in the battlefields. Instead, it is interested in indirect encounters of the Soviet Self and a variety of its Others, including internal ones. It is in these situations that identity games become possible not only due to the high volatility of the previously taken-for-granted Self–Other demarcation, but also due to the “contamination” of the Self, its incoherence and unevenness. Being short of politically correct inhibitions, this alternative discourse seems to be much freer than the official interpretation of the Great Patriotic War as an event loaded with a variety of meanings grounded in sovereign politics and the logic of great powerness. In this article, I will focus on the most indicative interpretations of the war in contemporary Russian cinema, and will borrow for my analysis some concepts developed by one of most influential European critical thinkers Giorgio Agamben.

Paradoxically, the Kremlin is not only aware of this slow and gradual rethinking of the old Soviet narrative, but sometimes seems to be willing to sustain—and take advantage of—it. One of the most indicative in this respect is *“The Priest”* (Vladimir Khotinenko, 2010), a movie that tells a controversial story about the collaboration of the Russian Orthodox Church with the Germans in the occupied territories. The fact that the movie was sponsored by Gazprom, the Ministry of Culture and the Foundation for Patriotic Films evidently speaks for its legitimation by—and even inclusion in—the dominating narrative. Yet the patriotic message of the movie is far from obvious, since the Russian Orthodox Church, one of the shapers of the hegemonic discourse in today’s Russia, features as a pawn in the great game between the two political giants, Germany and the Soviet Union. The story sheds light on the expatriated Russian Orthodox Church in Lithuania that during the Second World War accepts the provocative proposal from the Nazis to cooperate for the sake of reviving Orthodoxy in the occupied territories of the western parts of the USSR as a potential counter-weight to the Bolsheviks. The movie hero, the priest, is an incarnation of the situation of indistinction between the seemingly natural belongingness to the Russian collective Self and voluntary exclusion from it. The Church did not consider the country of “Godless Soviets” its “genuine” motherland, which made the movie character—the priest—a hostage of the impossibility to unequivocally make a political decision and take the side of either the Germans or the Russians. Paradoxically, this undecidability can be interpreted as the ultimate virtue of the Orthodox priest who, standing beyond the military clash of the two mortal foes, did his best to defend, as Giorgio Agamben would say, life as such, any life in a situation of war which obviously requires people to take sides and thus values “politically qualified life”. The main protagonist is evidently weak and unable to prevent the Germans from committing atrocities in the conquered villages, yet the church is benevolently portrayed as a spiritual institution above the Soviet–German war. It

is exactly at this point that the political consequences of its seemingly de-politicized stance appear, since the glorification of the priest's vacillation as an ethical position could be interpreted as synonymous with the equation of Stalinism with fascism, which the Kremlin harshly rejects as an inimical and politically-biased interpretation of history.

In "*Bastards*" (Alexander Atanesian, 2007) we see another example of questioning the immaculacy of the winning Self. The movie features a group of young criminals that in the midst of the war are forcefully formed into a "death squad" trained to carry out subversive acts in German-occupied territories. These youngsters are treated as outlawed outcasts, who might be legitimately killed by the state, which acts as a classical bio-political machine aimed at producing docile and serviceable human beings. In a typical remark, one of the Soviet officers refers to these adolescents as "non-humans", which logically presupposes that they are incapable of any hint of patriotism and are valuable only as "cannon fodder". Indeed, they are sent to almost guaranteed death and have no other choice than to submit reluctantly to the brutal force of their "own" state. The two survivors of the squad ultimately fulfilled their "impossible mission," mainly because they are motivated by a desire to avenge their mates who were killed by the Germans. At the core of the story are thus young people who are aware of both their abandonment by their own state and their inevitable mortal fight with the enemy. What is interesting is that "*Bastards*" was harshly criticized by the adherents of the Soviet-type interpretation of the victory over fascism as a feat of arms performed by the conscientious exploits and sacrifices of a patriotically-minded people. To their dislike, the movie shows the tragedy of those who, as Agamben would argue, are included in the collective social body only by means of being cruelly excluded from it.

"*One War*" (Vera Glagoleva, 2009) uncovers another socially marginalized group whose role identity was actualized by the war. The movie relates the story of Russian women exiled to a remote island for their liaisons with the Germans and thus considered "traitors", or—academically speaking—"internal others". Very much like the juvenile delinquents in "*The Bastards*", those women implicated in "sleeping with the enemy" are outcasts, whose loss of rights and even execution may be considered a legitimate gesture of ultimate justice during times of bloody war. Yet it is they who venture to question the narrative of a unified Soviet body facing the external Foe: "You failed to defend your sisters and wives. Be at least tolerant to them", one of the women pathetically exclaims. What is even more challenging is another strong utterance: "The Germans threatened to

kill us, now you do the same. What is the difference?"—one of the ladies throws in the face of a Soviet officer, thus again blurring the seemingly well established distinction between "us" and "them". Seen from this vantage point, "One war" becomes a lexem that bears a unifying message, questioning the universality of distinction between the mortal enemies in the battlefield. Therefore, the war is portrayed not as an event where 'We' and 'They' are separated by an unbridgeable gap, but as a more complex phenomenon that, on the one hand, unifies all human beings worthy of this name in the face of possible death, and, on the other hand, elucidates the rather deep gaps within the Soviet Self.

