# Soviet Cinema and the enemies of Soviet values: East-West relations through the lens of Soviet movies

## *Mariam Zibzibadze*[1]

**Abstract**

The study of cinema as a tool of ideological and political influence for Soviet propaganda is an important subject for studies of the Cold War. The following paper examines the portrayal of enemies of the Soviet Union in Soviet movies. The focus is on the times under post-WW2 leaders, namely Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev. The discussion of the wide range of instruments used by filmmakers is organised in terms of two distinct thematic frameworks in the article: that of gender discourse and spy movies. The paper illustrates the portrayal of Western characters and the Western lifestyle through Soviet narratives. This often entailed de-humanizing American women and de-masculinizing American men or glorifying Soviet spies as the national heroes.

**Keywords**: cinema, Cold War, Soviet Union, Soviet cinema, culture, gender

**Introduction**

The use of cinematography as a tool of ideological and political influence is an important part of Cold War history and was a familiar practice in the United States as well as in the USSR. Exploring how the image of the Western world evolved in Soviet films is still relevant today. Therefore, this study identifies the changing dynamics in the portrayal of Western characters, ideas and lifestyle during the leadership of Stalin (post-WW2) and Khrushchev (and, to some extent and more indirectly, under Brezhnev).

Both Western and Soviet/Russian researchers have shown that there had always been good grounds for ideological confrontation over the media (Shaw and Youngblood, 2014: 17). The paper explores the stereotypes inherent to the portrayal of the Western

---

[1] Mariam Zibzibadze is a student of the International Relations MA program at Corvinus University of Budapest. Her main research interests include: the transition of the Eastern European and post-Soviet countries and soft power politics.

world in Soviet film, and how this pattern changed against the backdrop of the changing level of political tensions between the US and the USSR.

It is crucial to underline and examine the social and cultural dimensions of the Cold War. Cinema became an authentic reflection of the socio-political situation, and as television and cinema turned into an integral part of the life of American and Soviet people, using these platforms became relevant for political and ideological purposes, too. This makes the study of Soviet cinematography as a tool associated to the Soviet Communist party-state's propaganda machine an important research field.

Firstly, the role of ideology as portrayed through cinema will be discussed. Secondly, the connections between specific models of illustration and the political context behind them is analysed, specifically the concepts of Soviet cinema that show the USSR's effort to undermine and question the Western lifestyle and Western values, and how gender roles were addressed in US and Soviet cinematic productions. Thirdly, a framework is presented as regards the already existing Cold War literature, offering an overview of the major authors and their findings about the cultural dimension and the key propaganda themes of the Cold War.

## Enemies of the system and the gender discourse: Female characters

The period from 1946 to 1953 was the most intense for the cinematic Cold War, in that films created in this period focused mostly on engaging the enemy and are clear cases of negative propaganda as such. In 1946, a few months after the end of World War II, the responsible authority for cinema in the USSR became the Ministry of Cinematography, which raised the status of cinema as a propaganda tool to new heights. Soviet cultural ideologist Andrei Zhdanov, considered at one time to be among Stalin's possible successors, offered a rationalisation of attacks on Western influences on Soviet culture in what came to be known as the Zhdanov doctrine or Zhdanovshchina. This became a vicious, xenophobic, and stultifying campaign, accusing filmmakers and writers of aiding American imperialism and admiring bourgeois aestheticism (Brooks and Brooks, 2000, 195-232).

Furthermore, Stalin himself expressed a genuine interest in movies since the 1930s. Many filmmakers tried to adapt by finding subjects more or less neutral to Soviet values, but over time even these became problematic. Research about the Soviet Information Bureau shows that during this period, one of the approved patterns for Soviet movies had become the idea of countering propaganda about Red Army brutalities in the

occupied countries. Soviet propagandists were also ordered to gather information about Allied troops' behaviour. When Eastern bloc countries were forced to reject Marshall Plan aid, it was yet another subject to tackle for the propagandists, and they sought to associate it with an attempt to spread American imperialism and capitalism. In addition, it was important for the propagandists to demonstrate that the Soviet Union occupied the moral highground with its peace-loving foreign policy behavior (Clark and Dobrenko, 2007: 20). In the movies produced between 1946-50, up to 45.6% of the villains were of British or American origin, compared to only 13% being British in 1923-45 (Shaw and Youngblood, 2014: 41).

