The Subaltern War Hero in 21st Century Russian Cinema:

Redefining the Russian Heroic Tradition and the Russian Nation in Multi-Ethnic Terms

An Honors Thesis for the Department of German, Russian, and Asian Languages and Literatures

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Introduction

Denise Youngblood makes an assumption in the opening lines of her book *Russian War Films* that is the origin of this thesis: "For all the multiethnic brigades seen in Soviet war films, with concomitant depictions of multiethnic friendships among soldiers, Soviet cinema was "Great Russian" in its orientation."[1] At one level, Youngblood has a point. The focus of Soviet cinema, and as she hints later in her book to post-Soviet Russian film, has largely been on the Russian. The Russian is the primary hero, even in the Soviet period when the official ideology was the brotherhood of nations. But this is too narrow a view. Yes, the Asian or Caucasian characters of Soviet film are secondary heroes, but this ignores the centuries of history and representations that occurred in epic poetry, historical texts, and novels. These materials had marked the non-Russian as an inferior being, a subaltern, and the non-Russian's, more specifically the Asian minorities that live in Southern and Eastern Russia, role was largely that of savage enemy.

Rather than being insignificant, this thesis will show that the Soviet multiethnic squad marks an important milestone in Russians' relationship with the people that have been a part of their empire, either Imperial or Soviet, or now a part of the Russian Federation. That milestone is all the more significant because of the chaos created by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The ideology that created the conditions that allowed the non-Russian to be a hero and to become part of the nation disappeared. The aftermath of the collapse and the wars in the Caucasus generated an immense amount of xenophobia and hatred for the non-Russian among the Russian people. While Russia had long been the heart of a multi-ethnic empire—which is widely regarded to have been founded by the conquest of the Muslim Khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan in the mid-

[1] Denise Youngblood. *Russian War Films: On the Cinema Front, 1914-2005*. (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 2.

1500s by Orthodox Muscovy—that imperial identity melted away as large parts of that empire broke away. Dealing with the loss of the old imperial identity and finding a substitute identity became an incredibly difficult task for the Russian people, one that politicians, intellectuals and the public would all be a part of.

Creating a new identity or reimagining an old identity is a process that film is a major part of, both globally and in Russia. The process of generating the nation and defining it in specific terms has been linked not only to political discourse and state action, but to cultural sources. The novel and the newspaper have been upheld by scholars of the nation like Benedict Anderson and Anthony Smith as generators of national identity, and forms of entertainment like sports and film appear to be a part of a process of banal nationalism, presenting symbols that reinforce the public's image of the nation.[2] While each scholar has their own definition of what the nation is, several scholars have reached similar conclusions about the role that cultural sources play, and there work has been taken and adapted by film scholars, who argue quite convincingly that film has supplanted many older forms to become the dominate medium for national identity formation in the cultural sphere. A major shift from the literary to the visual has occurred.[3] Reading has increasingly become viewed as an elitist activity, looked down upon by the masses. Instead of reading, the masses flock to the movie theater.

The Russian case is little different in terms of this shift to the visual, and the Russian film industry has seen an incredible revival. The Russian Federation represents one of the most drastic shifts in the past two decades in terms of the shift from the literary to the visual. There has been a sharp decline in the number of hours spent reading in the country, compared to some of the

[2] See: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (New York: Verso, 1991). More on banal nationalism and the role of the media and entertainment can be found in: Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, (London: Sage Publications, 1995), 109-125.

[3] Robert Rosenstone. *History on Film/ Film on History*. (New York: Longman, 2006), 132-133.

highest percentages of television watchers in the world.[4] Additionally, Russians are returning to cinema—an industry that had been devastated by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The state-run film studios had gone under, and the market for films disappeared. Only a handful of films in the 1990's could claim any kind of financial success, and the themes that the films of the 1990's often dealt with were bleak and uninspiring. The films that were financially successful or became cult hits, mainly Aleksei Balabanov's *Brother* and Nikita Mikhalkov's *Burnt by the Sun* and *Barber of Siberia*, represented drastically different approaches to filmmaking: the hero of the past reborn or the present day anti-hero. What films like *Brother* and others of the period were presenting was not always politically correct or dignified—the role of the non-Russian in these films was often as villain. The brotherhood of nations gave way to a plethora of films showing the Chechen as treacherous gangster or terrorist to be exterminated, rather than embraced as comrade.

