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The Motherland and the Fight with Fascism: War Cult and War Film under Brezhnev (1965–82)

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Abstract

This article, based on extensive archival documentation, newspapers, and periodicals, examines the impact upon the Soviet film industry of shifts in top-level policy relating to representation of the war. It contends that Leonid Brezhnev’s May 8, 1965, speech on the eve of Victory Day propounded an inclusive vision of the war (later sections of the speech comprise an exhaustive inventory of different representatives of military and civilian society who had been responsible for victory). Yet, in lending encouragement to participants of all kinds to consider their experience valid, the speech opened up a discursive space in which validity might be contested. Further, the emphasis in the film industry upon innovation and the need to avoid predictability ran directly against the requirement that commemoration of the war should fit highly ritualized and easily recognizable patterns. The article traces the results of these overall contradictions in the arguments about overall policy on the war film between representatives of the High Command, film managers at Goskino, cinema’s central bureaucracy, and filmmakers themselves, and the controversies around individual films, including Iurii Ozerov’s Liberation (1968–72), Andrei Smirnov’s The Belorussian Station (1970), Aleksei German’s Operation “New Year” (1971, released as Checkpoint, 1985), and Larisa Shepit'ko’s Ascent (1977).

The intensive elaboration of commemorative practices related to the Second World War is one of the best-known features of Leonid Brezhnev’s period as Soviet leader. On May 9, 1965, Victory Day became a public holiday for the first time since 1947. Two years later, on May 8, 1967, came the initiation of a new ritual, wreath-laying on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. 1 A nationwide program of monument-building was launched, on a scale incomparable with anything earlier. 2 Across

1 On the reinterment of the Unknown Soldier see Pravda, December 4, 1966, 1; on the wreath-laying, Pravda, May 9, 1967, 1.
2 While some major monuments, for example those in Stalingrad and at Poklonnaia Hill in Moscow, were projected before Brezhnev’s accession, between 1965 and 1985, levels of activity and coordination rose significantly. On Leningrad, for example, see Lisa Kirschenbaum, The Legacy of the Siege of Leningrad, 1945-1995: Myth, Memories and Monuments (Cambridge, UK, 2006), 113–50, 186–228; and Catriona Kelly, Remembering St Petersburg (Oxford, 2014), chap. 2, available at https://www.academia.edu/6847211/REMEMBERING_ST_PETERSBURG. Unless otherwise noted, all URLs cited in this article were last accessed June 16, 2024.
the USSR, May 9 was marked by commemorative rituals. School museums and visits by veterans to educational institutions and Young Pioneer groups ensured a transfer of memory and experience across the generations. As well as social practices, what was now known as “The Great Patriotic War” haunted the Soviet imaginary, shaping hundreds of literary texts, pictures, and films.

In the last fifteen years, substantive archive-based studies by, among others, Jonathan Brunstedt, Scott W. Palmer, Ekaterina Makhotina, Vicky Davis, and Ekaterina Boltunova and Galina Egorova, have analyzed the institutions and social groups that created the “high war culture” of the Brezhnev years, the cult’s relations with established patterns in earlier eras, and the importance of local and regional factors. There is now a large literature on phenomena of the cult such as memorials, parades, hero cities, and commemorative rituals. Less well developed is the question of how the significant alterations to commemorative tradition in the Brezhnev years affected feature films, the most prestigious and popular product of the Soviet movie industry. Certainly, we have good discussions of film texts themselves and their reception. Archive-based work exploring the institutional context for the production of war movies and the discussions around them before they reached the screen is, however, thin on the ground. At the same time, investigation of films evolved and produced precisely at the period when war commemoration was most actively reshaped (1965–75) can illustrate how party and government officials, professionals, members of the public, and war veterans negotiated ideas about appropriate understandings and evocations of the conflict. Such investigation in turn facilitates a better understanding of the Soviet Union’s “mnemonic regime” at this period, along with the activities of its “mnemonic actors.”

In what follows, I first of all identify specific reasons, both ideological and institutional, for the emergence and development of an intense interest in war film during the late 1960s and early 1970s. I contend that Brezhnev’s assiduous association of his personal authority with the cult, yet reluctance

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1 See, for example, Ekaterina Makhotina, Erinnerung an den Krieg / Krieg der Erinnerungen: Litauen und der Zweite Weltkrieg (Göttingen, 2017), chaps. 1–3.
3 The first usage of the term “Great patriotic war” (capitalized thus), according to the National Corpus of the Russian Language (www.ruscorpora.ru), is Emel’ian Iaroslavskii, “Velikaia otechestvennaia voina sovetskogo naroda,” Pravda, June 23, 1941. 4 However, “Patriotic War” was more common: see, for example, “Sovetski narod idet na pobedonuiu otechestvennuu voinu za rodinu, za chest’, za svobodu,” Pravda, June 23, 1941. 5 Stalin himself used “Velikaia otechestvennaia voina” only after victory was achieved in 1945. By the late 1970s “Great Patriotic War” was the standard usage.
7 Yet there are still fewer book-length studies of this era than of the postwar years, on which see Amir Weiner, Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution (Princeton, 2001); Karl Qualls, From Ruins to Reconstruction: Urban Identity in Soviet Sevastopol after World War Two (Ithaca, 2009); Steven Maddox, Saving Stalin’s Imperial City: Historic Preservation in Leningrad, 1930–1950 (Bloomington, IN, 2014); and Anne Hasselmann, Wie der Krieg ins Museum kam: Akteure der Erinnerung in Moskau, Minsk und Tscheljabinsk, 1941–1956 (Bielefeld, 2022). Likewise, in Nina Tumarkin, Wie der Krieg ins Museum kam: Akteure der Erinnerung in Moskau, Minsk und Tscheljabinsk (Ithaca, 2009); Steven Maddox, Sevastopol after World War Two (Princeton, 2001); Karl Qualls, World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution (Pittsburgh, 2020), which, though mainly focused on documentary, also includes relevant fiction films and TV. See also Stefano Pisu, War Films: Interpretazione storiche del cinema di guerra (Milan, 2015), which includes Soviet material.
8 An outstanding exception is Jeremy Hicks, The Victory Banner Over the Reichstag: Film, Document, and Ritual in Russia’s Contested Memory of World War II (Pittsburgh, 2020), which, though focused primarily on written works, also includes relevant fiction films and TV. See also Irina Tcherneva and Juliette Denis’s study of a Latvian cause célèbre, “Je me souviens de tout, Richard” (Rolands Kalniņš, Studio de Riga, 1967): a manifestation précocè d’une mémoire concurrente de la Grande Guerre patriotique.” Journal of Power Institutions in Soviet Societies 12 (2011): 1–47; and Eugénie Zvonkine’s discussion of Elem Klimov’s Come and See in her Le réal comme exces dans le cinéma soviétique et postsoviétique de 1970 à nos jours (Paris, forthcoming, 2024), chap. 5. My thanks to Professor Zvonkine for providing pre-publication sight of her work.
9 I borrow these terms from Michael H. Bernhard and Jan Kubik, Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration (Oxford, 2014).
to arbitrate controversial aspects of the cult, created an environment that presented new challenges to filmmakers. I go on to examine key discussions of policy relating to the production of war films that took place in the film management bureaucracy, Goskino, between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s. I then demonstrate how this context shaped the production history of key films grappling with the legacy of the War, including the multinational co-production Liberation (1968–72) and the Mosfilm-produced The Belorussian Station (1970) and The Ascent (1977). Rather than being driven by the antagonism of government and party bureaucracies toward creative artists, these production histories testify to the uncertainty of filmmakers and indeed cinema managers about what exactly was expected, and the vagaries of institutional power relations and patronage networks. The fact that the resulting films had a demonstrably significant impact on their audiences while garnering professional esteem for their directors and production crews suggests that seeing the history of cinematic “war cult” simply in terms of “what the powers that be wanted” is simplistic. Even during the war itself, as the film historian Neia Zorkaia has argued, film texts could have a meaning that went beyond propaganda.  

All the more was this the case when it came to films made in a political environment where pluralism, of however limited a kind, was in operation.

**THE RISE OF THE WAR CULT AND THE VISIBILITY OF THE LEADER**

An issue of immediate and pressing significance for Stalin’s successors was the extent to which Stalin had enjoyed personal credit for victory in the war. The standard formulation, used in an order signed by Minister for War Aleksandr Vasilevskii to mark Victory Day on May 9, 1952, proclaimed that

seven years ago the Soviet people and its Armed Forces under the leadership of the Communist Party and our wise leader and great general I. V. Stalin victoriously concluded the Great Patriotic War and achieved complete victory over the Hitlerite invaders who had assaulted the freedom and independence of our Motherland, and saved the peoples of Europe from the horrors of fascist enslavement.  

