

Depictions of Women in Stalinist Soviet Film, 1934-1953

By

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Abstract

Popular films in the Soviet Union were the products the implementation of propagandistic messages into storylines that were both ideologically and aesthetically consistent with of the interests of the State and Party apparatuses. Beginning in the 1930s, following declaration of the doctrine on socialist realism as the official form of cultural production, Soviet authorities and filmmakers tailored films to the circumstances in the USSR at that given moment in order to influence and shape popular opinion; however, this often resulted in inconsistent and outright contradictory messages.

Given the transformation that gender relations were undergoing in the early stages of development, one area that was particularly problematic in Soviet cinema was the portrayals of women. Focusing primarily on the Stalinist period of the Soviet History (1934-1953), I plan to look at the ways in which women were portrayed in popular Soviet cinema and specifically the ways in which these presentations shifted before, during, and after World War II.

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I. Introduction

The discrepancy between the images of Soviet life portrayed in the propaganda disseminated by the government under Joseph Stalin and the material realities of the millions of Soviet citizens is widely known. However, a confluence of political, social, and cultural factors preceding the commencement of World War II left the Stalinist government in a particularly problematic position in regard to the role of women in relation to Party, State, and society. A variety of different factors contributed to the perplexing series of stances taken by the Soviet government such as the societal lack of unanimity in regard to gender roles, the increasingly urgent need to compensate for diminishing troop numbers, and the desire shared by so many women of the first post-revolutionary generation to contribute to the war effort.¹²

Depending on the medium through which a message was being communicated, a plethora of potential difficulties presented themselves. This was particularly evident in the portrayals of women in popular films. Popular films in the Soviet Union were the products of a complex series of negotiations between various departments within the government, filmmakers within creative

¹ Djadkin, Iosif D. *Unnatural Deaths in the USSR, 1928-1954*. Transaction Publishing, 1983. 60

² Krylova, Anna. *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 48, 91

intelligentsia, and even Stalin himself.³ The fact that Soviet films were commissioned and exhaustively censored by authorities meant that popular films were essentially vehicles for government manipulation comprised embedded with calculated propaganda campaigns that corresponded with the perceived needs of the government at the given time in which a film was produced.

Following Russia's Revolutions in 1917, Russian women made considerable gains in terms of employment, societal status, military inclusion and their roles within the family; however, the progress made on these fronts did not come without complications.⁴ For example, while a legal commitment to "equal pay for equal work" was established and women entered into the workforce in unprecedented numbers, they generally occupied low-level positions and were surrounded by male coworkers who maintained conventional, patriarchal notions of gender.⁵ Similarly, progress in the domestic sphere such as compensation for informal labor and increased accessibility to divorce was accompanied by a temporary ban on abortion which indirectly tied

³ Kenez, Peter. "Black and White" in *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia*. Indiana/Indianapolis, Indiana State University, 1995. 157

⁴ Goldman, Wendy. *Women at the Gates: Gender and Industry in Stalin's Russia*. New York, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

⁵ Chapman, Janet G. *Women in Russia*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1977. 225-227

women to family and the domestic sphere.⁶ Such changes were microcosms of much larger shifts in the perception of gender and marked a reconfiguration of the heavily gendered social roles to which women were typically associated. Propaganda directly targeted women with campaigns calling for the creation of "New Soviet Women" which was directed at steering women away from the conventional notion that women's role was in the domestic sphere.⁷ The women's question refers to way in which the government made strides toward "emancipating women", but doing so in a calculated manner in order to not jeopardize their roles as mothers and child-bearers.⁸

Straying from the legislative and rhetorical advances on behalf of women championed in the preceding years, Stalin's dealings with Soviet women in society offered a convoluted position in which women's national duty was simultaneously framed as multiple contradictory roles. In certain instances, propaganda sought to bind women's civic duty to the domestic sphere by emphasizing their roles as mothers while, at other times, women were called upon to fulfill their duty as soldiers.⁹

⁶ Hoffmann, David Lloyd. *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917-1941*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003. 88-105

⁷ Bonnell, Victoria E. *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters Under Lenin and Stalin*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. 64-84

⁸ Reid, Susan. *Creating the New Soviet Woman: Women's Magazines as Engineers of Female Identity, 1922-1953*. New York: St. Marten's, 1999.

⁹ Sakwa, Richard. *Soviet Politics in Perspective*. Chicago: Taylor & Francis, 1998. 194

Given how pervasive popular films were within cultural consciousness, this particular medium of propaganda is illustrative of these contradictions. The convergence of these areas that were changing in the material realities of women's lives only further complicated the multitude of ways in which women were depicted in popular Soviet films. When examining these shifts in the context of the USSR's involvement in World War II, it becomes clear that women's freedom and role in the betterment of Soviet society was contingent upon and tempered by, not by a fixed set of values, but what was most expedient at the time.

With this paper I plan to examine popular Soviet films not solely as cultural artifacts but as calculated propaganda initiatives in order to trace the trajectory of representations of Soviet women in film over the span of Stalin's reign, and in particular, the changes that took place from before, during, and after World War II. I plan to examine the ways in which female characters were depicted in Soviet film and attempt to contextualize these propagandistic presentations within the larger context of the historical circumstances in the USSR during this time.

Due to the degree to which popular films were intertwined with culture and society as a whole, they represent the best medium for understanding the shifts that took place in official propaganda and the larger symbolic implications these shifts had. In addition, the films examined here were chosen because they were the most popular of the timeframes in which they were produced and of the most iconic films in Soviet history as a whole. Ultimately, these films were emblematic of the respective chapters of film history that is being analyzed with this thesis.

The timeframe around which this examination will be from 1934 to 1953, however, the primary area of focus will coincide with the years during which the Soviet Union was engaged in the battles of World War II (1939-1945). With the declaration of socialist realism as the official form for cultural productions in 1934, an end to the esoteric films from the preceding era was brought about as a new chapter of Soviet cinema was initiated. With this era, the films produced were informed both aesthetically and ideologically by the constraints of this new doctrine. While the precise specifications of socialist realism can at times seem elusive given that it applied to all forms of cultural production; in terms of film, socialist realist films can roughly be characterized by a handful of distinguishing

characteristics. Socialist realist films are known for their use of linear plot lines with straightforward social and political conflicts that are always resolvable. Further, the characters of socialist realist films are generally one-dimensional archetypes in which the hero, who embodies the socialist ethos of struggle for the common good, is contrasted with an overtly essentialized enemy who embodies all that Stalinist socialism and the USSR in general aims to eradicate. A final identifying characteristic of these films was the theme of looking forward to the glorious triumph of socialism. Quite often the plots within socialist realist films, either implicitly or explicitly, asserted that all obstacles were directly related to the fate of the socialism.

With the onset of the Great Patriotic War, the films produced projected women to the forefront of the Soviet Union's struggle against Nazi Germany. Popular films produced during this time were written and produced through the prism of the USSR's involvement in World War II. These films were intended to evoke a very strong emotional reaction to the images presented in which we see gruesome violence against women and children. While women were at times presented as heroic avengers, they were also presented as passive victims and silent sufferers. The ambiguity within the messages communicated in these films is

ultimately symbolic of the larger contradictions present within the official discourse surrounding women's involvement in the war effort.

