

## analysis

boundaries. The art collective *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, founded in 1984, drew on 'fascist' symbols to create the trappings of a mock 'state.' In 2000, the Polish-American artist Piotr Uklański staged an exhibition entitled 'The Nazis' that featured pictures of famous actors in Nazi uniforms. The Polish actor Daniel Olbrychski – one of the faces on display – entered the gallery with a sabre and slashed some of the pictures in protest, prompting the Polish Minister of Culture to close the exhibition, and Uklański's defenders to accuse Olbrychski and the minister of 'failing to understand.'

The main reason *stiob* and the attendant ambiguities are perpetuated and do not fade into insignificance is that the Russian political system makes it very difficult to express political dissent or social critique in straightforward, politically constructive ways, through party competition and public debate. Not unlike Soviet times, culture must make up for the restrictions on political life. By that very token, standards of evaluation become blurred. Should every utterance about politics be judged by straightforwardly political criteria as a call for action, or do

some statements need to be evaluated as ironic over-identification with an object that is otherwise immune to critique? And who is to decide? As long as the space of sincere political debate remains restricted, subtle ambiguity will continue to be an attractive response, and fascism will remain – among other things – an object of *stiob*. That is a pity, because the preoccupation with *stiob*, its debunking and its effects diverts attention from problems that may or may not have anything to do with 'fascism,' however defined, such as the murders of dark-skinned people in the streets of major Russian cities – problems that are indeed no laughing matter.

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## READING SUGGESTION:

Alexei Yurchak: *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More. The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006.

## THE SWASTIKA AND US: QUESTIONS WITHOUT ANSWERS

Maya Turovskaya

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As one of the people who had the original idea and wrote the script for the documentary film *Obyknovennyi fashizm* (*Ordinary Fascism*) by Mikhail Romm, I spent one and a half years watching Goebbels's film archive with other members of the research group. This required about three and a half thousand hours to view roughly two million metres of film. It is a scar that time does not heal.

In the early 1970s, the director Tatyana Lioznova and Yulian Semenov, an author of spy novels, *Semnadtsat Mgnovenii Vesny* ('Seventeen Moments of Spring'), created the first Soviet TV series about the last days of the Third Reich

starring the Soviet spy Stierlitz. Although serials now flood the post-Soviet small screen, none of their characters is the equal of Stierlitz as played by Vyacheslav Tikhonov. Highbrows might look down on him, as they did on his colleague James Bond, but, like Bond, everyone knows him: he has become a household name.

## STIERLITZ ENTERS WITH BELLS AND WHISTLES

In 2009, *Seventeen Moments* exploded onto the channel 'Rossiya' like a bomb. For the film's 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the film had not only been restored, but also colourised; its critics named it the 'Painted

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Stierlitz'. Three years of work had produced impressive results. Experts from the USA, South Korea and China participated in the project, headed by Lioznova herself. In the best of Soviet traditions, it is the longest colourised film in the world. However, this grand venture provoked polemics, one could almost say scandal, among the Internet community; of course, there is no such thing as bad publicity...

In France, a similar project was undertaken with the recently announced colourisation of the documentary serial about the Second World War *Apocalypse*; this venture is also far more radical than comparable restorations of American film reels. Its creators, Isabella Clarke and Daniel Costelle, not only colourised six hours of old newsreel, but as in the case of the new version of Stierlitz, they also reworked the soundtrack. Only the sections dealing with the Holocaust and the extermination of the civilian population were left untouched in order to remain true to the twentieth century's understanding of the documentary. In contrast, the team behind *Seventeen Moments* did not colourise the black and white newsreel in the film, implying that experimentation in fictional works is less frowned upon.

With this in mind, what was so controversial about the reinvention of Stierlitz? Why do some approve of it as making the film more interesting, dynamic and, above all, contemporary and accessible for the younger generation, while others see the restorers as *comprachicos*, maliciously disfiguring a work of art?

## ON THE OTHER SIDE OF AURA

For cinephiles, it is important that the film was conceived in black and white. It receives its quasi-documentary character partly from its use of extracts from newsreels and partly from the resonant echoes of the expressionist use of 'light-dark' from old German cinema. This combination suggested

the secretive, almost demonic, character of the spy who lives as a stranger among strangers. The painted Stierlitz lost something of his mystique, becoming more natural but also more ordinary. To use Walter Benjamin's term, the film lost its 'aura' through its modernisation. Therefore, it seems that the argument is not a squabble over cinema or television, but rather a clash between the adherents of different paradigms.