In "*Cuckoo*" (Alexander Rogozhkin, 2002), war is portrayed more as a locus of social and cultural communication than as a site of conflict. The movie depicts a situation of inter-cultural communication during the Soviet–Finnish war implicating three persons (a Russian soldier, a Finnish soldier, and a Saami girl) who randomly encounter each other somewhere in the borderland. They speak three different languages and can't understand each other but still manage to make up a "love triangle". In a culturally indicative way, the Russian character eventually becomes "a nameless man", known only to the other two characters by the self-ascribed nickname of "Psholty", which sounds like the Russian for "Get out of here".

In "*The Edge*" (Alexei Uchitel, 2010) one may see another story about the disintegration of the essentialist discourse grounded in the indispensable mobilization of the collective Self against the inimical Other. Correspondingly, all lines of distinction between "ourselves" and "others" lose their validity. The title of the movie can be understood in two aspects: as a denotation of geographical marginality/remoteness of the scenery, and as a problematization of the fuzzy boundaries between the insiders and the outsiders, "ours" and "aliens" against the background of traumatic post-war experience. The movie is a story about a macho-type of war veteran transferred to a Siberian colony for former Soviet prisoners of the German camps; yet on a more philosophical level it turns into a story of struggle between the essentialization of differences and their relativization. The war hero first beats a Baltic colonist for speaking German, and then gets involved in a love affair with a young Russian woman who had a child after her liaison with a German soldier. This metamorphosis could be explained by the shift from the war as an exceptional event that legitimizes hatred to the "normal times" that leave no room for it. The movie thus is instructive for demonstrating that the lines of distinction between the Soviet collective Self and the alleged "traitors", sustained by Soviet officialdom, are not work-

able as soon as it comes to what might be dubbed, following Agamben, “bare life”, or a life in its purest void of institutional regulations. It is symptomatic that the movie hero’s sympathy for—and then marriage to—a German girl hiding for years in the taiga does not make him an outcast in the community of colonists, yet the wider Soviet society, however, does not seem to be that tolerant: the German wife had to pretend to be mute in order to hide her accent.

“*Franz + Polina*” (Mikhail Segal, 2007) describes another situation of a loving couple squeezed between the two mortal enemies, the Soviet Union and Germany. In the movie a young German soldier in love with a Belorussian girl is forced to join the locals escaping from the Nazi troops. The story is demonstrative of a perfect type of split personality identity which divides others as well: Russian fugitives have to take an ethical decision on whether to accept Franz’s mimicry or not (very much like the German lady in “The Edge”, Franz had to pretend to be mute yet unfortunately failed to play this role and revealed his true identity). The end of the movie is pretty traditional though: in an act of brutal vengeance, a local boy kills the German soldier who has almost integrated into the community of displaced people looking for refuge from the Nazi army. The lesson of this gesture may be interpreted as a triumph of the inevitable pressure of traditional divides and the impossibility of steady communicative links between enemies. In a war-time milieu, alterity is not tolerated even as an exception, and dividing lines are reproduced in all their destructive force.

In “*Ours*” (Dmitry Meskhiev, 2004) the story of “*Franz + Polina*” turns the other way round: it is the Soviet officers who have to escape from the Germans and pretend to change their identity. The movie portrays a series of confusions between “us” and “them” in a time of war where no one can be trusted or even properly identified. Paradoxically, what ultimately unfolds within this seemingly post-modernist situation of distorted roles and masked identities is a very Hobbesian world which returns the viewers to the reality of an everlasting battlefield.

A similar message is inscribed in “*The Enemies*” (Maria Mozhar, 2007), a movie depicting an interactive situation in a village occupied by German troops, which turns into a site of communication between the invaders and the oppressed. The very possibility of such an interaction appears to be important as an evident revision of the canonic Soviet interpretation of the Great Patriotic War. However, the end of the story is again as traditional as it is tragic: the emerging communication instantaneously collapses as soon as the Germans shoot dead a local woman. The enemy thus shows its

true and inescapable identity restoring the Self-Enemy gulf in its purest form.