The malaise of the 1990's has given way to the phenomenon occurring presently in Russia: the increase in domestic films being released on a wider scale to large audiences and enormous critical acclaim. The biggest and most significant films have been blockbuster war films, filmed on massive budgets and in exotic locales. These blockbusters are also actively promoting the director's vision of positive Russian heroes. Many Russian filmmakers had openly talked about the depressing state of the film industry after the collapse, and one of Russia's most notable and popular directors, Nikita Mikhalkov, was a vocal force in advocating for the revival of the film industry. In a prominent address to the IV Congress of the Russian Filmmakers' Union in the Kremlin Palace, he decried the low-budget Russian films of the 1990's and the

[4] See Sergei Zassorin, "Modern Russian Nationalism on Television and Radio as a Reflection of Political Discourse." In *Nationalist Myths and Modern Media: Contested Identities in the Age of Globalization*, eds. Jan Herman Brinks, Stella Rock, Edward Timms. (New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006), 188-190.

status of Russia's film studios.[5] His most poignant criticism of these films was their complete lack of moral and positive heroes; they were instead filled with gangsters and meaningless violence. Mikhalkov called upon his fellow directors to create positive Russian heroes to help unite the nation and bring a sense of hope to Russian audiences. Many Russian directors have heeded that sentiment, and appear to be following in Mikhalkov's lead. More and more contemporary Russian directors claim to present a positive and patriotic hero to Russia's audiences.[6]

With so many directors creating works that aim to show a patriotic view of Russia, and with so many of these films becoming blockbusters, it would seem imperative to see how these films are actually defining Russianness. The focus of this thesis should be on those films that have made the biggest impact in recent cinema: films that have been successful financially and award-wise. Six films have been selected for their financial and cultural impact: *Star*, *Brest Fortress*, *9th Company*, *72 Meters*, *1612*, and *Stormy Gates*. These films are examples from some of Russia's most prominent and powerful directors, and have all been nominated or have won major domestic awards. What is most interesting about these cases is that while they represent a number of different conflicts (Time of Troubles, Great Patriotic War, Afghanistan and Chechnya) and drastically different styles, they represent a significant body of work that is showing non-Russians in glorified heroic terms; the Chechen gangster may still exist, but he is contrasted by Chechen soldiers who fight and die alongside Russians.

These representations tie into a larger scholarly debate about the direction of Russian nationalism and national identity. According to Vera Tolz, five major conceptions of Russianness

[5] Translation of the speech can be found in: Birgit Buemers. *Russia on Reels: The Russian Idea in Post-Soviet Cinema*. (New York: Berg, 2009), 50-55.

[6] The former head of the Congress also made a speech that talked about the need for a Russian hero. Several directors, whose films are analyzed for this thesis, like Nikolai Lebedev, Fyodor Bondarchuk and the producer for *Brest Fortress* stated they made their films to inspire Russian youth and to create positive heroes.

existed during the Yel'tsin years: civic, unionist, racial, cultural and linguistic.[7] These conceptions varied drastically in their inclusivity and their rootedness in Russian history. She frames them these identities in terms of a dichotomy between the choice of a civic nationalism, based on a vision of citizenship and loyalty to the country's institutions, and between four conceptions of ethnic nationalism, which define membership in the community in 'exclusive' terms based on racial, linguistic and cultural factors.

Tolz's intent was to find out which conception or conceptions the Yel'tsin administration and other elites were trying to use in an official capacity. Her analysis, along with the works of other scholars would reveal how unclear and multi-dimensional the elite decision making process was. Rather than dealing in one conception, the Yel'tsin administration had shifted over the long term from a civic to a cultural-ethnically defined conception. Over the short term, the regime was incredibly opportunistic. Yel'tsin intensively pursued a policy of integration with Belarus during his presidential campaign (taking a policy stance that was Slavic or Unionist because he thought that's what the people wanted), but immediately returned to a civic identity policy when the election was over.[8] Not only was Yel'tsin trying to define Russianness, but so was his intellectual and political opposition.

The chorus of elite voices would change quite suddenly with the arrival of President Putin. Scholars like Pal Kolsto have explained how President Putin came to the presidency with a very different conception of Russianness in mind based on 'common values'.[9] But this common values strategy did not actually resolve the debate over Russianness. Instead, the regime's actions appeared vaguer than before. Rather than supplying a concrete conception, the administration

[7] Vera Tolz. "Forging the Nation: National Identity and Nation Building in Post-Communist Russia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 50, no. 6 (1998): 995-1006.
[8] Vera Tolz, "Forging", 1010.
[9] Pål Kolstø. "Nation-Building and Common Values in Russia." In *Nation-Building and Common Values in Russia*, eds. Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud, 1-27. (Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 3-7.

actually institutionalized the vagueness, by defining Russian citizenship policy in terms of the near-abroad in the language of the 'compatriot *us*'.[10] This is so vaguely worded that it allows for Russianness to be rather easily defined in literally any of Tolz's five conceptions by regime policy makers. That ambiguity has certainly had its benefits. Ilya Prizel has provided an excellent study of how selecting one specific conception of Russianness can threaten certain Russian foreign policy goals.[11] Remaining vague or pandering to several different conceptions all at once allows Russia's politicians to avoid making difficult decisions with possibly disastrous consequences. And as Tolz and other scholars have pointed out, the general public's support for clear cut conceptions is not all that high, and even subjective. One opinion poll showed 87% of Russian respondents claiming that a 'love of Russia' was the most necessary characteristics needed to be considered Russian.[12]

