

## The Militarization of the Past in Russian Popular Historical Films

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**Abstract:** *This paper is devoted to the problem of the militarization of culture in modern Russia. The two key scientific fields are public history and the politics of memory. Firstly, based on the official documents and statements of authorities, the paper will characterize the relations between the state and Russian cinema as well as the role of history and historical films in the contemporary politics of memory. Secondly, after identifying the role of popular cinema in Russia, the paper will explore the characteristics of historical periods in popular films, based on the hypothesis that the Russian past is mostly represented around or inside war, while the criticism of war is becoming less and less important for popular cinema*

**Keywords:** *Russian cinema, politics of memory, historical film, militarization of culture, popular film.*

### 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, especially with 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 properties of a post-colonial space such as homelessness and a crisis of cultural identity, Russian society is seeking answers in its past and . The process of finding its own identity based on the military past is becoming one of the most important issues. Consequently, Russian authorities have pursued a historical policy aimed at fashioning a positive and oblivious history: the approval of a unified school history standard of education, pressure on NGOs engaged in working with memory, new public holidays devoted to commemorating historical events are indicative of how history is articulated at the 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. 67% of respondents consider Russia to be a great power, primarily understanding this as the availability of military power, the presence of nuclear missiles, the welfare of citizens and economic and industrial potential of the country. It is also important to note references to (?)the 'heroic past', which has increased significantly over the past years from 9% to 24% (Pipiya, 2016).

Because of this Russia seems to be trapped in the era of timelessness without doing work on its own historical trauma. 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 coevals 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 the society. It takes the form of myths and is maintained with the help of rituals, art and media. Here the state usually plays an active role, using such tools as the politics of memory and historical policy (Assmann, 2008, p. 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, p. 18). This policy relies on the idea that mass culture and images of the past are the 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: the manufacturer imposes uncontested images on the society. On the contrary, the society consumes and assimilates the product that harmoniously fits its worldview. This creates a certain system of relations where the producer attempts to satisfy the elites, while tries to predict the desire of the 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 elites and the society where the producer is acting as a mediator.

So, the main aim of this paper 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. The current Minister of Culture V. Medinsky discusses only about the state and the role of history and memory in the process of constructing national identity (Medinsky, 2014), but also about film policy (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 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 to become a launching pad for leading companies, and they, in turn, would someday have the opportunity to develop films with minimal government support. But the leading companies have not desisted from the state

funding of their projects. On the contrary, they are seeking for the opportunities for increased state funding . Thus, the leading companies received gratis exactly half of the three billion rubles allocated by the state to support the industry through the Cinema Fund in 2012. In addition, they received additional financing from the funds intended for other organizations. Likewise 2.8 billion rubles will be distributed in 2016 to support the national films, and the share of the leading film companies is only increasing. Those companies will receive about 1.8 billion rubles, and other film production companies will get around 1 billion rubles (Proficinema, 2016).

As it was mentioned above, the Russian Cinema Fund is not the only source of funding. If the Cinema Fund focuses on the potential of the Russian films to get a high number of ticket sales, in 2013 the Ministry of Culture has begun to support «socially important films, first time director and children's films, animation and documentary projects» (Ministry of Culture, 2014) with also 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 the military-historical film appeared to be a part 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 potential practices reminds one of the functioning of the 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 at the round table devoted to this topic (Lugansky, 2013). And at the end of March 2016 Mosfilm CEO K. 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 V. Medinsky denies accusations of trying to censor Russian cinema (Lenta.ru, 2014), several scandals around historical films have erupted over the past 3 years. In July 2013 the project of A. Mindadze (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 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 (Russian Academy of Sciences) and the Russian Military Historical Society «to ensure the maximum historical authenticity» of the film (Timofeev, Sheveleva, 2013).

The confrontation between the director of the State Archive S. Mironenko and V. 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 the “28 Panfilov’s Men” (The Panfilov Division's Twenty-Eight Guardsmen). 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, S. Mironenko was dismissed as the Director of the State Archive. Moreover, in June 2016 V. Medinsky published an article in a 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, who pointed to a twelve-fold increase of financing of Russian cinema since 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 elites are 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 top 100 most popular Russian movies) have historical settings.

