

Screening the Gendered Past: Women's Narratives in Russian Historical
Films about Stalin's Era: 1991-2022

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Abstract

Memory politics plays a significant role in contemporary Russian politics. Appeal to the past serves as a tool for the unification of the nation and legitimisation of the Russian government administration in the period between 1991 to 2022. The memory of Stalin is one of the most persistent narratives that the government addresses through a variety of mediums. Historical films and television series are one of the methods that help in constructing the collective memory of the past while drawing parallels to the present. This thesis attempts to examine the content of historical cinematic works about Stalin's era through film analysis, appealing to the notion of conservative values promotion used by the Russian government. It focuses on the construction of female images as an essential aspect of the representation of the past in memory politics. The first chapter addresses the issues of Russian memory politics and the notion of collective memory. The second chapter discusses the Russian film industry, historical film notions, and gender issues in the film. The third chapter includes an analysis of the films and television series and involves the contextualisation of the issues under investigation during Stalin's era. The conclusion presents the summation of the findings and discusses their interpretations in accordance with the previous theories.

Table of contents

Introduction	5
Chapter 1 Collective Memory and Memory Politics in Russia.....	10
Chapter 2 Historical Film and Gender	24
Chapter 3 Film Analysis.....	42
<i>Contextualisation</i>	42
<i>Film Moscow Parade (1992)</i>	49
<i>The television series “Bless the Woman” (2003)</i>	54
<i>Film One War (2009)</i>	58
<i>The television series “A.L.Zh.I.R.” (2019)</i>	62
<i>The television series “Zuleikha opens her eyes” (2020)</i>	67
Conclusion	73
Filmography	77
Bibliography	77
Sitography	83

Introduction

Memory politics is defined as the set of practices that are used by different political agents in order to construct collective memory of a certain country or nation¹. Indeed, in recent years memory politics started to play a crucial role in not only building and unifying nations but also in pursuing certain political ideologies. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 Russian government was left with no notions or concepts that it could offer to people as the tool for legitimisation and unification of the country. From that point on, it became apparent that there was a need to appeal to the past as a tool that would help to create and utilise collective memory to build a sense of continuity and belonging amongst the Russian population. The historical event that seemed to the government most approachable and least controversial was the Second World War (or referred to in Russia as the Great Patriotic War)², and, in particular, the role of the Soviet Union as one of the victorious powers in it. However, at the same time, the appeal to this topic automatically brings up the controversial figure of Stalin, whose role in Russian and Soviet history causes the most controversy and political and historical debates. Moreover, the public discussions and academic studies of Stalin's politics and the totalitarian regime he created started to appear only in the final years of the Soviet Union's existence and needed further exploration as one of the traumatic collective experiences of the Russian population. However, with the rise of Vladimir Putin to power in Russia, the choice of War as the common historical event was reinforced, and the policy towards the conciliatory approach to the national past became the most preferable.

¹ Alexey Miller, "Politika pamyati v Rossii: rol' ekspertnykh soobshestv," (Memory politics in Russia) *Poltia* No. 4, 2015, 215.

² Hereafter I address Second World War as the Great Patriotic War as it is frequently referred to in the Russian case.

Furthermore, it included the image of Stalin and the perception of Stalinism as one of the topics that needed neutralisation and normalisation that would not divide or challenge the Great Patriotic War and its significance in the eyes of the Russian population. Moreover, references to Stalin's epoch brought to light traumatic experiences and memories that called for justice, interpretations, and debates, which were not in the government's interests. At the same time, this policy further accelerated with Vladimir Putin's appeal to the country's past to seek to influence the state of public consciousness to promote conservative values, such as traditional gender roles and national exceptionalism³. Through the beginning of the 2000s and up until the present times, there has been a vivid rise of approval of Stalin's image within Russian society shown by multiple surveys⁴. At the same time, narratives concerning Stalin's image pertain to different social settings starting with the school textbooks and ending with the television series. Therefore, the memory politics adopted by the government successfully build the interpretation of the past, which not only creates the perception of the country's history but also provides a sense of continuity in the present. From that point of view, I am interested in exploring the portrayal of Stalin's epoch throughout the period from the collapse of the Soviet Union up until 2022 because I believe that it can help better understand existing myths around Stalin and his newly gained popularity. In that sense, the appeal to this period as difficult yet important and rewarding with the emphasis on the achievements of the era and sacrifices that led to the victory in the War serves as the reference to contemporary times.

³ Katalin Miklossy and Markku Kangaspuro, *Conservatism and Memory Politics in Russia and Eastern Europe* (Routledge: 2022), 180.

⁴ Andrey Kolesnikov, "Pokhorony Stalina – prodolzheniye. Kak pamyat' o voine I repressiyakh prevratilas' v dva razdelyayushikh diskursa," (Stalin's Funeral – continuation. How the memory of the War and repressions turned into two competing narratives), Carnegie Moscow, Jun 26, 2021, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/84853>, accessed 21.03.2023.

As part of memory politics includes the construction of the collective memory, it is important to underline that the notion of collective memory has a diverse range of meanings due to the coexistence of different approaches scholars take in their exploration of the memory studies field. In this thesis, I define collective memory as a construct within memory politics that serves as the bridge between the past and the present to legitimise specific political aspirations⁵. These perceptions of the past are built using commemorative practices that are embodied in different tools such as literature, museums, national holidays, or films. As films and television series play a significant role in Russian society and act as commemorative practices, in this work, I explore the representation of Stalin's epoch on the Russian screen⁶. For that reason, I appeal to the concept of historical film and its ability to not only portray the epoch it is made about but also reflect and shape contemporary societal beliefs and attitudes. In that sense, it is essential to understand how cinematic works portray the past and what interpretations and narratives they pay attention to and choose to deliver to the audiences. At the same time, the representation of the past in the Russian case frequently occurs through the lens of a male perspective that leaves gaps and does not represent a wholesome understanding of the historical period. For that reason, I am interested in exploring the portrayal of female images in historical films as it is not only a rare occasion when a woman plays a central character in the plot but also because the depiction of female experiences may help to broaden the narratives of the past and include new perspectives in the discussions of it. At the same time, looking at women's portrayals in cinematic works can help to see how the past is constructed within the broader promotion of conservatism by the government. Thus, I

⁵ Aleida Assmann, *Zabvenie istorii – obozřhimost' istoriey* (*The oblivion of history – the obsession with history*) (Novoe literaturnoye obozreniye: 2019), 223.

⁶ Alexander Prokhorov and Elena Prokhorova, *Russian Television series in the Era of Transition: Genres, Technologies, Identities* (Academic Studies Press: 2021), 103.

attempt to analyse the films and television series telling the history of Stalin's epoch from the women's point of view: those that present women as the main heroines, which serves as one of the criteria for choosing films. I also exclude the films that portray the women during the Great Patriotic War, as it falls into the category of Stalin's epoch portrayal because Russian historical-military films are subjects of wider studies on the memory of the Great Patriotic War in Russia. It is also important to mention that the availability of cinematic works dictates the choice of films; I have chosen those that are available for free access on the video platforms like YouTube and online platforms and those that I managed to get an official subscription. In the end, I analyse five cinematic works produced in the period between 1991 and 2022. In this work, I choose the timeline of the films drawing on the argument made by M. Kangaspuro, who states that the positive perception of Stalin's image started during the first presidency of Boris Eltsin (1991-1999) and was further reinforced after Putin's rise to power⁷. At the same time, the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 presents a culmination of Russian memory politics and serves as a borderline that further radicalised as a means of using historical misinformation as a part of the invasion's campaign.

In this thesis, I attempt to answer the following research questions: how do these historical films and television series about Stalin's era portray women, and in what ways do these created images of female experiences, through the appeal to the past, contribute to the support of the Russian government policy? How do these films portray Stalin's era and discuss the narratives belonging to women from that period? Finally, does the appeal to women's experiences open more freedom in the discussion of Stalinism?

⁷ Miklossy and Kangaspuro, *Conservatism and Memory Politics in Russia and Eastern Europe*, 180.

In the first chapter, I address the secondary literature on the topics of collective memory and Russian memory politics to explain the key notions that I draw on in this work. I discuss the memory of Stalinism in the Russian context, looking at its different aspects throughout the timeline from 1991 to 2022. I further address Putin's focus on promoting conservative values and their definition, underlining their alignment with Stalin's era that draws the symbolic continuity between the past and the present.

In the second chapter, I investigate the concepts relating to the Russian film industry and television, taking a brief look at its development and contemporary situation. I discuss the concept of historical film and its specific features that need to be considered when analysing it. Furthermore, in this chapter, I include the necessary appeal to the melodrama genre as it is an essential factor to consider before turning to films. Finally, I address the gender aspect and its role in cinematic works because I examine the representation of female experiences on the screen.

The third chapter attempts to contextualise Stalin's epoch and specific aspects of Stalin's policy, such as gender and national questions necessary for further discussions of the cinematic works and understanding the parallels that can be drawn between Stalin's era values and contemporary government's ones. Moreover, it explores the close readings of the chosen films and television series in the order of their chronic production and release. I attempt to analyse the representation of the women in the films, their relationship within the family settings, the presence of traditional values and gender roles specificities, the depiction of Stalin's era overall, and the appeal to the notion of Russian nationalism where applicable.

Chapter 1

Collective Memory and Memory Politics in Russia

The representation of the past is one of the defining aspects in the process of shaping the collective memory and the understanding of history for a society. This thesis explores historical fiction films as an important factor that influences the perception of history and its actualisation in the present. As the notion of collective memory became “a powerful symbol of many contemporary political and social processes”⁸, and this work draws on the notion of collective memory, it is essential to discuss the development of this concept in academic works. Even though the term collective memory is frequently used in different fields of study, there are still many ongoing discussions on its understanding and exact formulation. I use Olick's definition from the work *The Politics of Regret: on collective memory and historical responsibility*⁹. He states that “collective memory consists of recollections of perceptions about historical past of the politically organised society, which constitute society's ethnocultural, civil and political identities and determine the legitimisation of political institutions”. Therefore, collective memory is the abstract notion that exists not in individuals' memory but in social institutions' settings and may belong to a particular group or groups. Maurice Halbwachs, to whom usually all memory studies scholars appeal when they conceptualise collective memory, with publishing *On collective memory* in 1925, also underlined that “past is a social construction mainly if not wholly shaped by the concerns of the present”¹⁰. There was no initial interest in his work; however, in the period after the Second World War, remembering became a crucial topic in discussing the past and historical events. Since

⁸ Jeffrey Olick, “Collective Memory: The Two Cultures,” *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Nov. 1999), 333.

⁹ Olick, “Collective Memory,” 337.

¹⁰ Lewis Coser, “The Revival of the Sociology of Culture: The Case of Collective Memory,” *Sociological Forum*, Jun., 1992, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Jun., 1992), 370.

that period, the study of the collective memory concept has developed in numerous academic fields, including history, psychology, cultural studies, and others, and has undergone critical examination. At the same time, some scholars believe that collective memory is rather “a poor substitute for older terms like political tradition or myths”, while others find it misleading to use the word “collective”¹¹. For that reason, some authors prefer other terms to collective memory, such as cultural (J.Assmann) or national (J.Winter)¹². In this work, I chose the term collective memory because of its recognisability in the field of historical science¹³. This thesis addresses the collective memory as a part of memory politics in Russia and, therefore, explores the notion of collective memory from the political point of view. Aleida Assmann represents one of the prominent scholars who dealt with the different forms of collective memory and wrote several works regarding the status of memory politics in Germany. Assmann emphasises that collective memory is “political memory that creates such a symmetry between the past and the future that certain memories can legitimise specific aspirations”¹⁴. She further equates collective memory with political or national memory and points out that this type of memory repeats itself with the help of rituals, national holidays, memorials, moral practices, and broader metanarratives. All of them can be seen as forms of commemoration or the socio-political context that shape collective memory. Such memory is usually transmitted through the mediums such as archives, museums, libraries, cinema, and fiction literature¹⁵. What A. Assmann calls commemoration practices, J.

¹¹ Olick, “Collective Memory,” 334.

¹² Jeffrey Olick and Joyce Robbins, “Social Memory Studies: From “Collective Memory” to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 24 (1998), 111.

¹³ Although A. Assmann believes that there is a parallel coexistence of different types of memories which deserve validation, pointing out that such coexistence is possible due to the system of checks and balances that allows mutual control.

¹⁴ Assmann, *Zabvenie istorii – oderzhimost’ istoriey*, 223.

¹⁵ Aleida Assmann, *Novoye nedovolstvo memorialnoi kulturoy (New Discontent with the memorial culture)* (Novoye literaturnoye obozreniye, 2016), 64.

Wertsch, in his works, names “cultural tools” that mediate collective memory and are provided by sociocultural context¹⁶. He, therefore, also underlines the importance of these mediums that serve as ways of spreading ideas that form collective memory. The same position holds P. Verovsek, who states that it is important to understand the “interactive processes”, or in other words, mediums by which certain ideas on the past are conveyed¹⁷. Thus, the mediums are an essential part of collective memory that needs to be explored and analysed. In that sense, the instruments of the historical depiction become an important part of the moulding perception of history and historical events. If in the past this role was played mainly by literature, exhibitions or museum expositions, now cinematic works, such as films and television series that portray historical epochs, have a much more significant and massive impact on the public. When the representations of historical events start to reach a broader level of public attention, people absorb them into their self-image not only as a memory of the past but also as historical knowledge that becomes a part of their perception of the past¹⁸. This is especially true for the historical fiction that constructs historical imagination and collective remembrance while forcing us to reconsider and re-evaluate our current understanding of the past¹⁹. For these reasons, the consideration and analysis of the films that depict forms of the past are essential for understanding the inclinations of collective memory towards certain periods of the past. At the same time, the control of memory and its use as a “form of power, and those people who are in a

¹⁶ James Wertsch, “Collective Memory and Narrative Templates,” *Social Research*, SPRING 2008, Vol. 75, No. 1, 61..

¹⁷ Peter Verovsek, “Collective memory, politics, and the influence of the past: the politics of memory as a research paradigm,” *Politics Groups and Identities*, 4:3, 16.

¹⁸ Assmann, *Novoye nedovolstvo memorialnoy kulturoy*, 55.

¹⁹ Tintti Clapuri, “Spaces of Collective Memory in Contemporary Russian Women’s Historical Fiction,” *Scando-Slavica* Volume 68, 2022 - Issue 1, 46.

position to manipulate memory are in control of this political power”²⁰. Olick states that all the commemorative practices, no matter which forms they take, are mechanisms of political power²¹, and films, especially historical films, also function as a means of political strategy in moulding how and what the audiences remember. This thesis explores collective memory in Russia and how it is constructed through historical films. Therefore, it is necessary to note that in Russia, collective memory has become one of the most important priorities of state policy over the years, with cinematography being one of the cultural spheres included in implementing memory politics²². For further discussion of the films that I chose for the analysis in this chapter, it is essential to provide explanations concerning memory politics in Russia throughout thirty years period span.