Lenin was often quoted saying that "cinema is for us the most important of art." After World War II, this idea was given a second life by Stalin who declared that "Cinema in the hands of the Soviet authorities constitutes an inestimable force" (Stalin, 1935: 1, as cited in Riabov, 2017: 197). The battle for the hearts and minds of the masses resulted in establishing the Ministry of Cinematography in 1946. The list of governmental organizations controlling and censoring cinema was a long one and it included the Communist Party's Department of Culture, the Agitprop (Department of Propaganda), the Ministry of Cinematography and its Artistic Council, and finally the Ministry of State Security [later the KGB] (Kolesnikova, 2011: 69)

In the eyes of Soviet propaganda, in the capitalist system women lacked the qualities that were in their view inherent to femininity, such as empathy or mercy. Cold-bloodedness was one of the key attributes of the American woman. *Meeting at the Elbe* (1949) by Grigori Aleksandrov is a clear illustration of this: here, Mrs. McDermott, one of the main characters, shows her cruelty and goes so far as to tell her husband, General McDermott: "Be a man, and not a chicken in uniform! You are not in a general's uniform to nurse the Germans" (Kenez, 2008:110). Doris Steal of *The Silver Dust* also embodies such cruelty. She does not have compassion for teenager Ben Robinson, but sends him to death, even though his mother worked as a maid for the Steal family for twenty years. Another characteristic that critics considered worth underlining is her narrow mindset. As Oleg Riabov mentions, the film ridicules Doris Steal's piety, as well as her racist and anti-communist prejudices. As Soviet propaganda emphasised, socialist society created opportunities for the self-realization of women and for gender equality, while the capitalist system aimed at limiting the life goals of women in the US. In this context, consumerist criticism, which was considered an essential component of the American way of life, was very important (Riabov, 2017: 203).

The next remarkable case contributing to the discourse on capitalist consumerism was *The Russian Question* (1948) by Mikhail Romm. We can see how the director connects the dominance of materialism in the US to the notion of moral corruption throughout society. The movie puts great emphasis on showing that in capitalist societies prosperity was achieved at a moral and a social cost (Dowling, 2014: 28). Furthermore, Jessee Sherwood, from *Meeting on the Elbe,* who is played by Lyubov Orlova, portraits a superficial image of the simplicity of American women. She loves her husband and is ready to devote herself to him, for she wants her family to be happy, and she is a symbol of everything that was "women's happiness" in the Soviet Union. But when her husband loses her job, she decides to leave him. Riabov explains that Jessie is completely indifferent to her husband's moral dilemma: to be poor and honest or to be rich and corrupt (Riabov, 2017: 205) He believes that it is consumerism that always outweighs morality and ideals.

As Kenez mentions, the extravagance of American movies was always thrilling for Soviet audiences. Many of them imagined modern-day America as Rome just before its fall (2008: 109). Filmmakers were eager to confirm prejudices of the Soviet audience about American women who were thought to be ready to do anything to achieve their goals and saw chastity as worthless. In examining *Meeting on the Elbe*, Shaw and Youngblood call attention to that, albeit a large portion of the villains were male, there steadily grew an image of American villainy as female, at first through the figure of Mrs. McDermott, and later through Sherwood's character as well (Shaw and Youngblood, 2014: 154). Indeed, Sherwood seems a more dangerous foe than the American men. Orlova's performance of Sherwood presented the most mischievous picture of the American spy in early Cold War Soviet film. Shaw and Youngblood show that the images of bossy, wanton, brilliant and avaricious American women in *Meeting on the Elbe* were intended to signal that even U.S. officers and congresspersons were not man enough to control their women.