The process of downplaying Stalin’s military role started considerably earlier than Khrushchev’s all-out attack on the former leader’s strategic competence at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party in March 1956. On May 9, 1953, Vasilevskii’s successor, Nikolai Bulganin, issued an order that was phrased very differently from the text a year earlier.

Eight years ago, the Great Patriotic War of the USSR against German imperialism concluded with complete victory. Having achieved this glorious and world-renowned victory under the guidance of the glorious Communist Party, the Soviet people and its Armed Forces defended the honor and independence of their socialist Motherland and saved the peoples of Europe from the threat of fascist slavery.  

The vacuum left by the removal of references to the “Generalissimus” was not easily filled. Stalin’s successors—Georgii Malenkov and, in due course, Nikita Khrushchev—had played an entirely civilian role during the war, which inhibited the direct employment of war memory to personal advantage.

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11 “Prikaz voennogo ministra A. M. Vasil’evskogo,” Pravda, May 9, 1952, 1 (emphasis added). Cf. the ritual description of the key struggles of the War (for instance, the battles of Kursk and Stalingrad, the repudiation of the siege of Leningrad) as “Stalin’s ten blows” (desiat’ stalinskikh udarov): see, for example, “Prazdnik goroda-geroya,” Leningradskaja pravda, January 29, 1946, 3; and “Velikaia pobeda pod Leningradom,” Leningradskaja pravda, January 27, 1950, 2. For a detailed discussion of such pronouncements and their context see Vasilii M. Kulish, “Sovetskaia istoriografiia Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny,” in Sovetskaia istoriografiia, ed. Iurii N. Afanas’ev (Moscow, 1996), 274–315.

12 “Prikaz ministra obrony N. A. Bulganina,” Pravda, May 9, 1953, 1 (emphasis added).
Khrushchev’s relations with the military were strained: Marshal Georgii Zhukov, the nation’s premier war hero, who replaced Bulganin as defense minister on February 9, 1955, was removed from office on October 29, 1957, amid accusations of self-promotion and “Bonapartism.” His successor, Rodion Malinovskii, though a distinguished general, was not a household name. He was Hero of the Soviet Union twice over, to Zhukov’s four times, and had taken no part in the most famous battles of the war. There was thus no danger that his luster would overshadow Khrushchev’s own.

This institutional taming of the military under Khrushchev went with a downplaying of martial glory. The most important projects of the day—the Piskarevo Cemetery in Leningrad and Mamaev Kurgan in Volgograd—paid tribute to the war dead in general, rather than to the armed forces. In 1955, Zhukov lobbied the party’s Central Committee for the construction of a major war memorial complex in Moscow, but nothing resembling his vision was constructed until the 1980s. 13

So far as the cinema was concerned, from 1954 to 1964 the key agenda for studios was the creation of contemporary films, revolutionary dramas, and attacks on the “cult of personality.” Evocations of 1941–45 were, relative to their later status, marginal, and often focused on the high human cost of the war—sometimes in the teeth of opposition from army top brass. Aleksandr Ivanov’s *Soldiers* (1956), for example, based on Viktor Nekrasov’s *In the Trenches of Stalingrad* (1946), provoked vehement opposition from its military consultant, Lt.-Gen. M. A. Mironov. The general insisted that the retreat of Soviet troops after rout on the Southeastern Front should place more emphasis on “heroism,” and that the conflict of the lieutenants with a rigid commanding officer should have a more positive resonance. 14

Brezhnev’s accession as leader represented a marked shift of institutional direction. Though posthumous skepticism has been directed at his military credentials, as presented in his memoir *Malaia Zemlia* (1978–79), more important, in terms of late Soviet politics, was the fact that Brezhnev was one of only three members of the Politburo, ministers of defense aside, who could lay claim to any kind of active war record. 15 This was underlined in the appointment of Marshal Andrei Grechko as minister of defense after Malinovskii’s death on March 31, 1967: Grechko had commanded forces in the war theater to which Malaia Zemlia belonged, the North Caucasus Front. 16 There is evidence of good relations between Brezhnev, a skilled networker throughout his career, and the military, dating back to at least the Khrushchev era. For example, he was co-signatory with Zhukov to a December 20, 1956, memorandum demanding action on the construction of war memorial complexes in Moscow, Leningrad, Stalingrad, Sevastopol, and Odessa. 17 While the long history of party governance as a primarily civilian affair precluded the emergence of anything resembling a formal alliance, Brezhnev gave more leverage to the armed forces than any previous Soviet leader in peacetime.

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13 N. G. Tomilina et al., eds., *Pamiatnik Pobedy: Istoriia soorazheniia memorial’nogo kompleksa Pamiatnika Pobedy na Pklonnoi Gore* (Moscow, 2005), 58–59. As well as Moscow, Zhukov listed Leningrad, Stalingrad, Sevastopol, and Odessa as places urgently needing a major memorial, and he drew an unflattering comparison with the situation in “the people’s democracies and the People’s Republic of China,” where such complexes had already been built. For a good discussion of the many stops and starts in constructing the Moscow memorial see Brunstedt, “Bureaucratizing the Glorious Past.”

14 Tsentral’nyi gosudarstvennyi arkiv literatury i iskusstva Sankt-Peterburga (TsGALI-SPb), f. 257, op. 17, d. 1215, l. 31. Mironov was later to insist on cuts to the opening scene (ibid., l. 59).

15 These were Brezhnev’s former deputy in Zaporozh’e, Central Committee apparatchik Andrei Kirilenko (on the Military Council of the 18th Army in 1942–43), appointed to the Politburo under Khrushchev (1962), but retained by Brezhnev; former Belarusian party leader and Deputy Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers, Kirill Mazurov (who fought at the front in 1941–42, suffered a war wound, and later served in partisan units), who was appointed in 1965; and the Leningrad party chief Grigorii Romanov, who had served as a radio operator, appointed in 1976. Of these, only Mazurov had a record that was objectively more impressive than Brezhnev’s. On Brezhnev and war cult see Vicky Davis, “Time and Tide: The Remembrance Ritual of ‘Bezkozyrka’ at Novorossiisk,” *Cahiers du monde russe* 54:1–2 (2013): 103–30; and idem, *Myth Making in the Soviet Union*. For Brezhnev’s reliance on networks of male associates in general see Susanne Schattenberg, *Staatsmann und Schauspieler im Schatten Stalins. Eine Biographie* (Cologne, 2017).

16 Malaia Zemlia and the North Caucasus Front are mentioned together in Brezhnev’s May 8, 1965 speech.

17 Tomilina, *Pamiatnik Pobedy*, 80–81. The other signatories were Ekaterina Furtseva, then first secretary of the Moscow City Committee of the CPSU, and Minister of Foreign Affairs Dmitrii Shepilov, soon to fall from grace as a supposed member of the “anti-Party group.” Brezhnev is also regularly documented among those presenting the case for the Moscow monument to the Central Committee (see, for example, ibid., 96).
The ways in which war cult developed proceeded directly from these allegiances. Certainly, as Mischa Gabowitsch and Jonathan Brunstedt have argued, many of the ideological debates and commemorative practices post-1965 perpetuated those already in existence, right back to 1941. However, the prominence of the leader in the symbolic universe of war commemoration lent such debates and practices a new and compelling significance.

**AMBIGUOUS EULOGY: BREZHNEV’S SPEECH OF MAY 8, 1965**

The twentieth anniversary of Victory, on May 8–9, 1965, represented a breakthrough event not just in terms of the scale and pomposity of the associated events, but in terms of the general secretary’s visibility. Previously, hymning the war had been left to Pravda editorials and ministers of defense. Now, three entire columns of the party newspaper’s May 9 number were swallowed by Brezhnev’s oration at the festive meeting on the previous day. Studied by “applause,” “stormy applause,” “prolonged, stormy applause,” and (at the point when the decision to add Moscow to the list of hero cities was announced) “prolonged, stormy applause rising to shouts of ‘Hurrah!’ and ‘Bravo!’,” the speech ranged far and wide in its commemoration of the war effort. Legendary heroes such as self-immolating pilot Nikolai Gastello, marshals, and generals marched alongside anonymous tank crews, pilots, sailors, and radio operators, as well as intelligence officers, transport workers, farmers, and builders from the rear.