This work takes into consideration the period that starts with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and continues up to 2022, which commemorates the invasion of Ukraine that became a culmination in pursuit of the memory politics that was adopted in Russia during this period of thirty years. Moreover, because this work focuses on the place of Stalin's era memory in Russian politics, to explain the choice of the timeframe of the thesis, I address the position of M. Kangaspuro in his chapter on the memory of Stalinism. He states that the positive perception of Stalin, despite widespread opinion, started not after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 but rather already during Boris Eltsin's term (1991-1999) and was mostly reinforced and intensified during

²⁰ Verovsek, “Collective memory,” 10.

²¹ Olick and Robbins, “Social Memory Studies,” 108.

²² Russian Ministry of Culture, “The foundations of the Governmental Cultural policy”, MKRF, 2015, <http://mkrf.ru/upload/mkrf/mkdocs2016/OSNOVI-PRINT.NEW.indd.pdf>, accessed 05.03.2023.

Putin's presidency²³. This observation provides an opportunity to trace the tendency of Stalin's era's revival and development through the historical films and television series produced within the designated period. At the same time, Kangaspuro's statement allows us to understand better the dynamics between Stalin's era perceptions and the parallel construction of certain values, attitudes and beliefs in Russia's politics that align with those of Stalin's era. It means that a new conservative turn that started to develop in Russian politics gradually became an indispensable part of memory politics. Therefore, during the period under examination, attempts can be seen to reconstruct a symbolic continuity between the past, represented in Stalin's epoch, and the present, which I discuss further.

Memory politics is an important concept for this thesis, and therefore, this notion deserves a definition and an explanation of its specificities in the Russian case. In this work, I use the notion of memory politics from A. Miller, who defines it as "the construction of collective memory, or a set of practices, with the help of which different political actors aim to assert particular interpretations of the past events as the dominant ones"²⁴. Nonetheless, the existence of these actors and their ability to spread notions and ideas is highly dependent on the presence of democratic principles in a country that allows the plurality of opinions. A. Assmann notes that while democratic states use popular media or public discourses to form collective participation in the memory-building process, totalitarian states use indoctrination and propaganda²⁵. In that sense, the Russian case is rather interesting as, through the trace of memory politics, it becomes visible that the state in different periods of time used both democratic and authoritarian

²³ Miklosy and Kangaspuro, *Conservatism and Memory Politics in Russia and Eastern Europe*, 180.

²⁴ Alexey Miller, "Memory politics in Russia," 215.

²⁵ Aleida Assmann, "Memory, Collective and Individual" in *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, ed. Robert E. Goodin & Charles Tilly (Oxford University Press: 2006), 212.

techniques of forming collective memory. I attempt to discuss these different attempts further in this chapter by taking a more detailed look at Russian memory politics from 1991 to 2022, with particular attention to the discourse existing around the image of Stalin and his rule.

However, at the same time, before this discussion, it is important to underline the role of Stalinism and explain the choice of this specific historical time. The focus of this work is centred around the memory of Stalinism because the myth around Stalin's period and the perception of Stalin's era in Russian society are heatedly disputable and keeps occupying an ambiguous position in public opinion²⁶. A. Assmann, when writing about the myths existing in memory politics in different countries, notes that in Russia, the central place in collective memory is occupied by Stalin's myth²⁷. It is indeed true that one of the most contradictory topics in Russian history and current collective memory discourses revolves around Stalinism and different scholars on Russian memory politics point out the process of re-Stalinisation as one of the main trends within it. For example, D. Khapaeva underlines that Putinism²⁸ re-activates the historical memory of Stalinism and pays significant attention to the period of Stalin's era, highlighting some narratives over others²⁹. This policy tries to bring back to life some of the values and cultural characteristics attributed to Stalin's era to revive and legitimise them through the appeal to the past constructed by the state as a glorious time. This argument is central to the thesis and needs further explanation through discussing these memory politics.

²⁶ Miklossy and Kangaspuro, *Conservatism and Memory politics*, 174.

²⁷ Assmann, *Novoye nedovolstvo memorialnoy kulturoy*, 26.

²⁸ Putinism here is a form of autocracy that is conservative, populist, and personalistic (M. Steven Fish 2017).

²⁹ Dina Khapaeva, "Triumphant memory of the perpetrators: Putin's politics of re-Stalinization," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 1, 61.

The collapse of the Soviet system left Russian people with no well-defined identity but simultaneously destroyed all the previously existing concepts and views. History and the past began to have many narratives and interpretations that, by and large, unveiled unpleasant truths, some of which belonged to Stalinism. In the aftermath of the announcement of Perestroika (1985) and Glasnost (1986), the newly acquired opportunity to discuss the Soviet past opened the floodgates to the topic of repressions and Stalin's cult. This situation resulted in the publishing of varied materials, from fiction books to newspaper articles to producing films that covered the topic of Stalin's era and what it meant for the Soviet people. Even though the first attempts at opening the discussion on Stalin took place in the 1950s, with the climax point being the XX congress of the Communist party (1956), where N. Khrushchev read the famous report on the "Cult of Personality", it did not have any significant repercussions. Moreover, the topic was again censored after Brezhnev's rise to power, considered a period of "re-Stalinisation". Thus, the significant change in the interpretation of Stalin's era, alongside opening the archives with the data on the topic after the announcement of Perestroika and the further collapse of the Soviet Union, ignited new debates within the society. The interest in Stalinism and repression was reflected in the popularity of published journals writing about the latest discoveries of historians on the topic, while the number of copies of Solzhenitsyn's "Gulag Archipelago" reached more than 2.2 million³⁰.

The appearance of freedom of speech and the abolition of censorship overwhelmed the new Russian state with novel ideas and views that gained popularity and spread across the country. However, the gap left by the Communist ideology was not filled with any solid, versatile, and unifying notion, creating chaos in a society that was not ready to revise and reconsider its past. The lack of an appropriate agency to direct an emerging discussion further aggravated the

³⁰ Maria Ferretti, "Memory disorder," *Russian Politics & Law*, Volume 41, Issue 6, 2003, 43.

situation. At the same time, the Russian government strived for legitimisation through the appeal to the past to justify their holding power. Moreover, during this period of economic turmoil and political disappointment, there was a general sense of nostalgia for the stability and strength of the Soviet era. Thus, in the mid-1990s, the search for a unifying idea for the Russian population started establishing itself through the memory of the Great Patriotic War. Already in 1995 there was held the first military parade on the Red square in the new Russian state, laying the foundation of the new yearly tradition of the parades on the 9th of May. The role of Stalin in the War and the Soviet victory was indispensable, and already that fact further reinforced the image of Stalin as a Great Leader and not a tyrant responsible for many political crimes. Even though the popularity of Stalin and his image were still very low, the more or less positive attitudes towards the ruler began to rise³¹. B. Khavkin points out that already during the presidency of B. Eltsin, there was a rise in Stalin's popularity, partially due to acknowledgements of his role in the War³². At the same time, there was also a growing recognition of the atrocities committed under Stalin's regime, including the purges, forced labour, and mass executions that led to the deaths of millions of people. Some Russian intellectuals and activists began to call for greater recognition of these crimes and a more critical engagement with the legacy of Stalin³³. However, this push for greater historical awareness was not widely embraced by the Russian government or the broader public. Many Russians continued to view Stalin as a heroic figure and symbol of national strength, and there was a general reluctance to confront the darker aspects of Soviet history.

³¹ Miklossy and Kangaspuro, *Conservatism and Memory politics*, 178.

³² Boris Khavkin, "Novaya populyarnost Stalina: rol' Stalinisma v processe pereosmysleniya proshlogo v postsovetskoy Rossii" (New Stalin's popularity: the role of Stalinism in the process of reinterpretation of the past in the post-Soviet Russia), *Forum of the new Eastern European history and culture*, No.1, 2012, 121.

³³ Alexey Miller and Maria Lipman, *Istoricheskaya politika v XXI veke (Historical policy in the XXI century)* (Novoe literaturnoye obozreniye: 2012), 334.

With V. Putin becoming President of Russia in 2000, pursuing a memory policy that would discredit all the criticism and opposition to the authorities but simultaneously defend the current government dramatically increased. Such attitude found its expression in the tendency to emphasise the positive aspects of Russian history while downplaying or ignoring negative aspects was the main approach³⁴. N. Kopusov writes that in the Russian case, memory politics turned into the fundament of new Russian ideology, and the new concept of collective memory strives to simplify memories, tries to deprive these memories of multiple meanings, and attempts to destroy any interpretational pluralism³⁵. This approach has been driven by a desire to bolster national pride and promote a sense of national unity while promoting the comeback of traditional values associated with “true Russian identity”. The new policy aimed at the reconciliatory approach towards the past, especially the Communist Soviet past, which would allegedly allow people to come to terms with some of the new information discovered and open to the public after Perestroika and during the “dashing 90s”. The importance of restoring “national pride” and returning to “traditions” was the pillar of the adopted policy. At the same time, there were approaches to finding reliable references to authority figures in the past that represent the “glorious past” of the Russian state. The proposed figures, such as Peter the Great or Stolypin, were not accepted by the population as they were too remote and not closely enough related to the present day³⁶. For that reason, Roginsky believes that Putin's government decided to opt for the figure of Stalin, whose role in the Great Patriotic War appealed to the most uniting topic of

³⁴ Miller and Lipman, *Istoricheskaya politika v XXI veke*, 351.

³⁵ Nikolay Kopusov, *Pamyat strogogo režhima. Istoriya i politika v Rossii (Strict Regime's Memory. History and politics in Russia)* (Novoye literaturnoye obozreniye: 2011), 256.

³⁶ Arseniy Roginsky, “Fragmented memory. Stalin and Stalinism in Present-day Russia,” Eurozine, March 02, 2009, <https://www.eurozine.com/fragmented-memory/>. accessed 15.03.2023.

the past amongst the Russian population. The new trend in the memory of Stalin was to alleviate the political crimes, justify them through the appeal to the country's industrialisation needed to win the War and shift focus from the Gulag and repressions to the victory over Nazism³⁷. Sherlock suggests that the Russian government played a significant role in promoting a positive image of Stalin and praised his role in defeating fascism during the Great Patriotic War³⁸.

This use of the War further facilitated as a part of the defensive policy that Russia adopted after the Eastern European countries' "memory boom"³⁹. During Putin's first two presidential terms, these countries' attempts to overcome past tragedies and traumas inflicted by the Soviet regime became a cornerstone disagreement in their relationship with Russia, accelerating the turn to more authoritative approaches in Russian politics⁴⁰. One of the most significant events that considerably impacted Putin's approach to memory politics was the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004. The most prominent example of this approach is embodied in the new series of textbooks that were written in 2007 (so-called Filippov's Affair), where the formulations and attitudes towards the most contradictory past events, such as Stalinism, tried to as much as possible smooth Russian history's most entangled events⁴¹. This process is mostly referred to as the "normalisation" of past events that, in the words of the authorities, is a necessary measure

³⁷ Todd Nelson, *Bringing Stalin Back In: Memory Politics and the Creation of a Useable Past in Putin's Russia* (Lexington Books: 2019), 13.

³⁸ Thomas Sherlock, "Russian politics and the Soviet past: Reassessing Stalin and Stalinism under Vladimir Putin," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Volume 49, Issue 1 (2016), p. 52.

³⁹ Memory boom here is defined as the intensification of commemorative practices (D. Blight).

⁴⁰ Khavkin, "Novaya populyarnost Stalina," 122.

⁴¹ Thomas Sherlock, "Confronting the Stalinist Past: The Politics of Memory in Russia," *The Washington Quarterly*, Volume 34, 2011 - Issue 2, 99.

that prevents instability and chaos in people's minds. In the words of A. Roginsky, “this certain image of a happy past was needed to consolidate the population, to restore the continuity of the authority of state power”⁴².

Another important milestone in Russian memory politics occurred during the presidency of D. Medvedev, despite the overall tendency to liberalisation attributed to his time of rule. It was the creation of a special committee in 2009 under the supervision of the President called “Commission to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia’s Interests”, which was aimed to fight the falsification of history. At its core, the organisation’s goal was to protect the government's historical policy and silence the organisation’s voices like “Memorial” that attempted to raise conversations within the society about the difficult past, especially about Stalinist purges. Even though the commission did not achieve any outcomes and, in 2012, was dismissed, it became a sign of the government’s desire further to facilitate its control over certain images of the past⁴³.

With the third presidency of Putin, the start of the War in Ukraine in 2014, and the Russian annexation of Crimea, persistent memory policy on topics related to Stalin and the Great Patriotic War definitively persisted, and a clear course toward conservative changes became clearer than ever⁴⁴. It led to the closing of different memorials and museums related to Stalin's repressions⁴⁵,

⁴² Roginsky, “Fragmented memory”.

⁴³ Miklossy and Kangaspuro, *Conservatism and Memory Politics*, 187.

⁴⁴ Miklossy and Kangaspuro, *Conservatism and memory politics*, 180.

⁴⁵ One of the examples is represented in the story surrounding the Perm-36 Museum, which was built on the former site of the Gulag camp. The museum was forced to change the administrative staff and the exhibitions it possessed, along with the overall narrative related to Stalin’s repressions and conditions of the Gulag camps.

new laws that regulated discussions of the Great Patriotic War and the Soviet role in it⁴⁶ and the overall enhancement of censorship. Moreover, the unification of the Russian population under the agenda of the Great Patriotic War also enhanced the turn to the national question that started in the first Putin's presidency. The politics towards Russia as a historical state were not framed in the sense of ethnicity, but rather "as a civilisation based on Russian culture and values that were adopted in minority nations"⁴⁷. This appeal to the mission of the Russian people in uniting the multinational country gradually became one of the frequently mentioned agendas already at the beginning of the 2000s. However, the rhetoric changed in 2012-2013, when Putin started to underline the role of Russians, the Russian language and Russian civilisation as state-forming elements⁴⁸. This element of conservative turn was solidified in the new amendments to the Russian constitution in 2020 when the Russian language was proclaimed a "state-forming". This policy shows that even though there is a clear appreciation of the multinational features of the Russian state, the stress on the role of Russia and all the elements associated with it occupies quite significant space both within specifically memory politics and governmental politics overall.

The popularity of Stalin, therefore, was exponentially growing after 2014. In 2016, according to a "Levada-centre" survey, approximately 28% of Russians agreed that Stalin was "an irreplaceable and distinguished" leader. Another "Levada-centre" survey from 2020 found that 43% of Russians believed that Stalin's role in Russian history was positive, while in 2021, the percentage

⁴⁶ The list of criminal acts nowadays includes not only rehabilitation of the Nazism but also deliberate public dissemination of false information about veterans of the Great Patriotic War, that insults the memory of defenders of the Fatherland, humiliating the honour and dignity of a veteran of the Great Patriotic War. The law envisages imprisonment for up to five years or a fine of up to five million rubbles.

