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WEAPONIZING THE PAST: THE ROLE OF HISTORICAL BIOPICS IN THE STALINIST CULTURE WAR (1939–1941)

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Abstract
This article investigates how Soviet historical biopics produced between 1939 and 1941 functioned as instruments in Stalin's culture war – a campaign to reshape public consciousness and justify Soviet policies during the initial phase of the Second World War. Through close analysis of films *Minin and Pozharsky* and *Bohdan Khmelnytskyi*, the study demonstrates how Stalinist cinema mobilized historical myth to legitimize aggression against neighboring states and to justify the new Soviet-German alliance. By reviving imperial narratives of an "eternal struggle" between the virtuous, united East Slavic peoples and the oppressive, Western-aligned Polish enemy, filmmakers transformed history into a weapon of ideological warfare. The resulting synthesis of nationalist and Marxist rhetoric exemplifies how the Stalinist regime turned culture itself into a political front.
Keywords: cinema; propaganda film; Stalinist historiosophy; Soviet Union; Poland; Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact; *Minin and Pozharsky*; *Bohdan Khmelnytskyi*
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Introduction: Soviet Film as an Imperial Instrument

A quarter of a century ago, when Ewa Thompson put forward the postulate of applying Edward Said's postcolonial method to the study of the imperial relationship between the hegemonic power (Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union) and the smaller nations of Eastern Europe (as well as Central Asia and Siberia),[1] hers was, at the time, the solitary voice of a pioneer challenging the prevailing research perspective reproduced for generations by Russian-speaking and Anglophone Russicists. This traditional perspective held that emblematic Russian authors, such as Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky, were creators of literary masterpieces, luminaries of the human soul, and insightful observers of social processes – a view that long dominated the reception of their work. A postcolonial (or post-dependence) lens, however, while in no way diminishing their artistic greatness, also reveals in these works a reflection of imperial ideology, and in their creators its proponents. In recent years, this type of perspective has become increasingly common in the humanities of post-communist countries[2] – a development undoubtedly influenced by ongoing geopolitical changes. As in the case of postcolonial studies dealing with territories (post-)dependent on Western European empires, the main research objective remains the analysis of the relationship between the dominant (self-appointed) center and the peripheries forced into submission, achieved both through a critical reading of the dominant discourse and through the reconstruction of the strategies by which emancipatory tendencies are expressed.[3]

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1 Ewa M. Thompson, *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism* (Westport, London: Greenwood Press, 2000).

2 Among various studies, see Vitaly Chernetsky, "Postcolonialism, Russia and Ukraine," *ULBANDUS, The Slavic Review of Columbia University*, no. 7 (2003): 32–62; Janusz Korek, ed., *From Sovietology to Postcoloniality: Poland and Ukraine from a Postcolonial Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), the first English-language volume jointly produced by Polish and Ukrainian historians, political scientists, and cultural scholars exploring postcolonial perspectives on the region. Related reflections by Maria Janion, Ryszard Nycz, Aleksander Fiut, and Włodzimierz Bolecki were published in a 2014 English-language special issue of *Secondary Texts. Postcolonial or Postdependence Studies?* no. 1 (2014). More recent contributions in literary studies include works by the Ukrainian scholar Vira Ageyeva (*Behind the Scenes of the Empire: Essays on Cultural Relationships between Ukraine and Russia* [Hannover: Ibidem, 2025]) and the Estonian scholar Epp Annus (*Soviet Postcolonial Studies. A View from the Western Borderlands* [London, New York: Routledge, 2019]; *Coloniality, Nationality, Modernity. A Postcolonial View on Baltic Cultures under Soviet Rule* [London, New York: Routledge, 2020]).

3 The call to revise thinking about Russia and the Soviet Union as structures expressing cultural imperialism is articulated explicitly in the records of a 2005 discussion at the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Vitaly

A dynamic similar to the one observed in literary and culture studies unfolds within the historiography of Soviet and Russian cinema. In classical accounts – whether Russian-language works produced before and after the collapse of the USSR,[4] or their Anglophone counterparts[5] – foundational figures such as Sergei Eisenstein and Vsevolod Pudovkin are regarded first and foremost as great artists, auteurs whose films represent masterpieces of cinematic art. Their entanglement with the regime and its ideology, while indisputable, is typically treated as a matter of secondary importance – a contextual dimension rather than a core semantic component of their work. In contrast, for film scholars seeking to decolonize the discourse, the task of deconstructing and exposing successive layers of ideological content remains paramount.[6] In Soviet cinema, particularly during the period of the state's most stringent control over cultural production – roughly from the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s – the very distinction between auteur cinema and regime cinema loses its *raison d'être*. Every cultural production of that era was, by definition, propaganda; even the most canonical works of cinematic art were fundamentally propaganda films (*Aleksandr Nevskii*,

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Chernetsky, Nancy Condee, and Harsha Ram, "Are We Postcolonial? Post-Soviet Space," *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (2006): 828–835.

4 See Rostislav Yurenev, *Kratkaia istoriia sovetskogo kino* (Moskva: Soiuz kinematografistov SSSR, Biuro propagandy sovetskogo kinoiskusstva, 1979); Neia Zorkaia, *Istoriia sovetskogo kino* (St. Petersburg: Aleteiia, 2005); Neia Zorkaia, *Istoriia otechestvennogo kino. XX vek* (Moskva: Belyi gorod, 2014), published posthumously.

5 See Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983); Herbert Marshall, *Masters of the Soviet Cinema. Crippled Creative Biographies* (London, New York: Routledge, 1983).

6 One of the early examples of such a critical approach is Nancy Condee, *The Imperial Trace: Recent Russian Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Condee examines contemporary Russian film through the lens of enduring imperial preoccupations. In recent years, postcolonial discourses on Soviet film have also intersected with identity and ecocritical discourses, as exemplified by the tellingly titled works of Caroline Damien, *A Siberian History of Soviet Film. Manufacturing Visions of the Indigenous Peoples of the North* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2024), or Lukas Brasiskis and Masha Shpolberg, eds., *Cinema and the Environment in Eastern Europe: From Communism to Capitalism* (New York: Berghahn, 2024), doi: 10.3167/9781805391050. Moreover, a somewhat akin scholarly prism – i.e., one that approaches the Soviet Union as a colonial empire and its culture as a machinery for reproducing the ideological justifications of imperial practices – has gained increasing traction in the publications from both the former Eastern Bloc and the Anglosphere over the past two decades. For example, Joanna Wojnicka's studies (*Dzieci XX Zjazdu. Film w kulturze sowieckiej lat 1956–1968* [Kraków: Universitas, 2012]; *Prorocy, kapłani, rewolucjoniści. Szkice z historii kina rosyjskiego* [Kraków: Universitas, 2019]) and Denise Youngblood's *Russian War Films: On the Cinema Front, 1914–2005* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2024), doi: 10.1353/book.119502, share with postcolonial scholarship a sensitivity to imperial dynamics, even though they do not operate within the postcolonial paradigm as such.

dir. Sergei Eisenstein, 1938, being a prime example). This in no way diminishes the purely cinematic genius of their creators.

Particularly valuable material for an analysis in the spirit of postcolonial theory may be found in the body of films produced in the Soviet Union between 1939 and 1941, i.e, the period of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact's validity. This pact, signed on August 23, 1939 by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, was a non-aggression agreement that included a secret protocol dividing Eastern Europe between the two powers. Immediately following the pact's signing, Germany launched an attack on western Poland (September 1), while the Soviet Union invaded its eastern territories on September 17, and subsequently annexed them. Furthermore, the USSR occupied the Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia) and Bessarabia. In the north, after Finland rejected similar demands, the USSR waged the Winter War (1939–1940), annexing Finnish territory along the Karelian Isthmus. The Nazi-Soviet pact was broken by the Third Reich as it launched the offensive against the USSR on 1941, June 22.[7]

In retrospect, the discussed period in Soviet film culture may seem as a mere prelude to the intensification of propaganda efforts in 1941–1945. Yet, the significance of Soviet cinema in this brief, twenty-two-month span should not be underestimated. It provides valuable material for studying the relationship between film art and totalitarian ideology, exemplifying the rhetoric that rationalized and justified Soviet imperial aggression. Through a carefully constructed network of distortions, manipulations, and selective use of historical facts, Stalinist mass media furnished the public with persuasive arguments for the legitimacy, justice, and even historical necessity of its unprovoked military assaults on neighboring states. In doing so, the propaganda apparatus reused some of the culture-war rhetoric that had been successfully employed in Tsarist times.

