

The Militarization of the Past in Russian Popular Historical Films

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Introduction

The identity crisis of modern Russia, identified more than 15 years ago by D. Kujundzic (Kujundzic 2000), L. Gudkov (Gudkov 2005) and B. Dubin (Dubin 2006), continues to gain momentum; this has been exacerbated by the extremely aggressive foreign policy of the Russian Federation, with military interventions in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. With the full set of symptoms of a post-colonial space, such as homelessness and a crisis of cultural identity, Russian society is seeking answers in its past. The process of finding an identity based on a military past is becoming one of the most important issues. Consequently, Russian authorities have pursued a historical policy aimed at fashioning a positive and selective history: they have implemented a unified system for the teaching of history at schools, increased pressure on NGOs engaged in working with memorials, and established new public holidays devoted to commemorating historical events. All of these actions are indicative of the attitude with which history is being interpreted at a national level.

According to the Levada Center, the history of the country remains the main pride of Russians along with natural resources and the armed forces. Sixty-seven percent of respondents consider Russia to be a great power, primarily based on the availability of military resources, the presence of nuclear missiles, the welfare of citizens, and the economic and industrial potential of the country. It is also important to note references to the notion of a "heroic past," which has increased significantly over the past years from nine percent to 24 percent (Pipiya 2016).

Because of this, Russia seems to be trapped in an era of timelessness without doing work on its own historical traumas. The previously accepted views regarding its own history have ceased to be

novel, and no further logical connections and historical narratives can be produced under the pressure of a society requiring a heroic past primarily associated with military victories.

According to J. Assmann, public understanding of the past operates on two levels: the communicative and the cultural. The first covers the events and memories of contemporaries maintained by their joint communication in the framework of individual biographies. Cultural memory is a set of important traditions and images of the past for society. It takes the form of myths and is maintained with the help of rituals, art and media. Here, the state tends to play an active role, using such tools as the politics of memory and historical policy (Assmann 2008: 111).

The innovation of modern Russian historical policy governing public and cultural memory is the emergence of various funds cooperating with the state, and their active participation in the production of research projects, scientific and popular magazines, projects posted on the internet, movies, etc. (Miller 2009: 18). This policy relies on the idea that mass culture and images of the past are important elements in the construction of identity. A distinctive feature of mass culture is the invasion of all social spheres, but it would be a mistake to approach this process from the following point of view: that publishing entities impose uncontested images on society. On the contrary, society consumes and assimilates only the products that harmoniously fit its worldview. This creates a certain system of relations where the producer attempts to satisfy the elites, whilst trying to predict the desire of society to look at a certain problem or event in a specific form. In other words, a popular product in the Russian Federation is a successful communication process between the elite and society where the producer is acting as a mediator.

So, the main aim of this chapter is to explore the context of film production and to review Russian popular historical films, analyzing and describing the development of a system of images of the past that appears to be the mirror of a new Russian identity.

Film production and politics of memory in Russia

Russian officials have shown a strong interest in history and cinema. At the time of writing, the current Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky not only discusses the state and the role of history and memory in the process of constructing national identity (Medinsky 2014), but also debates film policy itself (Newsru 2013). 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 utilized 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 to become a launching pad for leading companies, and they, in turn, would eventually have the opportunity to develop films with minimal government support. However, leading companies have not moved away from the state funding of their projects. On the contrary, they are seeking opportunities for increased state funding. Thus, leading companies received exactly half of the three billion rubles allocated by the state to support the industry through grants from the Cinema Fund in 2012. In addition, they received additional financing from the funds intended for other organizations. Likewise, 2.8 billion rubles were distributed in 2016 to support the national films, and the share of leading film companies is only increasing. Those companies will receive approximately 1.8 billion rubles, and other film production companies will get around 1 billion rubles (Proficinema 2016).

As mentioned above, the Russian Cinema Fund is not the only source of funding. If the Cinema Fund focuses on the potential of Russian films to get a high number of ticket sales, in 2013 the Ministry of Culture began supporting “socially important films, first time director and children’s films, animation and documentary projects” (Ministry of Culture, 2014); this called for a budget of approximately three billion rubles per year. Curiously, hidden in the appendix of the document stating the basic principles of public funding of film production in 2016, the genre of military-historical film appeared to be listed under 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 potential practices remind one of the role of cinema in a slightly modified model of a planned economy. It is important to note that different actors have repeatedly talked about the revival of the State Committee for Cinematography. In 2013, in Sochi, representatives of the government and the film industry sat together at a round table devoted to this topic (Lugansky 2013). At the end of March 2016, Mosfilm CEO Karen Shakhnazarov offered to create a single movie center, an analogue of the USSR State Committee for Cinematography, which would deal with funding Russian films (Surganova 2016).