The films for this thesis belong to the Putin nation-building project in more than one way. The Putin and Medvedev regimes give support to these patriotic war films. The role of the government in the film industry has increasingly become one of patron; while the Yel'tsin regime focused little on cinema, the Ministry of Culture issued a Decree No. 1299 on September 18th, 2002 that made it a priority to fund films presenting historical and patriotic subjects, and also making positive films for children. Not only do the films for this thesis receive these types of funds, but they go on to be shown on national holidays on national broadcasts, have been awarded with medals from the military, and have even been co-opted in some way before elections. The ease at which these films are co-opted stems from their broad message. Rather than pandering to a specific political ideology or political mission, these films present

[10] Oxana Shevel. "Russian Nation-Building from Yel'tsin to Medvedev," *East-Asia Studies* 63, no.2 (2011), 192-199.
[11] Ilya Prizel. *National Identity and Foreign Policy: Nationalism and Leadership in Poland, Russia, and Ukraine.* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), 239-299.
[12] Tolz, "Forging the Nation", 1015.

conceptions of Russianness based on broad concepts like camaraderie, duty, and service in the armed forces.

Why exactly are so many directors including non-Russians? No director has blatantly said why they include the subaltern as hero, and this paper will not try to put words in any director's mouth. Instead, this thesis hopes to display a tendency among Russian directors to place non-Russians in recent Russian war films, and how these films are contributing to the Russian debate on Russianness. In order to study how filmmakers are contributing to the nation-building process in Russia, this thesis will need to provide a framework to study the hero in Chapter 1. This will require piecing together a scholarly debate on how the hero defines the nation, namely through the inclusion of people who were once marked as inferior, the subaltern. Using that framework, Chapter 2 will then analyze earlier Russian representations for how they explain how the Russians originally defined themselves against the non-Russian peoples of Asia. That relationship was traditionally confrontational—the Asian was the enemy of Russia. That changed in some regards in the Soviet period, when non-Russians were included in films as part of a squad on a mission. But the collapse of the Soviet Union put that positive role in jeopardy, placing the subaltern back into the role of hated enemy. The final chapter, Chapter 3, fill focus on how the subaltern is being placed back into the squad, redefining the Russian nation in inclusive terms.

CHAPTER 1: Heroic Function and the Subaltern

In order to understand the role of the minority in 21st century Russian war films, this thesis will need to provide some type of framework to study film and how it represents the minority and the nation. This is an issue that scholars of many different disciplines have covered in a variety of ways, but for this thesis the focus will be on the hero. A serious amount of work has focused on the national archetype and the relationship between hero and nation. The scholarship discussed below will highlight that a nation's heroes represent a certain value set and function, unique to that nation. Who takes on that national archetype is another way that the nation is being defined and re-imagined over time, since the subaltern, those that are politically and socially outside of the hegemonic power structure, are being integrated into the traditional heroic role and becoming a part of the old power structure. Taking these scholarly approaches all together will supply a framework that can be adapted to studying the Russian case and how the war films' heroes are defining the nation.

The Hero and Heroic Function

One of the major scholars of the nation and nationalism, Anthony D. Smith, is a proponent of focusing scholarly attention on myth and symbol. Smith is interested in the emotional power of the nation to mobilize its members, since, "that collective will and devotion are vital to the definition and persistence of the nation."[13] Understanding the nation thus requires scholars to locate what is generating that collective will, something Smith does not believe other scholars of the nation have been able to do convincingly.[14] As he points out, this is because these scholars fail to look at the pre-modern origins of nations: their mythologies.

[13] Anthony D. Smith. *Chosen People*. (New York, Oxford University Press, 2003), 22-23.

[14] See Smith, *Chosen*, 19-28, and Anthony D. Smith. *Myths and Memories of the Nation*. (New York, Oxford University Press, 1999), 3-19.

A nation's myths, specifically its myths of ethnic selection, imbue its members with a sense of chosenness that compels them to action. Myths of ethnic selection provide a structure and narrative that explains the nation's chosenness, or why a certain nation has succeeded and reached the present day in its current form. Whether it is the Turkish, the Greek, the English or the Russian, nations have been built around visions of an ethnic uniqueness and a specific purpose. That purpose can take on any array of qualities, but can often be seen through over-arching patterns, like the imperial-dynastic, communal-demotic, emigrant-colonist, and diaspora-restoration.[15] These patterns represent a repertoire of myths and symbols that define the specific reasoning for a nation's survival. For example, nations that follow in the imperial-dynastic approach often have warrior-cults, because their chosenness depends on an elect few being able to defeat the nation's enemies. In contrast, the emigrant-colonist or the diaspora-restoration patterns provide a structure that defines the nation's electedness and uniqueness by the process of wandering and going on to find a specific promised land or homeland.[16]

These patterns and myths are a part of a larger process that Smith is interested in: the redefining and reimagining of the nation over the long term, what he calls la long dureé. Nations survive not because they have an ancient myth to point to, but because the original myths of ethnic election are re-appropriated over many generations. That re-appropriation has had significant limitations placed upon it by linguistic, historical and symbolic contexts. [17] For example, more than one nation has a warrior cult, but the warrior cult of Russia and the warrior cult of Japan are very different, and non-transferable. Russia's myths cannot be taken by the Ethiopian or the Bolivian and made their own.

