

Egor M. Isaev¹

Politics of Memory and Cinematography in Modern Russia: the October Revolution and the Civil War

¹ National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia, E-mail: emisaev@hse.ru

Abstract:

This article discusses the representation of the era of the October Revolution and the Civil War in contemporary Russian popular cinema. It describes the modern tools used by the state to create new images of the past and to reconstruct history in Russian popular culture. It also considers how Russian society has reacted to this official discourse.

Keywords: politics of memory, cultural policy, public history, Russian cinema

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Over the past 30 years, images of the Soviet Union have occupied a key place in the Russian public sphere. The past seems to be the most important element of the present: perception of historical events is extremely controversial, while leaders and politicians constantly express their attitudes to the past in an attempt to ensure that their own vision of the past becomes the dominant one. However, 27 years after the collapse of the USSR, Russian society has not been able to develop an agreed-upon narrative about the Soviet past and reach a consensus on the largest issues involved. Indeed, the only event that has not caused controversy is the Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War.¹

Attitudes to the Soviet past are not only controversial; they are also exceedingly popular: according to various opinion polls, half of Russians think positively about the Soviet Union and would like to return to it.² Images of the USSR are created, formed and changed almost daily: in the media, in political speeches, and in many forms of popular culture. In the opinion of Yan Levchenko, “the second decade of the post-Soviet time consolidated the status of the object of veneration for the Soviet era, which led to additional commercialization.”³ This commercialization is largely due to popular cinema.

The historical content of popular films is a retransmission of various interpretations of history, which provide definite views of the described events to the moviegoer with the help of images, sounds, ideas, meanings and objects. Producers, directors and screenwriters frequently create film adaptations of historical events that do not claim to be authentic. Rather, they code ideas about history that reflect the “spirit of the times” and do not offer factual accounts of historical events. In this way they construct history, offering in particular historical narratives that focus on heroic stories and images, weaving them into the historical events of the last century.

The state is not the only political actor but, undoubtedly, it is one of the main ones. As Olga Malinova writes,

it [the state] occupies a special position in this field, since it has the ability to impose the methods of interpreting a social reality that it supports by means of power distribution of resources (for example, with the approval of educational standards), legal categorization (as in the case of legislation on citizenship), animating selected symbols with special status (through the approval of official symbols, state holidays and the establishment of awards), as well as the ability to represent us in the international arena, etc.⁴

With the emergence of Vladimir Putin, the attitude towards memory has changed dramatically – manifested almost immediately in the adoption of the law on state symbols and the return of the Soviet anthem. But the authorities revitalized the memory of the Soviet Union only partially by removing inconvenient moments from it. Some periods, events and people from the days of the USSR have disappeared from the public sphere. The history politics of Russia under Vladimir Putin are characterized by the fact that the authorities use “positive” moments from the past, while excluding uncomfortable questions and traumatic events from the discourse. Fortunately, under these conditions there are other groups involved in popularizing “inconvenient” pasts so that they do not disappear completely from public consciousness.

Faced with conflicting views within the Russian public sphere in the early 2000s, Putin developed a flexible tactic that in turn consisted in compromising with, or alienating, each of them. When he had the Russian

Egor M. Isaev is the corresponding author.

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flag officially incorporated into the constitution, Putin did so while ignoring the disapproval of the Communists. And when he supported the official reinstatement of the Soviet hymn, he disregarded the opposition of liberal-democrats. Yet, as the historian Alexei Miller writes, such a combination of symbols did not lead to the successful synthesis Putin may have hoped for. "Instead, an extremely contradictory configuration was brought into being, which was primarily based on a silence about problems and responsibilities." However, by the end of the 2000s, this policy led to the adoption not only of independent features but also its own image of the past, one which inevitably involved the "selectivity" of certain processes and periods of Russian history, and the "silencing" of others. Attempts to create new symbols, and to use the past selectively, often proved unsuccessful. For example, instead of placing the popular holiday celebrating the anniversary of the October Revolution on November 7,⁵ Putin created a new holiday on November 4, but polls revealed public disquiet about what was seen as an artificial re-writing of the past.⁶

Russian officials have shown a strong interest in history and cinema. The current Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinskiy not only talks about the state and the role of history and memory in the process of constructing national identity,⁷ but also about "film policy."⁸ Indeed, the Cinema Fund was organized at the end of 2009, and since then the government has been actively involved in financing a large number of films. Initially, the Cinema Fund was understood as a tool to support the film industry, to ensure the consistent production of popular films, and most importantly – to improve their quality. The Cinema Fund was supposed to become a launching pad for leading companies, and they, in turn, would someday have the opportunity to develop films with minimal government support.