In 1939–1941, the imperatives of state propaganda required the construction of a coherent narrative to justify decisions that were difficult to defend – not only under international law and basic ethical norms but also within the USSR's own political doctrine, which had to be rapidly revised. One of the fundamental axioms of Soviet thought was the conviction that objective, scientific truth could only be comprehended through the dialectical method which, to use an essayistic metaphor, functioned as a recipe for combining black with white

[7] See Dominik Zimmermann, "Molotov Ribbentrop Pact," *Max Planck Encyclopedia of Public International Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), https://opil.ouplaw.com/display/10.1093/law:epil/9780199231690/law-9780199231690-e1925.

so that an entirely new quality emerged, one that was by no means simply gray. This axiom became a potent ideological tool, capable of justifying any political move, even one that contradicted the very essence of the regime's previously declared ideological line. The utilitarian function of dialectical materialism was thus indispensable, facilitating the creation of a political mythology capable of reconciling contradictions and providing persuasive explanations for abrupt, 180-degree policy reversals.[8]

Regardless of how effective the dialectical method was in reconciling opposites, Soviet newspaper readers and film audiences could hardly have avoided a sense of cognitive dissonance in the latter half of 1939. According to Ewa Thompson's analysis of the pre-August 1939 media, Soviet print outlets provided no indication of the drastic geostrategic shift that would soon occur.[9] This insight can be extended to cinema: until very recently, the Third Reich had been portrayed as the ultimate enemy – a criminal state posing an existential threat to the USSR and representing the terminal stage of capitalism. This image was reinforced by films such as *Professor Mamlock* (*Professor Mamlok*, dir. Herbert Rappaport, Adolf Minkin, 1938), *Peat-Bog Soldiers* (*Bolotnye soldaty*, dir. Aleksandr Macheret, 1938), *The Oppenheim Family* (*Sem'ia Oppengeim*, dir. Grigori Roshal, 1939), and *Squadron No. 5* (*Eskadril'ia No. 5*, dir. Abram Room, 1939).

Naturally, any impulse an individual might have had to voice concerns over this cognitive dissonance was tempered by the awareness of consequences that could follow from questioning the newly adopted political line. Nonetheless, the propaganda apparatus had to mitigate this dissonance by crafting and promoting a narrative that justified both territorial aggression against neighboring states and an alliance with the regime's former "enemy number one." The aim of this article is to investigate this narrative's foundations in Stalinist historiosophy and to reconstruct the narrative itself.

One of the key factors shaping Soviet film production of 1939–1941 was Joseph Stalin's growing interest in cinema. The dictator, known for his personal interventions in the film industry, followed the development of major productions during this period with greater attention than ever before, directly influencing the decision-making process at every stage.[10] He was clearly aware

[8] See Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism. The Breakdown*, transl. P. S. Falla (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 103–105.

[9] Ewa M. Thompson, "Nationalist Propaganda in the Soviet Russian Press, 1939–1941," *Slavic Review* 50, no. 2 (1991): 388, doi:10.1017/S0037677900104930.

[10] Richard Taylor, "Red stars, positive heroes and personality cults," in *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema*, ed. Richard Taylor and Derek Spring (London: Routledge, 1993), 70.

of how crucial controlling the political narrative had become. The Soviet films of this period complement one another, together forming a coherent – at least from the standpoint of the dialectical method – and internally consistent semantic construction encompassing the various dimensions of this wide-ranging narrative.

During this period, a number of films were produced that directly or indirectly addressed the supposed necessity of Red Army intervention in the territories targeted by Soviet aggression. The Winter War with Finland became a particularly prominent theme, as evidenced by the feature films *Behind Enemy Lines* (*V tylu vraga*, dir. Yevgeny Schneider, 1941) and *Frontline Friends* (*Frontovye podrugi*, dir. Viktor Eisymont, 1941), as well as the documentary *The Mannerheim Line* (*Liniia Mannergeima*, dirs. Vasily Belyaev, Leonid Varlamov, Nikolai Komarevtsev, Valery Solvtsov, 1940). Cinema also depicted the annexation of the Baltic states, as in *Estonian Land* (*Estonskaia zemlia*, dir. Vasily Belyaev, 1941), and the occupation of territories belonging to Romania (*Bukovina – Ukrainian Land* / *Bukovina – zemlia ukrainskaia*, dir. Oleksandr Dovzhenko, 1940).

The central theme of Soviet propaganda cinema of this era, however, was the justification of the annexation of the eastern territories of the Second Polish Republic (1918–1939) – referred to in Soviet discourse as the liberation of Western Ukraine and Western Belarus. Soviet films responding to the propaganda needs after September 17, 1939, can be divided into three main categories according to the historical periods in which their narratives are set. The first one includes films depicting Polish-Russian conflict and the triangular relations among Russians, Ukrainians, and Poles in the epochs preceding the October Revolution. The most important examples are *Minin and Pozharsky* (*Minin i Pozharskii*, dir. Vsevolod Pudovkin, 1939) and *Bohdan Khmelnytskyi* (*Bogdan Khmel'nitskii*, dir. Ihor Savchenko, 1941) – historical epics characteristic of Stalinist cinema, focused on prominent military and political leaders. The second group is formed by films dealing with the Polish-Bolshevik War of 1919–1921, belonging to the specifically Soviet genre of revolutionary epic. Its most notable representative is *Shchors* (dir. Oleksandr Dovzhenko, 1939), alongside *Horsemen* (*Vsadniki*, dir. Ihor Savchenko, 1939) and *The First Cavalry Army or Breakthrough of the Polish Front in 1920* (*Pervaia konnaia, Proryv Pol'skogo fronta v 1920 godu*, dir. Efim Dzigan, 1941). Finally, the third category consists of films set in the territories of the Second Polish Republic occupied by the USSR, either shortly before their "liberation" by the Red Army or immediately afterward. The most significant examples are the social dramas *Wind from the East* (*Veter s vostoka*, dir. Abram Room, 1940) and *Dream* (*Mechta*, dir. Mikhail Romm, 1941), as

well as the feature-length documentary *Liberation* (*Osvobozhdenie*, dir. Oleksandr Dovzhenko, 1940).

In this article, I will focus primarily on the films belonging to the first group. The greatest attention will be devoted to *Minin and Pozharsky*, somewhat less to *Bohdan Khmelnytskyi*, while the films belonging to the other two groups will be invoked only in contexts that I consider relevant, without an in-depth analysis (with the exception of *Shchors*, which I will examine more closely because of its significant intertextual relationship with *Bohdan Khmelnytskyi*). This choice is based on the conviction – reinforced by extensive source research – that these two historical epics served the Soviet propaganda apparatus as a kind of foundation upon which it erected the ideological monolith of a historiosophical and geopolitical narrative crafted in response to the events of 1939. Prior to undertaking an analysis of the two historical biopics, I will set forth the most essential tenets of Soviet historical and historiosophical thought from the second half of the 1930s – as the crucial context and ideological foundation upon which these films emerged.

The Cycles of History and the Eternal Struggle

As the old saying goes, Russia is a country with an unpredictable past.[11] Periodically, the state engages in sweeping revisions of its official interpretation of history, refurbishing well-worn imperial narratives to align with current political imperatives. The films *Minin and Pozharsky* and *Bohdan Khmelnytskyi* exemplify the central themes of the Soviet propaganda narrative of 1939–1941, tracing the history of successive state entities, whose perfected and historically inevitable continuation Stalin's USSR proclaimed itself to be. These themes included, above all, the glorification of Russian-Ukrainian brotherhood, the portrayal of Poles as exploitative feudal lords, and the deliberate avoidance of representing Germany as an adversary. At the same time, both films belong to the wider tradition of biographical historical cinema, one of the key genres of Stalinist film production that popularized the Soviet historiosophical doctrine taking shape since the early 1930s. Stalinist cultural ideologues argued that Soviet historical cinema was not merely an artistic rendering of the past but a medium for

[11] See Mikhail Gurevich, "Teasing the Sacred Cows to the End of History: Appropriation of Emblematic Imagery in Late- and Post-Soviet Animation," in *Propaganda, Ideology, Animation. Twisted Dreams of History*, ed. Olga Bobrowska, Michał Bobrowski, and Bogusław Zmudziński (Kraków: AGH University Press, 2019), 31.

conveying objective historical truth, made possible by the "scientific" method of dialectical materialism.

