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SOVIET FILMS OF THE 1970S AND EARLY 1980S

CONFORMITY AND NON-CONFORMITY AMIDST STAGNATION DECAY

Edited by
Marina Rojavin and Tim Harte

ROUTLEDGE

Soviet Films of the 1970s and Early 1980s

This book explores a new character archetype that permeated Soviet film during what became known as the era of Stagnation, a stark period of loneliness, disappointment, and individual despair. This new type of character was neither negative nor positive, but nevertheless systematically undermined Soviet norms of behavior, hairstyle, dress, lifestyle, and perspective, in stark contrast to Socialist Realism's traditional, positive hero who fought for Soviet values and who vanquished the enemies of socialism. The book discusses a wide range of films from the period, showing how the new antiheroic archetype of Stagnation resonated through a multitude of characters, mostly male, and vividly reflected the realities of Soviet life. The book thereby provides great insight into the lives, outlook, and psychology of citizens in the late Soviet period.

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Tim Harte, Professor of Russian at Bryn Mawr College, USA, specializes in 20th-century Russian literature, film, and culture.

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Oleg Dal' as Ivan Laevsky in Iosif Kheifits's *A Bad Good Man* (1973).
Courtesy of Lenfilm.

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Introduction

This volume explores the character archetype of the antihero that prevailed in Soviet cinema throughout the 1970s and early 1980s or what became known as the era of Stagnation. A stark period of loneliness, disappointment, and individual despair amidst Brezhnevian absurdity, Soviet Stagnation gave rise to a new sort of film character who was neither negative nor positive and who systematically undermined socialist norms of behavior, appearance, lifestyle, and perspective. This character archetype, furthermore, embodied a marked shift in Soviet film from socialist realism's traditional, positive hero fighting for Soviet values while effectively vanquishing socialism's enemies. It also signaled a departure from the relatively ambivalent protagonists of the Khrushchevian Thaw who had begun to question the meaning of life in the Soviet Union but had not given up on Soviet values. What dominated in Soviet cinema—and made-for-television films—of the Brezhnev era was the antihero, a character unable to accomplish anything heroic, let alone fight for the Soviet state. Rather, the new, transgressive antihero of this period struggled to function in the Soviet system, even as most Soviet citizens (including those depicted in the era's films through supporting characters) functioned relatively well by conforming to Soviet norms. The non-conformist antihero became the predominant archetype, the so-called hero of that time in a wide variety of Soviet films discussed and analyzed here in *Soviet Films of the 1970s and Early 1980s: Conformity and Non-Conformity amidst Decay*.

From revolutionary and socialist realist to non-conformist

The antihero, of course, was not unique to Soviet cinema of the 1970s and early 1980s. In Western post–World War II culture the modern antihero predominated, for as Lilian Furst and James Wilson have written vis-à-vis the diminution of the heroic in Western literature, "After Hitler and Stalin we are suspicious of any larger-than-life figure with a panacea for all that ails us" (vi). Western counterculture of the 1960s, in particular, elevated the antihero. This broadly configured antihero may have arrived relatively late in the Soviet Union, yet when he did arrive, he resonated in emphatic, unique ways on screen, given the well-established role of the larger-than-life Soviet hero in socialist-realist film culture. For decades, Soviet audiences had admired and emulated this positive screen character. The

Soviet hero lived within the space of official ideological discourse, a discourse full of clarity and purpose, and he did not have his own individual plotline. As Evgeny Margolit explains, "The main plot of Soviet film was given to its main hero—the positive hero, otherwise he would not have been the main hero." The central protagonist of Soviet cinema had been placed on a solid ideological pedestal that proved difficult to topple.