⁴⁷ Miklossy and Kangaspuro, *Conservatism and memory politics*, 177.

⁴⁸ Miklossy and Kangaspuro, *Conservatism and memory politics*, 177.

of people finding Stalin one of the best leaders in Russian history reached almost 56%⁴⁹. The results of these surveys demonstrate that the memory politics adopted by the government throughout the given period has had a significant impact on the Russian population's perception of the past. Therefore, it is essential to analyse the mediums, or in other words, commemorative practices, that played a role in promoting the perception of Stalin's era along with conservative values attributed to that period.

Since I have mentioned conservative turns in Russian politics, it is necessary to define what conservatism means and represents in the Russian case and what features are attributed to it. Conservatism in Russian memory politics is defined here as a certain interpretation of history that revolves around choosing specific events and periods of history that fit with traditional values and culture as the government promotes them in contemporary times. The main features of these politics that M. Kangaspuro identifies are a traditional understanding of the family structure and gender roles, national values, and national exceptionalism⁵⁰. In this thesis, I focus on these aspects of conservatism and how they are promoted in the historical films under analysis. As these features represent the main pillars of the conservative turns in Russian memory politics, examining how they play out on the screen is essential.

In this sense, I argue that the constant appearance of Stalin's era memory in Russian memory politics through diverse mediums is not necessarily connected to Stalin himself but rather to the conservative values that the period of his rule represents. The appeal to Stalin's era within general Russian memory politics allows the government to draw a line of continuity between Russia's past and present, appealing to the "glorious" times while conveniently using conservative notions of

⁴⁹ Kolesnikov, "Stalin's Funeral – continuation".

⁵⁰ Miklossy and Kangaspuro, *Conservatism and memory politics*, 175.

this time that serve well to the current state agenda. This concept of conservatism is central to the thesis as it explores how the historical cinematic works depict Stalin's era in a way that correlates with the memory politics agenda used by the government, focusing on women's representation. The promotion of "old-new" traditional values⁵¹ that, from the government's perspective, sustain certain images of the Russian state through the appeal to historical periods may be particularly observed through the appeal to cinematic works. Therefore, it is important to address the issues of film and gender representation in films, as this is one of the core aspects of this thesis.

⁵¹The traditional values here prescribe family and maternity as the main priority of women, establishing a norm of what constitutes femininity within the overall conservative paradigm.

Chapter 2

Historical Film and Gender

In this work, films present as a part of commemorative practices that shape the collective memory of Stalin's era while simultaneously serving the agenda of the overall policy in the state. As M. Mwakalinga argues, after the invention of the cinema and its proliferation in every country worldwide, cinematic works became one of the important aspects of nation-building and creating collective memory while providing parallels to present-day reality⁵². At the same time, filmmakers play a vital role in the decision-making process and express their views and ideas on the topics they portray. In this thesis, I take into account the role of individual opinions of the authors of films; however, since the films and television series under analysis were produced with the help of state funding and were released on Russian federal television channels, I assume that final cinematic works align with the government policy or at least try to fit within the general framework of portraying the past. I use the argument made by S. Norris, who, in his analysis of Russian historical films, claims that all the “filmmakers, producers, screenwriters, composers, and other people involved in the cinema industry all attempted to articulate their vision of a “patriotic” film”⁵³.

The collective memory shape in Russia is highly dependent on the cultural representations of different epochs through books, theatres, museum exhibitions, and other mediums. At the same time, with the increased role of television and cinema, cinematic works play one of the leading roles in serving as a medium for opening the debates on the Soviet past⁵⁴. However, before

⁵² Mona Mwakalinga, “Cinema and nation formation in Tanzania,” *UTAFITI*, Vol. 11, No. 1/2, 2014-2015, 86.

⁵³ Stephen Norris, *Blockbuster History in the New Russia: movies, memories and patriotism* (Indiana University Press: 2012), 16.

⁵⁴ Marlene Laruelle, “The “Russian Idea” on the Small Screen: Staging National Identity on Russia’s TV,” *The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 22, no. 2 (2014), 319.

discussing the features of historical films and the specificities of their genre, it is important to outline the status of Russian cinema during the period under analysis, especially the genre of historical or national films, as they are the primary focus of this thesis.

After the collapse of the Soviet system, the film industry experienced many hardships, as all the other industries had to adjust from a state-controlled economy to a market orientation. In the Soviet Union, the industry fully ran on the support from the state that not only financed the films but also was responsible for their release and distribution. After 1991 the state funding of films significantly declined, which resulted in many filmmakers being unable to secure any financial resources for funding the production of their films. Even though there were several attempts from the Filmmakers Union and film critics society, the state was not interested in developing the film industry at the time. At the same time, already in the period starting from 1994, still with the presence of economic turmoil and financial crisis, specific genre films, such as war films, historical films, or adaptations of Russian literature, started to gain financial support from the government in a much easier way than any other genre⁵⁵. Such a turn of the state towards the allocation of funds to the mentioned genres of films demonstrates that the process of the government's acknowledgement of the potential of cinema as a valuable resource for spreading certain values and ideas started. During 1995-1996 two important events occurred in the development of the Russian film industry. Cinema Fund was created in 1995 for the support of the national cinema. This Fund is also responsible for releasing and distributing films and television programmes. In 1996 "the Law on the Cinema" was passed, and the industry began to be subsidised again by the government; however, the law's impact was limited "due to legal

⁵⁵ Jasmin Gorp, "Inverting film policy: film as nation builder in post-Soviet Russia, 1991-2005," *Media, Culture & Society* 33(2), 2011, 249.

deficiencies”⁵⁶. M. Lee divides filmmakers of the time into two camps: the young filmmakers who started experimenting with different genres and modes of films and those who saw the film as “a mission”⁵⁷. The latter especially resonated with N. Mikhalkov, who stressed the necessity to revive the Russian film industry because he saw it as a need “to create the myth of a Russian national hero in order to regain a spirit of patriotism that bonded the Soviet Union in the past”⁵⁸. The same attitude was expressed within the Goskino organisation⁵⁹, where one of the Board of Governors stated the necessity to raise the funding for the film industry, naming cinema “the chief ideology of a nation”⁶⁰. S. Norris claims that 1998 can be seen as the year of the “birth of Russian history films” as he points out the rise of discussion on the revival of Russian cinema. Thus, it is possible to point out that one of the main ideas that started to develop in the Russian film industry starting from the second half of the 1990s was the promotion of patriotism, history, and conservative values that “represent true Russia”⁶¹.

Despite the detrimental situation that the film industry faced at the end of the 1990s, after Putin’s arrival to power, a much more attentive approach was taken to the cultural sector, specifically to

⁵⁶ Birgit Beumers, “Cinemarket, or the Russian Film Industry in Mission Possible,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 5 (Jul., 1999), 873.

⁵⁷ Moonyoung Lee, “Nostalgia as a Feature of “Glocalization”: Use of the Past in Post-Soviet Russia,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 27:2, 166.

⁵⁸ Beumers, “Cinemarket,” 893.

⁵⁹ Goskino organisation of the Russian Federation was created in 1992 in place of the Goskino committee that existed in the Soviet Union and, in 2004, became a part of the Ministry of Culture.

⁶⁰ Gorp, “Inverting film policy,” 251.

⁶¹ Norris, *Blockbuster History*, 14.

the film industry and television sectors, as he recognised the role of the cinema in nation-building purposes⁶². Therefore, the state control over the film industry also increased, especially with cinema becoming a part of the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture⁶³. Therefore, the Russian film industry was revived with the rising support from the state. The production of films increased three times between 2004 and 2012⁶⁴. However, to receive funding from the government or be supported, films have to be “social”⁶⁵. Another institution created in 2008 to support national cinema was the Council for the Development of Russian Cinema. Putin, at that time not a president but a First Deputy Minister, was appointed the council's chair, and the institution operated to support films related to the topics of war, history, and young children's films⁶⁶. Currently, the funding for films that are considered to be social and patriotic and, therefore, deserve subsidising, comes from the Russian government through the support from Cinema Fund and the Ministry of Culture. N. Petrushenko points out that promoting pro-government ideas and patriotism became an important task for the Russian government, especially after the neglect towards the film industry in the 1990s, and historical films played a

⁶² Lars Kristensen, *Postcommunist film – Russia, Eastern Europe and World Culture* (Routledge: 2014), 15.

⁶³ Gorp, "Inverting film policy," 249.

⁶⁴ Mutluer Oğuzhan, "History in contemporary Russian cinema: Patriotic Dreams, Complicated Memories" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Ihsan Doğramacı Bilkent University, 2021), 13.

⁶⁵ Gorp, "Inverting film policy," 252.

⁶⁶ Oğuzhan, "History in Contemporary Russian Cinema", 15.

crucial role in reviving the Russian Film industry⁶⁷. This thesis analyses not only the films produced or distributed with some support and funding from the government.

At the same time, the film industry is also greatly involved in television series production. This thesis takes into analysis not only the films produced in post-Soviet Russia but also television series, as television plays an essential part in popular culture, especially “in Putin-era Russia, and is, in a way, the culmination of a long Soviet – now Russian – era of television”, as it came to dominate Russian cinematic space⁶⁸. Moreover, compared to the cinema, television series have become one of the most popular forms of mass media and the main content on Russian television as they occupy around one-third of broadcasting, and the government-controlled channels boast high production values for the television series⁶⁹. Television, in general, became the most popular form of mass media, leading to the appearance of the expression “TV drama as a national idea”⁷⁰. In the present time, the main Russian TV channels that broadcast within the territory of the Russian Federation are under “direct or indirect control of the government”, with three main channels being NTV, Channel One (Perviy canal) and Russia-1 (Rossiya-1), that occupy 43 per cent of the ratings⁷¹. Russia-1 is owned by the state agency VGTRK (All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company); Channel One’s ownership is shared between

⁶⁷ Miklossy and Kangaspuro, *Conservatism and memory politics*, 32.

⁶⁸ Prokhorov and Prokhorova, *Russian Television series in the Era of Transition*, 8.

⁶⁹ Prokhorov and Prokhorova, *Russian TV series in the Era of Transition*, 103.

⁷⁰ Lee, “Nostalgia as feature of Glocalisation,” 167.

⁷¹ Lee, “Nostalgia as feature of Glocalisation,” 167.

the government and private companies that are affiliated with the government⁷², while NTV channel belongs to Gazprom-Media, which also presents a company controlled by the government⁷³. In this work, I examine television series released on the mentioned television channels; therefore, it is important to underline their ownership and funding. The television series under analysis were subsequently released on each channel. Thus, the series “Bless the Woman” (2003) was released on Channel One, the series “A.L.Zh.I.R” (2019) was released on NTV, and “Zuleikha opens her eyes” (2020) was released on the channel Russia-1.

Another note should be made concerning the proliferation of digital platforms in Russia⁷⁴ that became popular throughout the 2010s⁷⁵; however, in this work, I only take into account those television series that was shown on the main federal TV channels and, therefore, exclude those series that are available for watching online.

Because of the influence, proliferation and popularity of the Russian television series and the special attention that the government paid to the control of television, it becomes essential to include the television series in the analysis of how historical television dramas depict the past. Even though the conditions for creating films and television series are not quite the same, including television series seems indispensable when talking about cinematic works that shape the

⁷² National Media Group and VTB Bank.

⁷³ Irina Grigor, “Weaponised News: Russian Television, Strategic Narratives, and Conflict Reporting” (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Helsinki, 2020), 23.

⁷⁴ Such online platforms like IVI, Amediateka, Okko, and more.tv.

⁷⁵ Prokhorov and Prokhorova, *Russian TV series in the Era of Transition*, 8.

collective perception of history. Thus, M. Wijermars emphasises that “in the Russian case, TV and cinema are overlapping spheres of cultural production and best analysed together”⁷⁶.

As the historical cinematic works present the focus of this thesis, I discuss the definition of the historical film and its main features and underline the main points that need to be taken into account when analysing historical films.

The historical fiction film is one of the main pillars in the contemporary historical policy adopted by governments worldwide. The effect of historical fiction films, whether intended or not, “is to create, change, and preserve the collective memory of a people or nation”⁷⁷. When discussing the purpose of historical films, the universally accepted notion states that the historical feature film not only portrays the epoch it is made about but also reflects and shapes society's contemporary beliefs and attitudes. Historical films are vastly imprecise and, in many cases, inaccurate. However, the purpose of this genre is not to depict the past in detail, which is what documentary films do, but rather to reconstruct, capture and explain the emotional impact of the historical epoch or events. P. Sorlin points out that “historical film is an indicator of a country's basic historical culture, its historical capital”⁷⁸. Historical cinematic works present selective and creative use of facts rather than “fact-based” historiography. At the same time, cinematic works are inevitably prone to factual inaccuracies due to condensation and production limitations⁷⁹. When analysing

⁷⁶ Mariëlle Wijermars, *Memory Politics in Contemporary Russia: Television, Cinema and the State* (Routledge: 2018), 29.

⁷⁷ Paul Grainge, *Memory and popular film* (Manchester University Press: 2003), 13.

⁷⁸ Pierre Sorlin, “How to Look at a Historical Film,” *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*, edited by Marcia Landy, 25–49. London: The Athlone Press, 29.

⁷⁹ Ofer Ashkenazi, “The future of history as film: apropos the publication of *A Companion to Historical Film*,” *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, Volume 18, 2014, 291.

films and television series, it is essential to consider that historical films adopt special narratives and frequently choose to follow the development of the plot rather than pursue facts and accuracy of actual historical events. However, exactly the features of the historical film, such as dramatic music, emotional storytelling, and star power, become a “powerful force in the process by which the meaning of history and past is focused, interpreted and sedimented in a particular culture”⁸⁰. In that sense, the quality of the historical film as the fictional work presents itself as a powerful instrument for spreading a memorable emotional message that the audience could conceive in a much easier way rather than the documentary mode films.

Robert Rosenstone, one of the prominent scholars of history and film, underlines the importance of historical films to engage audiences with the past and encourage them to reflect critically on key historical events. Rosenstone points out that historical films are never “purely” historical but are always shaped by the cultural and political contexts in which these films are produced. It means that historical films are always present as subjects of a range of competing interpretations and narratives which reflect the larger cultural and political contexts in which they are produced⁸¹. In that sense, Rosenstone’s position echoes the argument about films belonging to the form of commemorative practices, or cultural tools, that simultaneously shape the perception of the past and reinforce the promotion of certain agenda of the period in which these films were created. A similar point makes O. Ashkenazi, who emphasises that historical film participates in political discourse and provides information on the ideological biases of the society in which films are produced and consumed⁸². However, historical films also possess the power to convey history that

⁸⁰ Grainge, *Memory and popular film*, 15.