This conviction was articulated by Włodzimierz Sokorski, a senior functionary in Stalinist Poland's cultural administration:

> Soviet cinema has become a tool for discovering objective truth – truth about humanity, society, and the path of its development. A truth understood historically. Lenin's method of reflecting reality in art armed Soviet film with a scientific means of reconstructing historical phenomena. This is why, alongside films about the Great October Revolution, works such as *Peter the Great, Suvorov, Alexander Nevsky, Ivan the Terrible, Bohdan Khmelnytskyi* and many others could emerge – films that taught Soviet society to understand its national history and to discern within it the forces that drove progress.[12]

The new historiosophical doctrine – epitomized and celebrated by the genre of epic film biography – was a central, though not the only, component of a far-reaching project of political, ideological, and cultural transformation. This was the shift that David Brandenberger aptly described as the turn "from the materialist internationalism of the 1920s to the statist russocentrism of the late 1930s."[13] On the historiosophical and historiographical front of the culture war, a campaign was launched against "Pokrovskiism" – the interpretation of Russian history advanced by Mikhail Pokrovsky, the leading Soviet historian of the 1920s. Drawing on Marxist-Leninist premises, Pokrovsky saw history in determinist terms, as a chain of violent events inevitably leading to the emancipation of the exploited classes. He stressed the role of the masses as the driving force of history, relegating individual agency to a secondary role, and was an uncompromising critic of the tsarist system, Russia's imperial past, and Russian chauvinism. However, by the mid-1930s the official line had changed dramatically: the Great-Russian imperial tradition was largely rehabilitated and elements of tsarist imperial ideology were incorporated into the state's doctrine. As codified in the "catechism" of Stalinist historiosophy, *History of the Communist Party*

[12] Włodzimierz Sokorski, "Trzydziestolecie filmu radzieckiego," in *Film radziecki*, ed. Jan Guranowski (Warszawa: Książka i wiedza, 1951), 9–10. Unless otherwise noted, translations are by the author. It is worth noting the telling absence of the film *Minin and Pozharsky* among the examples mentioned by Sokorski. This is, of course, connected with the taboo surrounding the topic of the anti-Polish campaign of 1939–1941 within the framework of official discourse in postwar Poland.

[13] David Branderberger, "Who killed Pokrovskii? (the second time): The prelude to the denunciation of the father of Soviet Marxist historiography, January 1936," *Revolutionary Russia* 11, no. 1 (1998): 67, doi: 10.1080/09546549808575684.

of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks),[14] the past was no longer judged by the standards of "eternal justice" or condemned for failing to meet modern criteria, as in Pokrovsky's "vulgar sociologism." Instead, monarchs and military leaders were evaluated in relation to the historical conditions under which they acted. This methodological shift provided the rationale for glorifying the contributions of chosen rulers, some of whom were elevated to the status of heroes in the centrally managed collective imagination.

While one of the principal criticisms put forward by Stalinist historians against the "anti-Marxist" and "anti-historical" Pokrovsky's approach concerned its "incorrect, vulgar understanding of the connection between history and the present" and its interpretation of historical facts "from the standpoint of today rather than the conditions in which historical events occurred,"[15] it was, in fact, the newly reconstructed Soviet historiosophy of the 1930s that most profoundly blurred the boundaries between various temporal orders. The ultimate cinematic expressions of the historiosophical doctrine prevailing in the USSR in the late 1930s are two flagship works of Soviet historical-biographical epic: *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) and *Peter the Great* (*Pyotr Pervyi*, dir. Vladimir Petrov, 1937–1938). These films – paradigmatic of a system based on a powerful individual, surrounded by a widespread cult – articulated the need for centralized, absolute political authority, especially under external threat. In both films, the ruler's ruthless severity toward the enemies of the homeland is presented as a higher necessity, sanctified by his profound love for the nation and his superhuman sense of justice. Furthermore, these two emblematic film frescoes, like the entire paradigm of Stalinist historical art, reflect a significant shift in the perception and conceptualization of historical time.

In accordance to the dialectical worldview, which disregards simple "either-or" logic, the Marxist paradigm of historical progression as linear, unidirectional, and oriented toward a foreseeable future coexisted within Stalinist culture with a notion of historical time as cyclical, emphasizing the repetition and inevitability of certain mechanisms or historical conflicts. Such view, otherwise associated mostly with nationalist discourses, perceives contemporary events as echoes of past occurrences of significance for a nation's identity – the occurrences such as the anti-Polish uprisings led by Minin and Pozharsky or by

[14] See *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks). Short Course* (Paris: Foreign Languages Press, 2023). First print in the USSR: 1938.

[15] Janina Schoenbrenner, "O właściwe pojmowanie tzw. aktualizacji w nauczaniu historii w szkole," *Wiadomości historyczne* no. 5 (1949), 47. This citation from a renowned Polish historian from a Stalinist era is representative of the Stalinism critique of Pokrovsky.

Khmelnytskyi. Within this framework, history becomes a theater of the present, while the present becomes a ritual of history.

Ivan Čolović captures this phenomenon incisively:

> [T]he distance between then and now, between past and current events, sometimes shrinks to the point that they overlap. Two narrative streams – one depicting contemporary events, the other evoking similar events from the past – merge into a single account of a timeless event, often referred to as "eternal struggle." The principal actor in this struggle [...] loses its historical dimension, as it came to existence through the fusion of ancestors and descendants into one, eternal national subject.[16]

Although originally referring to a different, albeit closely related discourse – Serbian nationalism – these words equally describe Russian historiosophical ultraconservatism, whose successive iterations validate Merab Mamardashvili's observation that "the pathological repetition of many phenomena in Russian life has itself become a phenomenon of Russian life."[17]

This vision of history naturally aligns with an essentialist view of nationhood. And thus, figures portrayed in late 1930s and early 1940s Soviet films, particularly in historical cinema, are ethically and psychologically defined by their nationality. The all-Russian discourse revived under Stalin, emphasized the "eternal" threat from the West and the enduring bonds of brotherhood among the East Slavic peoples. Between 1939 and 1941, the role of historical enemy from the West – assigned in other periods to Germans, French, or Swedes – was primarily attributed to Poles, or more precisely, the elites of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In Soviet historiographical discourse, this state, whose Second Republic was depicted less as a continuation than as a pale shadow, appears as dependent on Western European powers while simultaneously pursuing an expansionist eastern policy aimed at subjugating Ukraine and Russia.

Minin and Pozharsky: Martyrdom and the Promise of Historical Justice

Vsevolod Pudovkin's highly mythologized costume drama is devoted to the armed uprising led by its eponymous characters against Polish and Lithuanian

[16] Ivan Čolović, *Balkan – teror kulture* (Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek, 2008), 50.

[17] See Merab Mamardashvili, *Kak ia ponimaiu filosofiiu* (Moskva: Progress, 1990), 140, quoted in Gurevich, "Teasing the Sacred Cows," 36.

magnates – a revolt of decisive importance for restoring the Muscovite state after the Time of Troubles (1598–1613). In certain respects, the film can be considered typical of the historical genre in Stalinist cinema. First, the action takes place during a historical period of great significance for Russian identity, and the film concludes with a battle that in Čolović's terms may be labelled an "eternal struggle" fought by the all-Russian, timeless national subject. Second, the two national heroes are portrayed hagiographically: they are not only two-dimensional but almost devoid of individual personality, much like Eisenstein's Alexander Nevsky. Moreover, the acting style of the performers in the title roles (Alexander Khanov as Minin; Boris Livanov as Pozharsky) is conventionalized and ceremonial. The actors, along with the director and the screenwriter (Viktor Shklovsky, based on his own novella of the same title), clearly did not aim to produce psychologically realistic portraits of the protagonists, but rather monumentalized representations of titanic figures. Third, from the opening shot to the finale, Pudovkin's biopic constitutes an apotheosis of the Stalinist myth of the Great Return, that blends temporal orders in an ahistorical manner.