The year of 1953, which bookends timeline used here, corresponds with the death of Joseph Stalin and the end of late-Stalinism in the Soviet Union¹⁰ Without the strain of the war, films produced during this era were afforded the ability to re-write recent history in order to situate Stalin at the forefront of the brilliance behind the Soviet Union's victory. The emphasis on the strong partisan heroines from the preceding wartime era was no more and the sacrifices made by women in nearly all capacities during the war were omitted. Within Soviet society, this shift marks a much larger shift in the gender landscape. This era signifies an abandonment of any semblance of gender equity in order to make space for the reintroduction of patriarchy. This period evidences the tendency of Soviet authorities to frame women's status as equal to that of men when it was expedient for them to do so before being discarded once their role was perceived to be less vital.

¹⁰ Taylor, R. (2007). Georgii and Sergei Vasil'ev, USSR, 1934 in *The Cinema of Russia and the Former Soviet Union*. London: Wallflower Press, 2007. 69

This paper will consist of three chapters. In the first chapter, I will focus on films from the years 1934-1939. I plan to focus the majority of this section looking at five Soviet films from this era, the first of which being Sergei and Georgi Vasil'ev's wildly popular 1934 film *Chapaev*. While the plot of this film tells the story of the Red Army commander and folk hero, Vasili Chapaev, I will primarily focus on the secondary plot which focuses on the ascendancy of "Anka the Machine Gunner." Anka is a significant figure in Soviet culture because her presence in this film marks the first appearance of one particular archetype of the ideal Soviet woman that was emphasized by Soviet authorities. After the release of this film, Anka the Machine Gunner became a national symbol for women's empowerment and the post-revolution feminine embodiment of nationalism, service, and country.¹¹

There were several areas in which the roles of women were in flux and, in order to provide a look at the portrayal of women in relation to other social roles to which they were connected, I plan to look at the popular 1934 musical by Grigori Aleksandrov titled *The Jolly Fellows*. This film is a rags to riches story including common Soviet themes and messages that emphasize the notion that hard work, diligence, and devotion

¹¹ Sakaida, Henry. *Heroines of the Soviet Union: 1941-1945*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2003. 28

will inevitably lead to success. Ultimately, *The Jolly Fellows* represents the quintessential Soviet vaudeville and is of the first of this Western-style of film in the USSR. This film is intended to provide for a more well-rounded understanding of the ways in which women were presented in different spheres.

The next film I plan to examine in this chapter is Sergei Eisenstein's highly acclaimed 1938 film *Alexander Nevsky* about the legendary Prince's triumph over the invading Teutonic Knights. I plan to examine the secondary plot which revolves around the role of Olga, a beautiful maiden from Novgorod, whose role is generally peripheral and minimized merely to a prize that is to be awarded to one of two counterparts.

I will also analyze Efim Dzigan's 1938 war film, *If Tomorrow There is a War* which was intended to mold the public's attitude and perception about the impending war by displaying the Soviet Union's capacity for sacrifice, heroism, and bravery employed against a thinly veiled allusion to the Germany as the enemy. Even though the plot of this film is fictional, the glorification of war and omission of women within the overwhelming majority of scenes in this film point to the inconsistencies present in the government's position on women's role in the military.

Chapter two, which will constitute the cynosure of this thesis, will focus on films produced during the Soviet Union's involvement in World War II. The fact that the Soviet Union was engaged in the war during this time conferred an increased significance upon Soviet propaganda; however, the preoccupation of the government with the war effort inevitably meant that resources generally allocated for non-necessities such as film were relatively scant.¹² In addition, the two primary Soviet film production studios in Leningrad and Moscow were threatened by Germany's advancement which exacerbated this situation. As the war dragged on, this relationship became increasingly dire and compounded by the need for women to enlist in the military in all capacities.

While certain Soviet films that were released between the years of 1939-1945 constructed women as a vital component of the war effort by their active resistance against the onslaught of Nazi Germany, other contemporary films framed them as passive victims or relegated them to peripheral roles deprived of agency. It is this area between competing propagandistic narratives on the role of women that I will focus on. There are two primary films that will constitute the bulk of my focus for

¹² Sortori, Rosalindei. "On the Making of Heros, Heroines, and Saints" in *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995. 179

chapter two that best emblemize this type of emotional drama produced during the wartime years.

The first film I examine in this chapter is Fridrikh Ermler's 1943 film, *She Defends the Motherland*. Widely considered to be Ermler's magnum opus, this film shows the transformation of the extraordinary character Pasha from a jovial, loving, mother and dedicated wife into a fierce Soviet combatant of German savagery. While the excesses of this film are blatant in hindsight, Ermler's marked dedication to Russian women at the onset of the film is indicative that the director had an agenda with a particular target audience in mind for this film which makes the construction of Praskovia increasingly important.

The next film under examination is the 1943 film directed by Mark Donskoi called *The Rainbow*. Set in a small Nazi-occupied village in Ukraine, *The Rainbow's* plot is intended to show both the best and the worst of humanity in an unprecedentedly realistic way. This film relies on a duality between two extreme character types. Olena Kastuk, is a Russian partisan who embodies the altruistic ethos that shaped the character of the Russian intelligentsia of this era. Whereas Olena is intended to represent the quintessential allegiant to her Motherland, Pusia, the materialistic sister of Olga, is intended to represent the

quintessential traitor who ultimately (and inevitably) suffers the consequences of her disloyalty. Similar to other socialist realist wartime films, *The Rainbow* places strong emphasis on the strength of the character, Olena, which is contrasted with the deprivation of humanity within the German ranks and the weak character and feeble mind of Olena's sister.

The final chapter of this thesis will be devoted to an examination of the epic two part film, *The Fall of Berlin* which was directed by Mikheil Chiaureli and released in 1950. With this film, I plan to mostly examine the role of protagonist Alyosha's love interest, Natasha. Specifically, I plan to analyze the largely supplemental role that Natasha occupies in concert with the rise of Stalin's personality cult in order to track where her presence falls within the wartime and postwar official discourse on the role of women within the war effort.

While the scope of this thesis spans a vast timeline, I hope to show the assortment of roles that Soviet women were expected to occupy as evidenced by the various depictions of womanhood in Soviet films under Joseph Stalin. Despite the various presentations of women in these propagandistic films, all of these constructions were intended to serve the specific purposes of the government. When placing the depictions of women in Soviet film against the backdrop of the various different

propaganda campaigns from before, during, and after the war, clear differences begin to emerge indicating that the image of the ideal Soviet woman was not a stable entity but rather one that is constantly transitioning in order to best suit the needs of the government and the circumstances inside of the USSR.

Given that Soviet films were commissioned by the government and function as vehicles of propaganda, what messages was the government trying send to Soviet society? What were the roles of women in Soviet society within the given time frame? How have these roles shifted from before, during, and after World War II? Why did these shifts occur? How were these shifts negotiated through the medium of popular films? How can an analysis of popular films in the Soviet Union help us better understand Soviet society and, in particular, the shifting roles of women through the time period?