⁸¹ Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (Routledge: 2013), 156.

⁸² Ashkenazi, “The future of history as film,” 294.

“deviates from the conventional views and introduces alternative perspectives into mainstream public discourse”⁸³. This is an important quality of the historical film as in the pursuit of a compelling and thrilling plot, the filmmakers turn to some narratives that address some historical issues which otherwise would not become a piece of common knowledge, especially if the topic itself is controversial. However, that does not necessarily mean that broadening the narratives includes rejecting certain attitudes and agendas. In that sense, however, including the female perspectives as the plot-driving main characters is particularly essential in historical films as it allows to broaden the overall perception of the past and, despite preserving certain ideological turns, attempts to expand the narrative beyond male perceptions. It is important to note at the same time that historical films construct a special relationship with the past for the audiences while, at the same time, these films operate within the already existing cultural discourses⁸⁴.

When analysing historical films, different approaches can be used to examine them: looking at history as film, film as a philosophy of history, film as an agent of history, and film as history⁸⁵. In this thesis, I discuss historical films as the agents of history that explore how these cinematic works depict certain historical events and how they can influence the political or social perceptions of the past and present for the viewers of the films.

In Russia, historical films have played an important role in shaping collective memory and identity.

In one of the surveys conducted in 2001 on the topic of the most common sources Russian people use for broadening their knowledge of history, 60% of respondents answered this

⁸³ Ashkenazi, “The future of history as film,” 294.

⁸⁴ Jonathan Stubbs, *Historical film: A critical introduction* (Bloomsbury: 2013), 19.

⁸⁵ Oğuzhan, “History in Contemporary Russian Cinema”, 34.

question, pointing out fiction films⁸⁶. S. Norris, in his book about post-Soviet historical films, also points out that historical cinematic works, which often are sponsored by the government or shown on national television, have played a significant role in shaping collective memory in Russia⁸⁷. Due to these factors, cinematic works are one of the most prominent mediums in understanding the past for Russian audiences. Moreover, there was an increased production of films depicting the Soviet Union's history. One of the statistical works regarding the topics of history covered in cinematic works shows that most of the historical films released in Russia during the last thirty years covered the period of the Soviet Union, reflecting the recent past on the screens⁸⁸. Another statistic claims that the number of Russian films whose plot takes place in the Soviet times reaches approximately 10% of all Russian films released on cinematic screens⁸⁹. E. Isaev emphasises that "all the tragedy shown in the cinema is largely concentrated on the representation of the Great Patriotic War, neglecting any conversation on the 1920-1930s"⁹⁰. Thus, even though it needs to be taken into account that the majority of the films from the Soviet period are war films depicting the events of the Great Patriotic War, the percentage of historical

⁸⁶ Rudolf Pikhoya, "Istoricheskaya pamyat' naseleniya Rossii: materiyaly sociologicheskogo issledovaniya," (The historical memory of the Russian population: the materials from the sociological surveys), *Otechestvennaya istoriya* (National history), No.3, 2002, 201.

⁸⁷ Norris, *Blockbuster History*, 17.

⁸⁸ Elena Kharitonova, "Television and Cinema as informational channels of Formation of the historical memory on political repression in the USSR." *Contemporary scientific thought*, 2018, 150.

⁸⁹ A. Dupak, "The image of the Soviet man in Russian films: a sociological analysis," *Saint-Petersburg State University Journal: Sociology*, Issue 4 (2019), 390.

⁹⁰ Egor Isaev, "Istoricheskaya politika v Rossii: reprezentatsiya Stalinskoy epokhi v populyarnom kinematografe," (Russian Historical policy: representation of Stalin's epoch in the popular cinema), *Zhurnal issledovaniy social'noi politiki* (The Journal of Social Policy Studies), No. 3, 2015, 397.

films within all released Russian films serves as confirmation that history on screen is perceived as an important instrument in memory politics in Russia.

Most films that fall under the category of historical films and television series are made in the genre of melodrama, in which the lives of individuals, lovers and families “are depicted as they are buffeted by the larger forces of history”⁹¹. All the Russian and Soviet historical cinematic works that I chose for the analysis in this thesis belong to the genre of melodrama, be it films or television series. Therefore, it is essential to address certain features and conventional aspects of the melodrama genre to consider these characteristics during the analysis of the films in subsequent chapters.

Even though melodrama is frequently perceived as a derivative genre that “hardly deserves the status or critical attention”⁹², it is one of the most popular genres in the cinematic world. Melodrama films are known for their intense emotional content and focus on romantic relationships and family drama. They include exaggerated emotions and heightened dramatic tension and often use music to evoke strong emotional responses from the audience. These qualities of the melodrama genre build a special attachment for a viewer and solidify the impression of the film, creating certain associations and memories of what has been seen. More specifically, melodramas depicting the Stalinist epoch could be placed in a specific subgenre. They have historical settings, depicting history on the scale of families as their lives are transformed by historical events over which they have no control. The attention melodrama pays to depicting some major events on a smaller scale is one of the most important characteristics of melodrama.

⁹¹ Peter Pozefsky, “Russian gangster films as popular history: genre, ideology and memory in Pavel Lungin’s *Tycoon*,” *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* Volume 2 Number 3, 2008, 301.

⁹² Patrice Petro, *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany* (Princeton University Press: 1989), 27.

It allows the audience to associate themselves with the story that unfolds on the screen and creates a sense of familiarity. M. Larulle points out that “it is this reloaded history, not interest in historical accuracy, displaying above all feeling and characters, that plays a major role in reshaping views of the past”⁹³. Thus, even though historical accuracy is one of the factors that are still essential for the historical film up to a certain point, as, for example, with adherence to the appropriate costumes, settings and other decorative elements, the most important part in the actual process of creating certain memory belongs to the melodramatic mode. In the case of historical films, Alison McKee suggested that using melodrama suggests an alternative way of constructing history, especially when using a gendered perspective to tell a certain story from the past⁹⁴. This note is essential to the thesis as it explores the depiction of specifically female perspective in the historical films about Stalin’s epoch.

I turn to the female experience depicted in cinematic works as a representational strategy that broadens the understanding of Stalin’s era on the screen. In many cases, when a film includes women, it frequently happens for the sake of simply having a female in the film as a stock character role. Such a limited range of portraying women on the screen leads to the “audiences learning hidden curriculum of favouring the male point of view as the paradigm”⁹⁵. However, it is

⁹³ Laruelle, “The “Russian Idea,” 320.

⁹⁴ Kendra Bean, “Cinema History: That Hamilton Woman,” Vivandlarry, February 16, 2011, http://vivandlarry.com/classic-film/cinema-history-that-hamilton-woman/#_edn6, accessed 15.05.2023.

⁹⁵ Cicely Scheiner-Fisher and William B. Russell III, “Using Historical Films to Promote Gender Equity in the History Curriculum,” *The Social Studies*, 103:6, 2012, 222.

necessary to explore the focused representation of women on the screen, shifting the narrative authority onto the female protagonists⁹⁶.

The appeal to women's perspectives is essential in exploring historical representation in any form of the medium. Baer Hester writes in his work on German post-war cinema that even though men and women suffer similarly from the traumas of history, they have different gendered modes of dealing with the past and present while working through the experience and problems they have encountered⁹⁷. He suggests that there is a necessity in depicting women in the roles of protagonists on the screen as it allows to situate them simultaneously as "the subject of the gaze and as the enunciator of the film's narrative at both the thematic and the formal level of the film"⁹⁸. In that sense, looking at the films that situate the plot through the main female character provides an opportunity to engage with women's experiences on a much broader level than when the women play the role of an additional character to the main male protagonist. P. Petro emphasises that "there is a need to focus on specifically feminist interpretation in the historical film", as she points out that gender representation still deserves more attention in this field⁹⁹. The same position holds J. Merrill, who underlines that there has been a consistent under-representation of women in Russian cinema, especially in the period of the 1990s and 2000s¹⁰⁰.

⁹⁶ Baer Hester, *Dismantling the dream factory: gender, German cinema, and the postwar quest for a new film language* (Berghahn Books: 2009), 145.

⁹⁷ Hester, *Dismantling the Dream Factory*, 89.

⁹⁸ Hester, *Dismantling the Dream Factory*, 84.

⁹⁹ Petro, *Joyless Streets*, 223.

¹⁰⁰ Jason Merrill, "Gender and nationality in Iurii Kuzin's *The Ark*," *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*, 3:3, 2009, 346.

The focus on the female perspective in cinematic works allows the female agency to be at the centre of dramatic sequences and, therefore, leads to the representation and exploration of new topics that belong to strictly female experiences that are frequently left out of the focus¹⁰¹. The appeal to these films presents itself as one of the ways to trace the turns to a conservative agenda with the attempts to show women in their “redomesticated” roles, devoted to their families and ready for self-sacrifice, where all these components are depicted as the inherent women’s status¹⁰². Moreover, regarding the specifically Russian case, V. Sukovataya addresses the issue of representation in popular culture of Soviet gender politics and its influence on the construction of public and personal consciousness¹⁰³. In that sense, attention to the transfer of gender identity and its portrayal is essential for building the bridge between the past and its remembrance in the present.

This thesis aims to investigate an under-represented group as females in historical films about the Stalinist era. Such choice of focus stems from a fact that when taking into account that when learning history, be it through literature sources or audio-visual materials, the default points of view and narratives always focus centre on male perspectives, leaving women out of consideration. When historical films put women in the roles of protagonists and examine a different viewpoint, the one that goes beyond the default male one, it allows to open new discussions on the already familiar stories but with a new fresh perspective or unveil the historical

¹⁰¹ Prokhorov and Prokhorova, *Russian Tv series in the Era of transition*, 15.

¹⁰² Hester, *Dismantling the Dream Factory*, 154.

¹⁰³ Viktoriya Sukovataya, “Ot “Maskulinnosti travmy” – k “Maskulinnosti nevroza”: gendernaya politika v sovetskoj I postsovetskoj massovoy culture,”(From the “Masculine trauma to Masculine neurosis: gender politics in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Mass Culture), *Zhurnal socialno-gumanitarnykh issledovaniy* (Journal of Socio-humanitarian Studies), No. 5, 2012, 39.

events and narratives that were kept in the dark all along, filling in the details about the women's fates.

Several factors defined the choice of films for the analysis. Firstly, the films under investigation include those that portray women during Stalin's rule. Therefore, the films included in the analysis use women as the main protagonist while also paying special attention to the affairs within the family, extended or nuclear; their experience with motherhood; and women representing different ethnic backgrounds. Such a choice is justified because most of the historical films produced on the topic of the Stalinist era and the repressions take a look at the representation of Stalin himself as a historical figure or his immediate circle; others follow the representation of Gulag or focus on the male figures as the main protagonist. At the same time, as this thesis draws on the notion of conservative values that are promoted as a part of memory politics in Russia, I decided to focus on two main aspects of what is understood by this conservative turn: gender roles, especially within the family structure, and national exceptionalism within which "Russianness" is promoted as the unifying concept. Moreover, as R. Salys puts in her article about Russian television, these historical films "encode Putin-era values pertaining to gender, class, and sexuality as a Stalin-era legacy, inscribing its values into post-Soviet cultural space"¹⁰⁴. In this sense, fictional narratives serve as a useful tool that allows accomplishing the establishment of these values and, therefore, deserve special attention. This work aims to focus on the groups and themes frequently underrepresented in the literature but nevertheless help shape certain perceptions or narratives about the given historical period. Moreover, the focus on more female-oriented stories and family-life agenda is of special importance as these two topics help to imagine the everyday reality and the life of society on a micro-level rather than focusing on the broader context of political affairs that are frequently discussed. At the same time, the focus on the representation of

¹⁰⁴ Prokhorov and Prokhorova, *Russian TV series in the Era of Transition*, 91.

different nationalities in the films opens up a further conversation that is especially relevant given the promotion of national exceptionalism ideology promoted by the Russian government in the frame of the invasion of Ukraine.

At the same time, one of the most popular genres of historical films in Russia during the period under analysis, military films about the Great Patriotic War, are excluded in this work for several reasons. Firstly, the representation of the War in cinematography has been broadly subjected to analysis, while films about Stalin's period of peacetime fall into the attention of researchers much rarer. Secondly, the use of the Great Patriotic War in Russian memory politics is a different complex issue within the wider construction of the so-called “invented traditions” and building of the united nation that I do not intend to consider as a part of my analysis. Thus, I do not include Russian films about the Great Patriotic War; however, it includes a film, “One War”, that depicts the experience of women at the end of the War but discusses it within the frames of subsequent fates that women face in the Stalin’s policy towards women who gave birth to the children from the German soldiers.

Therefore, I will focus on two themes in the next two chapters: the representation of women from the perspective of gender roles and the appeal to Russian national values and exceptionalism. These thematic discourses also influenced the film choice apart from the abovementioned reasoning. It is also essential to point out the factor of availability of films online, which impacted the choice of the films, as access to some of the television series and films are not available on the legalised online platforms or through free video platforms such as YouTube.

In this thesis, I apply the method of narrative analysis to the cinematic works under investigation. The narrative analysis presents a widely used way of approaching film analysis to examine and

interpret storytelling techniques, narrative structure, plot, characters, and the themes employed in the films. In that sense, such analysis allows a better and deeper understanding of how historical events are portrayed and presented to the audience. Such an approach can help shed light on the film's ideological stance and how it constructs historical narratives or challenges existing perspectives. Moreover, the recurring themes or motifs in the films under analysis can help explore the messages and values promoted in cinematic works.

However, this methodology has several limitations that need to be pointed out. Firstly, the approach helps to identify certain patterns and interconnected themes, but at the same time, it cannot provide certain cause-effect relationships and, therefore, cannot determine how much and in what ways cinematic works impact society. Secondly, even though the approach recognises the importance of visual metaphors, cinematography, and sound design, it relies on the narrative structure, characters' evolution and themes in the cinematic works. Finally, this approach encompasses a certain level of the subjectivity of an author conducting the analysis and, therefore, may depend on the author's personal beliefs and preferences.

In this work, I argue that focusing on the female perspectives in the cinematic works under examination allows to broaden the narratives about Stalin's era and brings out some of the topics that are not included in the films depicting males as the main protagonists in the plot. Moreover, I try to explore how female heroines frame the history of Stalin's era while at the same time serving the promotion of the conservative values that the Russian government tries to preserve as indispensable through their attachment to Stalin's era. I believe that even though the presented cinematic works promote, in one way or another, conservative values that became one of the pillars of Putin's policy within the overall memory politics, the gender space allows for more freedom in the discussions of Stalin's era past while also opening up the conversations on the

narratives that are largely neglected or not spoken of enough. At the same time, I aim to analyse how these historical cinematic works depict women's experiences and in what way these experiences fit into the promotion of the Russian government's policy. Therefore, the research questions that I attempt to answer in this thesis are: how and in what ways do the created images of women in the films about Stalin's era, through the appeal to the past, contribute to the moulding and support of the national model of a woman and her place in the society in contemporary Russia? How do these films portray Stalin's era and discuss the narratives belonging to women from that period? Finally, is the appeal to women's experiences open up more freedom in the discussion of Stalinism?