Brezhnev’s speech was a prime example of what political scientist Kenneth Jowitt has termed “the politics of inclusion” in action. The general secretary enveloped women in his warm commemorative embrace, announcing that, for their efforts and heroism at the front, and for their labor in keeping home fires burning, International Women’s Day, March 8, was to become a public holiday (cue “stormy applause”). And even the Resistance in Western Europe, partisans on Soviet territory, and participants of the Arctic convoys were given their due. Yet mentioned before anything else was the role of the center. “The State Committee of Defense headed by the General Secretary of the Communist Party, I. V. Stalin, was set up to supervise and co-ordinate the response to the enemy.” Equally, the list of major victories included not just Leningrad, Kursk, and Stalingrad, but also Malaia Zemlia, Brezhnev’s own theater of war—which, somewhat incongruously, led off a further list of storied triumphs running from battles in the Crimea through “the Belorussian operation” and the march to Berlin.

Brezhnev’s speech did not so much set an agenda as open up a representational and discursive space. It presented a far more detailed and wide-ranging view of “the Soviet people” than ever before, but also reintroduced Stalin as a major figure. Providing a more or less endless inventory of groups that had contributed to the war effort, it nevertheless emphasized the role of the regular forces as first among equals. It was as contradictory as it was compendious, creating at a stroke a whole series of

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19 Kenneth Jowitt, “Inclusion and Mobilization in Leninist Regimes,” *World Politics* 28:1 (1975): 69–96. Hitherto, Jowitt’s terminology has primarily been applied to the accommodation of Russian nationalism in the Brezhnev era. See especially Itzhak Brudny, *Reinventing Russia: Russian Nationalism and the Soviet State* (Cambridge, UK, 1998). As Jonathan Brunstedt argues, however, when it came to war cult, the picture was more complicated even at this level: “at the peak of official support for Russian nationalist expression and activism, the Russocentric paradigm did not extend to official representations of victory” (*The Soviet Myth*, 217). And in fact Brezhnev’s speech also invoked many other types of social diversity—gender, region, occupation, military role, and so on. See, for example, Hicks, *The Victory Banner over the Reichstag*, 124, which refers to “the creation of a comfort blanket of memory” under Brezhnev.


interest groups that could lay claim to a place in commemorative politics. Indeed, the significance of the war remained in certain respects unstable, even as “stability” was decreed a key political and social aim.

None of this ideological signposting was specific to the cinema. Indeed, Brezhnev, in his May 8, 1965 speech, named no cinema artist to stand with the twenty writers and journalists, four composers, and the Kukryniksy poster artists whom he specifically celebrated. The epic movies of the Stalin era, such as Friedrich Ermler’s She Defends the Motherland or Mikheil Chiaureli’s The Fall of Berlin, it could be inferred, were no longer to be models. But what was expected from Soviet film artists? Over the next few years, the discussions over this were often conflicted and confused, and their results, both from the perspective of film managers and of filmmakers, less than satisfactory. The situation was further complicated by Brezhnev’s failure to articulate a public position with regard to specific war films. Stalin as “Kremlin censor” had ruled on the fate of all cinematic works, those about the war included. Evocations that displeased him (Oleksandr Dovzhenko’s screenplay, Ukraine in Flames, Aleksandr Ivanov’s film The Star) had no chance of reaching the screen. By contrast, professional folklore aside, there is no evidence that Brezhnev ever intervened in public debates about war films, or indeed any others.

GOSKINO AND THE BATTLE FOR WAR MEMORY

Even before Brezhnev’s speech on May 8, 1965, filmmakers had begun contemplating a likely change of representational policy with regard to the war. During the late 1950s and early 1960s the dominant aesthetic, as in the cinema generally, had been films rejecting the epic monumentalism of the late 1940s. Sergei Gerasimov’s September 1964 Pravda article “Art with No Makeup” cited as a prime example of “life’s independence from man’s organizing drive,” and of “de-dramatization” and “de-heroicization,” Viktor Lisakovitch’s documentary Katiusha, about woman doctor Ekaterina Demina’s service at the front. However, less than six months later, at the inaugural meeting of Goskino’s Artistic Council on February 11, 1965, Aleksei Romanov, Goskino’s chairman, claimed “deheroicization” of war memory was as significant a problem as “the earlier tendency to represent the war in cultic terms.” This point was picked up later in discussion by Gen. Evgenii Vostokov, who headed the Cultural Section of the Soviet Army and Navy’s Political Directorate, which was responsible for ideological control in the armed forces. Recent films, he contended, “lacked the characteristics of great cinematic art of our Soviet kind,” and it was vital to provide “a riposte to the lies of bourgeois cinematographers that distort history and reduce to nothing the role of the USSR.”

Vostokov was not just any member of the military elite. He was a war veteran who had been wounded at the front and had accompanied his regiment to Berlin, and also a graduate of the Academy of Arts in Leningrad. An accomplished if conventional landscape painter and member of the Union of Artists, he regarded the representation of the natural world as an act of patriotic duty—“The landscape

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22 This was, of course, the case with memory regimes in other countries also. For an informative study of the British armed forces’ vexed relationship with the film industry (which during World War II operated with high levels of state sponsorship), see Simon P. MacKenzie, British War Films, 1939–1945: The Cinema and the Services (London, 2001). The distinction is that in peacetime, the British military services were primarily interested in reflections of themselves in their modern manifestation.

23 The claim that Brezhnev watched a particular film, and then championed it, is a trope of memoirs. See, for example, Sergei Mikaelian, Vliubljen po sobstvenomu zhelaniiu (Moscow, 1989), 71.


25 Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literature i iskusstva (RGALI – previously TsGALI), f. 2944, op. 1, d. 214a, ll. 18, 66, 68. Goskino’s Artistic Council (in full, Scripts and ArtisticCouncil) was a substantial body (around 150 members from the film profession and Soviet public life (obshchestvennoe) generally) that met for discussions from 1965 onward. Its discussions fed into Goskino’s overall planning policy.
is a symbol of the Motherland.” 26 His point about “bourgeois cinematography” was reiterated by film critic Kira Paramonova, who emphasized that the biggest Soviet international successes were war films: Sergei Bondarchuk’s The Fate of a Man (1959), Grigorii Chukhrai’s The Ballad of a Soldier (1959), Iuliia Solntseva’s Chronicle of the Flaming Years (1961), Mikhail Kalatozov’s The Cranes are Flying (1957), Andrei Tarkovsky’s Ivan’s Childhood (1962), and Aleksandr Stolper’s The Living and the Dead (1964). But they had important competition. “When I was in Paris, I saw people standing in line for the film The Longest Day, a film of an antihistorical kind—it shows that the Normandy landings decided the outcome of the Second World War.” 27

The high-level discussion relating to war film at Goskino in 1965 was unprecedented, and represented a major turning point. As international relations deteriorated over the following years, anxiety that Soviet filmmakers who took an insufficiently respectful attitude to the war were playing into the hands of “the imperialists” became all the sharper. The internationalist sentiments about victory through cooperation in the May 8, 1965, speech were replaced by emphasis on the USSR’s leading role (“the Soviet people and its valorous armed forces carried on their shoulders the main burden of the last war”). 28

In January 1968, at an internal meeting, Irina Kokoreva, chief editor of Goskino’s Scripts and Editorial College (SEC) again evoked the contestation of war experience and the need for the USSR’s urgent response: “Someone visiting from Yugoslavia recently told me that in 1969 the Americans are going to release The End of the War, with enormous panoramas of the liberation of Berlin, that is, the film’s about how the Americans liberated Europe. Whereas we…? We must think about creating a big historical canvas of the war. This must be one of our most important themes.” 29 It is not clear what Kokoreva (or her informant) meant by The End of the War, since no U.S. film with that title, or resembling her description, was ever released, but the episode underlines the significance of film as a weapon in the late Cold War battle for international prestige.