[15] Smith, *Myths*, 135-137.
[16] Smith, *Myths*, 131-140.
[17] Smith, *Myths*, 177-179.

These limitations, over many generations, have molded together nation-specific archetypes that define the nation's long term values. The most significant and defining archetype in the nation's mythological repertoire is the hero. Heroes act as, "exempla virtutis, models of nobility and virtue for emulation."[18] They thus define the nation's values in their purest forms, and exhibit how the nation should act in times of crisis. And for Smith, that role is the most important definition the hero gives to the nation. He claims, "of importance is not this or that personage, but the virtues and qualities they embody and the message of hope they proclaim."[19] Heroic cults and specific personalities come and go, but the traditional function of the hero and the values of the hero stay fairly consistent over la long dureé. A warrior mythos stays engrained over la long dureé, and is used and re-used over time.

Personage: Who is the Hero?

Smith's focus on the long term processes and the consistent archetypes has him dismiss what he calls personage, which he sees as the specific personality and characteristics of certain heroes or heroic cults. Smith is interested in showing how pre-modern myths are re-establishing themselves in modernity, and not so much with who certain heroes, ancient or modern, specifically are. This dismissal fails to acknowledge how the nation is defining or redefining itself, not in terms of values, but in terms of ethnicity. The issue here is who belongs to the nation over the long term: Who are the people?

Smith has argued that the nation is an ethnic entity, but at times avoided focusing on that relationship or on certain cases. The nation, according to Smith, "formed in the first place around a dominant ethnie".[20] It seems more than likely that the values and heroic function of that dominant ethnie, the ethnic core of the nation, have then defined the nation in some kind of

[18] Anthony Smith, *Chosen*, 41.
[19] Smith, *Chosen*, 41.
[20] Smith, *National Identity*, 39.

ethnic terms. But as Eric Kaufmann and Oliver Zimmer note, Smith largely avoids dealing with how the relationship between the dominant ethnie and the mythos evolves over time. [21] Instead of dealing with this issue in a forthright manner, Smith only hints at his views, on the one hand mentioning that the dominant ethnie would resist any decline in its role, and then later claims that the dominant ethnie would actually expand its role.

Smith gleans further criticism from Kaufmann and Zimmer when he claims that many of the classical multi-ethnic nations do not maintain ethnically based mythologies. Smith notes that multi-ethnic nations like the United States and Australia have always had myths of ideological selection, rather than ethnic selection. But the ethnic core of the American and Australian cases has been well documented as white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP), which has and to some extent still defines those nations' myths in ethnic terms.[22] The influx of immigrants into those countries forced a new relationship to form between the dominant ethnic core and new arrivals, something that Smith does not truly try to address.

Personage may be a non-issue for Smith, but Kaufmann and Zimmer have highlighted how the relationship between the dominant ethnie and minorities can radically change the inclusivity of the nation. Modernity has produced significant demographic and social changes that have generally caused a re-envisioning of the nation, not in terms of values, but in terms of what can be called the *who*. Instead of changing what the heroes' function is or the community's values, non-traditional groups are being incorporated into the traditional role. This is not limited to just racial or ethnic minorities, but also to gender or religious groups. One scholar of American film, Jeanine Basinger, has detailed how women, as well as religious minorities, like Catholics or

[21] Eric Kaufmann and Oliver Zimmer. "'Dominant Ethnicity' and the 'Ethnic-Civic' Dichotomy in the work of A.D. Smith," *Nations and Nationalism* 10, no. 1-2 (2004), 67-8.
[22] See: Kaufmann. "Dominant." Also, see the next section, which highlights the American case more specifically.

Jews, have been placed within the traditional American archetype, once dominated by the white Protestant males.[23] The American archetype is expanding, and represents a case study that can provide useful analytical foci that can be adapted for the Russian case.

Death Hierarchies and Re-imagining the Archetype

Scholars of the American nation have noted that the traditional heroic role has expanded the definition of who is American by including non-traditional groups into that role. Like Basinger, Richard Slotkin has explored the personage of the American war hero by looking at the shift from a white dominated mythos, to a much more inclusive representation. Slotkin believes that the 1943 film *Bataan* is, "the first fully articulated statement of what was, in 1943, a new fable of American nationality."[24] The film portrays the American soldier not only as white, but as Black, Latino and even Asian, creating in effect one of the first images of the American melting-pot. Before this point, the role of the hero had largely been relegated only to the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP), which Slotkin notes was the traditional ethnic core of American society.

These films appear to define the American hero in multi-ethnic terms by including non-whites, the 'new Americans' as a part of the squad. However, Slotkin reveals that the way *Bataan* and some later films portray minorities is not inclusive, but exclusive. Rather than being included, the minority is still the outsider. Black or Latino soldiers are not shown in the positive archetypal heroic role, but marked off as less capable soldiers, field hands, or even as dangerous. African-American characters in American combat films during and after World War II largely take on either the role of the Uncle Tom or the 'Ebony saint' (John Wayne's *Green Berets*,

[23] See the chapter Variations of Genre in Jeanine Basinger. *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 199-236.