### An Evolving Russian Identity

The movies which I have described, on the one hand, challenge the Soviet-era Great Patriotic War narrative by shifting attention from the mass-scale feat of arms to much less known aspects of the war related to the souls and bodies of human beings. In this regard, the war discourse is moved from a great-power triumphalism to much a more subtle bio-political reflection grounded in human bodies rather than hard power politics. The new war discourse, expressed in the language of mass culture, forms its own subjects, previously completely non-existent as artistic characters. As I have ventured to demonstrate, an Orthodox priest, young criminals, and Russian lovers of German officers are certainly among them. What is crucial at this juncture is that the bio-political representations of these characters blur lines of distinctions between “Us” and “Them”, thus making the loyalty—and submission—to the state weaker than the carnal and sensual gravitation of human bodies, a sphere “over which sovereignty has no hold”.

Yet the bio-political interpretation of the war narrative, seemingly deconstructing the Soviet-era triumphalism, under closer scrutiny may strengthen it, since one of the strongest messages conveyed by the reviewed movies concerns the ability of the winning Self not only to defeat the enemy militarily but—what seems to be of no less importance—to forgive and understand those compatriots officially stigmatized as “accomplices” and “abettors”. This message is most clear in “*One War*” where the Soviet officer in charge of transferring the women from the island to the prison lets them escape and, by doing so, signs a death verdict for himself. This ethical gesture asserts the primacy of “natural life” over “politically qualified life” with its inevitable boundaries between Us and Others<sup>1</sup>. The movies claim that “natural life” is not necessarily definable in sovereign—and thus politically divisive—terms, and in their biological existence human beings—both Russian and Germans—share “their singularity, their being-such or their whatever-ness”<sup>2</sup>, “the simple fact of living”<sup>3</sup>. The “line-drawing strategies”, those making distinctions between human beings, which for Agamben constitutes “sovereign moves”, are either avoided or questioned.

1 Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 88.

2 Johnny Edkins. *Whatever Politics*, in *Sovereignty and Life*. Edited by Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli. Stanford University Press, 2007, p. 74.

3 Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 2.

Seen from this philosophical angle, the movies represent an attempt to decouple/liberate the domain of “bare”/“natural” life from its political “weight”. However, the realm of “natural life” may contain strong political components of its own, since within it there is much room left for individual choices which are always personal. Perhaps this is what might be dubbed “non-sovereign politics”.<sup>4</sup> The priest has to make his own choice between defending “any life” and a “politically qualified life” that is predicated upon a friend–foe distinction. This is also the case of the Soviet officer who in “One War” was ordered to transport the women and their kids to the camp but ultimately released them, having paid the highest price for his individual—and explicitly anti-systemic—decision, arguably more heroic than his previous military deeds. The killing of Franz was not a sovereign act of punishment either, but an individual gesture of grass-roots vengeance.

The analysis of these movies makes clear that the political claim of Russia’s status as the successor of the USSR does not automatically translate into the deriva-

tion of the Russian identity from the “good old” Soviet times. The post-Communist Russian identity certainly keeps sharing the legacy of the Great Patriotic War as a historical proof of Russia’s great power status, yet this legacy, in cultural terms, is not static (i.e. it is not attached to a well fixed set of meanings) but rather mobile and open for some rethinking. The changing cinematographic language in Russia makes clear that the inscription of the war **problématique into identity discourse** requires moving from the simplistic dichotomies like “falsification of history” versus “adherence to objectivity” to accepting the value of different interpretations of the past. Arguably, it is the language of artistic representations, images and metaphors that is more suitable for uncovering new meanings in the war narrative than the much more conservative language of politics. Yet the later will definitely have to react to the multiple attempts to raise new issues in cultural terms and thus offer a more complicated view on the historical foundations of Russian identity.

*About the Author:*

Andrey Makarychev is Professor of Political Science and International Relations at the Public Service Academy in Nizhny Novgorod.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Calarco. *Jamming the Anthropological Machine, Sovereignty and Life*. Edited by Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli. Stanford University Press, 2007, p. 163.

ANALYSIS

## The *Marshrutka*—An Overlooked Public Good?

By Nicholas M. Wondra, Tbilisi

### Abstract

In the former Soviet Union, one of the most persistent fixtures of life is the *marshrutka*. Even in the smallest towns where there are no other public institutions, the *marshrutka* fulfills important economic roles. The importance of the *marshrutka* has only increased with the collapse of Soviet institutions and transport infrastructure. The *marshrutka* deserves serious academic attention because it is one of the few institutions which survived the collapse of the Soviet Union. As a mode of transportation, goods conveyance, postal service, news carrier, and provider of other indirect services, the *marshrutka* has been overlooked and undervalued by academics and students of development. *Marshrutki* serve in important roles for which there are often no, or poor, substitutes. Additionally, they provide numerous positive externalities. Future research should identify new methodologies to study this difficult-to-measure, wide-ranging fixture of post-Soviet life.

### Introduction

To live or study in the former Soviet Union (FSU) with little income is to know the shared taxi: the *marshrutka*. In the large-scale context, *marshrutki* (pl.) act as a net-

work: connecting people, towns, and productive capabilities. For many, this is the only form of conveyance, encompassing personal transport, news and goods distribution, and an informal postal network. By default