Chapter I: Empowerment & Romance (1934-1938)

1934 was an important year in Soviet film history. The film *Chapaev*, which tells the story of Vasilii Chapaev, an uneducated peasant turned Red Army Commander in the Russian Civil War, was released in November of that year to widespread critical acclaim.¹³ Adapted from the Bolshevik writer Dmitry Furmanov's 1923 novel by the Georgii and Sergei Vasil'ev, this film sold over fifty million tickets within only the first five years after its release.¹⁴ A testament to the widespread positive reception of the film is reflected by the iconic status that Vasili Chapaev achieved following the film's release.¹⁵ Not only was the film popular among average Soviet citizens, but it also fit neatly within official discourse and was viewed favorably by party officials. In addition, the November 1934 edition of the official party newspaper, *Pravda*, even went so far as to assert that *Chapaev* would be seen every citizen inside of the Soviet Union.¹⁶

Even though the film primarily focuses on the largely fictionalized role of Vasilii Chapaev in the Red Army's struggle

¹³ Gillespie, David. *Russian Cinema*. London: Pearson Education, 2003. 15-16

¹⁴ Kenez, Peter. *Cinema and Soviet Soviet, 1917-1953*. New York: Cambridge University Press: 1992. 172

¹⁵ Haynes, John. *New Soviet Man: Gender and Masculinity in Stalinist Soviet Cinema*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003. 157,164

¹⁶ Gillespie, David. *Russian Cinema*. London: Pearson Education, 2003. 15-16

against the Imperial Army, the focus here will be on one of the secondary characters, Anka. Anka is important because she is one of the earliest manifestations of a particular archetype that would become popular in succeeding socialist realist films: that of the strong-willed and self-sacrificing woman combatant.¹⁷ Similar to the way in which Commander Chapaev achieved iconic status following the release of the film, Anka became wildly popular as well as an early post-revolution symbol for women's empowerment and the female soldier's impressive capacity to perform on, and quite often above, the level of her male counterparts.¹⁸

Before she achieved this status, Anka was introduced as a reserved, unexceptional volunteer for the Red Army without any military training or obvious discernible talent to contribute to the war effort. As the movie progresses, however, Anka is shown to be an adept learner with an impressive capacity for assembling and operating a Maxim machine gun under the harsh conditions of war. However, she did not achieve this status without having to endure sexual advances by Petka, the male soldier instructing her, but this moment is brief and treated as comedy rather than a legitimate cause for concern. While it is

¹⁷ Sortorti, Rosalinde. "On the Making of Heros, Heroines, and Saints" in *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia*. Indiana/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995. 176-177

¹⁸ Henry Sakaida. *Heroines of the Soviet Union, 1941-1945*. Osprey Publishing, Oxford, 2003. 28

clear with this scene that Anka's skill level is beyond that of Petka's, the male comrade instructing her, he not only fails to acknowledge this fact, but he makes it clear that it is of no concern to him at all. Despite Anka having to consistently prove and reprove herself as a skillful soldier, her dignity stands second to the fact that she is female in a predominantly male setting. This ultimately undermines the notion of gender equity that is intended to be communicated here and instead delivers the message that if women become are to become involved with the military, regardless of how effective they are, their capacity as a soldier will never be separated from their gender; thus, they cannot be considered equals among their male counterparts.

At several moments within the film, Anka's abilities outshine those around her. One particular scene that illustrates this of a battle sequence in which Anka's comrade is fatally shot and she is quick to assume control of the machine gun. As the White soldiers' unit is rapidly advancing, Anka, despite being ordered to shoot, waits until the White soldiers are close enough for her to ensure that she wipes them all out. When asked by the unsuspecting Commander Chapaev why she waited so long to shoot, Anka matter-of-factly replied with "...I was waiting for them to get closer." In this scene, Anka evidences mastery over her new role as a soldier by her a cool temperament and the

degree of calculation she executes under pressure. Anka's approach here is quite dissimilar from Chapaev who, despite being shown as a brilliant strategist, was at times also portrayed as untamed and impulsive showing a degree of emotional immaturity. While both Chapaev and Anka are depicted as competent warriors, the differences between their approach and development evidence the distinctly different formulas used to construct female heroes as opposed to male heroes. Chapaev, with a grandiose bravado and self-perceived exceptionalism that is constantly being reaffirmed by those around him offers a rugged individualism that is impossible to be achieved by Anka given the heavily patriarchal environment established in his detachment. Instead, we learn that women must constantly outperform their male counterparts without acknowledging any semblance of superiority in order to simply justify their presence next to men. Any attention that women might draw to themselves essentially is perceived as a threat to the male hegemony within the military and thus hastens the potential for harassment.

The portrayal of women's role within the war effort in such an unprecedented way helped to create a historical narrative that placed women soldiers alongside men. The idealized image of Anka as the female soldier also eventually went on to typify

many later characters in succeeding socialist realist films.¹⁹ This archetype functioned in different ways within the ranks of Soviet civil society. For many women, Anka was a source of inspiration which was intended to translate into national service whereas, for some men with lingering patriarchal notions of gender, Anka was intended to legitimize women's role in the military and specifically in combat.²⁰

By the mid-thirties, Soviet citizens had seen widespread starvation from the 1932-1933 famine, excessive police repression, rapid industrialization, collectivization and overzealous censorship; many Soviet citizens needed a sense of reprieve from the bleakness of everyday life that war-themed films, despite their popularity, simply could not provide.²¹ In reaction to this popular sentiment, Soviet musicals emerged.²² This genre presented a unique opportunity for the government to use light-hearted humor, music, and dancing as a guise the traditional ideological messages present in these films. Typical socialist realist musical comedies had easy to understand plots and downplayed many of the ideological devices of other Soviet

¹⁹ Lawton, Anna. *The Red Screen: Politics, Society, Art in Soviet Society*. London: Routledge Press, 1992. 160

²⁰ Krylova, Anna. *Soviet Women in Combat*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 91

²¹ Rees, E. A. "Stalinism: The Primacy of Politics" in *Politics, Society, and Stalinism in the USSR*. New York: St. Marten's Press, 1998. 44

²² Gillespie, David. *Russian Cinema*. London: Pearson Education, 2003. 40-41

films from the era. For a portion of the Soviet population, these films also offered a means by which they could rationalize sacrifices made or shortcomings experienced in their everyday life as necessary, logical steps toward a triumphant Socialist Utopia.²³

The first of this genre was a film called *The Jolly Fellows*. Given that there was a multiplicity of differing depictions of women in Soviet propaganda at this time, much of which stood in contradiction with one another, it would be useful to examine this film. *The Jolly Fellows*, which was also released in 1934, is a musical comedy directed by famed director Grigori Aleksandrov. The aforementioned sense of escapism sought by the Soviet citizenry is underscored by Aleksandrov's explanation at the onset of the 1978 restoration of the film in which he claims,

This film is very dear to me. At that time people wanted to see inspiring, cheerful films. *The Jolly Fellows* met the demands of the time.²⁴

Before striking out on his own as a director, Aleksandrov worked as an assistant to the Soviet Union's most famous director

²³ Taylor, Richard. *Cinema of Russia and the Former Soviet Union*. London: Wallflower Press, 2007. 79

²⁴ Aleksandrov, Grigori (Director). *The Jolly Fellows* [Motion Picture]. Soviet Union: Mosfilm, 1934.