The leading companies received exactly half of the three billion rubles allocated by the state to support the industry as a grant through the Cinema Fund in 2014. In addition, they received further financing from funds intended for other organizations. Likewise, 4 billion rubles will be distributed in 2018 to support national films, and the share of the leading film companies is increasing.⁹

But the Russian Cinema Fund is not the only source of funding. Focusing on the potential for Russian films to garner increased ticket sales with the help of the Cinema Fund, in 2013 the Ministry of Culture began supporting "socially important films, first time director and children's films, animation, and documentary projects"¹⁰ to the tune of approximately 3 billion rubles per year. Curiously, hidden in the appendix of the document stating the basic principles of the public funding of film production in 2016 was the revelation that the military-historical film was considered to be included in the category of socially significant films. Since then it has been opportune for film production companies to make socially significant or military-historical films to reduce their own costs to nothing. These practices resemble the functioning of the cinema in a slightly modified version of a planned economy.

Sometimes the Ministry of Culture directly intervenes. One example is the postponement of the Russian release of the cartoon movie *Paddington 2* in order to eliminate some box office competition for the homegrown film *Scythian*, a historical drama also scheduled to debut on January 18, and "Going Vertical," a patriotic Soviet sports flick about the U.S.S.R.'s Olympic basketball triumph over the U.S. team in 1972. Alexander Mindadze's *Dear Hans* even suffered acts of censorship. The movie depicts Soviet-Nazi economic cooperation following the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact that lasted until the German attack on the Soviet Union. Because of the military advisory board's objections, the Ministry of Culture at first did not approve financing for the film. In the end it followed the decision of the artistic advisory board to provide funding for *Dear Hans*, but some historical references had to be cut out, and there were also manipulations of licensing arrangements. In the case of the French-British black comedy *Death of Stalin* Russian officials withdrew the distribution license two days before the film's scheduled release, thereby prohibiting its screening in Russian movie theaters.

It should be noted that the share of historical films in Russian film production is quite high. 30 % of the 250 most successful Russian films are historical films. At the moment, 9 of the 25 highest-grossing Russian films are historical. Most of them are devoted to events of the Second World War, but in recent years a number of new trends have appeared: sports films that take place in the Brezhnev era, films on the conquest of space, as well as films about Medieval Russia have succeeded in pulling in the highest box office returns.

By contrast, the periods of the February and October revolutions and the Russian Civil War have rarely been represented in contemporary Russian cinema. In fact, we are observing the process of concealment of these historical events. The emergence of the Soviet Union, the Revolution, the Civil War and the collapse of the USSR are the most obvious historical traumas of modern Russia. Because they are contested and controversial pasts, and because of their traumatic nature, there is in fact very little discussion about them in contemporary Russia. They are reflected on only indirectly in discussions about Stalin, repressions during the Stalin era and the participation of the USSR in the Second World War. In other words, discussions about the causes of the emergence of the Soviet Union and its organization are possible only when addressing later periods: the late 1910s, 20s and 30s are simply not represented in contemporary Russian cinema.

This is probably due to the fact that modern Russian society, which is currently going through a conservative turn, simply does not understand how to describe this era and the events associated with it. Consequently, in

terms of historical narrative, the public discourse of members of the elite stress the continuity of the history of millennial Russia rather than specific periods of decisive change.¹¹ It is a narrative that excludes the existence of a revolution, which is in fact the most vivid manifestation of the historical process, the essence of a moving history.