The Soviet Union’s role as “liberator” acquired further importance in the face of escalating crisis across the Warsaw Pact countries, as Alexander Dubček’s “Communism with a human face” pursued a unilateral policy of liberalization. On April 10, 1968, the Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR issued a decree noting the “serious sharpening of ideological conflict between capitalism and socialism” in conditions where “the entire enormous apparatus of anti-Communist propaganda is directed at the weakening of the unity of the socialist countries.” A particular threat was the rise of “militarism and revanchism” in the Federal Republic of Germany. 30

As the reference to “militarism and revanchism” suggested, the heritage of the Second World War formed an important frame for responses to the so-called Czechoslovak crisis. This point was made explicit in Pravda’s coverage of the approaching May 9 anniversary: “Tomorrow is Victory Day. In marking this day, we celebrate our heroic armed forces who routed the fascist invaders and healed the peoples of Europe from the brown plague.” 31 For its part, Izvestiia pointedly recalled the salvation of

27 Ibid., II, 177, 179.
28 A. A. Grechko, “Velikaia Pobeda,” Pravda, May 9, 1967, 2. As Gabowitsch points out, “Victory Day before the Cult,” 76, an important case of “mixed signals” even in 1965 was an article by Malinovskii in Pravda’s May 8 edition jeering at the West’s Second World War record, which triggered a mass diplomatic boycott of the May 9 ceremony.
29 RGALI, f. 2944, op. 5, d. 218, l. 8. The Scripts and Editorial College (Stsenarno-redaktsionnaia kollegiia) was the subdivision of Goskino that liaised directly with studios during the preparation of scripts and production of films. See Catrina Kelly, “Beyond Censorship: Goskino USSR and the Management of Soviet Film, 1963–1985,” Slavonic and East European Review 99:3 (2021): 440–46. It was renamed Chief (Glavnaia) Scripts and Editorial College in 1972, but in order to avoid confusion, the abbreviation SEC has been used throughout.
30 Pravda, April 11, 1968, 1.
Czechoslovakia itself. Journalist Lev Kandinov, fresh from a visit to Prague, hymned the feeling of brotherly solidarity that stemmed directly from war experience.  

Over the next months, the “Czechoslovak crisis” provoked not just generalized discussions about ideological rectitude (such as Sergei Gerasimov’s speech at the Filmmakers’ Union plenum on May 30, 1968), but a surge of anxiety about political subversion in the Czechoslovak film industry specifically. The day before Gerasimov’s speech, Aleksei Romanov waxed indignant at a certain “representative of the Czechoslovak film industry” who had used a meeting of socialist filmmakers in Berlin to sing the praises of the new wave and boast of their industry’s awards from Western film festivals. “And especially the Oscars for [Ján] Kadár and [Elmar] Klos’s The Shop on Main Street and [Jiří] Menzel’s Closely Watched Trains. We know the content of these films and we know the price of the Western recognition of Czechoslovak film art.” It was not solely films with a wartime setting that provoked the ire of Soviet film managers—Romanov’s deputy Vladimir Baskakov, reporting on Cannes, was particularly incensed by Ján Nemec’s satirical representation of an elite gathering, A Report on the Party and the Guests—“it’s just an antisocialist film!” But the fuss over The Shop on Main Street and Closely Watched Trains indicated that now, inappropriate representation of the war would be considered an assault on the socialist order.

After the invasion of Czechoslovakia, the drive to represent the liberating role of the USSR in 1945 gathered momentum. As a leading article, “In the Interests of Friendship,” published in the September 1968 number of Iskusstvo kino, remarked: “It is impossible to pass over in silence the emergence, among certain film and literature activists in Czechoslovakia, of mistaken ideological positions, which have directly led to a total rejection of the principles of socialist art.” Singled out for particular opprobrium was Karel Kachyna’s Carriage to Vienna (1966), which traces an Austrian soldier’s fluctuating relations with the young peasant woman driving a farm cart that he has hijacked; eventually, just after the two become close, he is brutally murdered by partisans. The film had “offended the feelings of those who fought in Czechoslovakia for the victory over fascism, in the name of joy and peace across the world.”

One effect of the panic about the threat from outside to Communist values was self-protective isolationism. A debate at Goskino about how to reduce the Soviet viewer’s affection for Western films was followed by a significant reduction in the number of such films acquired for release to Soviet audiences. Literature and film from the socialist bloc was also subject to unprecedented levels of suspicion. But another was the expectation that Soviet filmmakers should engage more actively with the country’s “ideological opponents” and promote its role in the war as the supreme illustration of its contribution to the cause of freedom. What was more, they should have an international as well as national film audience in view.

32 Lev Kandinov, “No pomnit mir spasennyi,” Izvestia, May 8, 1968, 4. Cf. Mikhail Makliarskii, “Iz chekoslovatskoi tetradi,” Iskusstvo kino, no. 12 (1968): 138, recalling a conversation with an official from the České Budějovice city council: “We may disagree with the odd article in the Soviet press or dislike the odd Soviet film, but we shall never forget that it was the Soviet Union and our own Communist party that saved our country and our people from the cruel yoke of fascist occupation. And we shall allow no-one to forget that!”


34 RGALL, f. 2944, op. 1, d. 496, l. 109.

35 Ibid., l. 126.

36 “V interesakh druzhby,” Iskusstvo kino, no. 9 (1968).

37 For the discussion see RGALL, f. 2944, op. 1, d. 497, ll. 3–82; on the reduction, I. N. Kiselev’s report, April 17, 1969, Tsentral’nyi gosudarstvennyi archiv istoriko-politicheskikh dokumentov Sankt-Peterburga (TsGAIPD-SPb), f. 1369, op. 5, d. 97, l. 18.

38 For a discussion of literature (the censorship organ, Glavlit, restricted access to 30 percent more materials from Eastern Europe in 1968 than in 1967), see Ol’ga Lavinskaia, “Tsenzura v SSSR i ograničenija informatsii o sobytiakh v Chehoslovaki,” in “Pravzhskaja vesna” i mezhdunarodnyj krizis 1968 goda. Issledovanija, ed. N. G. Tomilina et al. (Moscow, 2010), 133–34. For cinema, cf. the discussion in Goskino’s Cinema Committee, June 28, 1968, on “improving the selection” of foreign films released in the USSR, with the emphasis on reducing their number (RGALL, f. 4944, op. 1, d. 497, ll. 3–82). The figures given by user susr on Kinoklub Fenix, 2018, indicate that 109 full-length foreign films were released in 1968, but only 91 in 1969 (“films from capitalist countries” dropped from 31 in 1968 to 23 in 1969, and films from Czechoslovakia from 10 in 1967 to 6 in 1968; in 1969, the number released was also 6).
RESPONDING TO THE “SOCIAL COMMAND”: REACTIONS IN STUDIOS

Goskino could not simply direct film studios to produce war films of a new and resonant kind. The bureaucracy worked reactively. It received nominated scripts from studios and cleared these for inclusion in a studio’s so-called “thematic plan,” after determining that nationwide coverage was appropriate in terms of “ideological and artistic quality.” But studio directors quickly picked up the message of Brezhnev’s May 8, 1965, oration: as early as June 21 that year, Il’ia Kiselev, director of Lenfil’m, lamented to the Filmmakers’ Union: “Totally absent from the plan is the theme of the Soviet people’s victory in the Great Patriotic War, its culminating stage. We somehow edge away from the victorious phase of the Soviet Army’s work, although now, at this moment of international tension, such films are badly needed.” Pressure escalated in the wake of the “Czechoslovak crisis.” In July 1968, Aleksandr Ivanov, director of Soldiers, repudiated his own earlier stance: “Just recently everyone focused on the tragic defeats at the start of the war. Now the moment has come when we should also look closely at the times when we were winning.” In the Khrushchev era, studios had held long debates on films about the “cult of personality”; now such films were definitely “not topical,” whereas war films had moved up the agenda.

Alongside hints from the top, encouragement of the right type of activity included the “state commission,” a prestige, high-budget feature that was proposed by Goskino (or another government agency) to the studio, rather than vice versa, an incentive that was particularly relevant when it came to war films because they were costly and troublesome to make.

A key example of the state commission was Liberation, directed by Iurii Ozerov, a Soviet, East German, Yugoslav, Polish, and Italian co-production that was coordinated with the direct support of Vostokov and the Political Directorate. “At last, the studio [Mosfil’m] has responded to our calls to create an epic and heroic film (with a team of scriptwriters and reliable military advisors) dedicated to the victorious phase of the Great Patriotic War,” Aleksandr Dymshits, then chief editor of Goskino’s SEC, enthused on June 17, 1965. As they pushed for the substantial finance required, Romanov and his colleagues emphasized to the party Central Committee the political importance of the film as a riposte to the excision of the USSR from celluloid history. Alongside “putting right injustice,” Liberation would also make a major contribution to “the Communist and internationalist” education of the young.