On the other hand, Pudovkin's film departs in some respects from the "sanctified" canon of historical representation established in Stalinist cinema only two years earlier. Most notably, in contrast to the basic rule of the era's cult-of-personality films, the story centers on two equal protagonists rather than a single dominant military-political leader. It appears that the two main characters – Prince Dmitrii Pozharsky (a wise and just knight, courageous warrior, brilliant strategist, and benevolent protector of the common people) and the townsman Kuzma Minin (a butcher's guild member; visionary, patriot, and charismatic popular tribune capable of reconciling warring social classes and inspiring them to extraordinary sacrifices) – were intended by the filmmakers to represent two aspects of the historical grounding of total power in the Stalinist state.

This constitutes a specific variant of a rhetorical strategy that Evgeny Dobrenko, in his comparative analysis of *Alexander Nevsky* and *Stepan Razin* (dir. Ivan Pravov, 1939; a biopic about the leader of the peasant rebellion) calls the "dialectic of the popular monarchy."[18] As Dobrenko observes the Stalinist power was presented as rooted both in the heritage of the tsarist monarchy and in the tradition of grassroots uprisings against ruling elites. The particularity of

[18] Evgeny Dobrenko, *Stalinist Cinema and the Production of History: Museum of the Revolution* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 17, doi: 9780748634453.001.0001.

Pudovkin's version of this dialectic lies in its encapsulation within a single work, as well as in the fact that the ruling class, represented by Pozharsky, collaborates closely with the working class, represented by Minin, because their interests are perfectly aligned. Both are shown to stand on the same side of the "cultural front," united in defending the nation's future and moral order. This alignment is made possible chiefly by the fact that the principal antagonists are the Polish oppressors, and so the struggle against them carries both national and class dimensions.

Another striking – though ideologically justified – departure from the prevailing norms of Stalinist cinema is the portrayal of the Russian state as weak, dysfunctional, and disintegrated. This choice is closely tied to Stalinist culture's (re)construction of a martyrological narrative about the Time of Troubles, which, alongside the Mongol invasions and the Napoleonic wars, counts among the greatest historical traumas deeply inscribed in Russian collective memory. Although the causes of this crisis were complex and largely internal – dynastic discontinuity following the end of the Rurikid line, recurring famine, peasant uprisings, and factional struggles for power – in Stalinist historiography, as well as in conservative strands of Russian historiography from other periods, the crisis was framed as a Russo-Polish conflict and cast in the terms of a grand, almost Manichean struggle.[19]

Russian historical memory codified the narrative of the Time of Troubles around two complementary sentiments: victimhood and heroism. This perspective was solidified in the nineteenth century through patriotic works such as Stepan Degtiarev's 1811 oratorio *Minin and Pozharsky, or the Liberation of Moscow*; Ivan Martos's 1818 Kremlin monument (Moscow's oldest); paintings by Mikhail Scotti (*Minin and Pozharsky*, 1850), and Konstantin Makovsky (*Agents of the False Dmitry Kill the Son of Boris Godunov*, 1862; *Appeal of Minin*, 1896); and Alexander Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* (1825) with Modest Mussorgsky's 1872 opera adaptation. Collectively, these and countless other cultural texts created the myth of a united Russian people resisting foreign invaders – especially the Poles. After 1917, Pokrovsky's Marxist school reinterpreted the narrative, portraying the pretenders as progressive forces and condemning Minin and Pozharsky as reactionaries. Stalinist historiography reversed this position, restoring and intensifying the pre-revolutionary interpretation, reducing the period's complexity to a heroic tale framed by stark moral dichotomies. Within this mythology, Minin and Pozharsky regained the position of fearless liberators

[19] See Ibid., 80.

under whose leadership "the entire Russian people rose against the Polish invaders."[20]

It is a historical fact that the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – as well as Sweden – eagerly exploited the weakness of its eastern neighbor, pursuing a policy to destabilize Moscow's rule and seize control. The most striking examples were the so-called *Dymitriads* – campaigns to place on the Russian throne pretenders loyal to the Commonwealth and claiming Ivan the Terrible's legacy. In 1610, Polish forces, invited by powerful boyars, entered Moscow under Hetman Jan Karol Chodkiewicz, who soon returned to Poland, leaving the Kremlin under Aleksander Korwin Gosiewski. Both commanders appear in Pudovkin's film – unlike another key figure, Hetman Stanisław Żółkiewski, who also played a crucial role. The Polish-Lithuanian garrison became notorious for its brutality toward Muscovites of all classes, bloodily suppressing any signs of revolt. This lasted until 1612, when – as a Soviet critic wrote in an October 1939 report from *Minin and Pozharsky*'s set – "the Russian people crushed the Polish aggressors who had set foot on sacred Russian soil."[21]

It is worth devoting some attention to the film's opening sequence. From the very first seconds, the viewer is immersed in the imagery of Stalinist historiosophy. Even before the opening credits appear, the screen shows a series of static shots of the Kremlin in 1939. Ivan Martos's monument to Minin and Pozharsky is framed together with the Troitskaya Tower, topped with the five-pointed red star (installed in 1935), and the Grand Kremlin Palace, above which the red flag waves. It would be hard to find a better illustration of the symbolic interweaving of historical layers within Stalinist myth-making. The visual emblems of communism, rising above the architectural symbols of past despotism, do not conflict with them but resonate in a pure harmony.

After a long opening sequence accompanied by a solemn choral piece (music by Yuri Shaporin, lyrics by Nikolai Aseyev), a title card establishes the historical context: "For six years, Russian soil had suffered under the yoke of foreign intervention. In the autumn of 1610, Polish nobles seized the Kremlin by deceit and attempted to advance into northern Russia. Uprisings erupted everywhere, but well-armed invaders crushed the scattered peasant units, while the boyars preferred negotiating with foreigners rather than making concessions to their own subjects." In accordance with the tenets of Stalinist historiography, the

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[20] *Historia ZSRR. Krótki kurs*, ed. A. Szestakow, transl. Cz. Jędraszko (Warszawa: Nasza Księgarnia, 1952), 42.

[21] A. Amasovich, "Tak sozdaetsia fil'm," *Smena* 10 (1939), 22.

Time of Troubles is reduced to a bilateral national war. There appears a misleading implication that peasant revolts were solely anti-Polish uprisings, with only the final sentence hinting at an internal dimension. Yet the film leaves no doubt that the few traitors of the nation – "fifth column" of a sort – are contemptible exceptions, disrupting the nation's flawless unity and deserving the severest punishment. It is also worth noting the recognition of the Polish army's power. Films set in the seventeenth century portrayed the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as a formidable state. Interestingly, a pattern emerges in Soviet films from 1939–1941 dealing with Poland: the closer the action is to contemporary times, the less respect is shown for Polish military capabilities. Consequently, the late 1930s' Poland appears disorganized, lacking economic or military strength, and posing no threat to the world's most powerful nation.

The main narrative begins only in the fourth minute. The opening sequence introduces all major plot threads and key characters. We first meet Roman, a fugitive peasant serving as the viewer's guide; the Time of Troubles is shown from his "low" perspective. The monumentally portrayed protagonists remain beyond direct reach – revered idols of the cult-of-personality era, exalted by total authority, and not depicted as flesh-and-blood figures relatable to the audience. This applies especially to Prince Pozharsky. As a personification of the Orthodox warrior ethos, he radiates sanctity, inspiring awe and mystical fear, compelling humble submission of the gaze.

Minin is initially portrayed as slightly more human and approachable than Pozharsky. In the opening scene, he finds Roman, a peasant wounded in the head, amidst the devastation brought by the invaders. Stylized as Christ, Roman symbolizes the suffering of the Russian people under foreign domination. Minin provides aid but, above all, awakens Roman's national consciousness, addressing him – and, through him, the audience – with a fiery appeal in which lament over the homeland's fall mixes with a call for cross-class national unity in the face of a formidable enemy. These themes recur in the historically grounded scene of Minin's speech to the citizens of Nizhny Novgorod, one of the film's key moments from an ideological standpoint. In this eloquent diatribe, clearly directed at the contemporary Soviet viewer being prepared for wartime sacrifices, anti-Polish motifs intertwine with glorification of self-sacrifice, exhortations to renounce material goods for the defense of the homeland, and appeals to patriotic duty.