The roots of the Soviet film hero and his antiheroic counterpart of the Stagnation period extend back to the 1920s. The most celebrated Soviet films of the 1920s—Sergei Eisenstein's *Strike* (*Stachka* 1924) and *Battleship Potemkin* (*Bronenosets Potemkin* 1925), Vsevolod Pudovkin's *Mother* (*Mat'* 1926), and Aleksandr Dovzhenko's *Earth* (*Zemlia* 1930), among others—changed the cinematic landscape not only through their editing and cinematography but also through their revolutionary heroes. In so many of these celebrated films, an indignant, rebellious hero leads his respective uprising yet dies a martyr. Although reflective of the new nation's experimental cinematic trends, such films simultaneously set the baseline for how a Soviet screen hero might function (irrespective of the inevitable death). Although 1920s Soviet cinema placed an emphasis on the masses and revolutionary momentum, they also elevated this positive hero, who leads the people to a better future. From that point on, cinematic art became largely sociopolitical, for as Neya Zorkaya explains, "socially-oriented emotion took over the Soviet screen," as "the line between social and individual sentiment was eliminated" (32, 39). Eisenstein's martyred sailor, Vakulinchuk (Aleksandr Antonov), Pudovkin's striking son (Nikolai Batalov), and Dovzhenko's revolutionary-peasant Vasyl' (Semion Svashenko) became prototypes for the subsequent socialist-realist heroes in films of the 1930s and onwards.

Classical portraits of those positive socialist-realist heroes and heroines so central to Soviet cinema came predominantly from films of the 1930s, when a variety of prominent Soviet themes emerged. Heroic patriotism, most significantly, resonates in two of the era's most famous films, Sergei and Georgi Vasilyev's *Chapaev* (1934) and Sergei Eisenstein's *Aleksandr Nevskii* (1938), while the rapid growth of the hero's revolutionary conscience lies at the heart of Iosif Kheifits and Aleksandr Zarkhi's *Baltic Deputy* (*Deputat Baltiki* 1937) as well as Grigory Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg's "Maxim Trilogy" (*The Youth of Maxim* [*Yunost' Maksima* 1935], *The Return of Maxim* [*Vozvrashchenie Maksima* 1937], and *The Vyborg Side* [*Vyborgskaia storona* 1939]). In Grigori Aleksandrov's *Circus* (*Tsyrk* 1936), meanwhile, internationalism and love for the Soviet state prevail. Throughout this relatively early period of Stalinism, courage and a faith in Soviet ideals would underscore the action in numerous films, including Sergei Gerasimov's *Seven Brave Men* (*Semero smelykh* 1936) and Fridrikh Ermler's *A Great Citizen* (*Velikii grazhdanin* 1938–1939). Things, however, would change with the onset of World War II and then throughout the 1940s, when a slew of new film work emphasized in sincere yet unabashedly propagandistic ways love for the motherland, friendship, and the heroic sacrifice of the Soviet people. Ermler's *She Defended the Motherland* (*Ona zashchishchaet Rodinu* 1943), Leonid Lukov's *Two Soldiers* (*Dva boitsa* 1943), Aleksandr Stolper and Boris Ivanov's *Wait for*

Me (*Zhdi menia* 1943), and Ivan Pyr'ev's *At Six p.m. after the War* (*V 6 vechera posle voiny* 1944), to give four prominent examples, all feature socialist-realist heroes and heroines who fight for their country and defend the nation's communist principles, all the while demonstrating optimistic confidence in the ruling party and its leaders. Pyr'ev's *Cossacks from the Kuban* (*Kubanskie kazaki* 1950) would subsequently serve as the apotheosis of the Stalinist fantasy, portraying a fictitiously happy, satisfying life and an array of socialist-realist characters who affirmed this glossy Soviet lifestyle. Also contributing to the cinematic portrait of the socialist-realist hero of High Stalinism was Mikhail Romm's *Secret Mission* (*Sekretnaia missiia* 1950), which portrays the exemplary heroism of Soviet secret agents defending Soviet principles and values amidst a secret alliance between America and Nazi Germany.