#### **Table 1. Russian historical films in Russian Box-office**

<b>№</b>	<b>Position in box- office</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Director</b>	<b>Box-office in Russia</b>
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
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



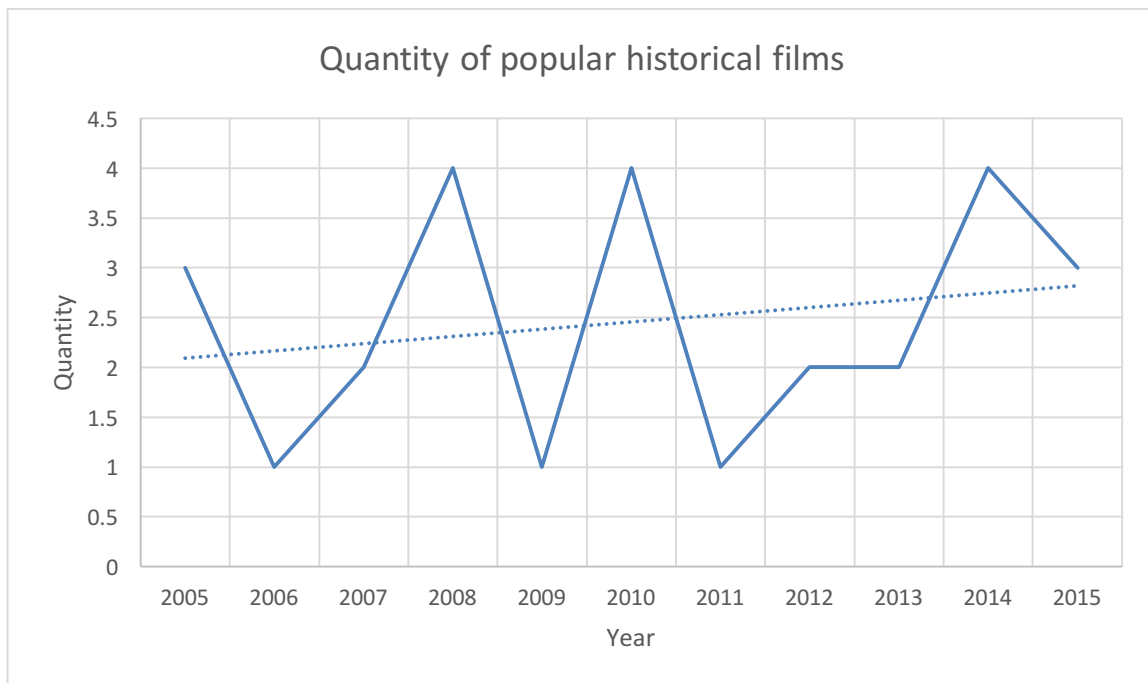
13	39	Yolki 1914	2014	T. Bekmambetov and others	\$12 848 123
14	57	Ilya Muromets and Nightingale the Robber	2007	V. Toropchin	\$9 739 679
15	58	Hitler Kaput!	2008	M. Vajsberg	\$9 713 500
16	59	Bastards	2006	A. Atanesjan	\$9 662 551
17	62	Battalion	2015	D. Meshiev	\$8 903 193
18	63	Battle for Sevastopol	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)*

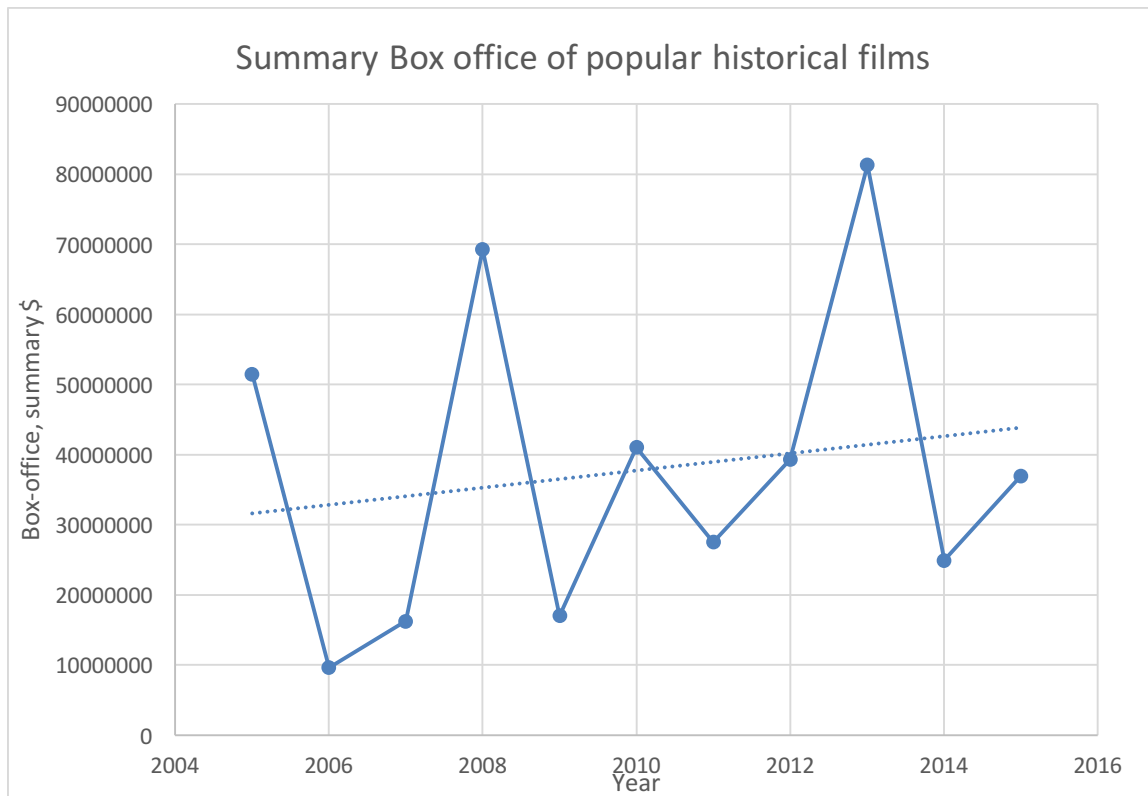
This seems to be a large proportion. For example, the American box office (also from 2000 to 2015) contains only 8 historical film, but most of them are fantasy films.