**Enemies of the system and Gender discourse: Male characters**

As to the image of foreign male figures in Soviet movies, one often comes across how competition in global affairs is represented there as a rivalry in masculinity (Cooke and Woollacott, 2016: 227-228). Discourse on global issues serves to shape and reshape gender orders (Hooper, 2001: 84–88). J. Ann Ticker points out that "the historic construction of the country, upon which the unitary-actor model in international theory is

primarily based, represents a gendered, masculine model" (Tickner, 2001: 54). This was particularly obvious in the early phase of the Cold War, and the masculinization of the portrayal of universal issues is especially reflected in the frame of gendered pictures and metaphorical representations of the two superpowers' disagreement. The General Secretary of the Union of Soviet Writers, Aleksandr Fateev, would in these years frequently "rehash that the victory over the Wehrmacht has demonstrated the dominance not only of socialism over capitalism but also of Soviet over German (and Western) masculinity" (Fateev, 1999: 29-30).

The flaws of American men were commonly shown in Soviet cinema to be vulnerability and cowardice. In addition, American male characters' interest in fashion was used to demasculinise them, contrasted with the ideal Soviet man who would not have such interests. For example, in *Farewell, America!*, men were wearing bright ties that resembled the Soviet youth subculture "Stiliagi", popular from the late 1940s to the early 1960s. This group condemned the Soviet lifestyle and admired American music and fashion (Dovzhenko, 1949). In *The Peers* (1959) by Vasyli Ordynsky, a Soviet propaganda film, the Stiliagi were shown to admire American men, and were thus often persecuted by the authorities and ridiculed in movies and the media (Ordinsky, 1959).

Aside from the Communist belief system, the Cold War concept of Soviet manliness alludes to the qualities and conventions of Russian culture. For example, Soviet directors, alluding to the national groups of masculinity, utilised the prejudice that a capacity to drink alcohol speaks for genuine manliness. In *Meeting on the Elbe*, Major Kuzmin visits the US occupied zone and offers the Americans Zveroboi vodka. While the officers succumb to the Siberian vodka, Kuzmin stays sober.

At the same time, Soviet Cold War movies were meant to counter anti-Soviet propaganda coming from the West as well. In the film "The Russian Question" audiences are shown that in the U.S. freedom of speech was supressed, and honest journalists could ruin their careers because of corporation and pressure by the government. The accusations that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was a deal with the devil was countered in the movie *The Silver Mission*, which depicted the US and the UK as ready to sign separate peace agreements with the Germans, to leave the Red Army alone in its fight – and in the interest of beneficial trade agreements at the same time (Romm, 1948).

**Spy movies and the later development of Soviet cinema**

Regardless of the fact that spy movies were popular worldwide, in the Soviet Union this trend was considered to be part of a perceived Western anti-Soviet hysteria. It was thought to be the product of Western mass consumption, and in Soviet culture studies they were referred to as "pulp fiction". Even so, spy movies eventually were produced by Soviet cinema for they were found suitable to Soviet propaganda in terms of both entertainment and ideology. Soviet spy movies had certain unique characteristics: for example, in Russian-language movies an actual Soviet spy would never be called a spy but an intelligence officer or investigator, as these had more positive connotations. The term spy was thus reserved for enemies of the Soviet Union (Sukovataya, 2017: 2).

The positive image of Soviet spies served clear ideological purposes. They were unknown heroes fighting on hidden fronts. Masses loved movies in this genre, for they offered a glance into real-life settings outside of the USSR, even as Western characters were portrayed in line with the official Soviet propaganda – moviegoers themselves were not necessarily anti-American.

According to Shaw and Youngblood, in regular meetings of the Ministry of Cinematography, the Artistic Council and filmmakers, a 3-point plan was developed as to the political goals of Soviet movies. Firstly, they had to be very expressive in describing the American military, capitalism and people according to Soviet ideological preferences. Movies were to contrast destructive capitalist America and the pacifist Soviet Union. It was the duty of the filmmaker to portray the USSR as a promoter of peace, and the US as an aggressive power, ever ready for war. Thus, movies were also to prepare the military, and the Soviet people at large, to always be ready for war themselves (Shaw and Youngblood, 2014: 174).