Sergei Eisenstein.²⁵ Eisenstein, regarded as the architect of socialist realism in filmmaking, asserted that, "...the only proper theme of film is conflict, namely social conflict; art is not meant to entertain, only instruct in the ways of social realism."²⁶ This ethos largely informed the model used for Soviet films under Stalin, however, Aleksandrov, despite working in such close proximity with Eisenstein, used a different, unprecedented formula to create *The Jolly Fellows*. This approach eventually established this film as one of the most famous, yet most controversial, films in Soviet film history. The use of jazz, which was regarded by many as a product bourgeois culture, in combination with the Western-influenced film techniques and humor, resulted in much debate and criticism about the influence of Hollywood on Aleksandrov's stylistic sensibilities.²⁷

The story told in *The Jolly Fellows* primarily focuses on an oblivious young shepherd named Kostya who, after being mistaken for a famous Italian composer finds himself the leader of a raucous jazz ensemble; however, I will examine here the role of the two main female characters. The character types embodied by Anyuta and Yelena in this film symbolize two classic female

²⁵ Taloyor, Richard. "The Happy Guys: Grigorii Aleksandrov, USSR, 1934" in *Cinema of Russia and the Former Soviet Union*. London: Wallflower Press, 2007.

²⁶ Raleigh, Henry P. "Hard Work, Happy Holiday-Later," *Art Times*, July, 2005.

²⁷ Taylor, Richard. "The Happy Guys: Grigorii Aleksandrov, USSR, 1934" in *Cinema of Russia and the Former Soviet Union*. London: Wallflower Press, 2007. 86

archetypes that eventually typified many later Soviet Realist films: the selfless, hardworking servant of the USSR and then there is the vile, materialistic and self-obsessed other who represents all of the bourgeois inclinations that the government discouraged.²⁸

Anyuta is the hard-working servant who works as a maid in the mansion belonging to Yelena. Anyuta has a modest demeanor and a beautiful singing voice which, coupled with her work ethic, ultimately allow for her to become the shining star of the prestigious Bolshoi Theater in Moscow. In the beginning of the film, Anyuta is shown singing a song with the lyrics:

Why can we love only one in this life?

My heart, beating in my breast like a bird,

If I had ten hearts, I'd give them all to him.

Despite Anyuta's relegation to the periphery for the majority of the film, she is shown in several different scenarios still singing the very same song modestly to herself while unsuccessfully vying for the affection of Kostya. By the end of the film, when Anyuta finally does win the eye of her love interest, her transformation magically takes place. Ultimately, Anyuta's modest diligence, impressive singing talent, and work

²⁸ Kenez, Peter. "Black and White" in *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia*. Indiana/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995. 159

ethic are rewarded with a glamorous performance at the Bolshoi and the hand of her love interest, Kostya. The fact that Anyuta is able to find pleasure in her mundane tasks of housekeeping by sweetly singing to herself without striving for fame or glory is precisely the reason she is eventually able to achieve both of these things by the end of the film.

In stark contrast to the talent and humility that Anyuta displays in the film is the repulsive character Yelena. Yelena is the bourgeois tourist for whom Anyuta works. Yelena's exorbitant wealth coupled with her apparent idiocy are by no means coincidental; however, it is not solely extravagance that Aleksandrov sought to disparage with Yelena's character, but rather, amassing such wealth without having earned it is the issue here. As is the case with most socialist realist films, the characters in *The Jolly Fellows* are not multi-dimensional. Whereas Anyuta's integrity is sincere and intended to be something for the viewer to emulate, Yelena's exaggerated despicableness is so vile that the viewer is intended become repulsed by her very presence. So much are Yelena's eccentricities exaggerated that this in turn translates into a rejection by the viewer of those qualities which constitute her abhorrent existence.

The Jolly Fellows represents a classic Soviet version of vaudeville. Rather than function solely as a means of indoctrination, this film, and the genre of musical comedy more broadly diverted the Soviet people's attention from the the harshness of life in this era.²⁹ Musical comedies allowed for a more palatable rationalization for the harshness of life than typical socialist realist films could offer.

The USSR's most famed filmmaker, Sergei Eisenstein, released *Alexander Nevsky* in 1938. Generally in analyses of this film, attention is focused on the character of Prince Alexander Nevsky, whose victory over the Teutonic Knights in the 1242 has been mythologized over the years in Russia; however, I plan to examine the character of Olga Danilovna. Nevsky's commanding presence throughout the film coupled the relatively minimal presence of Olga serves to elucidate the lack of priority on behalf of the government to emphasize women in a military capacity at this time. This changes significantly during the later wartime years when soldiers were getting killed at a significant rate and there was a heightened need for military enlistment of not only men but women as well.³⁰³¹

²⁹ Stites, Richard. *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society Since 1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. 88-89

³⁰ Djadkin, Iosif D. *Unnatural Deaths in the USSR, 1928-1954*. UK: Transaction Publishing, 1983. 53

The story line, which tells the legendary story of Prince Alexander Nevsky, who successfully led Russian forces through an onslaught from invading Teutonic Knights in 1242, had clear parallels to Soviet reality in 1938. With an impending invasion by Nazi forces looming on the horizon, Eisenstein sought to not only encourage nationalist sentiment among Soviet citizens with this film, but also inspire contempt for the enemy.³² While at times this film seems to almost address the Hitler and Nazi forces directly with such lines as:

"He who comes to us sword in hand by the sword shall perish. On that our Russian land takes and will forever take its stand,"

The role of Olga within this film is starkly different from the propagandistic and rhetorical devices employed by the government regarding women's role in Red Army and the USSR as a whole.³³

Soviet propaganda encouraged women to become "bold," "unprecedented," and "new" which was a response to ways in which the gender landscape was in a state of flux during this time; however, in Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky*, even the presence of Olga in battle is undermined by the marriage agreement made in

³¹ Krylova, Anna. *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front*. New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010. 167

³² Platt, Kevin M.F. & Brandenberger, David. ed. *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda*. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2006. 234

³³ Eisenstein, Sergei (director). *Alexander Nevsky* [motion picture]. Soviet Union: Mosfilm, 1938.

the film.³⁴ Early on, Olga tells two aloof soldiers that she would marry the one who best distinguishes himself on the battlefield. Rather than choose a partner based on merit or anything that remotely resembles an kind of emotional affinity, Olga's decision-making process relegates her own wellbeing to a lesser priority than the courage it takes to distinguish oneself on the battlefield. The two characters vying for Olga's hand in marriage, Vassily and Gavril, are shown to be barely competent and at times outright buffoons. This stands in contrast to Olga's character who is portrayed as well-tempered and arguably a better soldier than both of them despite only being shown in battle for a couple of fleeting scenes. Ultimately, Olga's primary role in this film is that of a prize to be won by one of her two male peers. Taking this notion into consideration along with propaganda which encouraged the development of the "New Soviet Woman," ultimately elucidates the chasm that existed between messages communicated to women within propaganda.³⁵

Even though this film was successful in its use of heroic historical figures as a source of inspiration and the Teutonic knights to instill hatred, Stalin ordered this film to be removed from theaters everywhere in the Soviet Union when the

³⁴ Krylova, Anna. *Soviet Women in Combat*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 83

³⁵ Krylova, Anna. *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 83

Non-aggression pact was signed only two years after the film's release.³⁶ Even though *Alexander Nevsky* was hugely popular and earned Eisenstein the Order of Lenin as well as the Stalin prize, the highest honors in the Soviet film, the film's removal from theaters and then the eventual placement of the film *back* into theaters in 1941 after Operation Barbarossa, parallel the nature of socialist realism in general.³⁷ That is to say, socialist realism was not entirely stable and, thus, changed according to the needs of the government. Socialist realism was generally a reaction to both the circumstances on the ground in the USSR and the needs of the government. When it was believed that there was a need to shore up nationalism or hatred for the enemy, cultural manufacturers could spoon-feed their message to the general populace through film and, when circumstances changed, such as when the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was signed, the film could simply be erased from the cultural landscape.