Roman soon separates from Minin and almost immediately encounters Pozharsky. The prince spends the night in a roadside monastery, what provided the filmmakers a convenient opportunity to surround the character with an aura

of sanctity, enhanced by Orthodox symbolism and iconography. On the wave of incorporating pre-revolutionary motifs into Soviet ideology, Orthodoxy was partially rehabilitated as a traditional foundation of Russian statehood, as evidenced, for instance, in the prologue of Mikhail Romm's *Dream*. The combination of the religious *mise-en-scène* and the choral soundtrack positions Pozharsky within a sacred tradition, turning him into a living icon without excessively emphasizing his attachment to orthodox Christian values.

Because of the heavy traveler traffic, Pozharsky must share a room with Roman's former master, Orlov – a character embodying all the pathologies of the elite, a prototype of the internal enemy, traitor, and collaborator, personifying the traits popularly ascribed to the boyars. Strictly speaking, as a *stolnik*, Orlov is not actually a boyar; he is a steward, not a landowner. Yet Roman pointedly addresses him as "boyar" in later scenes. Apparently, the filmmakers were less concerned with historical accuracy than with reinforcing a stereotype that framed social injustice not as systemic but as the result of corrupt elites, following the familiar "good tsar, bad boyars" trope. A cornerstone of the Stalinist culture war was the call – and practice – of ruthlessly eliminating the internal enemy. This is clearly dramatized in the conflict between Orlov and Roman, which echoes the heightened class antagonism of the Time of Troubles. Feudal lords demanded rights not only to pursue fugitive peasants but even those they themselves had expelled during famine. Of course, the film omits that the greatest victims of post-1612 re-centralization were the peasantry, whose exploitation grew even harsher. In the finale, Roman kills the vile Orlov, enacting popular justice. The viewer is left with the impression that by expelling Polish oppressors and punishing native collaborators, Russian society took a decisive step toward a fairer economic order.

Importantly, in the more than twenty-minute opening sequence, the main antagonists – the Poles – are not present on-screen. They function as "significant absentees" driving the plot as a factor determining all characters' actions and serving as a reference point for their moral condition ("Hold on to Władysław, as I do!" – shouts the drunken Orlov, provoking Pozharsky's deep outrage and leaving no doubt about the man's utter corruption).[22] When the Poles finally appear, they are immediately depicted as criminals who order a massacre of civilians. Warned of the approaching insurgent army led by Prokop Lapunov,

[22] Orlov refers to Władysław IV Vasa, king of Poland in 1632–1648, who formally held the title of Tsar between 1609 and 1613, in accordance to the agreement between Hetman Żółkiewski and the boyars.

Dmitry Troubetskoy, and Ivan Zarutsky,[23] commander Gosiewski eagerly accepts a treacherous boyar's proposal to burn Moscow's wooden districts and carries it out the next morning at the head of torch-bearing, winged hussars. Such use of distinctive Polish military symbols of various eras – demonized or parodied – remains a constant device of Soviet propaganda films of the period (e.g., *Shchors*, *The First Cavalry Army*, *Wind from the East*).

The sequence depicting the Moscow fire, crucial for the film's rhetorical impact, is based on an event that must be regarded as one of the most infamous episodes in the history of Polish military. On March 27, 1611, by order (probably) of commander Gosiewski, the Poles set fire to the residential districts of the occupied capital.[24] Stanisław Żółkiewski writes:

> It was a massacre of great scale among such a dense crowd of people, the wailing and crying of children, alike the Judgment Day. So many of them, with wives and children, flung themselves into the fire; so many defeated, so many burned, but also many saved themselves by fleeing to the nearby troops... In this way the Muscovite capital burned with great bloodshed and immeasurable damage, for it was a wealthy and great city.[25]

In Pudovkin's film, the inhabitants of Moscow, led by Pozharsky, bravely resist the enemy, but in the face of the raging element they prove powerless. The sequence of their defeat reaches the height of national-martyrological pathos, with the catastrophic tone pushed to its limits. The mystery of the national sacrifice culminates in a monumental shot of the wounded Pozharsky falling to the ground while the magnificent buildings around him turn to ruins.

The rhetorical complement to the Moscow fire sequence is the scene at the court of Polish King Sigismund III Vasa, showing that the barbarity of the Polish troops, while directly driven by cowardice, baseness, and atavistic impulses, in

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[23] The reference is to the so-called First People's Militia (*Pervoe narodnoe opolchenie*). The uprising led by Minin and Pozharsky is known in historical writing as the Second People's Militia (*Vtoroe narodnoe opolchenie*). Importantly, in Pudovkin's film the leaders of the first uprising are depicted in a critical light. Only the figure of Lapunov, who was killed in July 1611, is treated with reverence. Pozharsky is portrayed as the continuer of his great work – just as Stalin, according to the prevailing narrative, was presented as the spiritual heir and outstanding successor of Lenin. Zarutsky and Troubetskoy are shown as traitors to the cause, in whom the Soviet viewer of the time could easily recognize a metaphorical reference to the Trotskiist faction.

[24] For reasons that remain unclear, the film gives a different date (April 27). This inconsistency cannot be explained by the discrepancy between the Gregorian and Julian calendars.

[25] Stanisław Żółkiewski, *Początek i progres wojny moskiewskiej* (Kraków: Biblioteka Narodowa, 1920), 117–118. First print in Poland: 1833.

a broader perspective results from the imperial ambitions of Warsaw and other Western capitals greedily eyeing the East's riches. In an opulent throne room (sets and costumes styled on Western models, emphasizing the Commonwealth's cultural otherness from the Russian perspective), King Sigismund (Mikhail Astangov), Hetman Chodkiewicz (Anatoly Goryunov), and a catholic cleric named De-Mallo (fictional; Yevgeny Gurov) appear. The Polish monarch is insignificant in the film's plot. He appears only in this scene, portrayed as a grotesquely weak man of narrow horizons and inflated ego. De-Mallo – embodying the catholic church's hypocrisy and Machiavellianism – outwits the king, luring him with visions of power and wealth promised by further Eastern conquests. The priest uses a map to show Moscow's strategic importance as the key to controlling the region, with major economic significance. On behalf of his patrons (the Jesuits), De-Mallo promises financial support for the next phase of aggression (i.e., Chodkiewicz's reinforcements) and silently agrees to the king's suggestion of an assassination of Pozharsky. This provokes clear disapproval from Chodkiewicz, who remains the only Polish character in the film shown with a trace of respect (or rather as the least repulsive among the antagonists). Chodkiewicz considers himself a proud warrior, heir to the European knightly tradition, loyal to his class's honor code. His greatest flaws are arrogance and megalomania. Compared with the eminent Russian commanders of epic Soviet biographical cinema (e.g., *Suvorov*, 1941, dir. Vsevolod Pudovkin; *Kutuzov*, 1944, dir. Vladimir Petrov; *Admiral Nakhimov*, 1947, dir. Vsevolod Pudovkin), who make tactical and strategic decisions with both prudence and brilliance, Chodkiewicz is depicted as a far lesser commander – obstinate, blinded by ambition, and easily provoked into tactical errors tragic for the Polish side. In the final sequence, he leads the relief force toward Moscow, where the Polish garrison on the Kremlin is starving, cut off from supplies by the Russian siege. Just before the decisive battle, in which the Polish forces suffer a crushing defeat, Chodkiewicz compares himself to Caesar. His miscalculations come at great cost to the troops under his command. By the film's end, the portrayal of the Poles becomes increasingly grotesque – the routed invaders flee in panic before the victorious Russians, and the hussars abandon their wings that were slowing their retreat. The ultimate humiliation and exposure of the invaders' inherent cowardice serve as just revenge for the immense harm they inflicted.

Structurally, *Minin and Pozharsky* features a vivid compositional frame. All major formal and thematic elements introduced in the opening sequence find their resolution in the epilogue. The choral song celebrating beloved Moscow returns ("Do not forget, beautiful Moscow, how we dealt with the enemy... Rise, immortal force of the people!"). The two titular heroes, as if they were Ivan

Martos's monuments brought to life, stand on a platform addressing the cheering crowd – and by extension the cinema audience as well. In the closing words of Minin's speech, a clear suggestion emerges that the "eternal struggle," of which their anti-Polish uprising was a crucial episode, continues: "The Pole sat on Rus' like a goose, and did not depart like a swan! We crushed the Pole not only with arms, but also with our common, righteous unity! We crushed them! And if they return, we will crush them again! Here we cut the Pole's tail! And there [points West] we will strip their skin."