For three and a half decades, the omnipresent postmodernism has managed to wear away the prestige of aura. In post-Soviet Moscow, the most radical 'postmodernist' is Mayor Luzhkov, who not only put up new-old churches (for example, the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour) all over the capital, but also allowed the demolition and reconstruction on the same site, using the same design, of the Hotel Moscow in order to create a building more 'genuine' than the original.

In the light of this the painted Stierlitz, a crazy idea thought up by a single TV channel, was a sign of its time: this simplified and bastardised postmodernism has, unopposed, mutated into the often vulgar cultural nihilism of the post-Soviet period that is devoid of any 'culture' whatsoever.

My own position is equally split: on the one hand, as both a viewer and a professional: as an incorrigible documentarist in the style of the twentieth century and a constant hunter of aura, I am against the reduction of quality cinema to banality. I like the painted Stierlitz much less than his black and white twin, despite the fact that the latter retains the longueur and the sentimentalism that characterised Soviet cinema, despite the traces that time has left upon it.

On the other hand, as a professional and participant in *Ordinary Fascism*, I understand Lioznova and realise that M. Romm would have certainly taken the opportunity to bring *Ordinary Fascism* closer to the viewers by colourising it. He knew that films age quickly because cinema reinvents

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itself quickly and that cinema is for the audience, not the other way round. He has always been prepared to experiment, to use new technology and has not been loathe to encroach upon his earlier films, albeit sometimes for no appreciable benefit.

STIERLITZ IN A CHANGING WORLD

Police records testify to the popularity of the first Soviet serial. On the day of its premiere, the crime rate fell to almost zero. Thirty five years later, one can argue that the authors successfully created a national myth based on the Bond model. Both myths are compensatory; like Bond, Stierlitz was a child of the Cold War. Both were patriots, not in the contemporary, aggressive sense, but rather in a down to earth way, without nationalist overtones. Stierlitz was created in conditions in which it was not shameful to be a patriot.

However, any myth is multi-layered. In the 1960s, Bond personified the man of action who had long since disappeared from the big screen. Stierlitz, by contrast, was an intellectual, a hero of doublethink. In the film, this was part of his profession. However, at the time, everyone in the Soviet Union, or almost everyone, understood everything about their society, but like Stierlitz only said what was necessary. In this sense, the situation of the spy was a model for everyday life.

The seductive black uniform did not come from history (it was discontinued as early as 1934) but from cinema, or to be more precise, from the tradition of 'magical fascism'; its continued power is evident in Quentin Tarantino's latest film (*Inglourious Basterds*, 2008), where the splendid Christoph Waltz, in the role of SS *Sturmbannführer* Landa, wears exactly the same uniform.

Apart from Stierlitz, his opponent, the head of the Gestapo, Mueller, played by Leonid Bronevoi, became a favourite of the viewers. Whatever the theoreticians may tell us, the fundamental similarity between the two dictatorships made it pos-

sible for Soviet citizens to adapt their picture of the *Abwehr* and Gestapo to their understanding of state institutions. While Vyacheslav Tikhonov embodied the ideal romantic lead, Bronevoi personified the typical bureaucrat: intelligent, ironic and businesslike. Much of what Soviet cinema wanted to say was loaded onto its description of the strange and foreign; for this reason, the German punitive organs are described as an idealised version of those of the Soviets. The 'image of the enemy' that had been ludicrous in the past now required renewal; the intellectual hero needed a clever opponent, and thus a new 'image of the enemy'. Bronevoi was an extremely convincing theatrical actor.

As is often the case in the realm of popular culture, the mass audience understood the mythological character of Stierlitz better than did intellectuals. Numerous jokes not only provide evidence of Stierlitz's popularity, but also the permanent 'deconstruction' of his character in accordance with the spirit of the times. Times change, and so did the jokes, as did Stierlitz himself.

a)

Soviet jokes still made references to the film itself – its techniques and heroes that shaped Soviet mythology.

*A teacher is getting to know her new class:*

*What's your surname, young man?*

*Stierlitz.*

*Are you making fun of me? Tomorrow, bring your parents to class.*

*The parents turn up. The teacher is indignant:*

*I ask him for his surname and he answers 'Stierlitz'!*

*– He's embarrassed, justified the father, we are the Bormanns.*

The jokes transfer the plot to Soviet everyday life:

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*The Gestapo approached Stierlitz and told him that if he did not pay his electricity bill they would turn off his radio transmitter.*

However, the lion's share of the parodies played upon the unending game of cat and mouse between Stierlitz and the Gestapo, from which neither emerged victorious.