[24] Richard Slotkin. "Unit Pride: Ethnic Platoons and the Myths of American Nationality," *American Literary History* 13, no. 3 (Autumn, 2001), 470.

Bataan), or something akin to a streetwise hustler (*Boys from Company C*).[25] They are left to dig fox holes and the graves of the dead and unlike their white counterparts are not taking command and leading others into glorious battle.

These characters are further contrasted from the white soldiers in the manner and timing of death. These early films create a racial hierarchy with the whites on top and the minorities at the bottom, "with those who seem racially or culturally akin to the enemy dying less heroically."[26] The WASP characters are the most capable and heroic warriors, doing the most damage to the enemy. They die in relative peace, or in other cases even survive the war, like in *Sahara*. The whites are thus "victors in the Darwinian test of racial fitness".[27] On the other hand, the minority soldiers die in un-heroic conditions. They are tortured to death or die, not in silence and dignity like the whites, but literally kicking and screaming.[28] Some minorities, like Desi Arnaz's character in *Bataan*, never get into the fight, dying from malaria, not bullets.

This death hierarchy reveals that even though the traditional hero was appearing in new forms, the minority was still not fully included. That has begun to fade away in many regards, as minority soldiers, specifically African-Americans, are actively taking on the traditional heroic role. Instead of being shown as the grave digger or as stoners and hustlers, African-American soldiers belong among the highest leadership and command roles. Well known African-American actors like Jamie Foxx, Dennis Haysbert and Anthony Mackie took on leadership and command roles in recent productions, with Foxx playing the Marine sergeant in the 2005 film *Jarhead*, Haysbert as the Sergeant Major and primary hero of the CBS television series *The Unit*, and Mackie as Sergeant JT Sanborn in the award winning *The Hurt Locker*. These characters are not

[25] Woodman, Brian J. "Represented in the Margins: Images of African American Soldiers in Vietnam War Combat Films," *Journal of Film and Video* 53. no. 2/3 (Summer/Fall), 39-46.
[26] Slotkin, "Unit," 485. He calls this the 'Epps convention', after the Black character in *Bataan*.
[27] Ibid., 481.
[28] Ibid. The Black character in Bataan is beheaded in a terrifying sequence by a Japanese soldier, which elicits a horrific scream. Similar screaming is heard from the Polish-American soldier.

only leading America's soldiers into battle, but are taking the fight to the new ethnicized threats to America. With these kinds of representations within the war films genre, but also in action films and cop dramas (such as Danny Glover in the *Lethal Weapon* series), scholars have argued that African Americans have stopped being the outsider in Hollywood film. Instead, they join the fight against the new outsiders, often from the exotic Orient, or most likely, post-9/11, the Greater Middle East.[29]

Taking Smith's focus on archetypes and values, the issue of who the hero is, and also how that hero is being represented in that archetype form a greater framework for analyzing Russian films for how they present Russianness. The scholarly debate presented in this chapter explained that the hero defines his nation in relation to its archetypes by taking on a specific mission or purpose (his function), but also in its composition (his values, his ethnicity).

That debate also showed that these issues have to be taken into a greater context for their significance to be understood. *La long dureé* has defined the heroic archetype in a certain language and imagery that influences modern conceptions. But the modern day is also redefining that heroic archetype by putting new faces into that role, and changing their mission to reflect current needs. And Slotkin's analysis has also shown that those new faces need to actually be fulfilling that heroic role, not simply pandering to it.

In order to understand the significance of the minority hero and what sort of conception he represents in the contemporary Russian debate will require this thesis to explain the traditional role of the subaltern in Russian history and folklore. Chapter 2 will show that Russian heroism has long been a warrior-defender cult, defending against the barbarians of the East. Pagans, Mongols and Caucasians were the enemies of Russian heroes. That traditional role gave way in

[29] For an interesting analysis, see Brian Locke. *Racial Stigma on the Hollywood Screen from World War II to the Present: The Orientalist Buddy Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmilliam, 2009).

the Soviet period to the inclusion of the subaltern among the nation. Russian heroes were joined in the fight by non-Russians, though stereotyping remained. By showing this evolving role, Chapter 2 will set up the analysis of recent Russian war films done in Chapter 3 by explaining why these films are presenting a significant conception of Russianness in relation to the past: they are reimagining the role of the subaltern.

CHAPTER 2: The Evolving Function of the Non-Russian

With the analytical framework scholars like Smith and Slotkin have supplied for studying heroes as representations of the nation, this thesis needs to trace the role of the minority in the Russian heroic tradition. The framework in Chapter 1 demonstrated the importance of understanding the heroic function as it was traditionally understood, but also suggests that the role of the minority must be fleshed out. In the American case, the African-American and Latino had long been seen as racially inferior and outside the heroic role.