Chapter 3

Film Analysis

Contextualisation

In this chapter, I attempt to contextualise the themes that I am looking at through the chosen films, that is, women's representation in family settings and nationality-related narrative, through the policies of Stalin and compare them to the promotion of conservative values as it persists in the politics of the contemporary Russian state. The theme of wifehood and motherhood is essential to the thesis as the conservative values' focus of the work addresses first and foremost the issue of gender roles, in which women have quite a defined place of being a "keeper of the hearth". Such a choice of theme becomes especially relevant due to the implementation of a new policy by the Russian government in 2015 named Programme of a State Family Policy in the Russian Federation for the Period up to 2025 ("Kontseptsii gosudarstvennoi semeinoi politiki v Rossiiskoi Federatsii na period do 2025 goda")¹⁰⁵. The main aim of this policy centres around the preservation of "traditional Russian values" in the sphere of family life. The adoption of this programme serves as the culmination of the already-started process of the restoration of "conservative values and the moral discourse in general"¹⁰⁶ that started at the beginning of the 2000s. In this context, addressing the portrayal of female protagonists within the family context presents an important angle for exploration. However, as this thesis looks at how this contemporary policy finds a way of representation in the historical films about Stalin's era, it is essential to discuss the status of women in family settings through this period.

¹⁰⁵ Prokhorov and Prokhorova, *Russian Television series in the Era of Transition*, 139.

¹⁰⁶ Elena Stepanova, "Everything good against everything bad": traditional values in the search for new Russian national idea," *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik (Journal for Religion, Society and Politics)*, Issue 6, 2022, 2.

During Stalin's rule from the mid-1920s to his death in 1953, women in the Soviet Union were encouraged to participate in the workforce, and overall, gender equality was promoted as part of the state's ideology. One of the most significant advances for women during Stalin's era was the expansion of educational opportunities and subsequent entrance for women into professional careers and taking on leadership roles, which influenced their independence and ability to rely on income outside of their husband's support.

At the same time, Stalinist policies aimed at preserving traditional family values and encouraging women to take on domestic roles, which led to expectations of women to fulfil their roles as wives and mothers in addition to their careers. Ziva Galili points out "the reappearance of the "cult of the family" during the time of Stalinist rule when "women entered the sphere of "social" production at a time when their "domestic" production could not be dispensed with", especially when comparing it to the status of women as it was promised during the Revolution¹⁰⁷. At the heart of this vision was the idea of the traditional, patriarchal family, with a male breadwinner and a female homemaker responsible for the care of children and the home. Such policy led to the phenomenon in which women, even though they were awarded equal rights as men, had two working shifts in practice: one at their workplace and another at home¹⁰⁸. Moreover, L. Attwood, in her work on the analysis of women's magazines in Stalin's era, concludes that one of the propagated ideas about women's status was that "women's 'greatness' could derive exclusively from the support and devotion they bestowed on their husbands"¹⁰⁹. Such an attitude of the state towards women was embodied in article 58, which stood for anti-Soviet activity. In many cases,

¹⁰⁷ Ziva Galili, "Women and the Russian Revolution," *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol. 15, No. 2/3 (1990), 123.

¹⁰⁸ Aleena Karim, "Gender and Political Dynamics: A Comparative Study of Joseph Stalin and Vladimir Putin's Era," *Slavonica* 2020, Vol. 25, No. 1, 44.

¹⁰⁹ Lynn Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Woman: Women's magazines as Engineers of Female Identity: 1923-1953* (Macmillan Press: 1999), 130.

state traitors' wives were accused of aiding and abetting their husbands and were often subjected to interrogation, imprisonment, and other forms of persecution.

Becoming a mother was one of the most important roles that the state promoted as almost an obligation for every woman. Therefore, motherhood was highly politicised and emphasised during Stalin's era. To this end, the Soviet state implemented a range of policies to encourage women to have children and support them in their role as mothers. For instance, there were maternity leave provisions¹¹⁰, state-funded childcare facilities, and subsidies for larger families. At the same time, after the influx of many families from the peripheries and villages as a result of policies of collectivisation and industrialisation, “services fell far behind, and it was to the family, mostly the wife and mother, that the task fell of feeding, clothing, and rearing present and future workers”¹¹¹. Women were expected to be responsible for raising children and keeping the households, while men “seem to have had virtually no obligation in relation to their children”¹¹².

The idea of motherhood was a celebration topic in official propaganda, with Soviet mothers being depicted as the symbol of the future of the Soviet state. Thus, the state even developed a new understanding of the “hero mother”, who was seen as a symbol of resilience and strength in the face of adversity. In the pursuit of promoting motherhood, in 1936, the state prohibited abortions, depicting women who had abortions “as immoral and anti-social elements”, leading to women having no choice but to take responsibility for the family¹¹³. Such policies led to many women struggling to reconcile their own experiences of motherhood with the idealised image

¹¹⁰ Even though it is important to note that already in 1937, maternity leave was cut from sixteen to nine weeks right after being introduced in 1936.

¹¹¹ Galili, “Women and the Russian Revolution,” 124.

¹¹² Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Woman*, 129.

¹¹³ Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Woman*, 125.

presented by the state. Their lives, according to the propagated ideas, were dedicated to being responsible workers while simultaneously being outstanding mothers. From that point of view, women felt as if they “were responsible for the state of their families as much as for the state of the state”¹¹⁴.

Therefore, even though women successfully gained more freedom after the Revolution, during Stalin’s period, there was a turn to conservative values and traditional gender roles that propagated not only a woman’s service to a country as a dedicated worker but also as a devoted mother and wife that is responsible for the future of the Soviet state. L. Atwood believes that during this period, “an unreconstructed conception of gender difference continued to exist alongside proclamations of gender equality”¹¹⁵. Understanding these policies regarding women in the domestic setting is essential to this work and presents the ambiguity towards women’s status in the Soviet society of Stalin’s period. However, what is even more important to underline in this sense, is the parallels drawn in one of the works on comparative analysis of gender dynamics during Stalin’s and Putin’s eras. Thus, A. Karim concludes in her analysis that “the emphasis on motherhood and familial responsibilities of women serves as one of the factors that unite the policies of these two periods”¹¹⁶. In this sense, I look at the chosen films through their representation of women’s experiences of wifehood and motherhood within the context of Stalin’s era. In my analysis, I underline the aspects of this context and its representation on the screen.

¹¹⁴ Karim, “Gender and Political Dynamics,” 45.

¹¹⁵ Attwood, “Creating the New Soviet Woman,” 113.

¹¹⁶ Karim, “Gender and Political Dynamics,” 50.

As the conservative values that I appeal to in the first chapters consist of traditional values and national exceptionalism, it is also necessary to underline the national policy under Stalin as it is an essential aspect of the representation for my analysis.

J. Merrill points out that national identity in Russian memory politics is inseparable from gender in post-Communist Russia¹¹⁷. In this sense, it appears essential to examine the intersection of gender and the national question in the films that depict the female gaze. The rise of nationalism discourse and the appeal to Russian people as the “state-forming” appeals to the same concept of conservatism as I defined in the first chapter, which highlights national exceptionalism as an essential part of the country's unification under the Russian “cultural code”. This contemporary policy line in Russia resonates with Stalin’s epoch national policy, and as this thesis examines the historical films about Stalin’s era through the representation of nationalities, it is important to consider what Stalin’s policy consisted of and how it is characterised. In that sense, I appeal to D. Brandenberger’s point of view. He demonstrated in his analysis of national policy in Stalin’s era that “Stalin viewed the Russian nation as a “state-bearing people,” the backbone of the Soviet Union’s multi-ethnic society”, emphasising on the vivid presence of “Stalin’s russocentrism”¹¹⁸. In that sense, it is important to look at how films portray “Russianness” in Stalin’s epoch and how they use other non-Russian nationalities in this context of representation.

Overall, Stalin's policy towards the national question consists of contradictory approaches. There can be seen an official promotion of the idea of a “friendship of peoples” that aligns with the national policies in the Soviet Union adopted in the 1920s with its appreciation of different ethnicities and celebration of unity. However, at the same time, Stalin’s era also engaged in

¹¹⁷ Merrill, “Gender and Nationality,” 348.

¹¹⁸ David Brandenberger, “Stalin’s populism and the Accidental Creation of Russian National Identity,” *Nationalities Papers* Vol. 38, No.5, September 2010, 729.

policies that pursued forced assimilation and suppression of cultural and linguistic diversity. From that point of view, Stalin's policy toward national question and approach to Russia-centrism can be divided into two phases: the early days of his rule and the years from the beginning of the 1930s that were gradually leading to the War years. Thus, in the early years of Stalin's rule, he pursued a policy known as “indigenisation” (korenizatsiya), which “resulted in a more ethnically diverse communist party leadership and the creation of national republican elites”¹¹⁹. This policy aimed to promote the development of national cultures and languages within the Soviet Union. It resulted in the proliferation of local languages and cultures as part of embracing the diversity of the country and further reinforcement of this approach through the establishment of native educational institutions and publishing houses¹²⁰. Local languages were provided with official status, and efforts were made to promote education and cultural activities in these languages, which led to the rise of a new intelligentsia from various nationalities. However, D. Marples claims that already after the announcement of collectivisation, Stalin, in particular, feared “non-Russian insubordination” and that it had a “clear national dimension”¹²¹. He underlines that Moscow tried to “control and Russify republics from the end of the Civil War but was just interrupted by the policy of indigenisation”. The same opinion holds A. Tuminez stating that “under Stalin, the Soviet regime practised “ethnocide,” claiming millions of victims through forced collectivization, dekulakisation, and mass deportation”¹²². This especially was clear with the displacements of different nationalities, such as the Crimean Tatars, Chechens, Ingush and others. In this sense, the conclusion that scholars on Stalin’s nationalism reached consensus in the fact

¹¹⁹ Veljko Vujacic, “Stalinism and Russian Nationalism: A Reconceptualisation.” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 23:2, 159.

¹²⁰ Vujacic, “Stalinism and Russian Nationalism,” 160.

¹²¹ David Marples, “Stalin: authoritarian populist or great Russian chauvinist,” *Nationalities Papers* Vol. 38, No. 5, September 2010, 751.

¹²² Tuminez, “Nationalism, Ethnic Pressures and the Breakup of the Soviet Union,” 97.

that the policy of indigenisation was, most probably, an attempt to balance the necessity of national representation and promotion of Soviet rule in the peripheral territories to gain support from groups like intelligentsia under control from the centre.

However, a clear and certain turn to a more Russia-centred policy happened in the mid-1930s, with the overt assimilationist policy that underlined loyalty to the Soviet state above anything else. Stalin's rhetoric changed, and he started to increasingly appeal to the "great" Russian people"¹²³, downplaying the focus on the promotion of national identities. The Russian language was provided with greater prominence and became a mandatory subject for all the Russian nationalities in schools and the main language of communication in the Red Army, along with the change of perspective in the new textbooks that gave Russians a "special role in the "gathering" of the Soviet nations"¹²⁴. Appeal to Russian nationalism amplified during the Great Patriotic War, with Stalin underlining the role of Russians in the war and conducting further mass deportations of the nationalities that he accused of collaborationism with the Nazis, resulting in the loss of ethnic minorities' homelands for the decades to come. Concluding Stalin's approach to the national question, I appeal to V. Vuajacic, who stated that Stalin was "was offering his audience "Soviet Russian nationhood as a collective identity to be proud of and presenting the socialist-building enterprise as a Russian mission in world history"¹²⁵.

This idea of the unification of people under Russia, which persisted in Stalin's policies, is one of the most recurring rhetoric in Putin's perception, which became especially visible after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In that sense, examining the presence and representation of the nationalities

¹²³ Marples, "Stalin: authoritarian populist or great Russian chauvinist," 754.

¹²⁴ Vuajacic, "Stalinism and Russian Nationalism," 169.

¹²⁵ Vuajacic, "Stalinism and Russian Nationalism," 167.

in the Russian cinema and television series presents an important task as it allows to develop a better understanding of the attempts to construct a notion of national exceptionalism in contemporary Russia. In the films under analysis, I attempt to trace how this context is represented in the films and underline the parallels of Stalin's rhetoric with the portrayal of national exceptionalism on the screen.

Film Moscow Parade (1992)

The film "Moscow Parade" (in the Russian version named *Prorva*¹²⁶) was made by director I. Dykhovichiy depicts the story of the main heroine Anna who comes from an aristocratic family but is married to an NKVD officer. The shifting of focus to gender relations within the portrayal of Stalin's era was, at the time, a novel way to discuss the traumatic experiences of the past. The director himself, in one of the articles where he explains the idea behind the film, underlined that for him, "the catastrophe of Stalin's era is not about the social problems. Oddly enough, for me, the catastrophe is the gender issue"¹²⁷. In the analysis of the film, I focus on the main aspects of the main female character representation that the film plot revolves around.

One of the first opening scenes immediately grasps attention as it shows the sexual assault that Anna (Ute Lemper) experiences from her husband's commander. The scene sets up the overall atmosphere of the film as the rape occurs during the cheerful gathering of a group of friends and colleagues of her husband (Aleksandr Feklistov). This atmosphere persists throughout the film and appears as the absurd festivity in the setting of traumatic and tragic events in the life of the main heroine and the women surrounding her. It presents the coexistence of the two realities: the one in the background of the film, with its portrayal of athletes' parades and concerts of folk

¹²⁶ It has a meaning in Russian of pit or abyss.

¹²⁷ Ivan Dykhovichniy, "Prorva," *Ekran* (Screen), 1992, № 10, 13.

choirs, and the one with Anna's personal life where she is an abandoned woman whose whole family was murdered by the regime with the husband, whose only concern is on the upcoming military parade. This juxtaposition of the reality of the regime and its feigned embodiment that surrounds the narrative conveys Stalin's epoch in its colours of hidden personal suffering, especially embodied in women's experiences, and triumphant cover of the Soviet "happy life". In this sense, the film underlines the atmosphere of Stalin's epoch life and sheds light on its duality of it, criticising the totalitarian regime for its neglect and destruction of gender relationships.

The film splits Stalin's world between women and men and makes a sharp contrast between their experiences. In the multiple scenes, men present as centred on their service to Stalin and their motherland, trying to avoid disfavour and punishments; they only see women in the sexual "bodily" light and do not grant them any subjectivity, while women attempt to apathetically search for love and attention with no regard to from whom they can attain it.

