

## Identifying the Enemy in Contemporary Russian Film

Let me start with a parable, as befits the Russian tradition, one that is more shocking than edifying.

It's World War II. A wounded soldier is taken to a Soviet hospital. He's in a coma, with terrible burns; arms and legs are gone. A mute hunk of flesh. He's given the best possible care, a nurse's aide is assigned to him, surgeons perform a series of delicate operations. Months go by. He regains consciousness. Then he begins to speak – *in German*, which plunges his whole medical team into a funk.

This bit of Soviet military folklore from the 1940s clearly resonates with the sometimes daunting challenge of identifying the enemy in contemporary Russian film. Who are the good guys? Who are the bad guys? What are the identifying features of the first group? What features are used to encode the second group?

One fact is indisputable: The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the toppling of its communist doctrine have left a yawning hole where once there was an official ideology. Ever since, starting in 1991, a struggle to claim the role of dominant ideology has been underway between two leading contenders. The first is a rather incoherent blend of imperialist thinking, Russian Orthodoxy and elements of “state capitalism.” The second is a more intelligible liberal-democratic ideology based on market and bourgeois values and individual liberties. Each of these competing doctrines has its direct and indirect adherents in the world of Russian film.

For all the striking changes Russia has undergone, the basic Russian instinct for singling out an enemy, for “scapegoating,” is still alive and fully engaged today. It is nurtured by the sentiments of the millions of Russians embittered by the economic

“perestroika,” or restructuring, that left them impoverished, by the suspicious rise of a handful of “oligarchs,” by the protracted war in Chechnya and increasingly frequent terrorist attacks, by rampant crime in the cities and by environmental degradation. Deeply rooted in Russia’s protracted experience of serfdom and intensified by the Bolshevik doctrine of class antagonism, the dichotomous Russian mentality still pulsates to the anxious binary rhythm of Us and Them, Our Guys and Their Guys, Russian and Foreign. In filmmaking, the most intensive efforts to seek and destroy the “enemy” are now being made by two distinct ideological camps: the pro-Putin “new statist” and the nostalgic conservatives, including the neocommunists. In life and politics, these two camps can be sworn enemies, but in the world of film they are united first and foremost by nationalism and pan-Slavism.

One surefire catalyst for identifying the enemy is the war in Chechnya. The war functions as a litmus test for the political and ethical positions of Russian filmmakers. Why?

Because the old pattern that we all knew as the crucial question of revolutionary films – “Who are you for, the Whites or the Reds?” – has been reprojected onto a new reality and become the question “Who are you for, the federals or the Chechens?” Typically, films representing a pro-Chechen position are automatically out of the question in the Russian film industry: no one would even consider funding and producing such a film. What we see instead is the humanistic theme of equal responsibility for the war on both sides and a simply neutral depiction of the rebels – and even *this* is immediately interpreted as unqualified support for them.

This “even-handed” position was visualized by director Sergei Bodrov Sr. in 1996 in his film *Prisoner of the Caucasus* [*Kavkazskii plennik*], a kind of loose interpretation of Leo Tolstoy’s story by that title. Bodrov depicts abstract, generalized Caucasus highlanders, rather than Chechens specifically, and does so with sympathy and compassion. “Both sides are in the right, and both sides are to blame,” the director said of his film. “But when a large country wages war against a small ethnic group, it assumes a far greater share of the responsibility” (*Iskusstvo kino* [*Cinema Art*], 2000, No. 7).

We see the same generalized humanistic position in director Aleksandr Rogozhkin’s war drama *Checkpoint* [*Blokpost*] (1998), which tells of the daily lives of a Russian patrol in a Caucasus “hot spot.” The setting is identifiable, of course, as Chechnya, but the director makes a point of never referring to the republic by name, evidently in the interests of making his story as universal as possible. Rogozhkin’s highlanders do not speak Chechen but rather Circassian, a language common to a number of North Caucasus republics. Both the Russians and the highlanders are portrayed sympathetically. For Rogozhkin, the origins of the war are “a mystery” (*Iskusstvo kino*, 2000, No. 7), and he does not divide his characters into “good” and “bad.”