This chapter will provide a brief case study of the historic function of the Russian hero, but more importantly how the Asian and the Caucasian relate to that heroic function and role. Throughout much of the early and later Imperial Russian literature the subaltern is the "savage" enemy of the Russians. The Asian and the Caucasian were marked as uncivilized even into the Soviet period, which officially championed the equality and brotherhood of nations. While Youngblood is correct that the focus of Soviet film was on Russian heroes, the inclusion of the subaltern in these films represented a major shift. After centuries of conflict and conquest, Soviet directors were placing Asian and Caucasian characters into the heroic role alongside Russians. That inclusion could and did wane with time, and in early Post-Soviet film the subaltern was relegated largely to the role of terrorist or gangster. Tracing this role will partly show why the films analyzed in Chapter 3 represent an unexpected shift that is placing minorities back into heroic roles.

Early Russian Heroism and the Eastern Threat

As Smith and Slotkin would both advocate, locating the myths of a particular culture requires reaching back as far as possible into the pre-modern. The first incarnations of the heroic myth and ethnic selection shape the early archetype and define the early nation in its first forms.

Often, the earliest written sources and myths available are biblical and theological; myths of ethnic selection, along with the reason for the nation's chosenness, are often situated in terms of the divine.[30] In several of Smith's case studies divine intervention often occurs to mark a certain group as chosen. That intervention takes the form of a divine covenant, a contract between the nation and the deity. As long as the society follows God's commandments, it would benefit from his guidance.

Early Russian society and heroism were intrinsically linked with Orthodox Christianity. The Russian people are from the earliest written accounts marked as a messianic people, "the elect of God".[31] These elect people would also mark their heroes in holy terminology and imbue them with a holy mission to protect Rus'. Some of the most popular and famous folk heroes, like Ilya Muromets and Dobrynya, are given holy titles like, "Holy Russian *bogatyr*."[32] These titles are given to these warriors because they alone stand to protect the Rus' land and, as the folk tales often mention, the churches. While the *bogatyr* characters are sometimes given superhuman strength, "Kievan Rus heroism was determined not solely by physical strength but by the goals that this strength served."[33] Heroism was linked to a sense of duty in defense of Holy Rus', a sense that trumped all other concerns including family and life. In the epic "Ilya Muromets and the Falconer", Ilya Muromets' bastard son arrives at the gates of Kiev, looking to destroy the city and its churches. Ilya, "has the choice of defending the Russian land against an adversary or of accepting his son."[34] Without hesitation, Ilya stands up for the Kievan state, as he always does in his folk tales, and kills his own son.

[30] Smith, *Chosen People*, 44-51.
[31] Samuel Hazzard Cross and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor. *The Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text* (Cambridge: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1973), 119.
[32] Not all bogatyr were Holy Russian; Some Tatar warriors are called bogatyr, but they are enemies. Other Kievan characters that are called bogatyr or heroes are not given such titles. One bogatyr, Vasily Ignatyev, is a drunkard who saves Kiev, but is not described in the religious terms as is Ilya Muromets. See: James Bailey and Tatyana Ivanova. *An Anthology of Russian Folk Epics* (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1998).
[33] Bailey, *Anthology*, 13.
[34] Bailey, *Anthology*, 39.

While Ilya's son is one enemy of Rus', the folktales are consistently filled with enemies from the non-Christian East. Ilya Muromets is sent out to battle time and again against the Tatars, who in the stories come to Kiev with the intent of burning its churches and enslaving its people. In "Ilya Muromets and Kalin Tsar", Ilya faces the entire Tatar army alone. Eventually when captured, he refuses the Tsar's advances to pay him to join the horde. Instead he recalls his holy mission to protect the Russians, and is able to summon the strength and the help of some other bogatyr to capture the Tatar Khan. The threat of Tatar attack is a popular motif in the folktales, so much so that one satiric folktale pits an invalid Russian and a dwarf against a Tatar bogatyr, who is humiliating defeated.[35]

The threat of invasion was not just a fairytale; the historical record reveals the horrors that the Asians represented in the minds of the Russians and the hatred these groups elicited. The chosen Russian people are on more than one occasion marked in the Chronicles, early Russian writings, as sinners who are to be punished by God. That punishment takes the form of invading pagans like the Polovcians, and most infamously and horrifically the Tatars.[36] According to the Laurentian Chronicle, only God knows who these people, the Tatars, are and where they come from, and the destruction they bring to Rus' is God's wrath incarnate.[37] The Tatars destroy entire cities, crucify their captives and kill thousands of Russians in their first raids. They are a merciless enemy, and the chronicler describes them as filthy and even as *krovopiytsy*, blood-suckers or blood-drinkers.[38]

[35] Bailey, *Anthology*, 366.
[36] The Pagan Polovcians and other unnamed pagan hordes attack Kiev because of Russian transgressions. See: Hazzard, *The Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text*, 143, 146.
[37] See: D.M Bulanin, "Letopisnye povesti o mongolo-tatarskom nashestvii" [sections of Church Slavonic texts translated into Russian] (Institute of Russian Literature: Pushkin House), http://lib.pushkinskijdom.ru/Default.aspx?tabid=4954 (Accessed May 12th, 2001)
[38] Bulanin, "Letopisnye."