After the death of Stalin, the competences of the Ministry of Cinematography were inherited by the Main Administration of Cinematic Affairs, as part of the Ministry of Culture. Alexander Prokhorov notes that this relaxation led to the fragmentation of the unified hierarchical universe of Stalinist culture. In 1954, reporter Ilya Ehrenburg – who was a supporter of the regime – published a novel entitled *The Thaw*, which became a symbol of the post-Stalin era and Khrushchev's political and cultural policy. As Khrushchev was gaining power, *The Thaw* became associated with the denouncement of the personality cult of Joseph Stalin. Khrushchev's signature slogan became "Catch up with and overtake America!". During his leadership there began a cultural thaw, which would continue under Brezhnev. Russian writers who were suppressed before could begin

to publish again. Western ideas about democracy started to penetrate Soviet universities and academies. These had left their mark on an entire generation of Russians, most notably Mikhail Gorbachev, who later became the last leader of the Soviet Union. Khrushchev had efficiently led the Soviet Union away from the harsh Stalinist period. During his rule, Russia continued to dominate the Union but with notably more attention for minorities (Fedorov, 2017: 336–340).

Under the rule of Khrushchev, it is widely believed that cinema was subject to a lesser form of censorship, which is partially true. Cinema tried to return to the state of the 1920s, in terms of being in a more peaceful competition with the West (Kozlov and Gilburd, 2000, 22–23).

It is worth mentioning that a lot of movies in this era exemplify a re-assessment of the notion of patriotic warfare. Sergey Bondarchuk's *The fate of a Man* (1959), Grigory Chukhrai's *The Ballad of the Soldier* (1959) and Andrey Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood* (1962) shifted interest from heroic Soviet troops and betrayals by the Allies towards the human cost of conflict.

At the same time, movies still continued to portray foreigners as threats, well into the 1950s. Even artistically innovative pictures used negative Cold War associations and became the biggest box office successes as such. For example: *Extraordinary Event* by Viktor Ivchenko (1958-59) had between 71 and 98 million viewers, *The Fort in the Mountains* by Konstantin Yudin (1943) made $8 million in revenues and *The Blue Arrow* by Leonid Estrin (1958) was watched by no less than 44.5 million people (Prokhorov, 2001: 10). These movies were mostly detective-adventure or suspense-adventure stories.

Still, these movies were markedly distinct from the early Cold War movies. Firstly, they were set in the USSR. Secondly, the nationality of the foreign villains was not stated in most cases – apart from a few exceptions of American characters. Moreover, filmmakers did not necessarily have to be members of the Federal State Unitary Enterprise, Mosfilm, and therefore mass audiences' favourite directors had an opportunity to enjoy the spotlight. It is also interesting to look at the movies in the USSR that had the purpose of depicting how to live a good life. During the thaw under Khrushchev, there was a shift away from emphasising vigilance and the importance of ideologically driven denunciations to personal development and relationships. Many of these movies aimed to show Soviet life as comparable to the capitalist life in the West. Movies such as *The Big Family* (Iosif Heifetz 1954) and *The Spring on Zachernaya Street* (Marlen Khutsiev,

Feliks Mironer, 1956) showed the love and life of working-class families and thus constituted attempts to convey to the rest of the world how Soviet families live.

American culture became influential in this period, for people had better access to movies, books, music, and it was harder now for the government to persuade masses of the idea of the Evil Capitalist West.

**Conclusion**

Soviet cinema was highly centralised and vertically organised. That the Soviet leadership saw cinema as the highest form of art was both a blessing and a curse for Soviet filmmakers, who had to adjust their work to the needs of the party.

Soviet filmmakers have used various methods to build up the image of Americans and the US as the enemy of the USSR, particularly through de-humanizing American women and de-masculinizing men. According to the party agenda it was important to show to Soviet audiences that the nature of the capitalist system, consumerism and American imperialism were corrupting influences on ordinary human beings living a decent life. In the meantime, Soviet movies never referred to Soviet intelligence agents as spies, but as lone patriotic warriors inside the enemy bloc. The image of Soviet intelligence agents was used to invoke national pride, for they were ever vigilant and always ready to protect the Great Soviet Motherland from Western threats.