In Fyodor Popov’s chamber melodrama *Caucasus Roulette* [*Kavkazskaia ruletka*] (2002), a young Russian woman named Anna, a rebel Chechen sniper, and Maria, the mother of a soldier taken captive by the rebels, meet in a train headed for Russia. Anna is trying to get her infant son out of the war zone; Maria tries to get Anna to return her baby to Chechnya – if she does, then the rebels will release her son. Neither mother will give in. Each has powerful arguments on her side; each is partly right, and each partly to

blame. Popov sides with neither one, giving their conflict a sense of tragic indeterminacy. The title, *Caucasus Roulette*, well conveys the film's fatalist mood.

The soldier's mother in Natalya Pyankova's *Slav Woman's March* [*Marsh slavianki*] (2003) is traveling in the opposite direction: into Chechnya. She's going there to free her captive son. When she arrives she learns that another woman, aged 40, has nursed her wounded son back to health but been unable to save her own boy from drug addiction. We see only victims, no enemies, but it is clear from the film's ecstatic poetics that unnamed and undefined enemies certainly exist off-screen, and that they are the malignant forces that have unleashed this gruesome war that is claiming the lives of innocent boys.

The most famous example of the humanist, "balanced" approach to Chechnya is Andrei Konchalovsky's *House of Fools* [*Dom durakov*] (2002). Somewhere in the Chechen war zone is a mental institution which is visited by Chechen and federal forces by turns. The director does not side with either army but rather identifies with a third, passive party to their conflict, namely the inmates of the madhouse. This film is a kind of extended and updated quotation from Andrei Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublyov*: the story of Durochka, the holy fool of the church, who is threatened by raiding Tatars. Only the "Tatars" are now doubled: their function is performed by both the Russian federal troops and the Chechen militants.

The national-chauvinist position is clearly manifest in Aleksei Balabanov's 2002 action film *War* [*Voina*]. But that same position was marked out still earlier, in the mid-1990s, by Aleksandr Nevzorov, a Petersburg-based TV journalist, a muckraker and shrill demagogue. Nevzorov employed a quasidocumentary style to film *Purgatory*

[*Chistilishche*], about the fighting for a hospital in the Chechen capital city of Grozny in January 1995. The director clearly supported the central Russian government's position. To illustrate the depravity and cruelty of the Chechen militants, he has his female snipers on the Chechen side – evidently lesbians from the Baltics – deliberately aim for the genitals of the male federal troops. Nevzorov's Chechens are wild beasts, killing and mauling their prey. And there is only one thing to do about them: they must be destroyed.

Few people recall now that it was Nevzorov, back in 1991, who first precipitated the “ideological revolution” in film with his documentary *Our Guys* [*Nashi*], which gave the concept of national chauvinism its first aesthetic expression. As Soviet troops seized the TV center in the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, in January 1991 and Soviet tanks were deployed on the scene, Nevzorov shot a film that clearly delineated Us and Them. In one shot, Nevzorov puts aside his motion-picture camera and picks up an assault rifle, symbolizing the ultimate degree of solidarity with the “people's cause.” The ethnic and political polarization of the former Soviet Union has led yesterday's liberals and Bohemian artists more and more often to take up arms for a cause. I will never forget a conversation I had with the wonderful Georgian director Temur Babluani, who told me he'd grown to hate the Abkhaz so much that he'd gone off to fight them himself and had fired on them with an assault rifle. Earlier, this director created one of Georgian cinema's most humanistic films, *Sun of the Wakeful* [*Udzinarta mze*] (1992), a film suffused with the idea of all-forgiveness.

In Balabanov's *War*, we see the same black-and-white framework as in Nevzorov – Us and Them – , only complicated by psychological depth, convincing motivations and the significant presence of a third party: foreign hostages. The Chechens

are depicted without the slightest empathy, as cruel and cunning enemies. To drive home the idea that the Chechens are treacherous sadists and nothing more, Balabanov graphically recreates the beheading by knife of a captive Russian soldier. At one point, documentary footage of a similar scene had been posted on a rebel Chechen website. The main Chechen figure, the captor of the main character, Ivan, is also given a monologue certain to especially enrage Russian audiences. The Chechen boasts that he knows his lineage to the seventh generation, that this is *his* land, and that he will fight on until “not there’s not a single Russian left from here to Astrakhan (a city on the Volga delta, which is ancient Russian territory, seized from nomads by the Russian Tsar in the mid-sixteenth century).”