The process of getting this promising material to the screen proved a great deal more fraught than Goskino or the studio had anticipated. Preliminary reports on the script were guarded; the generals drafted in as consultants were unhappy about the critical treatment of the war leadership, including Commander-in-Chief Stalin himself. For their part, Goskino’s specialist reviewers found the script puzzling in genre terms. If Liberation was meant to be a melange of original newsreel footage, then why the lame attempts to provide a story? Why were the imaginary characters so pallid and unconvinving? As discussion dragged on, the original intention of releasing Liberation to mark the fiftieth
anniversary of the Red Army’s founding in February 1968 inexorably lapsed. However, as the contestation of war memory became an increasingly important component of the Cold War, Mosfil’m and Goskino absorbed delays without protest, and the plan for a double feature expanded into four interlinked yet autonomous films.

At this point, the generals made themselves felt again, and a voiceover was introduced to hammer home to viewers the strategic significance of the different campaigns: “the special role of the steppe front […] the historic significance and scale of the Battle of Kursk […] and the special impact of victory there on all the following events in Russia.”46 Given all these changes, only at the beginning of 1969 were the first two films in the series ready for release (FIGURE 1).

In his opening oration at a meeting of Goskino’s Artistic Council on March 4–5, 1970, Aleksei Romanov heaped praise on Liberation. Despite “significant difficulties” accompanying “the creative process,” Ozerov and scriptwriters Iurii Bondarev and Oskar Kurganov had managed to create “two historically plausible, deeply impressive, and powerful movies.”47 But there was no sense in which the twenty-fifth anniversary of the war dominated discussion at the meeting generally: primary attention was given to film output related to the hundredth anniversary of Lenin’s birth, which fell in April that year.48 So far as being antagonistic, as is sometimes argued, revolutionary and martial history were, at this period, complementary and mutually reinforcing ideological principles. Celebration of the war invariably cited Lenin’s sentiments about the need for effective defense, while the conflict itself was interpreted in terms of the preservation of socialist values.49

APPROACHING 1975: LIBERATION AS MODEL AND COUNTER-TYPE

With the Lenin anniversary over, the issue of how to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of Victory took on a new urgency. A decisive point in the process was the meeting of Goskino’s Artistic Council

46 Ibid., d. 1295, l. 64.
47 RGALI, f. 2944, op. 1, d. 700a, l. 9.
48 Ibid., ll. 5–6.
on February 10–11, 1971. General Vostokov, taking a leading role once again, commented extensively on *Liberation*, which, he argued, was a turning point in the history of the war film. Offering “a riposte to the falsification of war history” in its illustration of “the decisive role of the Soviet Union and our armed forces,” the film was heart-warmingly internationalist in its portrayal of Soviet soldiers from different ethnic backgrounds, all contributing to the war effort. *Liberation* was notable also because, Vostokov said, it offered “an answer of a kind not given before” to “an incorrect tendency to present the war solely from the trenches[,] to show on the screen the life of the rank-and-file.”

Further sympathetic portrayals of commanding officers were, however, needed. This was a point of central importance not just because of the moral superiority of Soviet troops to the murderous “green berets” of the U.S. Special Forces, but because of the attrition of officers with actual war experience in the modern Soviet army:

A complex process of generational change is taking place in our armed forces […] now the most widespread type [of officer], the platoon commander, does not include men who took part in the war. We have not a single company commander who took part in the war, we have almost no battalion commanders who took part in the war, and we’ll soon have no regimental commanders who took part in the war either.

The Minister of Defense has made comments that we are not entitled to ignore. He has underlined the importance of returning again and again to the experience of the Patriotic War, to the experience of inculcating heroism and manifesting this at a mass level.

Vostokov’s comments testify to the armed forces’ institutional investment in the promotion of war memory, both as a route to discipline among servicemen, and as a way of enhancing the standing of the military within society more broadly. The role of war films, in this view, was not just to “inculcate and manifest heroism at a mass level.” It was also to convey categorically the leading role of the army command, and by extension the regular army, in achieving the glorious victory.

Vostokov’s views, however, did not stand unopposed at the meeting. A challenge came from no less a figure than Boris Pavlenok, head since 1970 of Goskino’s Board of Film Management, and officially number three in the hierarchy, after Romanov and Baskakov. Certainly, Pavlenok conceded, *Liberation* was an exemplary series of narratives, “managing to speak with profound seriousness and yet in an absorbing and interesting way about the heroic feat of the Soviet people in the Great Patriotic War.” But rather than being an unassailable model, *Liberation* pointed to the dangers of typification:

A movie about the defense of Sebastopol is ready for release. One about the defense of Odessa is in production. There are plans for films about the defense of the Caucasus and the defense of Leningrad. But there is a point worth making about these projects. Film-makers are starting to repeat the device that Ozerov adopted and organize their material according to the same schema: the Soviet High Command—the Nazi and Allied High Commands—the Command at the Front—the front line. Even the film about Leningrad, which has gone down to history precisely as an example of courage and heroism on the part of the entire population, runs the risk of getting much too caught up in showing the army staffs, exactly the same range of characters. It’s not too late to avoid repetition and

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50 RGALI, f. 2944, op. 1, d. 799a, l. 178–79.
51 Ibid., ll. 182–83. Vostokov appears to be referring to Marshal Grechko’s article, “Velikii podvig sovetskogo naroda,” *Pravda*, May 9, 1970, 2–3, which had once again promoted the Soviet experience as unique (there had been “no serious resistance” to the Third Reich before the Soviet Union entered the war) and had alluded to the “instructive experience” of the conflict as the key factor in today’s ideological battle.
52 Cf. the introduction of special holidays for branches of the armed forces, for example, rocket troops and artillery from November 19, 1964.
53 “Stenogramma zasedaniya stsenarno-khudozhestvennogo soveta,” l. 16.
to create works that present the war in different ways, and above all, as a conscious heroic feat of the entire people in defending the achievements of Communism.  

Where Vostokov’s extended rationale for sticking to the command-oriented perspective drew on geopolitics and generational history, Pavlenok’s promotion of an alternative line was primarily aesthetic. Repetition was inimical, and diversification essential.

This position expressed deeply held feelings in the filmmaking establishment. In 1967–69, reviewing Naum Birman’s air force movie *Chronicle of a Dive Bomber*, editorial staff as well as filmmakers had repeatedly warned of the danger that it might descend into clichéd heroism.  

54 The most respected figures in Brezhnev-era Soviet film, such as Grigorii Kozintsev and Mikhail Romm, had begun their careers in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when modernist distaste for stereotype and “mechanical reproduction” held sway—a distaste that had survived the alienation of such senior figures from the artistic devices of their youth. Since filmmakers were also closely familiar with war films made outside the Soviet Union, the notion of what was “repetitive” and “stereotypical” proved to be capacious.

Yet this alternative, aesthetic, line, whatever its appeal to film professionals, was also institutionally fragile. Films were seldom judged in party public statements by whether the material seemed stereotypical. Indeed, Pavlenok’s arguments made no headway at all so far as Vostokov was concerned. Instead, the general completely misinterpreted the Goskino deputy chair’s views, assuming that he too was arguing against excessive focus upon war experience “from below.”

56 Another and perhaps more significant weakness of Pavlenok’s position was that the commemoration of the war dead, as this was understood by officials in the Ministry of Culture or the Central Committee, required repetition and standardization. Rituals such as the laying of wreaths were replicated in unchanged form year after year; war memorials, with their stelae, stirring inscriptions, eternal flame burning in its stone cauldron, and marble surround, had an instantly recognizable architecture, as indeed was the whole point. More broadly, promoting ritual commemoration of all kinds as harmonious uniformity was one of the major political and social campaigns of the Brezhnev years. Of course there should be variety, reflecting the multiplicity of the Soviet people itself, but variety in homogeneity.

57 Pavlenok himself had seemed to acknowledge part of this, in his vision of how film should honor the “legendary heroism of the rear guard (*tyl*)”:

> It is the duty of our conscience to tell the stories of millions of Soviet people, whose tears are unquenchable, of the women who wrecked their constitutions with men’s heavy work in the fields, of the teenagers who spent their youth wielding sledgehammers, not strumming guitars, of the enormous work of organization carried out by the party in the rear guard and the magnificence of friendship of nations—in short, it is the duty

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54 RGALI, f. 2944, op. 1, d. 799a, l. 16, l. 18.

55 See particularly Joseph Heifitz’s letter to Naum Birman, June 13, 1967, TsGALI-SPh., f. 257, op. 18, d. 1754, l. 68: “You and I have talked about this more than once: your film, in terms of its content, script, the era, is an identikit piece (*tipovoi*). There are hundreds like it, made in different countries, by different directors. That means you have to do your utmost to say something new in the film relative to all those dozens of others.”