The Russian relationship with the Asiatic peoples of the steppe had always been marked in terms of Asiatic inferiority and bestiality. The peoples of the steppe were literally labeled as wild or as beasts, or in the case of the Kazakhs as childlike.[39] In the Novgorod Chronicle the peoples who lived in the Yugra, large portions of Central Russia where the Khanti and Mansi reside, are no less savage and deceitful than the Khan, even going so far as to flay a missionary.[40] The alleged savagery and cannibalism of the natives even entered the etymological convention for some of the native peoples in Siberia, whether or not these beliefs were accurate. The Russian nomenclature Samoyed, for the Siberian tribe, and Samoyedic, the linguistic family, are now considered derogatory and outdated, since they derive from the Russian words *sama* (self) and *yed* (eater) 'self-eaters'.[41]

The relationship that the Russians maintained with the Asiatic peoples that resided in the empire would continue to be marked as outsider. There was some assimilation of native elites, but it was never systematic. The terminology of the Russians changed over time, but the relationship largely remained intact. The non-Christian and non-Russian were an inferior people, though as seen quite visibly in the case of the Caucasian highlanders the 'savages' could have endearing qualities.

The Caucasus and the Noble Savage

[39] Michael Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500-1800* (Bloomington: Idiana University Press, 2002), 53, 171-172, 185-186.
[40] Robert Michell and Nevill Forbes. *The Chronicle of Novgorod: 1016-1471* (London: 1914). Available online from the University of Washington, from the links on Professor Waugh's home page. http://faculty.washington.edu/dwaugh/
[41] See: Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer. *The Tenacity of Ethnicity: A Siberian Saga in Global Perspective* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 241. There is some debate over whether this is the actual origin of the phrase, though this has been a persistent view, and I believe indicative of the belief of the Russians' contempt for the natives.

A key group that left an indelible mark on the Russian psyche was the Caucasian highlanders. Some of Russia's most famous authors and poets, including Mikhail Lermontov, Alexander Pushkin and Leo Tolstoy, were witness to and a part of the conquest of the Caucasus. Their experiences and writings would popularize an image of the locales based on savagery and exoticism. That image was multifaceted, though largely based and focused on violence. Violence in the Caucasus could simply represent a threat to the Russians. The author and poet Mikhail Lermontov presented in works like *Cossack Lullaby* and *The Circassians* the "Northern Caucasian as Wild Man."[42] This wild man was a violent, predatory figure who slips out from the darkness with dagger in hand, ready to slit a sleeping Russian's throat.

But the violence of the Caucasians could also represent an alluring and exotic factor, manifested in the figure of the noble savage. The noble savage is not unique to Russian literature, and in general represents a role reversal:

> Deriving from nature virtues that were once considered signs of backwardness, the Noble Savage serves as a positive contrast to the coercive norms of European civilization. His resistance is no longer a sign of wildness, but functions critically, as a valorization of what risks being trampled in the march of progress.[43]

In the Russian case, writers like Pushkin and Tolstoy were presenting the Caucasus as a land of independence and freedom, qualities that these writers recognized as missing in Imperial Russian society. The violence that manifested in the blood feuds and raids was intriguing to these authors, who began to project their alienation from Russian society onto exotic figures. The Russian experience in the Caucasus popularized the stereotype of the highlander and the *dzhigit*, the

[42] Harsha Ram, "Prisoners of the Caucasus: Literary Myths and Media Representations of the Chechen Conflict," (Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Working Paper Series, Summer 1999), 3.
[43] Ibid,. 6.

Caucasian horseman. These were figures that entered into the Russian imagination, through fictional characters like Tolstoy's Haji Murat and the historical figure of Imam Shamil, whose battles with the Russians became legendary. These were figures that were strong and crafty enemies, and were, "a worthy analogue to the Russian aristocrat."[44] These were warriors that would test the Russian spirit, and prove the superiority of the Russian.

The noble savage was not only a worthy adversary; he represented an escape and alternative to the realities of Russian society. What the Russian captive experienced among these people was a new perspective on life. He grew to sympathize and admire his captors and even could become romantically involved. Life in the mountains was exhilarating for these Russian characters because they were now spectators rather than actors in the colonial game. For authors like Tolstoy and Pushkin, the noble savage became an allegory for the Russian people who they saw as victims of tsarist rule and order. The hero of the story is the prisoner of the Chechen or the Circassian, but figuratively he represents the Russian people as the prisoners of the state, bearing the physical and emotional costs of empire.[45] His empathy with the non-Russian marks his recognition of what is lost in the empire building process: his freedom.