Despite the fact that Medinsky denies accusations of trying to censor Russian cinema (Lenta.ru 2014), several scandals around historical films have erupted over the past three years. In July 2013, the project of Alexander Mindadze called «Dear Hans, Dear Pyotr» (the story of a Soviet engineer Peter and his German colleague Hans, who are on a business trip to the Soviet Union at a glass-making factory before the war) was not chosen for competition by the Ministry of Culture. This occurred, despite the fact that the commission of experts found that the majority of its members voted for the project. As a result of the scandal, the Ministry of Culture recommended the film to the Cinema Fund. It is also interesting that after the meeting with Medinsky, Mindadze agreed to work with consultants from the Institute of World History, the Russian Academy of Sciences, and the Russian Military Historical Society “to ensure the maximum historical authenticity” of the film (Timofeev and Sheveleva 2013).

The confrontation between the director of the State Archive Sergey Mironenko and Medinsky was an even more resonant event. Based on the available evidence, Mironenko pointed out the inconsistency of a number of Soviet propaganda stereotypes, including the myth of “28 Panfilov’s Men” (The Panfilov Division's

Twenty-Eight Guardsmen⁸⁹). In response, Medinsky, who had recently publicly praised the concept of the movie *28 Panfilov's Men* (which was also funded by the Ministry of Culture) urged the management of the State Archive “to do their job, and not to give their own assessments of the archival documents” (Vedomosti 2016). As a result, Mironenko was dismissed as the Director of the State Archive. Moreover, in June 2016 Medinsky published an article in the *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, where he suggested a new way of understanding history – as a constructive Russian ideology (Medinsky 2016).

However, even the full government funding of historical films does not allow us to account for the effectiveness of historical policy in Russia. This was stated by Vladimir Putin in 2013, who pointed to a twelve-fold increase of financing of Russian cinema since the year 2000. He noted that “the state can make a movie, but it can't make them watch it” (Latunina 2013). In other words, we can only affirm the presence of historical policy and, with the help of methods of media studies, try to analyze images and messages through which the elite is trying to integrate some ideas into society.

The images of the past in Russian popular films

In this sense, it is much more productive to look again at the list of popular Russian films, 27 of which (from the top 100 most popular Russian movies) include historical settings.

Table 1. Russian historical films in Russian box office

	Position in box-office	Name	Year	Director	Box-office in Russia
1	1	Stalingrad	2013	F. Bondarchuk	\$51 760 472
2	4	Viy	2014	O. Stepchenko	\$34 592 118
3	5	Admiral	2008	A. Kravchuk	\$34 518 207
4	7	Three Warriors on distant shores	2012	K. Feoktistov	\$31 505 876

89 It is the literary version of the defensive battles of the 316th Infantry Soviet Division against the 2nd Panzer and 35th Infantry Divisions of the Wehrmacht on the Volokolamsk direction on November 16, 1941, which was included in Soviet historiography.

5	8	Legend №17	2013	N. Lebedev	\$29 523 237
6	10	Vysotsky. Thank you for being alive	2011	P. Buslov	\$27 544 905
7	12	9th company	2005	F. Bondarchuk	\$25 555 809
8	21	Three heroes: The Knight	2015	K. Feoktistov	\$19 390 136
9	23	Three heroes and Shamahanskaya queen	2010	S. Glezin	\$19 010 585
10	24	Turkish gambit	2005	D. Fajziev	\$18 500 000
11	28	Taras Bulba	2009	V. Bortko	\$17 040 803
12	29	Dandies	2008	V. Todorovskij	\$16 810 383
13	39	Yolki 1914	2014	T. Bekmam-betov and others	\$12 848 123
14	57	Ilya Muromets and Nightingale the Robber	2007	V. Toropchin	\$9 739 679
15	58	Hitler Kaput!	2008	M. Vajsberg	\$9 713 500
16	59	Bastards	2006	A. Atanesjan	\$9 662 551
17	62	Battalion	2015	D. Meshiev	\$8 903 193
18	63	Battle for Sevastopol	2015	S. Mokrickij	\$8 702 274
19	68	We are from the future	2008	A. Maljukov	\$8 228 500
20	69	We are from the future 2	2010	A. Samohvalov, B. Rostov	\$8 224 084
21	73	Rzhevskij against Napoleon	2012	M. Vajsberg	\$7 805 333
22	78	Burnt by the Sun 2	2010	N. Mihalkov	\$7 499 840
23	81	State Councillor	2005	F. Jankovskij	\$7 445 000
24	91	Mongol	2007	S. Bodrov	\$6 504 128
25	92	Star Dogs: Belka and Strelka	2010	S. Ushakov, I. Evlannikova	\$6 293 840
26	94	Poddubny	2014	G. Orlov	\$6 175 475
27	100	Belka and Strelka: Lunar Adventures	2014	I. Evlannikova and others	\$5 923 290