It is telling that at the very moment when the Soviet Union was brutally annexing the territories of its Western neighbors, Soviet cinemas exhibited a film in which Russia appears as the victim of external aggression. Dobrenko makes a compelling case that one of the rules of Stalinist epic cinema was the equation of nation and class – both in relation to the oppressed groups and to the oppressors.[26] Setting the story during the Time of Troubles allowed for the Russians to be portrayed as the oppressed and the Poles as the oppressors. The implications are clear: by leading a victorious uprising against the Polish invaders, Minin and Pozharsky are inaugurating the great historical process of (pan-)Russian mass emancipation from the chains of historical injustice. The Red Army's expulsion of the "Polish lords" from Western Ukraine and Belarus is framed as nothing less than the fulfillment of Minin and Pozharsky's testament – the crowning and completion of their great historical mission.

In this context, it is worth devoting some attention to another historical biographical film by Pudovkin from the Molotov-Ribbentrop period. *Suvorov* (1940) does not directly address Polish themes, focusing instead on the anti-Napoleonic Italian campaign of 1799. What is important and symbolic, however, is that the film opens immediately after the successful (from the Russian perspective) storming of Warsaw's district Praga (November 4, 1794). This was a bloody retaliation for the Warsaw Uprising of 1794 (April 17–19) and marked the final defeat of Tadeusz Kościuszko's Insurrection, ending in a massacre that claimed anywhere from several to several tens of thousands of civilian victims. In a broader historical perspective, the massacre of Praga is described in Russian historiography as settling scores for the burning of Moscow in 1611. In *Suvorov*, the civilian casualties are not mentioned. The film's opening carries a between-the-lines message that could not have been difficult for a Soviet viewer in 1940 to decipher: the necessary precondition for establishing a new order in Europe – an order aligned with the political goals and interests of the USSR, and thus of

[26] Dobrenko, *Stalinist Cinema*, 25–26.

all humanity – is the resolution of the burning Polish question, as the spread of socialism is obstructed by the deep-rooted Polish reactionism.

Bohdan Khmelnytskyi: "Eternal Struggle" and "Fraternal Friendship"

A few paragraphs earlier, I noted that *Minin and Pozharsky* in some respects departs from the model of historical cinema that prevailed during the Stalinist period. Another distinguishing feature of Pudovkin's work, setting it apart from other Soviet productions of the time, is its casting of the Poles as the ultimate enemy threatening Russian statehood. As it was already mentioned, other Soviet films from 1939–1941 dealing with Polish themes – though anti-Polish sentiment had by then become an officially sanctioned and zealously practiced norm – do not depict Poland as posing a direct threat to pre-revolutionary Russia, let alone to the Soviet Union. Only Pudovkin's historical fresco does so, serving both as a response to a particular ideological need and as a foundation for further propaganda narratives.

As a result of the turn in Soviet geostrategic doctrine in 1939, the position previously occupied by the Third Reich as the paramount enemy threatening the security, cohesion, and identity of the Soviet nation became vacant – a void that could only partly be "filled" by placing the Polish Republic in that role. An analysis of Soviet propaganda discourse from 1939–1941 makes it clear that the Germans could not simply and mechanically be replaced by the Poles. For the reasons outlined below, such a substitution was not possible.

In 1939, most Soviet citizens still vividly remembered the anti-Polish propaganda campaign that had accompanied the Polish-Soviet War of 1919–1921, exemplified by films such as *War on War* (*Voina voine*), *To the Front!* (*Na front!*), *Lords – Bandits* (*Pany-naletchiki*); all three directed by Yuri Zhelyabuzhsky, *On the Red Front* (*Na krasnom fronte*, dir. Lev Kuleshov), and *Long Live Workers' and Peasants' Poland!* (*Da zdravstvuet, raboche-krest'ianskaia Pol'sha*, dir. Czesław Sabiński), all made in 1920. During the NEP (New Economic Policy) period, and especially after Józef Piłsudski's 1926 coup, anti-Polish themes became a regular feature of Soviet cinema (*P.K.P. (Piłsudski Bought Petliura* / *P.K.P. Pilsudskii kupil Petliuru*, dir. Aksel Lundin and Georgy Stabovoy, 1926; *Shadows of Belweder* / *Teni Bel'vedera*, dir. Aleksandr Anoshchenko, 1927; *Forest Story* / *Lesnaia byl'*, dir. Yuri Tarich, 1926). After the signing of the Polish-Soviet non-aggression pact in 1932, the anti-Polish tone in Soviet propaganda was reduced, but never entirely eliminated, as evidenced by Nikolai Ostrovsky's *How the Steel*

Was Tempered, a canonical work of socialist realist literature.[27] In the years just before the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, during the Great Terror of 1937–1938, the anti-Polish campaign took the monstrous form of ethnic purges, whose victims were Soviet citizens of Polish descent.

None of this changes the fact that the Polish Republic of 1939 could not be presented, for the purposes of domestic propaganda, as the chief enemy threatening the USSR security. In Soviet media discourse, Poland was portrayed as an ephemeral, decadent state led by corrupt politicians, degenerate plutocrats, and cowardly generals – an artificial construct brought into being by the Western powers after 1918. Two decades later, this state had become a textbook example of a decaying bourgeois-capitalist order in its terminal phase. Its last remaining resource was the quasi-enslaved labor of the working and peasant masses (watching films such as *Liberation* or *Wind from the East*, one might easily conclude that the exploited classes were almost exclusively Ukrainian and Belarusian). The final nail in the coffin of the Polish state was the catastrophe that fell on September 1, 1939. Soviet propagandists sought as far as possible to downplay the Nazi German invasion, vaguely suggesting that the attack was provoked by the reckless decisions of the Polish political elite and by the imperial ambitions of unspecified Western powers.

Soviet propaganda did not allow their receivers to forget that Poland had once been a formidable enemy of feudal Russia. Moreover, it also reminded them – albeit very cautiously (as seen in *The First Cavalry Army*) – that as recently as 1920, the Red Army had been defeated by the newly formed Polish state (to some extent, the September 17, 1939, aggression was rationalized as settling the score for the 1920 Battle of Warsaw). However, the Polish state of 1939, portrayed in Soviet propaganda as collapsed, was incapable of being a worthy opponent for the "world's most powerful army." Consequently, the propaganda story of the USSR's military aggression could not be framed within the conventional structure of a war epic. The disparity between the two military potentials was too great, and the outcome of their confrontation too predictable. There was no room for heroism or drama. In accordance with the rigid conventions of socialist realism – and, indeed, of any propaganda – the enemy could not be depicted as powerless. The structure of war propaganda crucially requires a symmetry that corresponds with a Manichean vision of military conflict. When one side

[27] The first volume, which has a much stronger anti-Polish tone than the second, was originally published in installments in the journal *Molodaia gvardiia* in 1932, with the second volume appearing two years later. A heavily revised book edition was released in 1936.

is labeled "good" and "powerful," and the other "evil" and "weak," it becomes impossible to maintain the dialectical balance needed to construct a narrative of suitably epic proportions. The Soviet propaganda machine developed a simple but effective rhetorical strategy to resolve this problem.

A dogmatically enforced narrative portrayed Polish political and military elites as shadows of a bygone era. While they posed no threat to Soviet might, they remained extremely dangerous to the impoverished and oppressed populace of the eastern territories of this faltering state, which had collapsed like a house of cards under the western assault. The more dire the situation became in the west, the more brutal Polish soldiers became toward the Ukrainian and Belarusian people (a motif of desperate Polish cavalry fleeing the western aggression, who burn villages in an act of blind hatred, appears in the films *Wind from the East* and *Liberation*). In order to legitimize this narrative, it was necessary to place it within a broader historical context. In response to this need, *Bohdan Khmelnytskyi* presents the Poles as the eternal enemies of the Rus' peoples – as cultural imperialists who aspire to dominate Ukraine and invariably seek alliances with Western powers hostile to Russia.