As for the West, unlike *Brother 2* [*Brat 2*] (2000), in which a debased, complacent, oblivious, stagnant, violent and hypocritical America is condemned by Danila Bagrov (the main character) to be wiped out by an ascendant and lawless Russia, *War* portrays the West as neither friend nor foe, but something indeterminate. Both foreign hostages, a British actor and his fiancée taken captive together with Ivan, are passively cartoonish and pathetic figures jerked this way and that throughout the plotline by the powerful will of the young Russian avenger.

I do not mean to simplify and flatten Balabanov’s position by reducing it to an easily discernible primitivism. In fact, as a narrative artist he is far from straightforward. His film *Brother* [*Brat*] (1997), the story of a fair-minded young Russian who devastates the crime organization that wronged his older brother, can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it is a parable of “might for right”; on the other hand, it is nearly a manifesto for Russian fascism. *Brother 2* is a vicious satire on an America that crumbles

beneath the blows of a Russian Rambo. At the same time it is a “double-barreled” parody of both the Hollywood action genre and the Russian folkloric hero – Emelya the Fool – who travels the world astride an oven. But the subject of Chechnya is too serious to ignore the obvious impulses of ethnic hatred that emanate from the film *War*.

Given the dramatic divergence in portrayals of the enemy in Russia's current conflict with Chechnya, it is hardly surprising that the ideological vectors of recent cinematic treatments of World War II – which Russian citizens still regard as the Great Patriotic War – have also diverged widely. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union there was a long hiatus during which this entire topic was regarded as closed and irrelevant. But during the last three or four years several noteworthy films on World War II have been released, each of them with its own distinctive image of the enemy.

Nikolai Lebedev's film *The Star* [*Zvezda*] (2000), the second film version of Emmanuil Kazakevich's story by that title, tells the story of a Soviet scout team suffering heavy casualties on a reconnaissance mission. The film combines the hallmarks of both Hollywood action movies and the Soviet heroic army story; it portrays the Nazis in the finest Soviet tradition – as an impersonal, uniform and alien mass. In contrast with, say, the late Elem Klimov's *Come and See* [*Idi i smotri*] (1985), an apotheosis of hatred for the German fascists, where they are portrayed as insatiable, gleeful ghouls with Boschian, almost paranoid interest in the details of their cannibal practices, for this young director, the Nazis are once again a malignant monolith, a teeming swarm of locusts unworthy of close inspection.

In Aleksandr Rogozhkin's *Cuckoo* [*Kukushka*] (2002) the direct clash of traditional enemies is given a quirky modernist treatment and ultimately turned inside

out. In September 1944 two soldiers, a Russian and a Finn, lock horns on the farm of a Lapp (Saami) reindeer herder, a woman whose husband has been “disappeared” by the authorities. The Russian and the Finn are both renegades and outsiders. The Russian has been falsely charged with anti-Sovietism and barely escaped execution by his Red Army comrades. The Finn is a committed pacifist and intellectual whom the Nazis have dressed in a German uniform, given a sniper’s rifle and chained to a rock, leaving him to die shooting it out with approaching Russian troops. Since the three characters have no language in common, their interactions are strictly carnal. The men sleep with the herder by turns, remaining enemies to one another. To be more precise, their enmity is maintained by the inflexibility of the Russian, who cannot see in this mild former student, a devotee of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, anything but a “Fritz” and a “fascist.” Rogozhkin absolutizes the Russian soldier’s xenophobia, his blind, instinctive hatred for the enemy; he forces him to commit acts that are impossible to motivate convincingly based on elementary laws of small-group behavior. The Russian makes two attempts to kill the Finn, wounding him grievously, despite the fact that the Finn gives him every possible signal of peaceful intentions, signals that can be understood even without a common language. Rogozhkin’s point is to sound the full depth of the zombification of “mass consciousness” under Stalinism, a phenomenon that he treats with wistful irony.