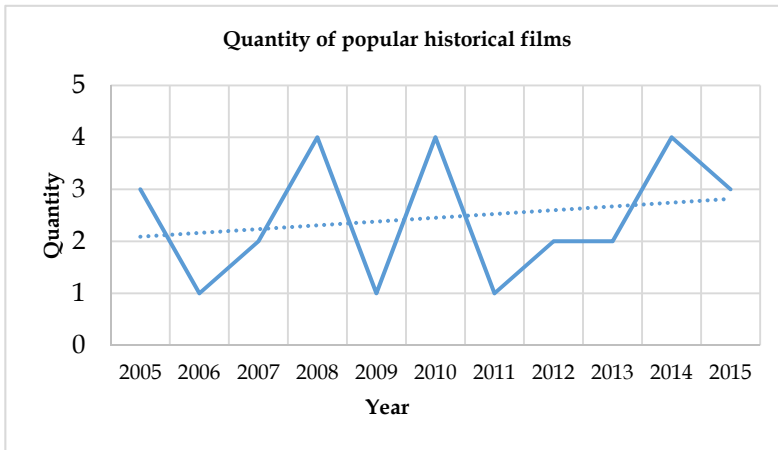
According to kinopoisk.ru (data access 19.08.2016)

This seems to be an abnormally large proportion. For example, the American box office numbers (also of the top 100 movies from 2000

to 2015) contain only eight historical movies, and most of historical films are actually fantasy films.

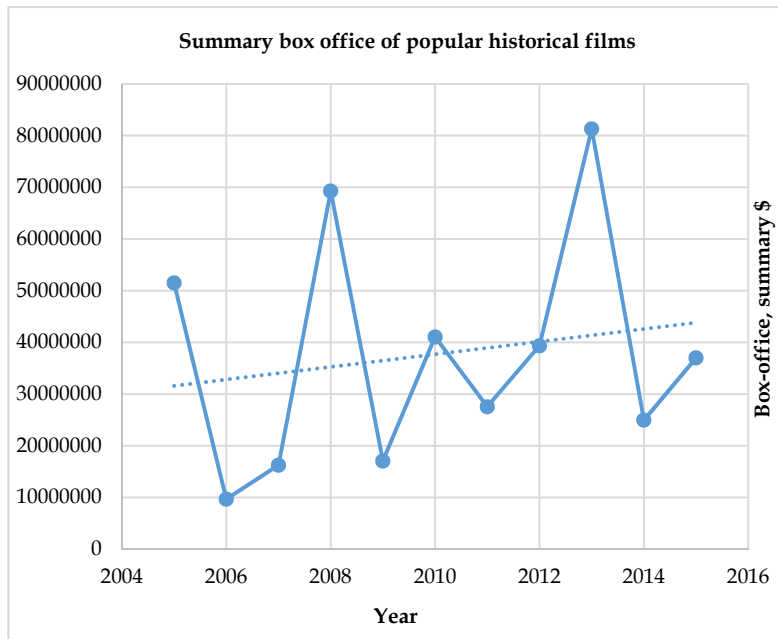
A detailed study of sales and release dates allow us to identify some new trends. Firstly, the emergence of historical films in the box office can be characterized as wave-structured, showing from year to year, the maximum numbers after the minimum.