– *Stierlitz, what is your real name?*

*Stierlitz realised he could not get out of this one.*

– *Tikhonov, he answered, and then asked, – and yours?*

– *Bronevoi.*

– *There, you've given yourself away, Mueller!*

b)

As time went on, the Stierlitz jokes were quick to comment on Gorbachev's Perestroika:

*Stierlitz enters the headquarters of the Abwehr and on his door sees the sign 'Resident Agent of the Soviet Secret Service'.*

– *Glasnost, thinks Stierlitz.*

The 'tender' cynicism of the late-Soviet jokes became noticeably more cutting.

*Hitler rings Stalin:*

*Stalin, did your people steal secret documents from me?*

*I'll find out.*

*Stalin rings Stierlitz:*

*Stierlitz, did you steal some secret documents from Hitler's safe?*

*Yes, Comrade Stalin.*

*Then put them back where they belong. The man is worried.*

New phrases and concepts with no connection to the film worked their way into the Stierlitz jokes. *Spring 1945. Stierlitz stands among the ruins of Berlin, weighed down with medals and decorations. A Gestapo agent rides past him on a motorcycle.*

*Metalhead, thinks the Gestapo agent.*

*Rocker, thinks Stierlitz.*

c)

In the post-Soviet period, the name Stierlitz, which came to refer to certain type of person, is now closely bound up with an endless chain of jokes based on untranslatable puns on contemporary slang. The omnipresent topics of sex and drugs, placed under taboo in the Soviet period, do not have

## SEVENTEEN MOMENTS OF SPRING

(SEMNAZAT MGNOVENIJ VESNY, 1973)

Berlin, February 1945: the Soviet agent Isayev works in the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* as SS *Standartenfuhrer* Max von Stierlitz, an NSDAP member from before 1930. He has the task of finding out whether a separate peace between Nazi Germany and the Western Allies is under negotiation in order to prevent a rift in the great alliance. Once Stierlitz is certain that the initiative for a separate peace has come from Himmler, he gets into contact with Martin Bormann in order to play off the party big-wigs against each other. However, Stierlitz soon has problems himself with Mueller, the head of the Gestapo; missions in which Stierlitz has been involved have failed too often. A trap is set for him...

As a result of the fiasco of the German military policy, the leading Nazis become embroiled in intrigue and attempt to save themselves. At the end, Stierlitz is able to foil the negotiations between Himmler and the Allies. The serialised spy film is partially based on real facts and events.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seventeen\\_Moments\\_of\\_Spring](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seventeen_Moments_of_Spring)

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anything to do with the screen hero. This is a radical deconstruction. The anti-Stierlitz is a character of our modern times who has gone from cynicism to nihilism.

The film *Hitler Caput!* seems to be connected to this (2008, dir. M. Vaisberg). Nominally, it is a direct parody of Stierlitz (British students also parody Bond in a similar way). The film contains humorous remarks and gags, a sexy radio operator and, of course, the stylish black uniforms. Indeed, the film parodies everything and everyone, be it Swan Lake<sup>1</sup> during the 1991 putsch, Chaplin's caricature of Hitler or contemporary Moscow's parties and nightclubs. It is a wild shot from the hip that does not hit a single target, including Stierlitz; it is instead trying to cash in on his great name. The film quickly becomes tiresome as its low intellectual level grates: compare this to Romm's magnificent parody in *Ordinary Fascism* of Hitler played by Hitler himself in the form of newsreels of the dictator.

## CAMOUFLAGE IS THE COLOUR OF OUR TIME

Contemporary viewers of *Ordinary Fascism* ask me, 'Why did Romm portray the *Fuehrer* as a caricature?'. I answer that we did not want to demonise Nazism. However, it was also because the seductive witchcraft of 'magical fascism' did not work on us. In the light of our own imperial experience, we saw fascism as 'ordinary' even when it wore its dress uniform.