While Rogozhkin insists on Russians’ singular fury toward their enemies, Aleksei German Jr., the son of the famous director, shot a debut film last year, *The Last Train* [*Poslednii poezd*], in which a Nazi is for the first time depicted as an “enemy with a human face.” Elements of tentative humanistic reflections on the occupying army were found in a few scattered Soviet and post-Soviet films, while this tradition as a whole



stems from Boris Barnet's brilliant *Outskirts* [*Okraina*] (1933; US title: *The Patriot*), in which a German POW of the First World War is portrayed as a decent young guy who wins the love of a Russian working-class girl.

As in Rogozhkin's film, German Jr.'s heroes are outsiders in the war. An aging and corpulent German army doctor arrives on the Eastern Front toward the end of the war and finds himself in absolute hell. The Russian winter is raging, the field hospital is in a shambles, officers and soldiers alike are sick, coughing, suffering; Russian bombs fall without letup. If this is the enemy, then it is a helpless and pathetic one. The army doctor enters the war zone together with a staff clerk. We will see the Russian camp as well, represented by a civilian troop entertainment unit – a group of equally wretched, disoriented, ailing and coughing people. The cruelty of both sides' treatment of one another is depicted in German's film as if dictated from on high, by the immutable laws of war, but his characters have no faith in the justice of those laws. Both the Germans and the Russians talk of more or less the same things – of peacetime, of the idyllic past lives stolen from them by the war. Since German Jr. is concerned primarily with the senselessness of war, seen as a “dark Satanic mill” that grinds individuals to dust, he makes a point of demolishing one of the hoariest Russian stereotypes of the German fascist enemy. To paraphrase Pushkin, he urges mercy for all the fallen – whatever their nationality, whosever uniform they wear. I do not expect *The Last Train* to pave the way for similar outings in Russian war films. It is more likely to prove an isolated case of extreme pacifism that would never be allowed to develop into a trend in Putin's Russia.

By contrast, it should be full steam ahead for jingoistic agitprop military and espionage action features like *Man's Work* [*Muzhskaya rabota*], the popular two-part TV

miniseries *Special Forces* [*Spetsnaz*] or the current series *In The Service of My Country* [*Rodina zhdyot*]. What sets this genre apart is its rough-hewn heroes in the Rambo mold and the relocation of its theater of hostilities to the Near and Middle East. Islamic extremism and Islamic international terrorism are now the main suppliers of enemies for Russian film. It is typical for films and series of this kind to portray such attributes of Islam as head- and face-covering garments, prostrated prayer and long beards as inherently alien to the Russian mentality. We see a gradual exoticization of the Other, of an inimical way of life, as described by Mikhail Bakhtin (*Voprosy literatury i estetiki* [*Questions of Literature and Aesthetics*] [Moscow, 1975], p. 251).

It is likewise typical that the increasingly negative interpretation of Islam has been paralleled by the rapid sacralization of Russian Orthodoxy as the “great-powerist” religion of the new Russia. In the absence of any new and intelligible “national idea,” Orthodoxy is obviously being proffered as a surrogate. The series *Special Forces 2* has a subplot about a special forces soldier who joins a monastery after his wife and daughter are tragically killed; he then journeys to Yugoslavia to rebuild an Orthodox church destroyed by Albanian Muslims. Critics, naturally, could make ironical observations about an Orthodox monk/ninja warrior as the paradigmatic superhero of today’s mass Russian culture. But one cannot help being struck by the ferocious, total hostility of this culture’s portrayal of its opponent, hostility suggesting an “ethnic instinct” not intimated since the films made during World War II.

As one would expect, in recent Russian films of a “neocommunist” bent, Russia’s progress toward capitalism is condemned. But whereas in earlier decades capitalism was

viewed as an external enemy, now it is an internal enemy, exulting in its triumph over the honest men and women it has reduced to an underground existence.