In the 1950s, the death of Stalin, his subsequent denunciation, and the relatively brief thaw under Nikita Khrushchev fundamentally altered the course of the nation's film industry. Even though Ermler's *Unfinished Story* (*Neokonchennaia povest'* 1955) reflects socialist-realist ideals, the film takes the form of a melodrama (a genre that flourished in pre-Revolutionary cinema but due to its bourgeois veneer used only sparingly in the 1920s and then under Stalin) that shows genuine human interaction between characters whose personae were still based on socialist-realist archetypes. Another melodrama, Mikhail Kalatozov's celebrated *The Cranes Are Flying* (*Letiat zhuravli* 1957), along with other thaw-era films such as Iurii Egorov's *Volunteers* (*Dobrovol'tsy* 1958), and Kheifits's *My Dear Man* (*Dorogoi moi chelovek* 1958), featured novel themes while exploring the private lives and relationships of typical socialist-realist heroes. Although Grigorii Chukhrai's *Ballad of a Soldier* (*Ballada o soldate* 1959) deals with the untouchable, sacred topic of war, it too shows authentic human emotions without lionizing Stalin (or Lenin) at the expense of character development. On the other hand, the voiceover in the finale of Chukhrai's film does not allow one to forget the film's portentous socialist-realist approach to its protagonist, a young man "who could have become a wonderful citizen, he could have built or decorated the earth with gardens, but he was and will forever remain in our memory a soldier, a Russian soldier." As *Ballad of a Soldier* and other thaw-era films attest, the positive Stalinist hero had considerable staying power in post-Stalin Soviet cinema.

All the same, the Khrushchev thaw established a new era for the Soviet hero on screen from which there was no way back in the 1960s. Even though many films still presented a socialist-realist realm via a variety of genres, thus preserving the tried-and-true socialist-realist tropes, a number of filmmakers succeeded in presenting their heroes and heroines in overtly ambiguous ways. Some, for instance, promoted Soviet principles and a genuine belief in the nation's radiant, communist future yet simultaneously posed uneasy existential questions about life, war, and personal happiness, as one finds in Romm's *Nine Days of One Year* (*Deviat' dnei odnogo goda* 1961) and Marlen Khutsiev's *I Am Twenty* or *Ilyich's Gate* (*Mne 20 let*/*Zastava Il'icha* 1962–1965). Aleksei Sakharov's *Colleagues* (*Kollegi* 1962) and Georgii Danelia's *I Walk the Streets of Moscow* (*Ia shagaiu po Moskve* 1964) moved even further from the tenets of socialist realism by accentuating

friendship and personal relationships through a romantic view of human nature, notwithstanding the fact that both films' central characters are presented as typical Soviet citizens. Other films signaled a large, unconventional step away from the socialist-realist perspective on World War II and its heroes, most notably Andrei Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood* (*Ivanovo detstvo* 1962), Vladimir Chebotarev's *Wild Honey* (*Dikii miod* 1966), and Vladimir Motyl's *Zhenia, Zhenechka and Katiusha* (*Zhenia, Zhenechka i katiusha* 1967). In these films, heroes and heroines defend common human values, yet at the same time, they have their own personal priorities and dreams.

Among the most pivotal films of the mid-1960s would have to be the popular, El'dar Riazanov-directed comedy *Beware of the Car* (*Beregis' avtomobilia* 1966). The protagonist (played by the celebrated Soviet actor Innokentii Smoktunovskii), a Soviet-era Robin Hood, spends his time actively resisting falsehoods, greed, bureaucracy, and mediocrity. The film does not cast doubt on the Soviet system and its broadly established values, but it does highlight certain flaws in Soviet society. Most importantly, the film shows that an average person can resist the status quo. The film's uniqueness, moreover, is accentuated by the fact that it stars Smoktunovskii as an insurance agent who, on the side, plays Hamlet in a community theatre, and this was just two years after Smoktunovskii himself had starred in Grigorii Kozintsev's celebrated film version of *Hamlet* (1964). Naturally, in playing Hamlet, the insurance agent in *Beware of the Car* poses existential questions, on stage at least, while the extra-diegetic blending of actor and his character blurs the lines between reality and screen and thus creates the distinct impression that the main protagonist questions things—about Soviet life—once seemed indisputable.