The revolution is a phenomenon of modern times. Aleida Assmann points out that the possibility of its emergence is the result of a new time regime: “The idea that revolution is not only a natural process, but also a historical event that it can be generated by a person, is the direct result of a new time regime.”¹² In the case of the Soviet Union, the 1917 revolution was not only variously interpreted in and of itself as a past event, but became point of convergence in contemporary discussions about national identity. A huge number of texts, films, songs and other products of mass culture (funded by the state) were dedicated to championing, displaying or developing a new attitude about this event. Thus, beginning in the 1950s a whole genre arose around the theme of the Revolution and the Civil War: the Red Western (or Eastern). In a style inspired by American western films, these films also relied on themes like the identity and articulation of good and evil in the history of the state.

Maria Ferretti has noted that discussions about the Russian Revolution and the role of Lenin in the revolutionary process appeared in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but were quickly displaced in the mid-90s by a narrative about the country’s Great Past,¹³ which excludes complex and problematic periods in the history of the country.

Indeed, films devoted to the October Revolution and the Civil War were practically not presented to viewers in the 1990s. However, since the end of the nineties the period of the Russian Empire has begun to be represented in a new way. Here the most striking example is the film “The Barber of Siberia” (dir. N. Mikhalkov, 1998), dedicated to “the lost bright past of the great country.” It is important to note that this film has become one of the most expensive film productions sponsored by the state. The revolutionaries in this film are presented more like thoughtless hooligans who do not understand what they are doing.

Nevertheless, over the past 20 years Russian cinematography has developed a few narrative strategies that serve to describe the events of the late 1910s and early 1920s. Films like *Admiral* (dir. Andrei Kravchuk, 2008), *Hero* (dir. Yuri Vasilyev, 2016) and *Sunstroke* (dir. Nikita Mikhalkov, 2014) represent three rare attempts at shooting popular, high-budget films about the events of the Civil War; but, only *Admiral* proved successful. *Hero* and *Sunstroke* appear to be derivative remakes that try to reproduce *Admiral*’s narrative in a different manner while aiming to achieve a similar level of popular success.

The protagonist is always an officer of the White Movement,¹⁴ who by chance becomes involved in historical events, and his fate, in fact, mirrors them. It is curious that all films are romantic tragedies: the characters wanted to love, but political events forced them to fight. In the end, the heroes are separated either by exile or death. However, it is interesting that both *Admiral* and *Hero* end up building a bridge to the present, linking the heroes and their descendants in a historical continuum, pointing out that Russian history has been put back on track and that any historical dislocation has been corrected.

It is most interesting how the filmmakers explain the phenomenon of the Revolution itself. The *Admiral* does not particularly reflect on this. Here sailors and soldiers start spitting and they use foul language – in fact they lose discipline and look like criminals. In *Sunstroke* Nikita Mikhalkov gives a much more interesting interpretation. In his opinion, secularism, an anti-religious mindset and scientific thought destroyed the established way of life; adultery, a stolen scarf, and a careless attitude towards the growing popularity of Charles Darwin’s theory was bringing down the Russian Empire step by step.

Modern popular films about the October Revolution and the Civil War seem to express contemporary conservative ideas about the historical process. Successors of the emigrant ballad,¹⁵ conservatives see in this process nothing more than a temporary outburst, causing a loss of conscience and humanity. The result leads to the hero’s death and loss of love, while the revolutionaries still simply look like one-dimensional characters out of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s “Demons.”¹⁶

While Vladimir Putin wants historians to display “an objective and respectful attitude to the past” in the context of 1917,¹⁷ Vladimir Medinskiy, in his article “Without Reds and Whites”, urges the following strictures: to “preserve the integrity of history; to not crush Russia into pieces; to not place in opposition the salient elements of its different epochs – Old Russian and imperial, Soviet and modern.”¹⁸ With this attitude, and being dependent on the budget of the Cinema Fund, Russian filmmakers turn to the only possible conservative narrative: the emigrant, who considers the Revolution and Civil War a catastrophe.

Notes

1 Alexei I. Miller, “Istoricheskaya politika v Vostochnoy Evrope,” in *Istoricheskaya Politika* 23, ed. Alexei Miller and M. Lipman, *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* (New Literary Observer, 2012), 7–32.