Figure 1. Russian historical films: Quantity



According to kinopoisk.ru (data access 19.08.2016)

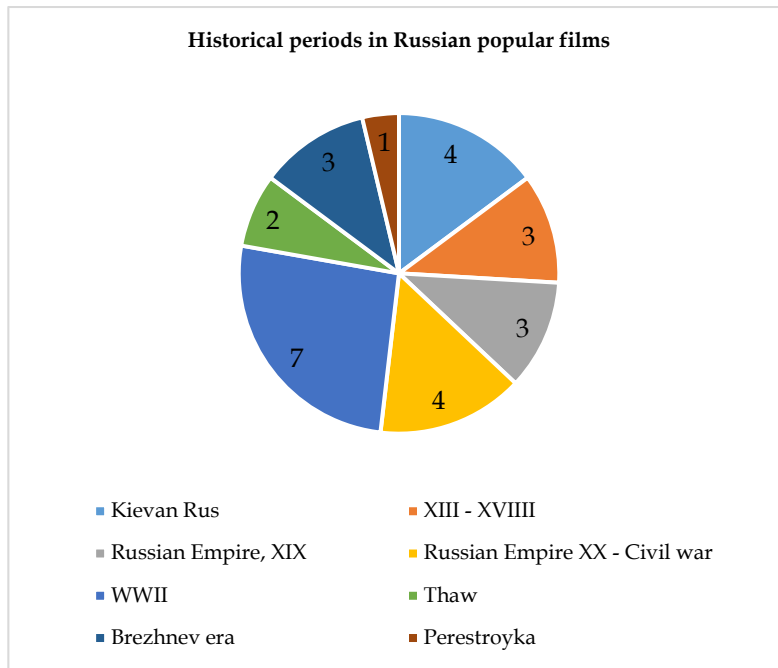
Moreover, approximately the same picture can be observed when analyzing the box office:

Figure 2. Russian historical films: Box office

According to kinopoisk.ru (data access 19.08.2016)

Secondly, the trend line gives us the indication that there is a tendency towards an increase in the number of popular historical films, as well as in their share in the film distribution market. Six of them are cartoons, 3 – comedies, 1 – a musical, 2 – sport films, 1 – a horror, 2 – biopics, 2 – detective films, and 11 of them are war films. It is also interesting to note that not only traditional war films concern the topic of war. Most cartoons, some of the biopics, and even detective films build their stories around wars. Two historical comedies also unfold around the events of wars.

To characterize Russian popular historical film, I'll start with historical categorization of the plots.

Figure 3. Russian historical films: historical periods

According to kinopoisk.ru (data access 19.08.2016)

As you can see, there are four almost equal quarters:

- The period from Kievan Rus⁹⁰ to the middle of 18th century;
- From the early 19th century to the end of the Civil War (1918-1922);
- The events of the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945);
- The period from the Thaw (1956-1964) to *Perestroika* (1985-1991).

It should be noted that the main feature of almost all heroes is a legitimate opportunity to use violence. The protagonist is usually involved in sports, police or army activities and is a representative of the given professional groups.

⁹⁰ Loose federation in Europe from the late 9th to the mid-13th century. The modern nations of Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine all claim Kievan Rus' as their cultural ancestors, with Belarus and Russia deriving their names from it.

The period from Kievan Rus to the middle of the 18th century is presented as a supremely magical period. It is a great example of how fairytales have become historical myths. Curiously these stories develop outside of the boundaries of the present-day Russian Federation, mostly on the territory of the modern Ukraine. Kievan Rus is not thriving, but a model of comfortable living. The main characteristic of medieval Russia is its stability and permanence. Here, everything marked as familiar seems to be good, no matter how disgusting it is, and any change promises to be a disaster. People have little concern with policy, thinking exclusively about their enemies – internal and external – who may disrupt stability (Mongols, for example). The main pride of Kievan Rus is the men who have big muscles and a gentle heart. Basically, these men operate on the principle of “if you have strength—you do not need to think.” Or as it was put by Julius the horse in *Shamahanskaya Queen*, “first hit, then ask.” Then comes the repeating conflict – an external one, often between magical enemies and weak authorities, which are resolved by the main characters. Here as Tereshenko noted,

the object of love of the fatherland becomes directly the land, in the most literal sense of the word: having lost his power in a foreign country, Ilya Muromets gains it back, touching the horseshoe that set foot on the Russian soil (2012).