In Stanislav Govorukhin's programmatic film of 1999, *The Voroshilov Sharpshooter* [*Voroshilovskii strelok*], three young men lure a neighbor girl into an apartment and rape her. Her grandfather, Ivan Fyodorovich, after giving up on the legal system, buys a rifle with a telescopic sight and metes out vigilante justice. With one shot he castrates one of his granddaughter's molesters; with his next shot he blows up another one's car, leaving him terribly burned; the third molester then loses his mind. The main culprit, a wealthy businessman, runs a string of retail kiosks and speaks in the slang of the prosperous "new Russians." His buddy, a student majoring in "structural linguistics," is obviously an enemy just for pursuing such interests. Finally, the third culprit is the most decent of them all, but very weak-willed and cowardly. Soviet films always used the clothing and mannerisms of negative characters to alert viewers that they were encountering an alien, an enemy. The enemies in Govorukhin's *Sharpshooter* are young men in dark glasses, wearing shorts, with a fitness machine in the room, Western blockbusters and pornography on the television and loud, aggressive rock music playing on the stereo. (The sympathetic heroine sings Soviet songs of the thirties and forties.) They drink tequila instead of vodka. They smoke pot instead of *Belomor*-brand cigarettes. The main culprit buys a brand new BMW, which the broad Russian public views as the ultimate emblem of Western consumerism. In the latest Russian films, the act of locking or unlocking a foreign car with its remote control has become a sure signal that the car owner is a member of the new criminalized business elite, a major player. The odds are 99 to 1 that a character who locks his car by remote control is either a negative or

ambiguous figure. Even if a positive character happens to drive a foreign car, the audience will virtually never see him use the remote. There is something aggressive about that gesture, something that doesn't sit well with Russian viewers.

The familiar, collectivist class antagonism of Us versus Them that served as a refrain for generations of Soviet directors does yeoman service for Mr. Govorukhin as well. "Us" is represented by the poor but honest retired railroad worker Ivan Fyodorovich, his beat-policeman friend – from the same working-class stock – who helps him evade punishment by concealing his rifle, a rough-mannered police captain who hates wealthy and educated scum, and Ivan's granddaughter Katya with her long pigtail symbolizing Russian/Slavic beauty. "Them" is represented by the pro-Western rapists, corrupt government officials and the "new Russians."

Shooting at the genitals of his granddaughter's molester (as in Nevzorov's *Purgatory*), the frequent references to the male role in procreation – all this suggests an unconscious desire on the part of the filmmaker to nip Russia's nascent capitalism in the bud. Physiologism is typical, in fact, of all extreme manifestations of hatred.

Physiological revulsion is sure to be evinced by another "new Russian" in Lidia Bobrova's affecting melodrama *Granny* [*Babusia*] (2003). This story of a neglected old woman who is disowned by her ingrate children and grandchildren is peopled by characters who are far from angelic. But the only figure that the director portrays with unqualified disapproval is a heavyset oaf in a sheepskin jacket, the "new Russian" husband of one of Granny's daughters, who lives in an upscale detached house and drives an SUV. Naturally, we see him locking his car with its remote keypad.

The new enemy – soulless bourgeois pragmatism – can be invisible, as in Vadim Abrashitov's *Magnetic Storms* [*Magnitnye buri*] (2003). We are meant to be deceived, in certain respects, by the feud we see unfolding between two opposing clans of workers, each supporting its “own” patron oligarch. But the scenes of hand-to-hand combat between the clans are as mechanized as a conveyor belt – clearly implying that this entire mass of working stiff is being manipulated by unseen puppet masters. Russia has clearly been duped by the new capitalism and must reconsider what it has to gain from that capitalism and find a solution for mutual enmity.