Within the overall semantic structure of the Soviet propaganda cinema's historiosophical narrative under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, *Bohdan Khmelnytskyi* emerges as the ideological continuation and fulfillment of *Minin and Pozharsky*. While Pudovkin's work presents a mythologized genesis of the Polish-Russian conflict, Savchenko's film broadens this narrative by incorporating the Ukrainian context – an element integral to the Kremlin's contemporary prowar rhetoric that was presented in strict accordance with state doctrine. On an ideological level, the film is an amalgam of Marxist slogans blended with Cossack and Great Russian themes, which are presented – in accordance with the prevailing ideological line – as convergent and harmoniously aligned. The nation-building myth of the Cossacks, though inherently incompatible with the reformulated pan-Russian narrative of the Stalinist era, was nonetheless absorbed by it for the needs of the historical moment in the spirit of dialectical materialism. Within the traditional narrative celebrating the "ancient" and "natural" brotherhood of "Great" and "Little" Russians, the period from 1939 to 1941 saw an emphasis placed on the affirmation of Ukrainianess and the promise that Ukrainian cultural and ethnic identity would not be constrained within this brotherhood, but rather, could only be fully realized within its framework.[28]

[28] It is worth noting that from the post-revolutionary years to the early 1930s one could observe a genuine appreciation of Ukrainian culture (at least when viewed in comparison with the pe-

Khmelnytskyi's uprising (1648–1654) – much like the popular insurrection in Pudovkin's *Minin and Pozharsky* – was portrayed as both a revolutionary and a national-liberation struggle. The film frames the Cossack rebellion using the elementary conceptual categories of Marxism, modified and "Russified" in the Stalinist spirit. In this way, the struggle of the Ukrainian Cossacks against the "Polish lords" becomes another chapter in the timeless struggle of the pan-Russian national subject. Following the rigid convention of Soviet historical cinema of the 1930s and 1940s, Savchenko's film glorifies the intellectual and moral qualities of an outstanding individual. Khmelnytskyi appears a great leader without whose contribution the uprising would have been merely a peasant revolt, insignificant from the perspective of historical change – one that would likely have been easily crushed by the militarily superior Polish nobility. In Nikolay Mordvinov's interpretation, Khmelnytskyi possesses all the obligatory attributes of Stalinist cinema's political-military leaders: strength, charisma, strategic genius, and a deep (and mutual) love for his people.[29] As a sworn enemy of the Polish political elites, this historical prototype of the protagonist perfectly fit the propaganda needs of the 1939–1941 period.

Dobrenko characterizes the titular heroes of *Minin and Pozharsky* and *Bohdan Khmelnytskyi* as mythological figures lacking distinct personalities – "moving monuments" or "speaking statues."[30] However, compared to the protagonists of Pudovkin's film, who behave in a hieratic, conventionalized, and ritualized manner in every single scene, Khmelnytskyi appears as a hero somewhat

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riod before 1917). Moreover, the tradition of resistance to Russian domination was regarded as an integral element of Ukrainian identity. This corresponded with the sharp criticism of tsarist imperialism and Great Russian chauvinism (as well as of "local nationalisms") expressed by the participants of the 12th Congress of the Communist Party of Russia (Bolsheviks) in 1923, and with the *korenizatsiia* ("indigenization" or "rooting") policy implemented during the following decade. See Marek Waldenberg, *Narody zależne i mniejszości narodowe w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej: Dzieje konfliktów i idei* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2000), 358. In the 1930s, an opposite, centrally directed process began – one of whose symptoms was the previously unimaginable absorption of heroic narratives from the tsarist era into the Soviet propaganda machine. Especially in Soviet Ukraine, the policy of re-Russification was carried out brutally and relentlessly, under the slogan of eradicating Ukrainian nationalism. The affirmation of Ukrainian identity between 1939 and 1941 was purely declarative, and it must have been clear to Ukrainians of the time that these declarations diverged sharply from the actual political practice.

[29] For comparison, one may recall the hostile depiction of Hetman Mazepa in *Peter the Great*, where he appears as a pro-Western traitor to the ideal of all-Russian unity – a symbol of Ukraine's cultural and political estrangement from Moscow. By contrast, Stalinist historiography portrayed Khmelnytskyi as a visionary devoted to his people, deeply committed to the notion of Ukrainian-Russian brotherhood. See *History of the USSR*, 47.

[30] Dobrenko, *Stalinist Cinema*, 67.

less stripped of the impulses and passions typical of ordinary mortals. In this respect, he more closely resembles Petrov's tsar Peter I than Eisenstein's prince Alexander Nevsky: he gladly feasts at lavishly set tables and does not shy away from earthly pleasures.

Khmelnytskyi's greatest (and perhaps only) weakness is his passion for Helena Czaplińska (Garen Zhukovskaya) – a character embodying the patriarchal archetype of the seductive temptress and treacherous manipulator, akin to Jezebel or Delilah. Their turbulent relationship echoes the costume melodramas popular in 1930s Western cinema, which centered on romantic intrigues within royal courts (e.g., *Queen Christina*, 1933; *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, 1933; *The Scarlet Empress*, 1934). This subplot strongly reinforces the film's anti-Polish message. Initially portrayed with slight empathy as a proud Catholic, Helena regards the Cossack leader with fear and contempt. She resists him but is compelled by her confessor, Father Łętowski (Aleksandr Davison) – a spiritual twin of Pudovkin's Father De-Mallo – who convinces her that becoming the hetman's mistress (and later wife, after converting) is her duty to God and Poland. Her true role, however, is to spy on and undermine him. The subplot climaxes when Helena attempts to poison Khmelnytskyi. The hetman ruthlessly sentences her to death in a scene echoing Peter the Great's condemnation of his son Alexei, often interpreted as allegorical justification for Stalinist purges and show trials.

Bohdan Khmelnytskyi aligns with a historiosophical vision emphasizing the fatalistic cyclicity of historical processes. This is reflected not only in its portrayal of Polish-Ukrainian relations as inherently and "naturally" antagonistic but also in its depiction of an eternal and indestructible Russo-Ukrainian brotherhood, embodied in Savchenko's work by the figure of Hetman Khmelnytskyi (an interpretation, of course, at odds with historical facts). Symptomatically, in a pre-release director's statement, Savchenko stressed that Khmelnytskyi was considered a traitor by both Polish monarchists and Ukrainian nationalists.[31]

The film reinforces a Stalinist pan-Russian interpretation of Russo-Ukrainian history. It presents the Russo-Ukrainian fraternal bond as natural and constant, while simultaneously framing the Poles as a perpetual threat to both nations. Polish political elites and their military forces are shown to be as brutal as in *Minin and Pozharsky;* their superior weaponry is noted, too. Cruel Sarmatians suppress Cossack rebellions "with fire and sword,"[32] impaling rebels.

[31] Igor Savchenko, "Ne budet sily toi, chtob nas slomila," *Sovetskii kinoekran* 3 (1941), 3.

[32] Let us refer here Henryk Sienkiewicz's epic novel *With Fire and Sword* (*Ogniem i mieczem*, 1884) which depicts the 17th-century Cossack uprising from the Polish nobility's perspective.

Their bloody methods horrify the Muscovite envoys en route to Warsaw. This group is led by the Prince Trubetskoy (featured episodically but highly significant for the film's ideological message) whose immense wisdom and integrity leaves no doubt of his spiritual nobility, radiating dignity akin to Pozharsky in Pudovkin's film.

The film's final sequence depicts the signing of the Treaty of Pereiaslav (concluded on January 18, 1654 by Hetman Khmelnytskyi and Vasily Buturlin, plenipotentiary of Tsar Alexis I), under which Ukraine was placed under the rule of the Russian Tsar. To this day, the treaty remains a symbol of unity within the pan-Russian geopolitical narrative, representing the incorporation of Ukraine into the Russian sphere of influence. In Savchenko's film, the signing of the Pereiaslav Agreement is portrayed as the symbolic ratification of an already existing alliance, Khmelnytskyi's greatest triumph, and the fulfillment of his most ambitious political plans. It is presented both as an act of ultimate political emancipation for the Cossacks and as a resounding defeat of the Polish nobility's imperial aspirations.

In the context of *Bohdan Khmelnytskyi*, some attention should also be given to the film *Shchors*, as from a broader perspective these two works appear to be mutually reinforcing in meaning and ideology. Together, they form a cohesive vision of historical Russian-Ukrainian-Polish threefold relations. What is specific to the 1939–1941 period is the fact that both films explore symbols and sentiments which, in other times, were treated with reserve and suspicion in Soviet culture as dangerously inclined toward Ukrainian nationalism. According to the doctrine, Ukrainian identity could only be affirmed if it fully embraced both its "fraternal" subordination to the Russian/Soviet cultural-political center and its uncompromising rejection of Polish influence.