There was indeed something rotten in the Soviet state. The era of the Brezhnev stagnation commenced in 1964, when life in the Soviet Union began to prove a stifling miasma from which many found no way forward. That, however, did not prevent filmmakers from creating compelling art, for a number of masterpieces appeared in the mid-1960s. A true turning point in Soviet cinema came with *Andrei Rublev* (1966), Tarkovsky's epic vision of medieval Russia, Khutsiev's *July Rain* (*Iiul'skii dozhd'* 1966), Larisa Shepitko's *Wings* (*Kryl'ia* 1966), and Kira Muratova's *Brief Encounters* (*Korotkie vstrechi* 1967), all of which provided innovative cinematic aesthetics along with nonlinear narrative, unusual mise-en-scène, long shots, groundbreaking sound editing, new types of characters, and a wide range of unfamiliar topics. With *Andrei Rublev*, Tarkovsky refrained from glorifying Russia's distant past and fabled leaders and instead presented history as a panorama of enduring violence, all the while foregrounding the role of the artist in society. At the same time, *July Rain, Wings,* and *Brief Encounters* all featured unhappy heroines (Lena [Evgeniia Uralova], Nadezhda Petrukhina [Maya Bulgakova], and Valentina [Kira Muratova], respectively) who manage to concentrate on their own personal complexities while simultaneously assuming an active role in Soviet society. These female characters proved heroic in groundbreaking ways, whereas their male counterparts conspicuously diverged from the traditional, positive hero of earlier Soviet cinema. Cynicism, egotism, arrogance,

and reserved coolness distinguish, for instance, the central male character of *July Rain* (Volodia [Aleksandr Beliavskii]) from the socialist-realist heroes of old. Likewise, the main character in *Brief Encounters*—Maksim (Vladimir Vysotsky)—looks neither heroic nor strong in spite of his personal charisma and charm (and the fact that he was played by Vysotsky, such an iconic figure of the 1960s and 1970s).

Like *July Rain* and *Brief Encounters*, several Soviet films from 1970 precipitated the ascendance of the antihero. Andrei Konchalovskii's *Uncle Vania* (*Diadia Vania* 1970), Pyotr Todorovsky's *A City Romance* (*Gorodskoi romans* 1970), and Ottar Iosseliani's *Once Upon a Time There Was a Singing Blackbird* (*Zhil pevchii drozd* 1970), all feature disillusioned protagonists: Uncle Vania (Smoktunovskii) is chronically bored and suffering from a quite topical bout of ennui; Todorovsky's Zhenia (Evgenii Kindinov) emerges as a disappointed egoist who does not value or respect other people's emotions and cannot find a niche for himself in Soviet society; and Giia (Gela Kandelaki), a lighthearted musician in Iosseliani's film, could be making fine music but instead spends all his time running about, both literally and figuratively, and always shows up late to things. As Peter Rollberg puts it, *Once Upon a Time There Was a Singing Blackbird* "presents […] a critique of modern urban lifestyle and the inability of the city dwellers to concentrate on anything meaningful" (291). Such a description pertains to the country as a whole at that time and to so many of its citizens, who felt frustrated by the stagnating Soviet system, did nothing to change their lives, and lived with that acquiescence.

When it comes to the antihero of 1970s and early 1980s cinema, it is hard getting around the fact that all of these ambiguous film characters in question were men and not women. The male antihero indeed receives the bulk of our attention in this volume, for it was the Soviet woman who took over the role of the positive hero in the Brezhnev era, as gender politics shifted at the time. "It was no accident," well-known Soviet playwright Natalia Riazantseva has asserted, "that the woman became the main heroine of the seventies." In Soviet films of the 1970s, the female protagonist tends to lead an active life and to work for the good of her family, children, and, on occasion, herself. So many Soviet women take charge on screen: Masha (Maria Solomina) in Todorovsky's *City Romance* (*Gorodskoi romans* 1970), Pasha (Inna Churikova) in Gleb Panfilov's *The Debut* (*Nachalo* 1970), Tatiana Vlasenkova (Liudmila Chursina) in Vladimir Fetin's *Open Book* (*Otkrytaia kniga* 1973), Katia (Nataliia Popova) in Vadim Gauzner's *Did You Call for a Doctor?* (*Vracha vyzyvali?* 1974), Elizaveta Andreevna Uvarova (Churikova) in Gleb Panfilov's *I Wish to Speak* (*Proshu slova* 1976), Katia (Vera Alentova) in Vladimir Men'shov's *Moscow Doesn't Believe in Tears* (*Moskva slezam ne verit* 1979), the list goes on … Even in Tarkovsky's loosely autobiographical *The Mirror* (*Zerkalo* 1975), the mother and wife (both played by Margarita Terekhova) predominate like no male character in the film. All of these Soviet heroines assume on screen an active role and quickly emerge as strong women making their mark on Soviet society, even in difficult and controversial situations.