Similarly, another film that was released in 1938 before being shelved barely two years later also as a result of the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact was *If Tomorrow There is a War*

³⁶ Stites, Richard. *Russian Pop Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. 113

³⁷ Neuberger, Joan. *Ivan the Terrible: the Companion*. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003. 9

directed by Efim Dzigan.³⁸ In this film, which begins as a pseudo-documentary of sorts, the carefree existence of a small, unspecified Soviet village is shown. Shortly after and without provocation, an unspecified enemy hatches an attack. Despite the fact that the enemy was not explicitly stated to be German, they were German-speaking and certainly implicitly stated as such. On this subject, assistant director to Dzigan has stated that, with *If Tomorrow There is A War*, they attempted to realistically depict "...the first 3-4 days in our country in the event of an attempt by aggressors to violate our borders and our peaceful construction."³⁹

This film is overtly propagandistic and exaggerates the stupidity of the enemy while contrasting it with the simultaneous exaggeration of the education, bravery, and overall capacity for war tactic. The only women shown in this film were Soviet citizens and remained largely undeveloped. Women were depicted as dedicated mothers and brave soldiers, but their function in this film was similar to that of their male counterparts: to emphasize the stupidity of their enemy. Ultimately, the excesses of this film were apparent by today's

³⁸ Bellamy, Chris. *Absolute War: Soviet Russia in the Second World War*. New York: Random House, 2007. 111

³⁹ Brandenberger, David. *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination, and Terror Under Stalin, 1927-1941*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. 201

standards, however, Dzigan was awarded the Stalin prize in 1941 for this film which evidences that this was precisely the point.⁴⁰

With the prewar films discussed in this chapter, it can be deduced that there were several contradictory messages in regard to the role of women in Soviet society. Contradictions in film existed regardless of the situation in the USSR; whether in a state of peace or in a state of war, women were depicted in roles that were most convenient for the government in the context of the times in which they were filmed. Anka the Machine Gunner and Olga were framed as assets to their military outfits, however, their abilities and skill levels could not be disassociated from their gender, whereas in *If Tomorrow There is a War*, women were portrayed as indistinguishable and absent from battle sequences. These depictions contrast the traditional depiction of Anyuta in *The Jolly Fellows*. All of the films discussed here highlight these inconsistencies and reflect Soviet authority's lack of a definitive position on the role of women in the military and broader society. Ultimately, the image of the female combatant established during this era, established a precedent for the heroines of the films produced after the

⁴⁰ Rollbert, P. *Historical Dictionary of Russian and Soviet Cinema*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2009. 202

onset of World War II.

Chapter II: Heroism, Victimhood, & Treason (1939-1945)

On June 22, 1941, three million German troops crossed into Soviet territory and initiated the Russo-German aspect of what came to be known as "the Great Patriotic War".⁴¹ Despite the seemingly amicable relationship between Stalin and Hitler that existed prior to the German invasion, the mutual distrust and cynicism between the two leaders ultimately meant that, by the time German forces infiltrated Soviet territory, the Soviet government was already aware of the impending onslaught and taking measures to craft a corresponding contingency plan.⁴² However, Stalin's reticence to acknowledge Hitler's intention to break the treaty protocol soon resulted in hastily crafted preparations that ultimately proved inadequate.⁴³

The trying circumstances that the USSR inevitably found itself facing as a result of World War II meant that all forms of cultural production, whether in print, music or film, inherited a newly refocused sense of purpose: to cultivate a sense of national unity among all citizens of the Soviet states in order to encourage support for the war effort.⁴⁴ While Soviet

⁴¹Youngblood, Denise J. *Russian War Films: On the Cinema Front, 1914-2005*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2010. 55

⁴²Ulam, Adam B. *Ulam. History of Soviet Russia* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1976), 136-138

⁴³*Ibid*, 150-151.

⁴⁴Brandenberger, David & Platt, M.F. *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006. 9

propaganda was generally quite effective, popular war-themed films emerged as an important medium within the Soviet propaganda machine. During the year of 1942 especially, films differed from other forms of propaganda because many of the resources and regulatory mechanisms generally allocated for cultural production were scaled back or streamlined in order to compensate for diminishing war resources. As a result, both filmmakers examined here, Mark Donskoi and Fridrikh Ermler, used this relative leeway to produce films that were more complex and multi-dimensional than films made prior to the commencement of World War II.⁴⁵

The circumstantial re-prioritization of efforts brought about by the onset of The Great Patriotic War required the government to reconsider the role of women in Soviet military and society. With the war effort now the focus, Stalin was forced to address the women's question in more of a practical manner rather than from an ideological or purely rhetorical point of view.⁴⁶ No longer could the government afford to solely espouse rhetoric of women's liberation; the role of women in the USSR was expanded in order to encourage what was framed as their

⁴⁵ Kenez, Peter. *Cinema and Soviet Society: From the Revolution to the Death of Stalin*. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001. 177

⁴⁶ Krylova, Anna. *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 155, 167

national duty of suffering, providing sustenance, bearing children, and even laying down their lives for the Soviet cause. The distinctions made between the roles of men and women that resulted from the onset of the war mark a divergence from the rhetoric of gender equality proclaimed less than three decades prior which asserted the most significant gains in women's rights in the entirety of all of imperial Russia's preceding history.⁴⁷

Fridrikh Ermler, a veteran director in the USSR since the early nineteen-twenties, released *She Defends the Motherland* in 1943. This film, in many ways, epitomized what would become the socialist realist wartime film genre. Wartime films in this vein can be characterized by their handling of many similar stylistic techniques and thematic elements. One of the main distinguishing features of these quintessential Soviet cinematographic elements within the socialist realist wartime film genre is the stark dichotomization of the altruistic protagonist who is represented by a seemingly ordinary Soviet *woman*, and the dehumanized enemy, represented by none other than German Nazi forces.⁴⁸ Much of the wartime film genre is also shaped by its use of Soviet women as

⁴⁷ Pushkareva, Natalia. *Women in Russian History: From the Tenth to the Twentieth Century*. New York: Sharpe, 1997. 257

⁴⁸ Kenez, Peter. *Cinema and Soviet Society from the Revolution to the Death of Stalin*. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001. 177

symbols of sacrifice and suffering in contrast to Soviet men who were often presented as glorious liberators and judicious arbiters of justice.⁴⁹

She Defends the Motherland chronicles the story of Praskovia Lukyanova (also referred to as Pasha), a seemingly typical peasant wife, mother, and award-winning tractor driver who, by the end of the film, establishes herself as a courageous partisan heroine. The opening scenes of the film depict protagonist Pasha as a simple, carefree woman whose life is centered around her small family. Shortly thereafter, however, the ominous sound of planes is heard overhead and Pasha's husband, who is now adorned in his military uniform, is shown kissing his wife and son goodbye. This would be the last time he is seen by Pasha alive.