Stalin personally ordered Dovzhenko to create a film about the "Ukrainian Chapayev" – Mykola Shchors, a Red Civil War hero. At the dictator's request, the project was repeatedly modified to align with shifting political demands.[33] This was no accident – the "USSR's primary viewer" clearly believed the propaganda value of *Shchors* was immense. In Dovzhenko's characteristic style, the film combines a glorification of revolutionary fervor with a fascination for the cultural and geographic "flavors" of the Ukrainian soil. Its depiction of Ukraine during the Civil War largely coincides with that found in the novel *How the Steel Was Tempered*: the semantic landscape unfolds across a continuum of nature, folk customs, and the intellectual and spiritual life of the progressive (and Russified)

[33] Oksana Musienko, *Ukrains'ke kino: teksty i kontekst* (Vinnytsia: HLOBUS-PRES, 2009), 154.

Ukrainian elites. All these components are coherently and harmoniously integrated within a framework of Ukrainian self-identification that is presented as both idealistic and subordinate. The Ukrainian people's choice of the revolutionary path is portrayed as entirely natural and nearly unanimous – a reaffirmation of ancient brotherhood in a new and better, socialist form.

In classic film studies on Soviet cinema – both Russian and international – *Shchors* is widely considered one of its greatest achievements.[34] Dovzhenko himself described it as the most significant work of his life, a "monument to the people and the great Ukrainian October."[35] Today, however, this consensus is increasingly questioned. Critics now point not only to the film's ideological bias – understandable, given its production context – but also to its structural weaknesses.[36] Perhaps the main flaw, at least within the conventions of epic war cinema, is its vague and convoluted portrayal of the enemy. On the surface, the primary antagonists are the followers of the Ukrainian independence leader Symon Petliura, who is exposed as an ally of the Polish elites complicit in exploiting the Ukrainian people. Yet the "Petliurists" seem too weak and lack popular support to be compelling adversaries. Meanwhile, the Germans – potential key foes – are treated with ideological caution, reflecting Soviet cinema's taboo around German themes at the time.

Dovzhenko's film depicts German officers negatively but emphasizes transnational class solidarity among ordinary soldiers who sympathize with the revolution. In a typical scene from the Stalinist era, German privates condemn their own colonel to death in a people's court. Thus, while Shchors fights against, in his own words, "Petliura and the German occupiers," the German troops are ultimately portrayed as fellow working people. In one scene, they and the Red Army soldiers discard their weapons and embrace – a clear message that class bonds outweigh national loyalties.

The Polish headquarters is filled with ornaments of historical imperial power – hussar armor and baroque patriotic paintings. In the sequence's climactic moment, a highly symbolic shot uses a "picture-in-picture" composition: Shchors stands before a battle painting in the style of Jan Matejko (1838–1893,

[34] Vsevolod Pudovkin, Elizaveta Smirnova, "Drogi rozwoju radzieckich filmów fabularnych," in *Film radziecki*, ed. Jan Guranowski (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1951), 36; Rostislav Iurenev, *Historia filmu radzieckiego* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1977), 109–110; Leyda, *Kino*, 354–355.

[35] Oleksandr Dovzhenko, "Avtobiografiia," in *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh*, vol. 1 (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1966), 53.

[36] Liubomir Hoseiko, *Istoriia ukrainskogo kinematografu, 1896–1995* (Kyiv: Kino-Kolo, 2005), 98; Youngblood, *Russian War Films*, 48; Wojnicka, *Dzieci XX Zjazdu*, 152–153.

Polish patriotic history painter), which depicts the Cossack colonel Ivan Bohun fighting a Polish nobleman. Raising his saber, Shchors shouts the order to attack. This is a direct reference to the historical figure of Bohun, the antagonist in aforementioned Henryk Sienkiewicz's novel *With Fire and Sword* who also appears in Savchenko's *Bohdan Khmelnytskyi*. It is no accident that the regiment led by Shchors was named after Bohun – an unambiguous symbol of Cossack revolt against Polish domination. This fusion of temporal layers – similar to the opening frames of *Minin and Pozharsky* discussed earlier – is characteristic of the Soviet historiosophical doctrine of the late 1930s and early 1940s. Shchors becomes Bohun; Bohun becomes Shchors. They merge into a single, transcendent national subject engaged in a perpetual struggle against their eternal enemy: the Polish lord.

Conclusion

As Joanna Wojnicka notes, the Polish theme in Soviet cinema before 1941 "rarely appeared on its own; it usually existed 'in the context' [...] of the Ukrainian and Belarusian themes."[37] The Stalinist discourse of 1939–1941, which was thoroughly essentialist in its approach to nationality issues, defined Polishness primarily in relation to Ukrainianness, and vice versa – Ukrainianness was itself defined mainly by its reference to Polishness. Their mutual relationship was presented as embodying a master-slave model; the narrative framework of all Soviet films from this period thematizing Polish-Ukrainian relations (*Wind from the East*, *Liberation*, *Bohdan Khmelnytskyi*, *Shchors*, *The First Cavalry Army*, among others) was consistently based on the same culture-war pattern: a story of liberating the Ukrainian people from Polish bondage (with fraternal support from Moscow).

The category of Polishness was thus fused with capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, and even fascism. Polish characters were almost exclusively depicted as privileged figures in positions of authority: landowners, industrialists, catholic church hierarchs, officers, and gendarmes. Soviet filmmakers particularly favored using recognizable elements of Polish military iconography from various eras (from hussars' wings to the early twentieth-century square-shaped *rogatywka* cap). Along with recurring motifs (such as lavish Sarmatian costumes and the monumentalism of catholic religious architecture), these visual tropes functioned as symbols of the brutal, state-sanctioned violence essential

[37] Wojnicka, *Prorocy, kapłani, rewolucjoniści*, 135.

to maintaining the Polish political and economic order – a backward construct based on extreme social inequalities whose destruction by the USSR was thus presented as an ultimately moral and righteous act.

On the other hand, Ukrainian (and Belarusian) identity, through the lens of Soviet filmmakers in the 1939–1941 period, was portrayed as one tempered and cultivated in opposition to the oppression of Polish lords – both under serfdom and in its post-feudal forms.[38] Ukrainians and Belarusians were stereotypically identified with the common people, or with an undernourished and severely overworked urban proletariat formed through urbanization processes driven by rural poverty (see the narrative premise of Romm's *Dream*). Soviet films of this period strongly affirmed Ukrainian identity and culture (primarily folk traditions, but also high culture, especially literature). However, Ukrainians and Belarusians were depicted as organically united with Russians – their powerful protectors against Western, especially Polish, colonial expansionism.

While constructing the narrative that sanctioned the imperial policy, Soviet cinema emphasized the cultural and linguistic proximity of these three nations while downplaying the significance of existing differences and divisions. The role of the Cyrillic script was heavily emphasized as a key unifying factor,[39] as was the cultural significance of a shared religious tradition (something unthinkable in the fiercely secular pre-Stalinist era).

All these elements were perfectly suited to "driving a wedge" between the East Slavic nations and the Latinized, catholic Poles. In advancing an ideological narrative designed to meet immediate political needs, Stalin's propagandists ultimately employed the universal framework of all propaganda, a framework tailored to generate both exclusive and inclusive sentiments through its foundational logic: us versus them.

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[38] Although in the Soviet propaganda from 1939–1941 Western Ukraine and Western Belarus were presented together, even a cursory look at the research material discussed here reveals that, quantitatively, the Ukrainian theme clearly dominated over the Belarusian one. This disproportion was likely caused by the Kremlin's belief in Ukraine's greater strategic importance – both in terms of its geographical location and natural resources – as well as in the stronger potential for social resistance among the Ukrainian population. To support this assumption, one may refer to the "statistics" presented in the film *Liberation*. The results of the referendum mentioned in the film stated that 93% of Ukrainians and 96% of Belarusians voted in favor of unification with the USSR. These figures, of course, should not be taken literally as an accurate reflection of public sentiment, but rather as a message to be read between the lines – that reactionary elements were perceived as more deeply rooted among the Ukrainian population.

[39] It is symptomatic that in 1940 the alphabets in the Soviet republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus were changed from Latin or Arabic script to Cyrillic.