56 Commending *Liberation* as “the result of the overcoming of an incorrect tendency to present the way solely from the trenches[,] to show on the screen the life of the rank-and-file,” Vostokov suggested that he was quoting Pavlenok (“When you were speaking about *Liberation*, you emphasized…,” RGALI, f. 2944, op. 1, d. 799a, l. 178), but in fact Pavlenok had been arguing against the representation of the war from the point of view of the military leadership. While Vostokov did accept Pavlenok’s point about the need to avoid “cliché” (*shablon*) in the war film (ibid., l. 183), he did not engage with what this required in terms of overall perspective.

57 A modern study of the place of ritual in late Soviet life is badly needed. An overview of the subject on the basis of published literature is Christel Lane, *The Rites of Rulers: Ritual in Industrial Society: The Soviet Case* (Cambridge, UK, 1981). For a cogent application of theories of ritual to the history of the war film see Hicks, *The Victory Banner over the Reichstag*, 6–11, 125–30. In this context, it is worth noting that Aleksei Romanov went on lauding *Liberation* well after Pavlenok’s 1971 address: see, for example, the meeting of the Artistic Council, Goskino, March 9, 1972, RGALI, f. 2944, op. 1, d. 871a, ll. 8–9.
of our conscience to hymn the feats of labor achieved by the Soviet people in the war years.\textsuperscript{58}

The female agricultural worker and the male industrial worker were emblematic; likewise the references to the party’s leading role and “friendship of nations.” At the same time, in his references to the grief of soldiers’ mothers and to women doing the work of men in the fields, Pavlenok at least glancingly recognized an alternative actuality of war experience. There could be heroism in weeping and valor in hard physical labor.

Of course, the Soviet cinema had provided examples of this insight already, in two of the most celebrated war films of the 1950s and early 1960s, Kalatozov’s \textit{The Cranes are Flying} and Chukhrai’s \textit{The Ballad of a Soldier}. While evoking the future, Pavlenok was, as much as anything else, defending the past—attempting to head off an incursion by the military into the world of the war film and the imposition on the Soviet cinema of “the view from the High Command.” As party and military authorities started to take a closer interest in war films, these became subject to a pincer movement of increased institutional regulation plus mounting pressure to reflect war memory in the monolithic terms of monuments and wreath-laying ceremonies. Yet the professionals’ sense that films—unlike the language of \textit{Pravda} when commemorating the heroic dead—should \textit{not} be repetitious and ritualistic, or simply celebrate the war as seen from above, proved stubbornly resistant.

\textbf{ON THE FRONT LINE: MAKING “ALTERNATIVE” WAR FILMS}

Filmmakers themselves well knew that making war movies was “a responsible business,” in other words, one that carried significant risks. Avoiding “ideological miscalculations” was difficult with a film on any topic because the various bodies that regulated the process—in-studio editorial boards and artistic councils, Goskino, party organizations stretching from studio cells to Moscow—were often at variance in terms of what they expected. A film unproblematically cleared by the studio might meet resistance in Goskino, or the party, or both. Sometimes films, even after their release, annoyed a powerful institution or individual in the government or party leadership. War films might run into trouble with a yet further range of political actors.\textsuperscript{59} As with other films where there were powerful external lobbies, such as those dealing with Soviet sport or the factory floor, studios attempted to secure patronage by engaging consultants, in this case people high up in the military. These influential figures vouched for the probity of the representation and the good faith of scriptwriters and filmmakers.\textsuperscript{60} But there was no guarantee that this would buy off the objections of everyone in the armed forces.

Veterans as well as military agencies took a particularist view of the war, depending on gender, ethnic background, rank, branch of service, type of service—whether at the front or in the rear, in a regular unit or a partisan detachment, and so on—and, crucially, in terms of the precise period of the war in which they had seen service and where they had fought. Someone conscripted in the early months of 1944, when the war was all but over on Soviet territory, had vastly different recollections from those who experienced service before the tide turned decisively against the invaders in 1943. Civilians covered a still wider range of possible perceptions and prejudices. The very inclusivity of Brezhnev’s May 8, 1965, speech, abandoning the safely generalized concept of “a popular war,” had served to

\textsuperscript{58} RGALI, f. 2944, op. 1, d. 799a, l. 18.

\textsuperscript{59} A film that ran into problems with the local party, rather than the studio or Goskino, was Sergei Mikaelian’s \textit{Widows}; Igor Sheshukov’s \textit{Viktor Krokhin’s Second Attempt} had been cleared for release by Goskino in October 1977 when it ran into problems with the State Committee on Sport. On these cases see Catriona Kelly, \textit{Soviet Art House: Lenfilm Studio under Brezhnev} (New York, 2021).

\textsuperscript{60} This was widely perceived in studios themselves as a form of unavoidable corruption. See, for example, the comments of a senior administrator at Lenfil’m in 1962, “We have to search out influential comrades and ask them in as consultants, which looks like a hidden bribe” (TsGAIPD-SPb., f. 1369, op. 5, d. 43, ll. 5–6).
empower a bewildering range of different interest groups. Any of these could at any moment claim that a certain representation “offended their feelings” or “failed to reflect” their experience.

War films were also expensive to make, and technically tricky: even a small-scale drama focusing on the events in a single dugout could hardly do without at least one battle scene and assorted military hardware and pyrotechnics. All in all, the production of such films was not simply and perhaps not mainly a question of political expedience (kon"iunktura)—it was also an act of conviction. Some directors (Chukhrai, for instance) were war veterans themselves; others the children of war veterans; many more were eyewitnesses of life at the front or in the rear. They were not blank slates on which “official” dogma might be inscribed. They brought to the work of filmmaking their own perceptions and experience, as did their colleagues in production teams and in the studio generally, not to mention the officials who vetted films.

Artists as well as ideologues, filmmakers were at the sharp end of the Soviet creative dilemma. Working for a mass audience, they could get away with less than choreographers, composers, writers, or even feature-writers for the press. No other form of war memory was visible to so many (most memorials had primary significance for a local public). Despite its backing from the Political Directorate of the Soviet Army, even Liberation went through travails “on account of vigorous protests by the military,” leading to missed deadlines and delays in paying bonuses to the film production team.

The route to approval from studios and Goskino was not necessarily making a challenging war film: Aleksei German’s Operation “New Year” and Elem Klimov’s Come and See demonstrated precisely the opposite. German completed Operation “New Year” in 1971, but it was released only in 1985, and then under the title Checkpoint. Klimov, meanwhile, started shooting Come and See in 1977, but the film was not screened until 1985. In each case, a major factor in the delay was Pavlenok’s personal opposition. Although the head of Goskino’s Board of Film Management, Pavlenok also was Belarusian by background, the former chair of the republic’s Cinema Committee, and a client of partisan hero Petr Masherau, first secretary of the Belarusian Communist Party. In the case of an equally artistically ambitious war film, however—Larisa Shepit’ko’s The Ascent—the picture looked very different (FIGURE 2).

In principle, the combination of a director who had run into trouble with her earlier short, The Homeland of Electricity (1967), shelved for twenty years, and the sensitive material of the partisans, should have worked in her favor. In fact, it did not. For one thing, the veterans’ movement that petitioned for enhanced pension rights and other social benefits saw the film as “unjust” and “disrespectful” to the heritage of the Soviet war effort; for another, the veterans feared that the film might at best be left on the shelf or at worst be suppressed. In the end, The Ascent was shelved for another twenty years, not finally released until 1996, the year of the 50th anniversary of the Great Patriotic War.

61 For an instructive study of one particularly successful interest group, the veterans’ movement that petitioned for enhanced pension rights and other social benefits see Mark Edele, Soviet Veterans of the Second World War: A Popular Movement in an Authoritarian Society (Oxford, 2008).

62 A decree of the Council of Ministers of December 9, 1966, created a “war technology depot” for use in “historical-revolutionary and military-patriotic films,” but in practice filmmakers had to resort to piecemeal requests for machinery from the armed forces every time a war film went into production. See, for example, the letter from head of Goskino Filipp Ermash to Minister of Defense A. A. Grechko, November 18, 1972, RGALI, f. 2944, op. 1, d. 879, l. 119.

63 This did not preclude using war representations as cover for other, more inflammatory topics. A notable case was the Estonian director Kaljo Kijisk’s Hullumeelitus [Madness], in which an SS officer’s visit to a mental hospital became an allegory for the Soviet occupation. Despite the serious doubts voiced by Goskino, the film was cleared for release by the Cinema Committee of Estonia on January 16, 1969. See Estonian National Archive (Eesti Rahvusarhiiv), ERA.R-1707.1.1028, ll. 55–56; ERA. R-1707.1.1035, l. 1). However, after a high-profile public denunciation by critic Larisa Kriachko, Kijisk’s film was shelved until the glasnost era. See L. Kriachko, “Chuzhaia skhema mstit,” Iskusstvo kino, no. 11 (1969): 23–30.