This dichotomy is persistent in the line of Anna and becomes especially evident in the scene with the confrontation between Anna and her husband when she accuses him of neglect towards her rape. The husband's position comes down to one phrase: "Nobody raped you; you are just an aristocratic prostitute"¹²⁸. The scene abruptly ends with the husband receiving a work call and not paying any more attention to the wife or the emotional fight they had, leaving Anna in the middle of a mental breakdown. The only times' Anna's husband interacts with her throughout the film are connected to his appeals to her to behave and "not embarrass him", as in the scene when she chooses to sing in a foreign language instead of some Russian patriotic songs¹²⁹. In the film, Anna

¹²⁸ 44 minutes.

¹²⁹ 21 minutes.

brings to light men's attitudes to women, saying that "they all sleep with me, and they all do not see me; I can die, and none of them will ever notice"¹³⁰. Vividly, these scenes demonstrate the break of the ties between men and women in Stalin's era, underlining that "a woman does not have the right to claim a central place in the life of a man for whom family and love do not have the same importance as the recognition of other members of the "male brotherhood"¹³¹.

Even when Anna accidentally meets Gosha (Evgeniy Sidikhin) at the train station and pursues a romantic relationship with him, we see only her attempts to build some substantial connection. This perception is embodied in Gosha's complete silence and the inability to hear him speaking to Anna or sharing any of his life with her, while one of the most powerful speeches in the film Anna gave when talking to Gosha about her trauma and past: "They killed all of them, all of my relatives, and I have to live with them and share food with them now"¹³². We only hear Gosha speaking when he accuses Anna of enjoying her role as the victim, indifferent to her earlier revelation about men's abuse over her powerlessness and the disgrace she feels towards herself, exclaiming, "I bet you like to say that you were raped when you actually cannot wait for him to call on you again"¹³³. The scene ends with his attack on Anna, in which she eventually loses her eye. This situation solidifies the inability of a man to enter a woman's world of suffering from the system and other men around her, Anna's exposure to Gosha, with whom she felt some connection, led to his defensiveness and aggressive behaviour instead of the support or sympathy that she expected to gain. This line again underlines the separateness of the male and female

¹³⁰ 37 minutes.

¹³¹ Viktoriya Sukovataya, "From the "Masculine trauma to Masculine neurosis," 42.

¹³² 40 minutes.

¹³³ 57 minutes.

world, which, especially in Stalin's promotion of masculine power, leaves a woman lost in navigating this new space.

The film's ending, however, leaves the sense that woman's happiness is only achieved through belonging to the right man, as in the final scene, Anna saves Gosha from prison even after he attacked her and leaves her with only one eye. Even though he cannot offer her anything more than silent listening and staying with her whenever she feels the need to be loved, she chooses to stay with him because, for her, he is the only male figure in life that grants her some affection and provides the sense of masculinity that she did not experience with other male figures in her life. In this sense, the film diminishes Anna's independent personality and reduces it to the quite stereotypical template of a Russian woman's fate when she accepts "the best out of worst": she does not stay alone and owns her freedom from the husband who was executed by the regime he dedicated his life to but chose to stay with a person who gives her the sense of belonging.

The film critiques Stalin's totalitarian regime for its destruction of gender relationship connections, portraying Stalin's indifference to the fate of a person within the much more global and substantial importance of the state. It moreover demonstrates the abandonment of women's fates in the context of growing masculinity and men's indifference and atrophy of feelings towards female fates. The film does not portray traditional values but rather presents them as impossible to exist within a space in the totalitarian regime where the connections between genders are mutilated and are subjected to the men's submission to the state's totalitarian depersonalisation, and women's inability to cope with the male shifted values. However, simultaneously, the film's cross-cutting theme of the stereotype of a woman's necessity to rely on the man by her side and the portrayal of women in the paradigm where "to be loved and

appreciated was supposed to be enough”¹³⁴. In that sense, the film rather stresses women as those who had to adapt to the changed role of a man in Stalin’s regime while pursuing the same realisation of the same attributes of a woman: love, security, and reliance on the male authority.

The film received widespread praise in the main Russian cinematographic journals. Critic and director O. Kovalev even called *Moscow Parade* “the best and most talented film ever made about Stalinism”¹³⁵. While there were many debates over the ways the film “propagates Stalin’s culture”¹³⁶, the critics from major journals like “Seans” or “Cinema Art” perceived the film as “a strange mix of delight and disgust which depicts the reality of Stalin’s era”¹³⁷, while acknowledging that Dykhovichniy’s film “has elements of the love-hate relationship” towards the epoch. In that sense, the film highlights the epoch’s most prominent characteristics, showing the beauty of Stalin’s time with its never-ending celebrations and parades while also highlighting “the horror of indifference towards people’s fates in the face of the personality cult”¹³⁸. Therefore, the film produced discussions over its approach towards depicting Stalin’s era and how it presented the period through the appeal towards uncanonical characters and sexual affairs of the main heroine. However, the overall critical perception of it converged in the opinion that the film is one of the first works that portrayed Stalin’s epoch not only in depicting violence and repressions but through elaborating on the rupture of relations between the two sexes.

¹³⁴ Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Woman*, 113.

¹³⁵ Susan Larsen, “Melodramatic masculinity, National Identity, and the Stalinist Past in the post-Soviet Cinema,” *Studies in 20th Century Literature*, Vol. 24, Iss.1, 2000, 114.

¹³⁶ Zhanna Vasilyeva, “Ivan Dykhovichnyi. Shosse v nikuda,” (Ivan Dykhovichnyi. The highway to nowhere), *Isskusstvo Kino (Cinema Art)*, August, 2006, <https://old.kinoart.ru/archive/2006/08/n8-article10>, accessed 05.06.2023.

¹³⁷ Mikhail Trofimenkov, “Prorva-prorva,” *Seance*, August 04, 2014, <https://seance.ru/articles/prorva-prorva/>, accessed 05.06.2023.

¹³⁸ Elena Gracheva, “Prorva,” *Seance*, May 29, 2011, <https://seance.ru/articles/prorva/>, accessed 05.06.2023.

The television series "Bless the Woman" (2003)

The television series "Bless the Woman" appeared both in the cinema in a shortened version and later on television in the form of four episodes. The film received no significant attention, and the box office fees were very low. However, the television version of the film was quite a success¹³⁹. In my work, I am looking at the television version because I believe it includes important to this analysis details. Director S. Govorukhin, in the film's opening line, states that it is dedicated to "Our grandmothers and mothers", allegedly implying that the story depicts a typical Russian woman's fate in the historical period.

The series starts in 1935 when the main heroine, Vera (Svetlana Khodchenkova), meets a military officer, Aleksander Larichev (Aleksandr Baluev) and decides to marry him, despite her very young age of only 17 years old and not spending any substantial time together. From the beginning, the series sets up Vera's character as an obedient and weak-willed woman who has no other options except to marry off to a person who is ready to take her. However, as the plot moves on, more and more apparent becomes the confrontation between Aleksander's destructive masculine energy and Vera's feminine inclination to peacefulness, love, and family values.

As Aleksander is a military man, the family frequently moves from one military base to another, with Vera being responsible for creating a home in each place they go. Aleksander straightforwardly defines the responsibilities in the family, stating that "the duty of the wife is to keep the house and cook the meals" while also claiming that the "husband's right is to see his wife not crying but happy and fresh, and wife's right is to be loved"¹⁴⁰. The series emphasises the man's

¹³⁹ "Bless The Woman": Actors And Reviews About The Film," Atomiyme, <https://en.atomiyme.com/bless-the-woman-actors-and-reviews-about-the-film/>, accessed 07.06.2023.

¹⁴⁰ Episode 1, 28 minutes.

belonging to the country and not to the family when Aleksander sends Vera for an abortion because, for him having a child disrupts his main duty as a man to be at the disposal of his country, even though the families of each military base have more than one child. In this sense, Aleksander's character presents a true patriot devoted to the country and putting it in the forefront, while his wife dutifully follows his line. He does not allow personal feelings or emotions to appear and prohibits Vera from expressing them. This rigidity and rejection of familial ties are underlined in the scenes when Aleksander's son from the first marriage had to come and live with Larichev's family. As soon as Vera affectionately takes care of the child, Aleksander expresses his contempt, saying she "needs to stop that silly feminine stuff"¹⁴¹. Vera's existence becomes fully controlled and dictated by her husband's will, in which she not only has to adapt to the patriarchal way of life but also reject the roles within the traditional values setting where a woman plays the role of mother. Simultaneously, how Vera accepts her circumstances resonates with self-sacrifice and devotion as the only way for a woman to fulfil her role in Soviet society. In that sense, she serves the state through her service to her husband. The only times she can express herself come during the War when Aleksander goes to the frontline and Vera works as a nurse in the hospital while she pursues her duty to her husband and the state.

At the same time, the series points out Stalin's repressions, its destructive influence on the Red Army and the failed Finnish campaign of 1940. However, these events happen only in the background of the storyline and serve mainly as an explanation for the toughness of Aleksander's character and depict him in the role of a true devoted patriot who acknowledges the wrongdoings of the system but continues to serve the country which is especially vivid in his conversation with Vera that happens after Stalin's death: "I went to a war not for him [Stalin] but

¹⁴¹ Episode 2, 17 minutes.

for you and my Motherland”¹⁴². Only in this conversation, some revelation can be seen towards Vera’s attitude to Stalin’s image, when, hearing about the news of Stalin’s death, she mourns him and calls him “the great leader of the country”. Apart from that, Vera appears apathetic towards any situations happening during Stalin’s repressions, even when she hears and participates in the conversations about it. She is much more concerned with her household duties and taking care of her husband’s well-being, and she has no space left to engage with something outside of it. This once again reinforces Vera’s abstinence from the realm of life except for the one where she plays the role she was assigned. Moreover, at the same time, even her “conventional and traditional” dreams of becoming a mother are not satisfied because her full existence is dedicated to the desires of her husband, who overtly in each episode interferes when Vera finds her happiness in spending time with children (be it Aleksander’s own son or the children of Vera’s friends) and restores his role as the one and only person in Vera’s life. Vera’s attitude towards her life’s purpose presents itself at the moment when Aleksander dies as she concludes: “My life has ended; there is no meaning anymore”¹⁴³.

The series presents a set of clichés that depict masculine-oriented consciousness, in which a woman follows the template of subordination, self-sacrifice and lack of agency, depicting Stalin’s turn to the traditional familial values in which woman’s role reduces to serving the country through serving the man. The film vividly portrays how Stalin’s regime perceived women only in the bodily sense, with its ability to provide household skills and give birth only when necessary to the state and not subjected to a woman’s desires or needs. From that point of view, it is possible to deduce that the series attempts to depict Stalin’s era critically, portraying woman’s inescapable fate in difficult times in contrast with the male-blinded focus on the service to the state.

¹⁴² Episode 3, 40 minutes.

¹⁴³ Episode 3, 49 minutes.

Moreover, even though Vera is not directly involved in the events of Stalin's regime, the series sheds light on the "unpleasant" past and quite openly identifies them as wrongdoings while not expressing overt condemnation of Stalin's period or depicting the impact it had on the private life of Larichev's family. However, the series' final scenes, when Vera ends up married to another man and continues her role as a devoted wife, demonstrate that it does not portray a woman's status in a manner of criticism but rather reinforces it and presents it as the only way for a main heroine to be happy. Such a restriction to the main heroine's character development appears as a declaration of her inability to be anything more than self-sacrificing and serving the man's needs. The film examines Vera through her belonging to the husband and state, not providing her with any agency, underlining her feminine characteristics and desires and creating out of her a mere "function" to a man even though Vera is the main plot-driving character. Soviet femininity was constructed in a notion of sacrifice: the sacrifice of the female body for the sake of a man or homeland, and throughout the film, that is the main message that can be detected. In that sense, it appears possible to conclude that the series idealise and eulogise the patriarchal system's values and echoes the new Russian establishment of values that started developing in the government's rhetoric.

The film divided the opinions of contemporary critics, causing debates over the approach that Govorukhin chose to depict in his film. According to literary critic and journalist D. Bykov's article in the journal "Cinema Art", the series presents as "completely neutral and non-ideological", and Govorukhin managed to "bring out an important topic that deserves serious attention and turned it into a new piece that subjects people to the process of rethinking our

past”¹⁴⁴. He concludes that the film presents a good example of “a new angle” that Russian society is looking for in interpreting its collective past. At the same time, cinema critic E. Tarkhanova calls the series a “pure melodrama, terry-cheap in the form of a recognisable familiar historical context” while also speaking to a nostalgic view of the past in which “men were manly and masculine, and women were feminine”¹⁴⁵. In that sense, she underlines that the series addresses gender roles and relationships of the sexes as they existed in Stalin’s era in an attempt to idealise and romanticise them, highlighting the “good old times” when each sex played its assigned role. While Bykov’s perception speaks to an important task of searching for some new interpretation of the past as the necessity for Russian society to deal with its own past, Tarkhanova’s view of it as a classic nostalgic melodrama presents more of a critical view towards the portrayal of women’s place in the series.

Film One War (2009)

The film *One War*, created by director Vera Glagoleva, can be potentially put in the category of historical-war films as the events it depicts take place in the last days of the Great Patriotic War. However, I believe that *War* plays only a background role in the film, while it focuses mainly on the forgotten topic of Stalin’s repressions against the women who gave birth to the children of German soldiers. The film is especially important because it takes a critical look at the other side of the War and women’s place in it, considering that the memory of Stalin is strongly associated with the Soviet win over Nazi Germany.

¹⁴⁴Dmitriy Bykov, “Sny o tom, chto bylo. “Blagoslavite zhenshinu”, rezhiser Stanislav Govorukhin,” (Dreams about what happened. “Bless the woman” by Stanislav Govorukhin), *Iskusstvo kino* (Cinema Art), February, 2004, <http://old.kinoart.ru/archive/2004/02/n2-article5>, accessed 07.06.2023.

¹⁴⁵Ekaterina Tarkhanova, “Recenziya na “Blagoslavite zhenshinu,” (Review on the film “Bless the woman”), *Film*, September 01, 2003, <https://www.film.ru/articles/tak-oni-i-vymerli>, accessed 07.06.2023.

The film tells the story of five women and five children that live on a far-away island in tents, where their main occupation is to catch and send fish to the frontlines. They are waiting to be sent to the camps as they know that having a relationship with the enemy is considered treason to the country. Throughout the plot, each of the heroines shares their stories, which creates sympathy and a deeper understanding of the atrocities of the War and the place of a woman in it. The oldest of them, Shura (Natalya Surkova), had to voluntarily go to the Germans and provide them with sexual services to save her children from starvation. She tells her story directly to two male figures in the film, a guard of the island (Aleksander Baluev) and a newly arrived NKVD officer, comrade Prokhorov (Michael Khmurov), whose task is to prepare women to be sent to the camps. The confession did not cause an overt reaction from either of the men; however, in the subsequent scenes, it is visible that Prokhorov's treatment of the women slightly changed as he allowed them more freedom and fewer constraints.