After her husband's departure, Pasha witnesses firsthand the brutal death of her son at the hands of Nazis when he is crushed beneath the weight of a German Panzer tank. This scene marks the beginning of Pasha's transformation from the loving mother into the partisan warrior. Pasha's unflinching courage and leadership as depicted in this film are shown to be a source of strength for those around her and even at times the sole driving force for her less capable male counterparts. This

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 177.

strategy of portraying such a strong and commanding female protagonist battling the odds against her merciless enemy is intended to accomplish three things, all of which aimed at shoring up support and participation in the Red Army's war effort:

- i. Demonstrate women's impressive capacity for leadership and self-sacrifice in order to inspire actual women from Soviet society to participate in the war effort,
- ii. Shame Soviet men into action by showing such a heroic and strong female lead,
- iii. Incite hatred for the enemy by depicting them in a one-dimensional, heinous manner.

Alongside the nationalistic overtones present throughout this film, there are certain elements within that also qualify it as a uniquely *Russian* film and thus somewhat of an anomaly within the Soviet wartime film genre. The first indication of this emerges at the very onset of the film with a dedication to specifically *Russian* women rather than a more broadly encompassing and consistent dedication to *all* Soviet women.⁵⁰ Other exclusively Russian motifs of varying subtleness emerge throughout the course of *She Defends the Motherland* to further exemplify its Russocentrism. Other examples of this include the

⁵⁰ Ermler, Fridrikh (director). *She Defends the Motherland* [Motion Picture]. Soviet Union: Lenfilm, 1943.

traditional Russian folk music composed by the devout party loyalist, Gavriil Popov, which can be heard throughout the course of the film.⁵¹ Other solely Russian details are represented by the local men's beards, which for centuries has been a sign of maleness in Russia, *not* in the USSR.

Released the following year was the widely applauded adaptation of Wanda Wasilewska's novel titled *The Rainbow* which was directed by Mark Donskoi. *The Rainbow* employs many of the same propagandistic devices used in *She Defends the Motherland* such as the use of excessive brutality of the enemy and a woman as the film's protagonist who is a symbol of courage, self-sacrifice, and ultimate allegiance to country.⁵² *The Rainbow* ultimately proved to be of the most successful Soviet films during the wartime era.

Protagonist Olena is a visibly pregnant partisan combatant who, at her own accord, decides to return to her native village in the Ukraine in order to give birth in a peaceful environment. Upon her arrival, Olena is detained by a typical composite of a German officer who questions her on the whereabouts of her detachment. Olena's voluntary return to her native village for the sake of her child is intended to serve as a contrast to

⁵¹ Ermler, Fridrikh (director). *She Defends the Motherland*. [Motion Picture]. Soviet Union: Lenfilm, 1943.

⁵² Thurstan, Robert W. & Bonwetsch, Bernd. ed. *The People's War: Responses to World War II in the Soviet Union*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000. 177

Kurt, her German captor's apparent lack of such an emotional capacity. In addition to demonstrating the Soviet woman's extraordinary capacity for motherhood and self-sacrifice, Olena's bravery here illustrates her adaptability and resolute dedication to her detachment and to her country. This further establishes Olena in several different competing roles such as that of the fierce partisan combatant as well as the protective nurturing mother, the protector, the defender, and eventually, the savior.

Olena's dedication to her country is challenged once again while in captivity when Kurt, her German captor, in an attempt to gather information regarding which of her fellow prisoners has been sneaking her bread, forcefully strips her newborn baby away and presses his pistol to the baby's head. Staunch in her refusal to relinquish valuable information, Olena defiantly replies, "I have only sons in the forest and beyond, they are *all my sons.*" Kurt, offended by Olena's tenacity then proceeds to threaten to summarily kill the child. While on the surface it appears that her country is unquestionably the top priority in this instance, the relationship between Olena, motherhood, and country is more complex than it appears on the surface.

Establishing Olena as a dedicated mother at the onset of the film, isn't then discarded as she allows her baby to die at the

hands of the enemy, rather Olena's familial relations shift from her conventional family to one around which the relationship between the state and its citizenry are intimately connected. The implication here is that the conventional family's place in one's individual existence becomes less important when their own wellbeing is said to be in the best interest of the all.

The messages presented in these films created during the crucial years of World War II, were of a specific formula developed that focused primarily on the heroine depicted as ideologically pure and the enemy depicted as depthless and cruel, etc.⁵³ However, while this film meets most of the aforementioned parameters, it also deviates from Soviet film orthodoxy in many ways as well. One realm in which *The Rainbow* accomplishes this is the degree to which the director allows stunningly realistic depictions of the Nazi occupation to confound the plot at certain moments, never allowing an entirely dark nor a purely light outlook on the situation. Further, the typical depiction of the Soviet citizenry as unabashed enthusiasts of all things Soviet is not present here. Instead a more nuanced and diverse portrayal of Soviet citizens is shown including Soviet captives as passive victims rather than active resistors. Further, coinciding with a relaxation on religious

⁵³ Moss, Walter Gerald. *A History of Russia Volume II: Since 1855*. London: Anthem Press, 2005. 389

persecution and a fleeting movement toward reconciliation with the church, this film also marks an atypical leniency with regard to incorporation of religious imagery. This is evidenced by the portrayal of citizens who look to the Orthodox Church for strength rather than the future Socialist utopia on the horizon.⁵⁴

In nearly every way, both the partisan Olena as well as Olga, the *narodnik* female and sister of Pusia, symbolized two variations of idealized Soviet citizens with a characteristically lack of complexity. Olga displays this with her retreat to the countryside for the sake of educating peasants and bringing hope to an otherwise dismal environment. From the onset of the film, both characters consistently illustrate their selflessness and refusal to compromise their morals in the face of depraved torturers. Olena displays her strength of character through maintaining her devotion to country, and more specifically, to the Partisan detachment to which she belongs despite the threat to her child's life as well as her own. Similarly, Olga refuses to compromise her integrity and succumb to bribes of material goods such as chocolates and German medicine offered by her own sister Pusia which further emphasizes the dichotomy between these two character types.

⁵⁴ Ulam, Adam B. *A History of Soviet Russia*. New York: Praeger, 1976. 163

Consequently, she reaffirms her resoluteness by rejecting her connection to Pusia entirely even under the threat of mortal danger.

Each challenge posed to Olena and Olga here that present a potential threat to their commitment is implicitly shown to be connected to the Soviet Union's fate in the Great Patriotic War. That is to say that, if the Soviet populace doesn't assume the strength of spirit and character demonstrated by these heroines, then the USSR will be at mercy of the ruthless Nazi barbarians as depicted in the aforementioned films. Given that this film was made in the bloodiest months of World War II, Olena and Olga's level of commitment was intended to represent the benchmark of Soviet sacrifice to which civil society should look to emulate.