64 Even the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier had a Moscow coloration, because the remains came from the capital’s locality and TV footage focused on the May 9 military parades, rather than the rituals associated with the tomb.

65 See the stenograph of a Goskino meeting on January 28, 1972, RGALI, f. 2944, op. 1, d. 850, l. 100.

66 On German’s film see Kelly, Soviet Art House, chap. 19; on Klimov’s see Zvonkine, Le reel comme excés, chap. 5.

67 In Kino: Legendy i byl’ Pavlenok claims that it was “Leningrad partisans” who opposed German’s film, but Goskino’s script file contains only laudatory comments from these partisans (RGALI. f. 2944, op. 1, d. 871a, ll. 76–79), Goskino employee Igo” Sadchikov’s recollection that Pavlenok had himself coordinated partisan disapproval is much more plausible (see the 1996 interview quoted in Martine Godet, La pellicule et les ciseaux: La censure dans le cinéma soviétique du Dégel à la perestroika [Paris, 2010], 267). As Pavlenok recorded, when it came to Klimov’s Come and See, he was outflanked because the director used his own Belarusian connections to get Petr Masherau on his side (Kino: legenda i byl’, chap. 2; cf. Elem Klimov, “A pamiatnikia ne nado…...” Ogonek, no. 2 (1988): 19). On Masherau see Natalia Chernyshova, “Between Soviet and Ethnic: Cultural Politics and National Identity-Building in Soviet Belarus under Petr Masherau, 1965–80,” Kritika 24 (Summer 2023): 545–84. On Masherau’s patronage of war memorials see Mischa Gabowitsch, “Patron-Client Networks and the Making of Soviet War Memorials,” in Monument. Central and Eastern Europe 1918–2018, ed. Agnieszka Tarusia, (Warsaw, 2019), 16.
have promised trouble. In addition, the film explicitly employed Christian imagery in its portrayal of the doomed partisans, with facial features, hairstyles, gesticulation, and camera angles strongly echoing the aesthetic of Russian and Ukrainian icons. Yet Goskino officials required only minor changes to the original script (for instance, replacing some of the Hilfspolizei officers with actual Germans). They accepted the completed film without demur, requesting simply the omission of some footage showing two of the partisans, Kolya Rybak and the film’s hero, Boris Sotnikov, crawling through undergrowth after the latter is wounded in the leg. The paper trail for Operation “New Year” stretches to over 100 folios, and for Liberation to nearly 200. The Ascent’s Goskino file, by contrast, comprises just 35, most of which is laudatory copy from Mosfil’m.68

The explanation for the discrepancy between the reception of The Ascent and German’s portrayal of the partisans cannot lie in the unproblematically “official” character of Shepit’ko’s project. The Ascent was based on a story by Belarusian writer Vasil’ Býkaũ, Sotnikov, that had been much more controversial in its time than the story by Iurii German used for Operation “New Year.” Rather than the nature of the material as such, the key appears to be, once again, the “Belarusian connection.” As he recorded in his memoirs, Pavlenok responded with deep emotion to The Ascent when it was screened at the Berlin film festival:

Can I ever forget the tense silence in the hall, when during the last sequence appeared on screen the sacred face, surrounded by heavenly light, of the partisan ascending to Golgotha, acted with genius by young Boris Plotnikov? And the finale—the repentant kissing of the earth by the comrade who betrayed him—as played by [Vladimir] Gostiukhin—went beyond the director’s intention, and raised this scene to the highest tragic level, the furthest possible point of sincerity.69

68 RGALI, f. 2944, op. 4, d. 3524, ll. 1–35.
69 Pavlenok, Kino: legendy i byl’, chap. 2.
In reference to other work by Bykau, Pavlenok was prepared to be critical, failing to understand why this “great and subtle artist” had not spotted the “falsity” in the premise of his own Alpine Ballad.\footnote{Ibid.} It is safe to assume that his admiration for The Ascent was genuine.

Pavlenok had argued strongly in 1971 that a “talented” film was by definition one that surprised its viewers, rather than a celebration of medal-laden military commanders. But representing lives outside the regular army was potentially a path to trouble—though, as The Ascent shows, far from always. At the same time, a third possible strategy—the scrutiny of war memory itself—also raised problems, as was shown by the case of an apparently much “safer” film—Andrei Smirnov’s The Belorussian Station (Mosfilm, 1971).

Based on a script by Vadam Trunin, Smirnov’s movie portrayed the reunion, at a funeral and after, of four men who were comrades-in-arms during the Great Patriotic War. Since 1945, their lives had radically diverged, but bonds had endured, and the renewed connection served to make war experience vivid. Much of the material provided by the studio emphasized the ideological conformity of the project: “This script is about people in whom the indestructible force of comradeship lives on, strengthened by blood in the years of cruel wartime ordeals,” read a letter from Mikhail Romm, artistic director of Mosfilm’s “Comrade” creative unit, in 1969.\footnote{RGALI, f. 2944, op. 4, d. 1752, l. 2.} Yet Goskino’s review of the film, while nothing like so hostile as its reception of Operation “Happy New Year” (the script file stretches only to 41 folios), still pointed to moments of awkwardness. Particularly, the SEC’s editors were concerned with the excessive attention to the funeral, and party following it, at the beginning of the film—a point repeatedly emphasized right up to the final stages of clearance.\footnote{Ibid, l. 9–10 (SEC decision of August 7, 1969); l. 16 (letter from Vladimir Sytin, deputy chief editor of SEC, to Vladimir Surin, general director of Mosfilm, July 7, 1970); l. 37 (decision of SEC, January 11, 1971).} Goskino’s reviewers were also anxious that the impression of diminution created by the veterans’ encounters should be ameliorated. “It plants aching depression in the heart of the viewer,” complained Rostislav Iurenev after reading the original script.\footnote{Ibid., l. 6.} The theme should be less the contrast between then and now than the continuity between them: what a cliché of the late Soviet period called “the relay-race of generations” (estafet pokolenii), or transferral of precious ideological content from one era to another.\footnote{Ibid., l. 9.} Eventually the SEC conceded that the final film was “a serious and moving work dedicated to the theme of friendship and the demonstration of the high moral qualities of the Soviet person.”\footnote{Ibid., l. 37.} However, this demanded adjustments and concessions from scriptwriter and director, despite the pair’s willingness at an early stage to seek common ground with Goskino.\footnote{Ibid., l. 9.} In suggesting that the memory of military experience back then might allow people who had drifted apart to recover their former, more authentic, selves, Trunin and Smirnov had involuntarily raised anxieties about their understanding of the present which took much effort to allay.

CONCLUSION

The rise in the importance of war memory in the USSR after 1965 can be traced to several causes: the enhancement of Brezhnev’s profile as leader; the drive for support among war veterans, including members of the military establishment; and the struggle to promote the USSR’s role as the exemplum of wise socialist rule and the liberator of nations after the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. War memory was essential both to the Communist party’s national prestige and to the position of the USSR as great power.

\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{RGALI, f. 2944, op. 4, d. 1752, l. 2.}
\footnote{Ibid, l. 9–10 (SEC decision of August 7, 1969); l. 16 (letter from Vladimir Sytin, deputy chief editor of SEC, to Vladimir Surin, general director of Mosfilm, January 7, 1970); l. 37 (decision of SEC, January 11, 1971).}
\footnote{Ibid., l. 6.}
\footnote{Ibid., l. 9.}
\footnote{Ibid., l. 37.}
\footnote{See their letter to Vladimir Sytin, January 7, 1970, ibid., l. 15.}
At the same time, rather than engaging in what Nina Tumarkin has termed “a massive effort to obliterate the real collective memory of the most horrific war in the history of humankind,” the party establishment attempted to work with such memory.\textsuperscript{77} As Bernhard and Kubik aptly put it,

mnemonic actors often try to treat history instrumentally, as they tend to construct a vision of the past that they assume will generate the most effective legitimation for their efforts to gain or hold power. But they are not totally free in their construction of history if they want to remain credible for their target audience(s). Each audience (public) constructs a vision of the past that it considers valid. […] The line between credible and incredible visions of the past is not easy to specify, and it shifts.\textsuperscript{78}

The management of war films in the cinema exemplifies this elastic dialogue between different audiences and publics. The story is not about the imposition of well-established “official” norms on a reluctant public, but about the creation of such norms, and about the uncertainty over what might lie inside or beyond them. Contradictions even fissured the perceptions of specific individuals. Firmly resisting the efforts of General Vostokov to advocate greater attention to the high command, Pavlenok did his best to promote and closely regulate representations of his own version of war memory, and particularly, the role of the partisans.