Another story is shared by Nina (Yulia Melnikova), who was raped by a German soldier stationed at her house. She underlines that the same happened to her neighbour, who killed a child to save herself from being sent to the camps when Soviet soldiers came to liberate the city. After seeing her newly born daughter, Nina could not commit the same. This story simultaneously stresses two traumatic experiences of women, sexual violence and infanticide, while bringing up the topic of fear of their state, which was no better than the occupants in what treatment it offered to women who suffered from the War's consequences.

One of the least tragic stories is shared by Natasha (Kseniya Surkova), who fell in love for the first time with the German soldier and had a child with him. The heroine believes in God and refuses to accept that life after the War will be spent in camps and dreams of becoming an actress

in Moscow, while none of the heroines seems to object to her, allowing her to believe that there is some good yet to come.

Anya (Anna Nakhapetova) gave birth to a child from the Soviet pilot whom she saved from death and helped for months to get better; he died later from the bomb attacks of the Soviets who came to liberate the occupied territory. However, one of her neighbours reported her to the NKVD as a woman who had a relationship with Germans as they occupied the village. This story brings to light an important topic of denunciation that was widespread during Stalin's era. Even though there is no further elaboration in the film, it still underlines the consequences that innocent people suffered due to denunciation practices.

Masha (Natalya Kudryashova) just got married before the War started but was taken by the Germans to a soldier's brothel and, as a result, had a child from one of her offenders. Later, in the scene where the women celebrate the end of the war, Masha is the one who gives the most revealing speech in the film: "Why are we celebrating it? Victory..so what? We are the enemies now, even worse, we are their "podstilki"¹⁴⁶. We do not have a place in the world of the living. They will kill us in the camps and have no pity for our children"¹⁴⁷. Masha's breakdown reveals the tragedy of women's fate in Stalin's regime, in which a woman who had intercourse with the enemy is considered "worse than the enemy". This speech once again underlines that in the system, women were only seen through their bodies and what they could offer through it to the state.

Even though the film positions itself as a film about the War, which is evident in how the heroines of the film condemn the War as the main reason for their suffering, the film still indirectly speaks to the image of Stalin and the state regime he created. It especially becomes vivid

¹⁴⁶ The word in Russian slang means "prostitute".

¹⁴⁷ 67 minutes.

when the heroines bring up Stalin's image in their conversations. In multiple scenes, they address him as "the best leader they could ever have" while describing the time before the war "as a great period", and when celebrating the victory, they drink to the health of "the greatest leader, Stalin". The film overtly demonstrates this dichotomy of the regime's perception in the eyes of the ordinary Soviet citizens: the women know what awaits them but simultaneously continue to imagine Stalin as a saint figure of the country. This representation of attitudes in the film resonates with the paradox of Stalin's perception in post-Soviet Russia with the ongoing debates over the costs of victory in the War, including the repressions towards women who had sexual relationships with Germans. In that sense, through the appeal to female experiences, the film raises the conversation on the unspoken topics of the uncomfortable past, in which Stalin's image plays a crucial role.

Overall, the film focuses solely on women's experiences and the portrayal of female place in Stalin's system, in which they are powerless and vulnerable to both violence from the enemy and their own state. Moreover, each individual story touches upon the topics of Stalin's regime's social setting in which women's status is. The film manages to grasp the despair of the heroines when Anya eventually chooses to commit suicide after she finds out that the War is over because, for her, death appears as liberation compared to what awaits her in Stalin's camps. This final scene is symbolic as Masha's suicide concludes Victory Day's celebration and shifts the focus back to the reality of the Stalinist state, reminding that the War is over, but the everyday tragedy of the Soviet system continues to prosper and kill its citizens. In this sense, the film speaks to Stalin's repressions not in the form of necessity as it is most commonly presented in the governmental discourse but as the cruelty that led to the broken lives of the Soviet citizens.

The film received criticism towards its justification of “collaborationists” in the War. However, E. Stishova, in her critical article, contemplates the factors that influence the silence over the topics of female destinies. She underlines that “the women’s narratives were forgotten in the Soviet culture due to the work of censorship, but currently, there is vivid evidence of self-censorship” that does not allow discussions over the traumatic past experiences, especially regarding women’s statuses. She concludes that the film once again underlines that the “Russian culture is hopelessly masculine, and a woman is not accepted as an equal”¹⁴⁸. In that sense, the film speaks to the absence of discussion of women’s roles and experiences in the Russian past and present, with the main stresses made on the depiction of men and masculinity as one of the attempts to establish a new Russian ideology. At the same time, the film was criticised for shifting the attention from the heroes and victors to the tragic, unfortunate stories, which “does not help in determining specific moral and ethical guidelines for the different generational groups”¹⁴⁹. Because the main heroines of the film still talk of the War as the main reason behind their sorrows (except for the final Masha’s speech in which she condemns the regime), it is still perceived through the lens of not directly appealing to Stalin as the villain figure, but rather plays with the ambiguous stance of “the repressions did take place but out of the necessity to protect the country”.

The television series “A.L.Zh.I.R.” (2019)

The television series “A.L.Zh.I.R”, directed by A. Kasatkin, came out on the NTV television channel but was quickly acquired for distribution outside Russia by the Global Agency company. The topic of history that the “A.L.Zh.I.R.” series brings to light is the Gulag camp that existed on

¹⁴⁸ Elena Stishova. “Deti Rozmari. “Odna voina”, rezhiser Vera Glagoleva,” (Rozmari’s children. “One War” by the director Vera Glagoleva), *Iskusstvo Kino, Cinema Art*, September, 2009, <https://old.kinoart.ru/archive/2009/09/n9-article6>, accessed 03.06.2023.

¹⁴⁹ Tatyana Ovsyannikova, *Velikaya Otechestvennaya voina na ekrane: vytesneniye istoricheskogo konflikta iz syuzheta istoricheskogo filma*,” (Great Patriotic War on the screen: the replacement of the historical conflict from the historical film plot), *Gramota journal*, No. 6, 2014, 145.

the territory of Kazakhstan. In one of the interviews, one of the main actresses in the series, Darya Ekamasova, points out that “the series tells the story of women who had their lives taken away and cut off. This story is not particularly touched upon in schools or institutes, so it was important for me to tell it”¹⁵⁰. From that point of view, the series attempts to depict female experiences in Gulag camps, which usually represent a topic that falls in the category of unspoken in the Russian public discourse, especially because many materials are still unavailable. The main historical sources available to us for the reconstruction of the camps’ life are the memoirs and diaries of the women who were imprisoned there collected by the organisations such as “Memorial” and Sakharov’s archive centre. The television series incorporated some of these memoirs into the narrative to make attempts to approach reality.

The abbreviation “A.L.Zh.I.R” is the colloquial name of one of the largest “islands of the Gulag archipelago”. It was a specialised women’s camp for the wives of traitors to the Motherland, located in the Akmoła region, in which, according to unofficial data, over the 15 years of the existence of the camp, 18.000 women passed through Alzhir, 8.000 of whom served their sentences completely. The main characters of the series were two prisoners who were charged with Article 58, which involves punishment for the wives of those who were found the traitors to the state: the wife of the aircraft designer Pavlova Olga (Daria Ekamasova) and the outstanding opera singer Sofia Ter-Ashaturova (Ekaterina Guseva), who was detained on the denunciation of her husband’s mistress. However, the series does not exclusively focus on the representation of women accused by Article 58; it also includes female criminals that served their sentences in the same camps.

¹⁵⁰“Na NTV vykhodit istoricheskiy serial A.L.Zh.I.R. s Ekaterinoy Gusevoy i Daryiyei Ekamasovoi,” (New historical television series “A.L.Zh.I.R.” with the stars Ekaterina Guseva and Darya Ekamasova is released on NTV channel), VokrugTV, June 15, 2019, <https://www.vokrug.tv/article/show/15605265791/>, accessed 04.06.2023.

Through the eleven episodes, the television series touch upon different significant topics of the female experiences and their particularities in the camps settings: it covers the topics of motherhood in camps, forced labour issues, violence, and the dynamic of relationships between the female inmates and between inmates and guardians. The series follow not only the stories of women who ended up in the camps but also the stories of the guardians, which is an important angle for exploring the lives of those who were perceived as perpetrators in the eyes of women. While I do not consider this angle, I believe it is essential to acknowledge that the series choose to also focus on the life of guards. This appeal to the stories behind guards' lives may serve as a justification for their harsh treatment of the inmates and once again presents as blurring the line between victims and perpetrators, promoting the idea that in the existing system, everyone was a victim. It shifts the attention from women's stories to the narrative of guards and their part of the story, adding to the plotline but simultaneously equating women and guards' unfortunate fates.

One of the important topics that the series touch upon is presented in the depiction of the motherhood experience. One of the episodes focuses on the story of a pregnant prisoner and provides an important look into the treatment of women in the camps through the dialogue between Sofia's character and the local doctor, who not only says that "pregnant women will not be granted any special conditions", but he also points out the abortion as the best option, as "the child anyway will never see his mother, he will constantly be lying in his own wastes, and after he or she reaches three years old he will be sent to the orphanage, not seeing his mother ever again"¹⁵¹. That episode serves as one of the most important ones in the series as it precisely addresses the issues of womanhood in the conditions of the camps, which includes such specific conditions as being pregnant and raising a child. The overall theme of motherhood is a cross-

¹⁵¹ Episode 2, 16-18 minutes.

cutting theme for the series, as practically every woman has children left in orphanages. Writing letters to the children and talking about seeing them once again in their lives is the main thought that keeps the women alive and gives them hope to survive. This attitude is presented through the women's determination to help a Kazakh woman, Demesh (Dina Tasbulatova), escape after they find out she has a newly born child she needs to care for. The series depicts her struggles with the inability to breastfeed and constant mental breakdowns that do not allow her to work, eat or sleep. In attempts to explore the female experience in the camps, the series includes the topic of motherhood while not directly addressing the realities of giving birth and raising a child there with the representation of the so-called "mother's houses" where the children were kept. Every situation portrayed in the series continues to unveil outside the camp's walls and, therefore, does not include the existence of this phenomenon in the broader contexts¹⁵².

The series focuses on depicting Kazakh nationality as the only nationality included in the camps' setting, even though the camp historically consisted of representatives of different Soviet parts. Primarily, it includes the depiction of the inability of a Kazakh woman to speak Russian, which results in the constant offences she experiences from the guards and some inmates. Further representation of nationality signs or cultural aspects in the series can only be observed through the appeal to rituals and traditions that two Kazakh women try to implement in their daily routines, which receives a lot of mockery and results in punishments for "anti-Soviet enterprises"¹⁵³. Apart from these short and unexplained scenes, the series does not elaborate any further on the specifics of the non-Russian nationalities' experience and its difference while also including only a shallow focus on some aspects of Kazakh steppe life, represented in Demesh's

¹⁵² The series included in episodes 9 and 10 the depiction of a German woman who gave birth to a child and was sent to a camp, but it does not elaborate on her experience and rather emphasises only the emotional aspect of her frustration in raising a child behind bars, without exploring the theme in more meaningful senses.

¹⁵³ Episode 4, 46 minutes.

family. In that sense, including Kazakh nationality in the plot seems rather arbitrary and mostly plot-driven, with occasional remarks demonstrating the mistreatment and disrespect that Kazakh women experienced in the camps settings.

The series emphasises the portrayal of self-sacrificing and strong-willed women that, even in the circumstances of the camps, manage to preserve themselves and continue to not only adapt to the new conditions but, experiencing no transformation, they also present as the modelled Soviet women who aim to continue serving the country. The series, in that sense, depict brave and strong-willed women who, despite the circumstances and conditions they live in, continue to not only fight for their own lives but also help each other and sacrifice themselves to help those around them, including the Soviet state. From that point of view, the series propagate the idea that even in the circumstance of the Gulag camp, the willingness of women to serve the state and stay self-sacrificing people. This issue especially persists in episodes eight to ten when the main heroine, Olga, enthusiastically finds ways to open a new fabric in the camp and happily builds connections with the camp's authorities to help the Soviet country in a war setting.

The series reduce women's experience in the camps to the depiction of some of the harsher conditions, and it successfully creates an atmosphere of danger by including some actions of brutal killings and punishments. However, at the same time, it does not go beyond creating a melodramatic story that includes the highlights of some more or less traumatic experiences of the camps. Even though some particular contexts of female perspective are touched upon, they are not persistent and do not allow to go beyond the demonstration of violence in the Gulag camp system.

It is essential to underline that after "A.L.Zh.I.R"'s release on television, the series did not cause much discussion around it, while at the same time, the television series "Zuleikha opens her eyes",

which speaks on the topic of collectivisation received much controversy in different media. The absence of reaction from different sides of the Russian public poses a valid question on why the series about female experiences in Gulag camps did not attract any attention. Especially given that after the release of “Zuleikha opens her eyes”, one of the major complaints came from the Communist Party, which frequently engages in the condemnation of historical dramas and questions their historical validity. One of the few reactions in the media that the film received was in the “Independent newspaper”, in which the author condemned the series for depicting a very polished and smooth representation of the female Gulag camp and melodramatised the story that needs a much more series approach to the depiction of the women’s fates in the unbearable circumstances of Stalin’s camps. She points out that attempts to show women’s mutual support are “entirely romanticised as in the frames of the camp everyone activates their self-preservation mode, which can be contained to the words “You die today, and I still try to survive till tomorrow”¹⁵⁴. In that sense, the author points out quite significant criticism that can be applied to many films and television series depicting Stalin’s epoch: these cinematic works diminish the harshness of Stalin’s era reality and demonstrate rather polished versions of history, be for the sake of melodramatic plot and supporting the entertainment level for the viewers or for the sake of not crossing the line in the discussions of the traumatic past.

The television series “Zuleikha opens her eyes” (2020)

The television series “Zuleikha opens her eyes”, directed by E. Anashkin, was released on television on TV channel Russia-1 and caused significant discussions over its content in different groups within Russian society. The series was based on the book that was published in 2015 and

¹⁵⁴ Vera Tsvetkova, “Serial Alzhir snyali skoree po motivam, chem po factam,” (The television series “A.L.Zh.I.R. was made based on some motifs rather than on the facts), *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (Independent Newspaper), June 20, 2019, https://www.ng.ru/tv/2019-06-20/7_7603_tv.html, accessed 08.06.2023.

written by G. Yakhina. The book previously received many endorsements and criticism from different voices, be it the representatives of the Tatar people or the Communist party; however, the book did not become as popular and did not cause as much controversy in the media as the series released on the federal channel.