Whereas Olena and Olga were intended to symbolize the epitome of Soviet potential, another character in this film, Pusia, symbolizes all that society should reject and actively take a stand against. Pusia, the materialistic and self-obsessed sister of Olga, becomes the mistress of Kurt, the morally bankrupt Nazi overseer in charge of maintaining the occupation of this small Ukrainian village. From the opening scenes of *The Rainbow*, Pusia is shown to be lounging in the commandeered house of an elderly local woman whom she disrespectfully refers to as

"ugly baba." In this film, *Pusia* is seen as the epitome of despicableness illustrating that, despite her Soviet origin, her sense of materialism and self-indulgence are her most prominent characteristics. So repugnant is the character of *Pusia* in this film that, in the closing scenes as the partisans liberates this village, her very own husband, a partisan commander, callously shoots her without remorse indicating that even his wife is rendered meaningless without a thorough appreciation for Soviet ideals. *Pusia's* presence in this film reiterates the importance of the motherland over more conventional family ties. This is first established by *Olga's* hatred toward her sister, then furthered by *Olena's* sacrifice of her child and then finally driven home when *Pusia* is executed by her own husband. Ultimately, the audience is left with the indubitable understanding that *Pusia* is a loathsome individual and, as a result, of her flimsy character and treasonous activities she must suffer the consequences.

Both *She Defends the Motherland* as well as *The Rainbow* represent a specific type of wartime films released during the war that primarily revolved around female partisan heroines as the protectors of the virtue of the Soviet people and saviors of the Soviet Union. However, the heroines depicted in these films offer a different formula for what constitutes a hero than the

historic male heroes that preceded them in the films made during the prewar years. The construction of heroism here, which is a specifically female version of heroism, requires that women fulfill many positions simultaneously. Not only must women sacrifice their own lives, they must sacrifice the lives of their children and they must endure their suffering in silence to ensure that more punishment is not hastened.

In both Donskoi's *The Rainbow*, as well as in Ermler's *She Defends the Motherland*, the partisan heroines of the films, Olena and Praskovia, are in many ways similarly constructed. The mold of the female combatant as embodied by these characters contains an unshakable sense of purity and loyalty that seems to exist deep within the psyche of the character and ultimately serves as the basis from which their impressive capacity for courage, self-sacrifice, and virtue is able to continually assert itself regardless of the danger level of a given situation. Examples of this are pervasive throughout both of these films, to the point of caricature at times; however, when examined in the context of and in contrast of the viciousness used to depict the German enemy, it becomes evident why it was

not only necessary, but vital, portray such thoroughly heroic characters as a means of ensuring Soviet success.⁵⁵

In *She Defends the Motherland*, even after learning of her husband's death, witnessing the gruesome death of her son beneath a tank, as well as experiencing the trauma of rape, all at the hands of the Germans, Praskovia, rather than succumb to the despair that would inevitably follow such a tragic series of events, rises to a leadership role in seeking retribution from the savage German forces which callously subjected her to such trauma. Staying focused on her objective of exacting revenge from the enemy, Pasha mobilizes and inspires her fellow villagers along her journey without the slightest question of the integrity of her mission even when, in rare moments of Soviet film history, other characters are shown doubting the likelihood of a Soviet victory in the war. Olena's character, in the following year's *The Rainbow*, embodies the same ideals that comprise Olena's character and is intended to serve the same purpose indicating to the films' viewers that no deterrent, no matter how horrific, not even the death of one's family, is enough to stop the committed defender of the Soviet Union.

⁵⁵ Shlapentokh, Dmitry & Shlapentokh, Vladimir. *Soviet Cinematography, 1918-1991*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1993. 118

In both of the wartime films examined, *The Rainbow* and *She Defends the Motherland*, women are pushed to the forefront of Soviet cinema for the purposes of evoking an emotional reaction for the sheer visceral nature of these films. Despite undergoing unthinkable torture and punishment, their stoicism never falters, their loyalty never flinches and their dignity is never relinquished. Despite their consistent display of bravery, they are never recognized or rewarded for their sacrifices. Instead, we see them "liberated" or "rescued" by their male counterparts who make spectacles of themselves and are constantly praised for their efforts. The heroines of the wartime films were not the larger-than-life heroes that became iconic in the thirties, they were silent sufferers used as shaming mechanisms. Whatever potential for the progress of women in Soviet society established is later undermined as they are discarded once again after the resolution to the war.

Chapter III: Return to Patriarchy (1946-1953)

The Fall of Berlin is widely regarded as the pinnacle of representations of Joseph Stalin's cult of personality in film.⁵⁶ Directed by Mikhail Chiaureli, whom Stalin personally regarded as his favorite director, this epic two part film was released as a birthday gift for Stalin on his 70th Birthday in 1949-1950.⁵⁷ The purpose of releasing a film about the Soviet Union's recent success in the Great Patriotic War, however, was less about Russian Nationalism or celebrating the USSR's victory, as was it was about the rewriting of recent history. This film employs this revisionist tactic in order to ensure that Joseph Stalin is remembered as not only the sole mastermind of the Red Army's war strategy, but also, amazingly, as an omniscient authority on micro-level social matters by depicting him as a premier matchmaker for Natasha and Alyosha, the characters who comprise the human interest aspect of the story. Ultimately, *The Fall of Berlin* elevates Stalin to a god-like status while all others are portrayed as lesser individuals who either revered him or feared him.

Another storyline that exists in this film revolves primarily around the character of Alyosha, an extraordinary

⁵⁶ Chambers, John Whiteclay and Culbert, David. *World War II, Film, and History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. 86

⁵⁷ Gillespie, David. *Russian Cinema*. London: Pearson Education, 2003. 133

factory worker who enlists in the Red Army after German forces launch an unprovoked attack against the Soviet Union. At the onset of the film, the viewer is introduced to Natasha, a schoolteacher who immediately falls for Alyosha at an awards ceremony recognizing his above average capacity for steel working. However, her development does not extend far beyond that of a prop for Alyosha throughout the remainder of the film. Natasha's minimal presence here feels closer to an attempt to counterbalance the all-consuming presence of the film's central male characters, Stalin and Alyosha, than a fully developed character in her own right.

Natasha's role in this film marks a clear departure from the image of the empowered woman warrior seen in the previously mentioned wartime productions. Similar the role of women in *If Tomorrow There is a War*, Natasha is only present for select scenes throughout the entirety of this epic two-part film; and even in those few scenes, she is deprived of any discernible substance or agency. Ultimately, Natasha's primary function is that of a means to validate her love interest, Alyosha's existence. She gives him a reason to continue fighting despite the brutality endured in the trenches of battle; in other words, she is his captive so that he can be her savior. While these gender roles are similar to those used in *The Rainbow*, when the

Red Army liberates the women from the German-occupied Ukrainian village, they are different than the portrayals of women from the pre-war era. For example, rather than assume the popular "Anka the Machine Gunner" archetype, Natasha is kidnapped and enslaved by Nazi forces which then serves as the driving force for Alyosha throughout battle until he liberates the concentration camp in which she is held captive. The "damsel in distress" dynamic is first established in the opening scenes when Alyosha carries an unconscious Natasha in his arms as Nazi planes drop bombs onto the wheat field where the two were walking peacefully. Finally, Alyosha's mission is complete in the final scenes when Natasha is shown to be alive.