Filmmakers—directors, scriptwriters, actors, camera and sound operators, composers—were likewise “mnemonic actors” committed to specific visions of the past, and often tenacious in promoting these. There was no sense in which making a war film offered an easy path to fame and riches. Even the makers of apparently more “orthodox” war films, such as Iurii Ozerov and Andrei Smirnov, were faced with complex processes of negotiation. A surprising winner was Larisa Shepit’ko’s \textit{The Ascent}, but the insights from this were hard to extrapolate to other projects.

A standard objection to war films of realist aims was “excessive naturalism.”\textsuperscript{79} That people had died and endured loss of limbs and psychological damage was what Soviet censorship practice branded “a disgraceful fact” (vozmutitel’nyi fakt), not to be given attention. But these attitudes went beyond “the censorship” and beyond people holding official positions. They were shared also by many veterans.\textsuperscript{80} And there is evidence that large audiences did find war films of the kind considered suitable for general release appealing. \textit{Liberation} may strike film buffs and historians (me included) as a wooden, high-command-bound vision of the twentieth century’s largest conflict, and no doubt the grand prix at the All-Soviet Film Festival in 1972 was essentially awarded \textit{ex officio}. All the same, \textit{Liberation} was widely distributed internationally, as well as in the USSR, and was considered to have “broken through the blockade” on Soviet cultural products after Czechoslovakia and the Six–Day War. “Forty countries have bought the film, thirty of which supported the Zionists,” Vladimir Baskakov boasted in 1971.\textsuperscript{81}

While not “headline news” in the same way, Smirnov’s and Shepit’ko’s films were also notable successes. Viewing figures for \textit{The Belorussian Station} during the first two years of its release stood at over 28 million, among the highest for a “serious” movie at a point when competition from television was starting to bite.\textsuperscript{82} \textit{The Ascent} was awarded three prizes, including the Golden Bear, at the Berlin Film Festival in 1977, following a string of earlier triumphs for Soviet war films at major festivals. Conversely, Western war films such as David Lean’s \textit{The Bridge over the River Kwai} were widely

\textsuperscript{77} Tumarkin, \textit{The Living and the Dead}, 51.

\textsuperscript{78} Bernhard and Kubik, \textit{Twenty Years after Communism}, 9. They go on to say that “once it [the line between credible and incredible] is crossed, the entrepreneur’s claim to legitimacy in a given context fails or is weakened,” but, of course, there is a percentage factor here too.

\textsuperscript{79} As in the case of German’s \textit{Operation “New Year.”}

\textsuperscript{80} On the acceptance of war mythology by veterans see Catherine Merridale, \textit{Ivan’s War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939–1945} (New York, 2006).

\textsuperscript{81} RGALI, f. 2944, op. 1, d. 769, l. 57.

\textsuperscript{82} TsGAIPD-SPb., f. 1369, op. 5, d. 191, l. 61.
admired in the USSR, and the limited distribution of such titles was due less to lack of goodwill than to difficulty in meeting the licensing fees that Western rights holders charged. 83

Material from Soviet institutional and production history thus suggests that seeing war memory as inevitably adrift from “real experience”—at any rate, apart from the obvious sense in which any war film is a piece of fiction—is unwarranted. Filmmakers were able to achieve national and international recognition in a representational tradition that, despite ideological pressure, allowed considerable diversity. Equally, their experience calls into question the division between “official” and “unofficial” that has so often been underlined in analysis of war cult. Is a state-funded film director an “official” figure? The answer, surely, is yes. At the same time, such a person could easily find him- or herself at variance with other “mnemonic actors,” including not just representatives of Goskino, but also veterans with an alternative view of how war memory should be honored.

The Gorbachev years, and the first years after the USSR’s collapse, witnessed a wholesale assault on war myth. 84 Svetlana Aleksievich’s The Unwomanly Face of War (1985) was a pioneering oral history of female experience at the front; a few years later, the short-lived Moscow magazine Stolitsa (1990–97) published a whole series of anti-heroic articles (drunken troops indifferent to the death of comrades because at least there was more vodka to go round; general disorganization and lack of morale). Yet the remarkably successful restoration of war cult as a form of “nation branding” under Vladimir Putin has called into question the “failure” hypothesis. 85 At the same time, the hybridity of the newly evolved celebration of the war, and the controversies it has provoked, suggests that we should be looking for multifaceted understandings of war cult in the preceding decades as well. 86

In the 2010s, war films remained among the most popular titles on the Russian-language internet. 87 The tropes of Soviet war films endured in new productions, such as Fedor Bondarchuk’s 2013 blockbuster, Stalingrad, which turned a (contextually remarkable) 30 million dollar profit and secured national prizes for some of the production team, albeit not the director or actors. 88 This slick, self-consciously mythologizing work represented a new and shiny, globally oriented patriotism, comparable to such crowd-pleasing and historian-enraging Anglo-American products as Christopher Nolan’s Dunkirk (2017), the highest grossing war film in history. 89 All this suggests the viability, rather than redundancy, of war movies if not war memorials, as reflections both of enduring strategies of political legitimation, and of the self-understanding of two countries whose pride in the triumphs

83 Originally, the U.S. distributors wanted a million dollars for The Bridge over the River Kwai; by 1968, this had dropped to $300,000, still about ten times what was usually paid for a foreign release (RGALI, f. 2944, op. 1, d. 497, l. 16).
84 For a vivid account of this process see Tumarkin, The Living and the Dead.
87 For example, as of March 25, 2019, the first part of Liberation (The Arch of Fire) had over 3.3 million views on YouTube, and the first part of They Fought for the Motherland 3.2 million views. This was lower than top-rated film comedies such as Office Romance (9.6 million), The Irony of Fate (8.2 million), or the melodrama Moscow Doesn’t Believe in Tears (9.2 million), but higher than popular thrillers such as Seventeen Moments of Spring (1.2 million), or The Dead Season (280,000). With over 150,000 views, Checkpoint (the title under which Operation “Happy New Year” was eventually released in 1985) was the most widely watched of German’s Soviet-era films. (Figures include the top-ranked copy on YouTube only. As of March 1, 2024, Mosfilm’s listings give the total ticket sales in the Soviet period—22 million for Liberation, 67 million for Office Romance—rather than “live” numbers for YouTube.)
89 Dunkirk’s release a year after the Brexit referendum vote was a coincidence, but its character as a romantic portrait of military valor and self-sacrifice certainly put it in tune with a dominant national mood—though not everyone was enraptured. For a contrary voice see the review by the historian Hugh Sebag-Montefiore, “Dunkirk is Full of Inaccuracies: And Then There Are Omissions,” Irish Times, August 5, 2017, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/dunkirk-is-full-of-inaccuracies-and-then-there-are-omissions-1.3175704.
of the war years reflects, among other things, anxiety about the lack of achievements on a comparable scale over the decades since. 90

Since February 24, 2022, film censorship norms have transformed patriotism into outright propaganda. Many Brezhnev-era films would fall foul of the March 4, 2022, prohibition on “discrediting the armed forces,” not to mention the ban on open discussion of “war” and “peace.” Working in what, from that point of view, was a less repressive political environment, filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s were able to create complex and ambiguous interpretations of the past. This not only makes their films far superior as records of war experience to most recent films, but also more rewarding as “history” than the publications of some professional historians at the era when they were made. 91

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90 See, on the post-Soviet case, Serguei Oushakine, The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia (Ithaca, 2009).

91 On the defects of official history, particularly of the Soviet past, in the Brezhnev era, see, for example, Iurii A. Poliakov, Nashe nepredskazuemoe proshloе (Moscow, 1995); Kulish, “Sovetskaia istoriografiiia Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny”; Joachim Hösler, Die sowjetische Geschichtswissenschaft, 1953 bis 1991: Studien zur Methodologie und Organisationsgeschichte (Munich, 1995), 185–96; and Nikolai Koposov, Pamiat’ strogogo vremen (Moscow, 2011). It is not just the “unofficial” works of professional or self-nominated historians—as discussed, for example, in Barbara Martin’s Dissident Histories in the Soviet Union: From De-Stalinization to Perestroika (London, 2019)—that represent an alternative, but literature, newspaper, and TV journalism, as well as cinema.