In 1989, almost a quarter of a century later, when I organised a retrospective of 'Cinema from the Totalitarian Epoch' at the Moscow International Film Festival, I was struck by how Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda film *The Triumph of the Will* inspired exaltation among the large audience of filmmakers. Remnants? Of what? An imperialist mentality? (The Soviet Union had not yet

<sup>1</sup> i.e. the Soviet habit of showing classical music and ballet during national crises instead of the news.

collapsed.) Three years later, at Duke University, I found consolation in the fact that Leni Riefenstahl's pompous pathos only provoked laughter and boredom among the American PhD students present. However, on 21 June 2001, on the eve of the anniversary of the German invasion of the Soviet Union, my colleagues welcomed Riefenstahl herself with a standing ovation at the cinema of the Association of Filmmakers in St. Petersburg. On the site of the once besieged Leningrad, they rewarded her 'for her contribution' with a festival prize with the indicative name 'A Message for Mankind' – genuine absurdity. Is this a secret yearning, expressed tangentially, for Stalinism? Is it the alibi of 'beauty' which all dictatorships use? Is this a declaration by the elite that fascism is acceptable?

Stierlitz returned to the screen after the cinematic equivalent of plastic surgery: a little makeup and a tightened rhythm, less sentimentality and better sound. Nevertheless, it has kept the same magnificent cast, the same unmistakable music by Mikael Tariverdiev; though the style is somewhat more banal, the director's particular touch has not been lost. How important will the film be in the landscape of contemporary Russian culture? Will it remind us that, after all, we fought the Nazis? Does Russia's age-old suspicion of the West continue to resonate? Or, similar to his British colleague, who has not left the TV screens over the last half century, has he left his historical context and become a myth, 'carrying out the duties' of the hero of the unheroic post-Soviet society? Or is it a simple reminder about how good a serial can be?

Either way, this has nothing to do with the common, i.e. everyday and practical, fascism of skinheads. They do not need anything from the arsenal of *Seventeen Moments of Spring*, not even the notorious black costumes. The times have changed their colour and the new generation of self-proclaimed Aryans wear camouflage uniforms and

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heavy commando boots; their emblems originated in very different, irreconcilable contexts. However, why do ‘patriots’ from Germany, Russia and the Ukraine want to be Aryans?

They celebrate the *Führer’s* birthday, but do those sons and grandsons of the men who fought the Nazis know that Hitler called the Slavs a race of slaves, not as a slip of the tongue, and from the outset aimed to conquer their land to create *Lebensraum*? Or is this the psychology of slaves in action?

A contemporary of the Great Fatherland War, the famous

scriptwriter Eduard Volodarskii, created an idiosyncratic time machine for the film *My iz budushchego* (‘Back in Time’; dir. Andrey Maliukov). Four illicit treasure hunters dig up the battlefields of the war in search of military artefacts. They find Red Army identity papers which display their own photographs. Miraculously, they find themselves in the middle of a fierce battle in 1942. They are all different: there is a skinhead, tattooed with swastikas; however, put a forage cap on his head and you cannot tell him apart from a private of the Great Fatherland War. Unfortunately, the film does not do justice to the message in the script: the necessity of reminding today’s youth who they are and where they came from.

When Yurii Khanyutin and I first turned to Romm with the script for *Ordinary Fascism*, he said: ‘What? Do you want to make a film for the

Moscow filmmakers? Films about Nazism must be seen by millions, otherwise there’s no point starting’. I do not think that cinema can re-educate someone, but it can start a trend in society, as pop-



‘Don’t worry, Stierlitz! In 2009 coloured people are in charge everywhere.’ (more jokes at [http://www.netlore.ru/17\\_mgnoveniy](http://www.netlore.ru/17_mgnoveniy))

ular culture sometimes does. Maybe someone might try to scrape off the tattooed swastika, as in the case of the skinhead in Volodarskii’s film. For this reason, despite all the costs, I am glad that Stierlitz has returned, not in a bland manner, but ‘with bells and whistles’, with scandal and discussion, and with the problematic black swastika on a red armband of the

anachronistic black uniform. It has returned as popular cinema of an almost forgotten quality and as a stand-in for the hero for an unheroic time...

*From the Russian by Christopher Gilley*

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Maya Turovskaya (born 1924) is a film, theatre and media critic, who with Yuri Khanyutin came up with the idea behind and scripted the film *Ordinary Fascism*, 1965, directed by Mikhail Romm. She worked at the Institute for the History and Theory of Film, participated in the exhibition *Berlin-Moscow/Moscow-Berlin 1900–1950* (1996) and was a member of the jury of the Berlin Film Festival in 1998. She now lives in Moscow and Munich and writes on cultural topics for a number of newspapers and journals.