Gennady Sidorov's film *Old Women* [*Starukhi*] (2003) was a powerful and rare antithesis to all types of social and ethnic intolerance. In 1995, Vladimir Khotinenko's *The Muslim* [*Musulmanin*] had portrayed a Russian POW returning from the war in Afghanistan to his native village after having converted to Islam while in captivity; typologically, this figure is no longer fully Russian, if only for the fact that he does not drink or smoke (and what kind of red-blooded Russian male would give up vodka and cigarettes?). In *Old Women*, in a run-down Russian village where a community of half-destitute old women are living out their days in dilapidated huts, Russian typological fears meet head on with the materialized object of those fears. A family of Islamic refugees from an ethnic conflict in a Soviet Central Asian republic settles in the village. At first, the old women employ the village idiot to torch their house, but then they take pity on the family and become great friends with them. The refugees are enemies, or aliens, only by virtue of such external differences as their language and way of life. In essence, however, they are the saviors of Russian civilization: the male refugee builds a power station and arranges a celebration in the finale in which all the characters get up

and dance together to Eastern rhythms. *Old Women* is essentially an instructive and therapeutic film about Russians managing to overcome their ethnic xenophobia. The real enemy is within these old women, within the Russian mentality, and the sooner it is exorcised and defeated, the closer the Russian nation comes to renewal.

The reflective consciousness of Russia's intelligentsia has grown equally disenchanted with the romanticization of "honest communism," with Western-style democratization, with the rapacious capitalism of the "new Russians" and with the resurgence of a chauvinist Russian Orthodoxy; it is therefore keeping the greatest possible distance from all forms of engagement. In the world of these films no one is just, and no one is to blame, exactly as in the world of Aleksei German Sr.'s *Khrustalyov, My Car!* [*Khrustalyov, mashinu!*] (1998), which depicts the Stalin era as a hyperrealistic fairy tale with elements of black humor and satirical mythology. As Oleg Aronson aptly observed, "this is not so much a film as an anthropological study, or better still, a medical assessment of a disease which afflicts each and every one of us, but which we are unable to fully recognize in ourselves" (*Metakino* [*Metacinema*] [Moscow: AdMarginem, 2003], p. 223).

In certain types of genre film the problem of identifying the enemy is the very thing that drives the plot. One example of this is Pyotr Buslov's *Bimmer* [*Bumer*] (2003), a youth crime drama heavily influenced by Quentin Tarantino in which four young gangster wannabes tour a lumpenized and volatile post-Soviet frontier in a stolen BMW. Since everyone who inhabits this landscape is resentful and treacherous, every new encounter is fraught with potential violence. The four must quickly decide on the basis of clothing and conversational styles whether they're among friends or foes, whether they'll

soon be fighting for their lives or tossing back shots of vodka. Essentially, the heroes of this road movie are constantly testing different social milieus for receptivity. The point of each new contact is to flush out the new person's or group's attitude toward the four main characters. The initial encounter consists of a nearly physiological ritual of sniffing one another out. Make a mistake, and you end up robbed or dead. A second example is Aleksandr Proshkin's *Trio* [*Trio*] (2003), in which undercover policemen drive a truck through Russia's southern provinces, acting as bait for a gang of murderers preying on long-distance truckers. Distinguishing killers from cops proves very difficult in the turbulent Russian heartland. This is not, of course, a problem for Russian society alone, but the fact that Russian directors are now concentrating on it is quite telling. The Russian film industry has grown tired of blurred distinctions between "good guys" and "bad guys" and has decided to exploit this very confusion and fence-straddling as a plot-driving device.

Let us try to sum up, then, at least as far as possible given that we have been examining trends in a state of rapid and contradictory evolution. There have emerged three main discourses of identification of the enemy. The first affirms that the enemy never sleeps: he is here among us, and must be physically destroyed without pity or reflection. The second – that the enemy *is*, in fact, "asleep," that is, he is under cover, unexposed, and must be flushed out and analyzed, to which end society must be constantly on its guard. The third – that in principle there is no such thing as the enemy: the enemy is actually a phantom, a vestige of the past, or if there *is* an "enemy," then he is within each of us, and the sooner we can purge ourselves of him, the better for all concerned. Each of these three discourses has its adherents and promoters in Russian

cinema – and this fact in and of itself is probably all to the good, as an index of pluralism of opinion. If democratization has borne real fruits in today's Russia, look for them in the world of film.

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