- 2 Levada-Centre, Raspad SSSR [The collapse of the USSR, (2016)]. Available at: <https://goo.gl/zPntbe> (accessed August 25, 2018).
- 3 Yan Levchenko, "Vechnaya molodost'" [Eternal youth]. *Neprikosnovennyj zapas*, no. 89, (3 2013) [Emergency Ration, no. 89, (March, 2013)]. Available at: <https://goo.gl/H5Q95w> (accessed August 25, 2018).
- 4 Olga Malinova, Tema proshlogo v ritorike prezidentov Rossii [The theme of the past in the rhetoric of the presidents of Russia]. *Pro et Contra* 15, no. 3–4 (2011): 106–122.
- 5 The anniversary of the October Revolution, the main public holiday in the USSR from 1918 to 1991. It was celebrated on the day of the October Revolution on November 7 and 8.
- 6 The Day of People's Unity is a Russian national holiday, celebrated on November 4 since 2005. In the explanatory note to the draft law it was noted: "On November 4, 1612, the militia under the leadership of Kuzma Minin and Dmitry Pozharsky stormed Kitay-gorod, freeing Moscow from the Polish interventionists and demonstrating an example of heroism and cohesion of the entire people regardless of origin, religion or position in society."
- 7 Vladimir Medinskiy, "Sushchestvuet li seichas spros na patriotizm?" ["Is there any demand for patriotism?"]. *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, no. 6284. Available at: <https://rg.ru/2014/01/22/istoria.html> (accessed August 19, 2018).
- 8 Newsru, "Medinskiy obiasnil svoiu politiku v kino" ["Medinskiy explained his policy in cinema," (2013)]. Available at <http://www.newsru.com/cinema/02aug2013/medinkino.html> (accessed July 19, 2018).
- 9 Artur Chachelov, "V 2018 godu Fond kino raspredelit gospodderzhku vesnoj i osen'yu" (The Cinema Fund will allocate state support in the spring and autumn 2018). *Booker's Bulletin*, (2017). Available at: <https://goo.gl/EWqzEE> (accessed August 25, 2018).
- 10 Ministry of culture, Departament kinematografii nachinaet otbor organizatsii kinematografii. (2014) Available at: http://mkrf.ru/ministerstvo/departament/detail.php?ID=461490&SECTION_ID=19543 (accessed August 25, 2018).
- 11 Olga Malinova, "Simvolicheskoe edinstvo natsii? Reprezentatsiya makropoliticheskogo soobshhestva v predvybornoj ritorike Vladimira Putina" ["Symbolic unity of the nation? The representation of the macro-political community in the pre-election rhetoric of Vladimir Putin]. *Pro et Contra* 3 (2012), 76–93.
- 12 Aleida Assmann, "Transformations of the Modern Time Regime," in *Breaking up Time: Negotiating the Borders between Present, Past and Future*, ed. C. Lorey (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, 2013), 39–56.
- 13 M Ferretti, "Rasstrojstvo pamyati: Rossiya i stalinizm" ["Memory Disorder: Russia and Stalinism," 2002]. *Polit.ru* Available at: <https://clck.ru/9Xbhf> (accessed August 25, 2018).
- 14 The White movement was a loose confederation of Anti-Communist forces that fought the Bolsheviks, also known as the Reds, in the Russian Civil War (1917–1922/3).
- 15 Slow, sad musical compositions about love and homesickness, popular among Russian emigrants in the first half of the twentieth century.
- 16 "Demons" is a novel by Fyodor Dostoevsky, first published in the journal *The Russian Messenger* in 1871. It is an allegory about the potentially catastrophic consequences of the political and moral nihilism that were becoming prevalent in Russia in the 1860s. A fictional town descends into chaos as it becomes the focal point of an attempted revolution, orchestrated by master conspirator Pyotr Verkhovensky.
- 17 TASS, "Putin: polemika o revolyutsii 1917 goda dolzhna osnovyvat'sya na faktakh i dokumentakh" ("Putin: the controversy about the revolution of 1917 must be based on facts and documents"), November 6, 2017. Available at: <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/4705671> (accessed August 25, 2018).
- 18 Vladimir Medinskiy, "Bez «belykh» i «krasnykh»" ("Without 'the whites' and 'the reds,'" 2016). *Rossiiskaia gazeta* (7009). Available at: <https://goo.gl/NTwZmK> (accessed August 19, 2018)