In the second group (from the early 19th century to the end of the civil war) there is a clear trend to shift the focus to the external conflict: along with the weak authorities there are spies, traitors, revolutionaries and terrorists. Here, the hero, nearly always a man, spends a lot of energy unearthing them. But despite the fact that most stories end with victory for the hero, he “wins the battle but not the war.” The final scenes often progress through a variety of iconic sets and then the author tells us of an impending tragedy. It is also interesting that almost all love stories of this time period end tragically: the fate of a hero or heroine is usually death or some other morbid outcome. As importantly, in every film there is a person with the highest authority, the proximity to which is also a sign of or the prize itself for the protagonist.

The Second World War certainly is a key event for Russian popular movies. Here, we should note the following: the majority of the films work exclusively with the events of the Second World War, which is traditionally represented in the condensed form of the Great Patriotic War. Forming history as a myth is a feature of World War II movies. *Stalingrad* capitalizes on the tradition of the Immaculate Conception, where the main characters – defenders of a young pregnant woman – act as kings of the East, called to save lives at any cost. The plot of the film *We Are From The Future* is explicitly magical: a group of friends take a trip back in time. Moreover, in these films the image of a war veteran undergoes significant changes. The former commander of a division, Kotov (played by N. Mikhalkov) becomes a kind of a cyborg in the film *Burnt by the Sun: Predstoyanie*. His metal index finger periodically turns into a knife.

In the early 2000s the most common conflict was the confrontation of the hero, and of his individuality, with the repressive state machine. But by the end of the 2000s, this issue moves first into the background, and then completely disappears. In this respect, *We Are From The Future* is a big step towards the discourse and images of the Great Patriotic War constructed in Brezhnev era.

The absence of a critical approach to representations of ethnic diversity, and the existence of many chauvinistic clichés in the films, requires a special mention. Almost all of the major and minor characters are Russian. Clichéd images of the eastern nations are represented in several films. But the drinking and stealing Chukchi do not differ from the drinking and stealing Kazakhs. The notion of anti-fascism has also changed: the fearsome battle cry “Get up, Slavs!” and the opposition of Soviet soldiers to neo-Nazis in the first part of *We Are From The Future*, is enhanced in the second film; here the demoralized Ukrainians shoot unarmed women and children, while their descendants are acting as the SS-officers in historical reenactments.

However, when it comes to the fourth group (the period from the Thaw to *Perestroika*), with some exceptions, it is worth discussing pacifism and non-conformism, albeit with minor reservations. Films are mostly dedicated to music, sport and space. Heroes of the *Dandies* and *Vysotsky* are more opposed to the state than willing to

protect it, and the film *9th Company* in this sense is one of the few critical of war. However, this trend finished in 2011. *Legend №17* and the second part of *Belka and Strelka* are devoted to the Cold War and the confrontation with the USA. In this sense, *Legend №17* is a great example of a sports movie which is just a disguise for a military film.

In conclusion, I would like mention two key ideas that have guided the conceptualization of this research. Firstly, the popular contemporary Russian historical films can be divided into two periods: before 2008 and after. The first period is mainly characterized by critical comprehension of Russia's past: here, we have a trash comedy about World War II—*Hitler-kaput!*, *9th company*, *Dandies and Bastards*. The general frame of the movies is a critique of the state as a system that generates violence in different forms.

The turning point occurs at the end of the second presidential term of Putin, and the beginning of the presidential term of Medvedev in 2007 and 2008. It coincides with the invasion of Georgia. Such films as *We Are From the Future*, *Admiral, Ilya Muromets and Nightingale*, and *The Robber* set an entirely new frame and mood of popular historical film. A critical attitude towards authorities is replaced by a more primitive conflict with external and internal enemies. The story is not a source of new questions, but rather attempts to find simple answers. This further leads to the emergence of militaristic images of the past. This comes to full fruition in the film *Battalion*. The second important point is related to the myth-creation of the past.

The Second World War is no longer a traumatic experience; it becomes the starting point of modernity, which serves as a sacred practice for others to follow. It is important in this context to mention such forms of public history practice as the “Immortal regiment” – an event annually that gathers a few million people in public places. Participants carry the posters of their relatives, veterans of war, like icons. This begins to resemble a religious procession. In this sense, it is also a reenactment, where the descendant becomes his ancestor. And here it seems appropriate to mention that reenactment in general exists, in the first place, on the level of images (such as in *We Are From The Future*); secondly, it exists as a common

and institutionalized practice in modern Russia. Here I will simply note the integration of historical re-enactors in the Russian military-historical society and the figure of Strelkov-Girkin, who, in being a historical re-enactor, in fact, has made his games real.

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