The plot revolves around Zuleikha (Chulpan Khamatova), a Tatar woman who becomes a victim of Stalin's collectivisation policies. Dekulakisation and collectivisation are plot-driven processes depicted as traumatic and tragic experiences for the people. In that sense, the series raises the topic that usually is preferred to be forgotten, while, for example, there are always talks in the Russian public sphere about industrialisation and its role in the subsequent War. It even includes a short historical reference to the number of people sent to exile in the aftermath of the dekulakisation reform¹⁵⁵. At the same time, there is a paradox of collectivisation's portrayal in the series. The brutal policies of collectivisation ruined the previous situation in which Zuleikha lived, allowing her to escape from the devastating conditions of family living. It especially becomes ambiguous when considering that the series specifically point out that the family lives according to the Islamic laws and traditions in the Tatarstan region. Such depiction is further reinforced through the development of Zuleikha's life, where she not only becomes an independent working woman (even a hunter) but also finds love with Ignatov (Evgenii Morozov), a Russian man after her unsuccessful traditional Muslim marriage to her Tatar husband (Ramil Sabitov). In that sense, the series illustrates Zuleikha's transformation into a more independent and happier woman only after her forced deportation and sovietisation in new circumstances where she is also deprived of her national context.

¹⁵⁵ It should be noted overall that the series uses a lot of voiceovers that frame the plot line within the respective historical events.

At the same time, there are more critical depictions of Russian officers' treatment of non-Russian nationalities in which they are perceived as “unable to speak proper Russian”¹⁵⁶ and will be “soon sent to the places with no mosques or Allahs to pray to”¹⁵⁷. Another aspect of nationality representation revolves around the absence of a detailed portrayal of the Tatar people. This critique of the series was especially emphasised by the representatives of the Tatar community, who claimed that, by and large, the series makes references to some small cultural features, but the image of the Tatar people is “still not shown clearly and in detail”, with only exceptions when Zuleikha calls her son "Ulym"¹⁵⁸ and tells him the legend of the bird Simurgh¹⁵⁹. Other than that, the Tatar language, religion and any cultural references were shown at least in the first two episodes, depicting mass praying and communication in the Tatar language between people. However, by the end of the series, there is barely any mention of the town's inhabitants belonging to Tatar culture or any other signs of their nationality. In that sense, the series again emphasises the disappearance of any national characteristics or belonging to a certain culture as the characters immerse themselves in a more Russian environment. It is especially vivid as Zuleikha starts speaking and opens to the people surrounding her more as the series goes on, while in contrast, her voice barely ever can be heard in the first episodes, where she presents as a shy, silent and submissive character. With her living more in a “true” Soviet environment with all other deported people of different backgrounds, she finally starts to have conversations, builds relationships and explores different work options (being first a nurse and then a hunter). This gradual rejection of

¹⁵⁶ Episode 1, 22 minutes.

¹⁵⁷ Episode 1, 35 minutes.

¹⁵⁸ Meaning “my son” in the Tatar language.

¹⁵⁹ Valeriya Zaviyalova and Elvira Samigullina, “Zuleikha – eto lakmusovaya bumazhka, pokazyvayushaya, v kakom sostoyanii my nakhodimsya,” (Zuleikha is the litmus test that shows in what state we are now), Business Online, April 23, 2020, <https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/466070>, accessed 30.05.2023.

the culture and assimilation in more “liberating” conditions underlines that “in Russia, any sign of a conscious national identity is seen as a “rebellion”, and any display of ethnic nationalism is perceived as something negative”¹⁶⁰.

It is important to focus not only on Zuleikha’s character in the series but also on the female figure of a Russian woman, Nastasya (Yulia Peresild), who serves in the Red Army. Throughout the series, the heroine appears as a quite contradictory character as she simultaneously claims her newly attained rights to serve the country and be equal to men (“In the soviet state I have a right to choose, and I choose to serve the Revolution”¹⁶¹ while continuing to pursue a love affair with Ignatov and seeking to build family relationships with him. Thus, Nastasya’s main role in the series is reduced to her pursuit of Ignatov and her hatred towards Zuleikha as her rivalry, whom she constantly addresses as “this Tatar” and asks “what kind of Tatar potion” Zuleika used to “bewitch Ignatov”¹⁶². In that sense, the series demonstrates that even though women received equal rights, their true natural desires still lie in the paradigm of getting married and having a family. More than that, it depicts a trivial love triangle that only underlines the Russian Nastasya's contempt towards Tatar Zuleikha.

The topic of mass deportation and overall Stalin’s politics is vividly present in the series, both towards the treatment of people and the commanders themselves. “Do not worry, half of them will die soon anyway”,¹⁶³ or “Who did you just call people? These are not people”¹⁶⁴. In the

¹⁶⁰ Nuriya Fatykhova, “Zuleikha protiv Zuleikhi,” (Zuleikha against Zuleikha), Colta, May 8, 2020, <https://www.colta.ru/articles/art/24311-spory-o-zuleyhe-i-sovetskiy-imperializm>, accessed 30.06.2023.

¹⁶¹ Episode 2, 10 minutes.

¹⁶² Episode 6, 32 minutes.

¹⁶³ Episode 2, 15 minutes.

¹⁶⁴ Episode 2, 40 minutes.

episode where the whole barge of people sinks, the only emotion that one of the NKVD officers expresses is that he is afraid of “too much paperwork” to fill. Thus, the representatives of the Soviet authorities are depicted as incompetent and indifferent towards people. It is especially overt in the scene when one of the Red Army guards kills a boy who tried to escape and presents it afterwards to his commanders in a proud manner. However, throughout the series, all the authoritarian figures also fall victim to the regime’s mistreatment. The most vivid example of it is the story of Ignatov, who was a truly revolutionary and supporter of the Soviet state serving in the Red Army but was destroyed and manipulated by the higher authorities that not only left him on his own with all the deported people to build a new town without any support but also threatened him into becoming the commandant of it. In that sense, the series creates a narrative which blurs the line between the perpetrators and victims, allowing to feel empathy towards all the people on the screen.

Overall, the series portrays Stalin’s epoch in a way that resonates with the contemporary perception of Stalin’s epoch, in which everyone is presented as a victim without any actual perpetrator who is responsible for the suffering of the people. It projects the idea of an anonymous yet powerful system in which personal responsibility does not exist, and everyone has to overcome difficulties and hardships. However, eventually, through unifying and working together towards a collective future, represented in the series as the town built by those deported. It moreover reinforces the idea of the “ideal” Soviet woman who experienced mistreatment, but as she successfully became a mother and an engaged Soviet citizen in the break from her cultural ties, she managed to discover happiness and peace.

The series received quite a significant number of criticism and evaluation from different sides of the Russian public. One of the most detailed analyses was done by N. Fatyhova, the representative

of the Tatar community and a researcher on gender and decolonisation, in which she touches upon the problematic depiction of the past, calling the series the “neo-Stalinist folklore”¹⁶⁵. She further elaborates on the ideological message of the series, stating that the series depicts Russia “as the successor to the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire, in which the deported peasants alongside NKVD officers and intelligentsia are building a heroic country, contributing their suffering to the greatness of the empire”. The series was found “tatarophobic” by multiple Tatar community organisations that signed letters against the film’s distribution¹⁶⁶. Apart from that, the series caused disapproval from the Russian Communist party, who called for the ban of the series because “the historical epoch of the 1930s of the XX century, which was significant for the development of our state, is presented in unreliable and diminishing ways”, while one of the party leaders, Maksim Suraikin called the series “a spit in the face of the Russian peoples”¹⁶⁷.

The mere depiction of collectivisation and mass deportations on the federal channel presents an important attempt to address the past, especially when it includes the depiction of non-Russian nationality. At the same time, when taking a closer look at the dynamics of female characters and their evolvment, they are portrayed as self-sacrificing, family-oriented, and needing love and affection while accepting their fates. Moreover, the main message that can be seen stays within the frames in which Stalin’s epoch is depicted as hard and severe times, but uniting and leading the country to the successful future of the War’s victory justifies all the prior excesses.

¹⁶⁵ Fatykhina, “Zuleikha against Zuleikha.”

¹⁶⁶ Aleksander Dobrovolskiy, “Skandal s serialom “Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza”: opasnaya provokatsiya ili “prostitelnaya glupost?” (Scandal with the television series “Zuleikha opens her eyes”: is it a dangerous provocation or “excusable silliness?”), MKRU, April 18, 2020, <https://www.mk.ru/culture/2020/04/18/skandal-s-serialom-zuleykha-otkryvaet-glaza-opasnaya-provokaciya-ili-prositelnaya-glupost.html>, accessed 02.06.2023.

¹⁶⁷ Yana Bobylkina, “Kommunisty Rossii: Serial s Khamatovoy oskarblyayet nashe sovetskoye proshloye,” (Communist of Russia: the television series with the actress Khamatova insults our common Soviet past), Daily Storm, April 16, 2020, <https://dailystorm.ru/kultura/kommunisty-rossii-serial-s-hamatovoy-oskorblyayet-nashe-sovetskoe-proshloe>, accessed 30.06.2023.

Conclusion

It was stated in the thesis that Russian memory politics plays an important part in forming not only collective memory of the past but also influences the Russian population's beliefs and biases towards the contemporary societal system and values. Historical films and television series are one of the main mediums that communicate the perception of the past, simultaneously promoting certain political agenda attributed to the time of the production. The memory of Stalinism occupies an important place in Russian memory politics, and the appeal to Stalin's epoch and its values presents an important reference for the current Russian government headed by V. Putin. In that sense, the films dedicated to Stalin's epoch can tell a lot about the existing attitudes towards the period and demonstrate which aspects are highlighted and in what manner. Moreover, the appeal to Stalin's epoch presents an important factor in memory politics as there has been a vivid turn to conservative values in the Russian case, which opens a conversation about gender roles and Russian nationalism that became a backbone for the state's agenda. By examining the representation of women in historical films and television series, it is possible to trace not only the depiction of female experiences and the values they possess but also how Stalin's epoch is framed within these cinematic works.

In general, through examining the chosen films, it is possible to deduce that female representation changes by becoming more diverse in the narratives that are being told or the topics that the cinematic works bring to light. In that sense, the analysed cinematic works depict not only different time settings of Stalin's era (all the period from the beginning of the 1930s to the War years, after the War period and the 1950s before Stalin died in 1953) but also try to investigate different historical events of the period, exploring the range of topics connected to the traumatic experiences of the past: the cinematic works address the topics of collectivisation, mass

deportation, Gulag camps, Stalin's repressions before and after the War). Moreover, some cinematic works include the depiction of non-Russian nationalities, which also serves as a factor that allows the inclusion of more voices into the discussions of the past.

However, this broadening of the narratives does not, in the case of the films, mean changing the essence of the past's perception, especially in the women's depiction. Through examining the films, it becomes apparent that there is a vivid homogenisation of the experiences of women and different nationalities. This signifies that the cinematic works are not ready to admit that the perception of history remains different among different groups, and all of them have weight. Even though the cinematic works attempted to address the issues relating to the specific women's experiences and nuances, the main traits of women's characters and their relationships persisted virtually unchanged. In that sense, even when films portray women as the main heroines and focus on their stories, the female perspectives remain unexplored or on the periphery, functioning mostly as a tool for dramatic effects rather than the actual investigation of women's place in the Russian past. The female characters are considered through the belonging to the man or the state, endowed with typical features and a set of attitudes, views, and behaviours. Therefore, even though the films include new angles and stories that are being told on the screen about women's experiences in Stalin's period, the representation of women in their "natural" conditions continues to persist and is not subjected to critical reassessment. From that point of view, it is possible to deduce that the cinematic works frequently not only resurrect propagated traditional Stalin values without challenging them but attempt to justify or endorse them by depicting them as necessary or unavoidable attributes of a woman's fate.

Moreover, even though there is an inclusion of women of different nationalities in the places of the main heroines, as in the cases of the television series "Zuleikha opens her eyes". However, no

vivid trajectories distinguish or elaborate on the women's statuses as different nationalities within the Russian context. In the case of "Zuleikha opens her eyes", it is especially apparent with the presence of the ambiguous plot that simultaneously criticises mass deportation of different ethnicities and sheds light on this topic while also demonstrating the transformation of Zuleikha into an ideal form of the Soviet woman.

In that sense, cinematic works usually do not provide many alternative views on female experiences. They put women at the forefront, which still allows to address new narratives and familiarise the broader audiences with some topics of Stalin's epoch that are otherwise frequently avoided in the public discussion. However, within these narratives, women continue to be depicted in accordance with Stalin's and Putin's eras' expectations of conservative values, with the correct order of traditional gender roles and unification of all the peoples under Russia.

One of the definitive conclusions from the cinematic works of Putin's era is that there is still a vivid inability to decide whether Stalin's progress, which is usually pointed out as the rapid industrialisation or victory in the War, is worth all the repressions, destroyed families, and traumatic experiences. In that sense, the cinematic works of Putin's era after 2000 have an apparent contrast with the depiction of Stalin's era in Moscow's Parade film from 1992, which depicts the vivid contrast between the "image" and "reality" of Stalin's epoch. However, already the cinematic works of the beginning of the 2000s portray Stalin's epoch in a more ambiguous way, proposing a reconciliatory approach to the past. Even though the works contain the representation of the dark sides of Stalin's period, in many cases, they diminish the harsh reality of the events or reduce the narrative to the justification of severe conditions to the necessity due to the preparation of the country to face the War. This position opens possibilities to create a

sense of the collective past in which hard times were compensated with victory, bridging this narrative to the current state of Russian politics.

One of the limitations of the thesis is connected to the methodology chosen for the film analysis in this thesis. I focus on the narrative analysis that includes the examination of the recurring themes that are shown in the chosen films; the character development and the features attributed to them; the plot as the driving force that allows the audience to perceive a historical event through a certain angle; and the portrayal of the historical time as a part of narrative structure. At the same time, this approach is subjected to limitations such as subjectivity, neglect of the film production process and overlooking the cinematography-related details. Therefore, further potential research on the topic may achieve a more holistic understanding of historical film by including these approaches.

From that point of view, further examination of the subject can include the analysis of the data on cinematic works' reception (perhaps through the appeal to forums and social media usage), the elements of film production analysis, focusing on the role of directors or scriptwriting processes, and the analysis of historical accuracy concerning material elements (such as costumes, set designs, or architecture), verification of certain characters, dates and events and the portrayal of historical figures through the appeal to the documentation and archival materials of the period.

Filmography

Moscow Parade (1992), directed by I. Dykhovichny, 108 minutes.

Bless the Woman (2003), directed by S. Govorukhin, four episodes of 50 minutes.

One War (2009), directed by V. Glagoleva, 89 minutes.

A.L.Zh.I.R. (2019), directed by A. Kasatkin, eleven episodes of 51 minutes.

Zuleikha opens her eyes (2020), directed by E. Anashkin, 8 episodes of 47-58 minutes.

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