Overall, the international political dimension has contributed to the development of the Soviet Cold War cinema. The harshest period was the post-WWII era, from 1946 to 1953, when movies served to carry very specific messages about the West as enemy. Conversely, under the rule of Khrushchev, and later under Brezhnev, the thaw led Soviet cinema to become less rigid and shifted from typical heroic plots to showing the rest of the world what ordinary Soviet life looked like.

**References**

Aleksandrov, G. (1949) *Vstrecha na Elbe.* (*Meeting at the Elbe.)*

Armand, P. (1953) *Serebristaya Pyl*.

Bondarchuk, S. (1959) *Sudba Cheloveka*.

Brooks, Jeffrey & Brooks, John (2000) *Thank you, comrade Stalin!: Soviet public culture from revolution to Cold War*. Princeton University Press.

Chukhray, G. (1959) *Ballada o Soldate*.

Clark, K. & Dobrenko, E. A. (2007) *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents, 1917-1953*. Yale University Press.

Cooke, M. G. & Woollacott, A. (2016) *Gendering War Talk*. Princeton Legacy Library. Princeton University Press.

Dovzhenko, A. (1949) *Proshchay, Amerika!*

Dowling, R. (2014) Communism, Consumerism, and Gender in Early Cold War Film: The Case of Ninotchka and Russkii vopros. *Aspasia*. [Online] 8 (1), . [online]. Available from: http://berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/aspasia/8/1/asp080103.xml (Accessed 2 September 2018).

Fateev, A. (1999) *Obraz vraga v sovetskoi propagande 1945-1954 gg*. Moskva: Rossiyskaya Akademiya Nauk.

Fedorov, A. V. (2017) The Western World in Soviet and Russian Cinema (1946–2016). *Russian Education & Society*. [Online] 59 (7–9), 319–464.

Hooper, C. (2001) *Manly States: Masculinities, International Relations, and Gender Politics*. Columbia University Press.

Kapterev, S. (2012) *Post-Stalinist Cinema and the Russian Intelligentsia, 1953-1960: Strategies of Self-Representation, De-Stalinization, and the National Cultural Tradition*. VDM Publishing.

Kenez, P. (2008) 'The Picture of the Enemy in Stalinist Films', in Stephen Norris M & Zara Torlone M (eds.) *Insiders and Outsiders in Russian Cinema*. Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press. p.

Kheifits, I. (1954) *Bolshaya semya*.

Khutsiev, M. & Mironer, F. (1956) *Vesna na Zarechnoy ulitse*.

Kolesnikova, A. (2011) *Igrovoi kinematograf serediny 1950-kh— serediny 1980-kh gg. kak instrument sovetskoi propagandy: Formirovanie i aktualizatsiya obraza vraga,*. 19 (1), 68–76.

Ordinsky, V. (1959) *Sverstnitsy*.

Prokhorov, A. (2001) *Springtime for soviet cinema: re/viewing the 1960s*. Pittsburgh: Russian Film Symposium.

Riabov, O. (2017) Gendering the American Enemy in Early Cold War Soviet Films (1946–1953). *Journal of Cold War Studies*. [Online] 19 (1), 193–219.

Romm, M. (1948) *Ruskiy Vopros*.

Shaw, T. & Youngblood, D. (2014) *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds,*. University Press of Kansas.

Sukovataya, V. A. (2017) Spy and Counterspy as a "Cultural Hero" in the Soviet Cinema of the Cold War. *Diacronie. Studi di Storia Contemporanea*. 30 (2), 19.

Tarkovsky, A. (1962) *Ivanovo Detstvo*.

Tickner, J. A. (2001) *Gendering World Politics: Issues and Approaches in the Post-Cold War Era*. Gendering World Politics: Issues and Approaches in the Post-Cold War Era. Columbia University Press.