A detailed study of fees and release dates allows us to talk more about 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.



*According to kinopoisk.ru (data access 19.08.2016)*

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



*According to kinopoisk.ru (data access 19.08.2016)*

Second, the trend line gives us the understanding, that there is a tendency towards increase in the number of popular historical films as well as in their share in film distribution market. 6 of them are cartoons, 3 - comedies, 1 – a music film, 2 - sport films, 1 – a horror film, 2 - biopics, 2 - detective films, 11 of them are war films. It is interesting that not only traditional war films are concerned with wars. 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 the Russian popular historical film, I'll start with historical categorization of the plots.



As you can see, there are 4 almost equal quarters:

- the period from Kievan Rus to the middle of 18th century;
- from the early 19th century to the end of the Civil War;
- the events of the Great Patriotic War;
- the period from the Thaw to *Perestroika*.

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 social group.

The period from Kievan Rus to the middle of the 18th century is presented as an extremely magical period. It is a great example of how fairy tales have become historical myths. Curiously these stories are developing outside of the boundaries of the present-day Russian

Federation, mostly in the territory of the modern Ukraine. Kievan Rus is not thriving, but an exemplar of comfortable living. The main characteristic of the 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 the Kievan Rus are the men who have big muscles and a gentle heart. Basically, these men operate on the principle of 'if you have got strength – you do not need to think'. Or as it was put by Julius the horse in *Shamahanskaya queen* film, 'first hit, then ask'. Then comes the repeating conflict - an external one, often between magical enemies and weak authorities, who are supported and saved by the main characters. Here as M. 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' (Tereshenko, 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 spends a lot of energy discovering them. But despite the fact that most stories end with the victory of 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 about the impending tragedy. It is also interesting that almost all love stories in this time period

end tragically: the fate of a hero or a heroine is usually death or some other unhappy result. As importantly, in every film there is a person with the highest authority, the proximity to which is also a sign of or a prize for the protagonist.

The Second World War certainly is the key event for the 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 the young pregnant woman - act as kings of the East, called to save their lives at any cost. The plot of the film *We are from the future* is explicitly magical: a group of friends made a trip back in time. Moreover, in these films the image of a war veteran undergoes significant changes. The former commander of the division Kotov (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 state repressive machine. But by the end of the 2000s, this issue first moves first into the background, and then 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, the existence of many chauvinistic clichés in the films, requires special mention. Almost all of the major and minor characters are Russians. 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 antifascism 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, where the demoralized Ukrainians shoot unarmed women and children, while their descendants are acting as the SS-officers in historical reenactments.

As for the fourth group (the period from the Thaw to *Perestroika*), with some exceptions, on the contrary, 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 already devoted to the Cold War and the confrontation with North America (US?). 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, the Robber* set an entirely new frame and mood for the popular historical film. A critical attitude towards authorities is replaced by a more primitive conflict with the 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 mythologization of the past.

The Second World War is no longer a traumatic experience; it becomes the starting point of modernity, which becomes a sacred practice for others to follow. It is important in this context to mention such form of public history practice as the 'Immortal regiment' – an event 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 important to mention that reenactment in general exists, in the first place, on the level of images (such as in *We are from the future*), and secondly, 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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