Nevertheless, the larger message communicated here is that this was only possible due to the brilliant strategizing of Stalin.

Despite the love between Alyosha and Natasha, which survives throughout the entirety of the war, even this most personal aspect of Natasha's life is unable come into fruition until the Great Leader himself makes it so. In what is perhaps the most outrageous scene in this film, a plane carrying Stalin is shown to have landed in Berlin and so that he could personally greet soldiers in a symbolic display of Soviet triumph. In the midst of celebration, the cheering of thousands dies as both Alyosha and Natasha walk up to the leader and,

rather than acknowledge their lost love, her first words uttered are a request for a kiss from the leader "...for all that he has done for her people."⁵⁸ Finally, due to Stalin's personal role in their romance, Alyosha and Natasha's love can be fully realized.

Not only does Natasha's character remain deprived of depth and substance, but the role of the female in general is almost entirely invisible throughout this film. By the end of World War II, over 900,000 women served in nearly all capacities of the Red Army, however, watching Chiaureli's *The Fall of Berlin*, the viewer is not left with the impression that women contributed so significantly to the Soviet victory.⁵⁹ Further, all of the various propaganda initiatives that glorified Soviet women's participation in the Red Army in the preceding years are omitted entirely from this film. Throughout all of the bloody battle scenes, solely all male regiments are shown struggling against Nazi forces. It is not until the final sequence of the film that female soldiers are depicted at all and even then their uniforms are shown to be largely unsoiled and crisp. This is a sharp contrast from the appearance of Alyosha, whose struggle and bravery is evidenced by his bloodied and disheveled uniform. This contrast sends the message to the viewer that female

⁵⁸ Chiaureli, Mikhail (Director). *The Fall of Berlin* [Motion Picture]. Soviet Union: Mosfilm. 1950. Film.

⁵⁹ Krylova, Anna Krylova. *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 168-169

soldiers' efforts were not as great as those of Alyosha or the other male soldiers.

With *The Fall of Berlin*, the Soviet Union saw the end of a chapter of Soviet cinema history coinciding with the death of late Stalinism. This film sanitizes the brutality and chaos inherent in this military entanglement in order to crowd out all other possible interpretations in order to establish a symbolic space large enough only for Stalin. Notwithstanding previous attempts to frame women's role as indispensable to the success of the Soviet Union in the Great Patriotic War, with this film, women's role within the Red Army is rendered meaningless. Ultimately, *The Fall of Berlin* coincides with the Soviet society's reversion back to the traditional gender roles of the past for the sake of reinstating paternalism and patriarchy going forward.

Conclusion

Given the close eye and heavy hand that Soviet authorities maintained over the film industry through the Stalinist years, many Soviet films were similarly shaped by party principles, government policy and the doctrine of socialist realism during the timeframe in which they were made; however, when examining films from the eras before, during, and after the war, clear divergences in the messages communicated and the characters depicted manifest themselves. Ultimately, when considering the messages conveyed in films during postwar years such as *The Fall of Berlin*, released in 1950, compared to the prewar Soviet films from the thirties, such as *Alexander Nevsky* or *Chapaev*, the degree to which the portrayals of women in popular films have changed over the years become evident and, when taking into consideration the ways in which the circumstances of the USSR changed from 1934-1953, the reasons behind those said shifts can be better understood.

After the war, films could divert their focus from the images of the female combatant from the previous years into a one by which recent history could be rewritten in order to secure Stalin's place in history as the brilliant architect of Soviet victory and was able to deliver the his people from what

was the gravest threat to the first post-revolution generation of Soviet citizens, the Great Patriotic War. Rather than honor the sacrifices of women as mothers and soldiers, women were essentially written out of this history. This new history created in the late Stalinist period symbolized the reintroduction of patriarchy into society and asserted that the battle arena was a place for men. As a result, men were the ones who once again were praised for their bravery and sacrifice.

In the films examined from the prewar years during the thirties, the likelihood of an impending attack had a significant impact on the messages conveyed in many of these productions. In certain cases, the notion of Germany as the enemy was implicitly or allegorically stated, as is the case with *Chapaev*, while in the later pre-war years, there is a strong, explicit emphasis on Germany as the most imminent threat to the USSR, as is the case with *If Tomorrow There is a War*. If the purpose wasn't to attempt to directly instill a sense hatred for the enemy during this era, it was to inspire pride in the Soviet way life. This message was at times communicated by showing the courage, struggle, and sacrifice of past Russian folk heroes such as in *Chapaev* and *Alexander Nevsky*, whereas, in other cases, this sense of pride emanated from the promises of

progress and social mobility in the Soviet system such as in *The Jolly Fellows*.

With the knowledge that a war was potentially on the horizon, there was a sense of urgency surrounding the need for national unity.⁶⁰ This notion was complicated, however, when it came to the role of women within this effort and more specifically inside of the Red Army. The government's convoluted stance is most evident in the war-themed films from before and after World War II when the dire circumstances weren't exacerbated by diminishing troop numbers, dwindling resources, and the overall hardships of the war. For example, while the archetype of "Anka the Machine Gunner" was iconic for many Soviet women growing up and was intended to encourage participation in the military, when looking at the prewar films in which some variation of the female combatant is present, such as in *Alexander Nevsky* and *Chapaev*, the prominence of this character is quite minimal relative to that of their male counterparts. That is to say, even though propaganda stressed the strength of the female combatant in cultural productions, propaganda, and in rhetoric, depictions of women as an asset to the war effort in capacities other than that of the domestic

⁶⁰ David Brandenberger & Kevin M.F. Platt. *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2006), 9.

sphere was scarce if not nearly non-existent. After the resolution of World War II, the greatest omission of the struggles of women within the military is evidenced with such films as *the Fall of Berlin* which allowed Mikhail Chiaureli to inflate Stalin's cult of personality to an unprecedented level at the expense of all others who sacrificed their lives for the USSR in The Great Patriotic War.

The films made during World War II evoke the strongest emotional reactions of the three eras examined for the degree of realism employed when portraying the barbarities perpetrated by the German forces. The story lines for the wartime films generally regurgitated a particular formula that consisted of the Soviet woman as mother and wife who experienced tragedy at the hands of the German forces and, as a result, transformed into some formation of an idealized combatant whose unshakable faith in Soviet principles allow her to seek retribution against her enemy. Stalin's unprecedented agreement to relax constraints on religious symbols and Soviet dissenters in popular films during the war marked a clear divergence from the typical socialist realist films that preceded them.

The prewar, wartime, and postwar eras that comprise the 1934-1953 timeframe covered here ultimately mark distinct chapters in Soviet film history. Much of the films before the

war era revolved around past historical figures which was followed by an era that emphasized heart-wrenching dramas that focused on the suffering of virtuous Soviet women, before finally, the films in celebration of Soviet success aimed exclusively to inflate Stalin's cult of personality at the expense of those who served in the Red Army during the war.

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