While the Russian flirts with the noble savage and the freedom of the mountains, he eventually leaves it behind. The relationship between the subaltern and the Russian did change somewhat—there were endearing qualities to these exotic people—but in the end the hero chooses to return to civilization and leave those natural freedoms and passions behind. He ultimately must escape from the mountains either out of longing for his homeland or the threat of death. The Caucasus would eventually be subjugated and would become an exotic playground of sorts. In the 1800's the Caucasus became a getaway for Russians and the once proud Caucasian

[44] Ram, "Prisoners," 8.
[45] Ibid., 9.

warrior was subdued and literally paraded around; the subaltern enemy had been defanged, and Caucasians were included as exhibition pieces in parades and museum as entertainment.[46]

A New Role in the Soviet Period

The Russian Revolution and the Russian Civil War challenged the hegemonic power structure between the Russian and the subaltern peoples of empire. The power structure that had once favored the Russians was dismantled, and the religious, imperial and nationalist tones were 'officially' stripped in the Soviet period. The official ideology the Soviet was the brotherhood and friendship of nations. All of the people of the Soviet Union whether Russian, Abkhaz, Yakut or Uzbek were considered equals and were forging a bright Socialist future together. The role of the Asian and the Caucasian, which had long been the savage enemy, turned into the comrade.

That role was quite clearly manifested in Soviet film, specifically during the Stalinist era. The war against the Nazis presented unique challenges and propaganda needs for the Soviets. The multi-ethnic nature of the Soviet Union made it vulnerable to Nazi advances; the Nazis actively tried to recruit ethnic minorities to rebel against the Soviets, specifically in the Caucasus. Soviet officials needed to promote a sense of unity in the country to try to undermine possible separatist or insurgent movements, and the method they chose was to incorporate non-Russians actively into the war films genre. The minorities that had once been oppressed or marked as inferior in the Russian empire were now being included as heroes in Soviet film.

The role of the non-Russian in Stalinist era films is of a secondary nature, but that should not be dismissed outright. The Asian and Caucasian characters are presented as a visible part of Soviet victory and sacrifice, being placed within a squad of soldiers. This squad motif is used over and over again in Stalinist and later Soviet film to highlight the regional differences of the country as well as to highlight the toll of victory. What these heroes die for is just as telling of the

[46] Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 100.

inclusive nature of these squads and Soviet ideology. In some films the glue that kept the Soviet people united could not be Russian-centric, while other films were blatantly catering to and acted as a forum for Russian nationalism. Soviet propagandists needed on the one hand films that looked beyond Moscow and international revolution in order to avoid inflaming ethnic tensions.[47] Films focused less on these factors and placed patriotism in terms of Stalin and the motherland (the Soviet Union) as what drove the soldiers to storm no-man's land or the steps of the Reichstag.

A clear and significant example of the Stalinist multi-ethnic squad is *The Fall of Berlin*. The film follows Alyosha, a steel mill worker turned soldier as he fights his way to Berlin to find his love Natasha. While the film's major hero is the Russian Alyosha, the squad of soldiers that fight alongside him to Berlin includes the Asian character Yusup and a Caucasian character Kantaria. While these characters are certainly secondary heroes, they fight and die with the same conviction as Alyosha. In the film's portrayal of the storming of the Reichstag, these heroes are shown as major participants of the war. Yusup and Kantaria are the soldiers hoisting the victory flag over the German capital, and Yusup pays the ultimate price for victory, being shot during his ascent. Alyosha cradles his body, saying to him, "Yusup, Berlin is ours." The ending of the film continues to highlight the multi-ethnic contribution to victory, as the crowd of soldiers at the Reichstag's base begins to call out their hometowns, which include Moscow, Yerevan, Baku, and Kiev among others.

The multi-ethnic squad motif carried on beyond the Stalinist period. The 1976 film *One Two Soldiers Were Going* presents another multi-ethnic squad, but this time as seen through the eyes of Soviet citizens living during the Brezhnev era. The squad is made up of several Russians, a soldier from the Baltic, an Uzbek nicknamed Khabenera, and a soldier from the Caucasus.

[47] Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society, 1917-1953* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1992), 201.

Unlike the Stalinist film *The Fall of Berlin*, the focus is not on Stalin but on the heroic sacrifice of the squad for the defense of the motherland. They defend a small bridge from a German tank division, which results in 18 destroyed German tanks at the cost of the entire unit being wiped out. That sacrifice is honored by the descendents of the squad's members on the battlefield thirty years later at the site of the battle.

While the multi-ethnic squad was featured in Soviet films, it was not always invoked by Soviet filmmakers or propogandists. Another focus was to mobilize the Russian population through films that dealt with Russian-centric or even Pan-Slav identities. Kenez notes that a series of historical epics were made about 'past Russian glories': *Aleksandr Nevsky*, *Suvorov*, *Kutuzov*, and *Ivan the Terrible*.[48] These films were presenting the Russians as a victorious people, without much regard to the ethnic makeup of the Soviet Union. Films the included the squad motif could just as easily focus their attention away from the multi-ethnic. Sergei Bondarchuk's *They Fought for Their Motherland*, which came out the year before *One Two Soldiers are Coming* is a clear example of a film focusing its attention on the Russian sacrifice. The squad of the film is composed entirely of Russians, and the film openly shows Russian icons and features Bondarchuk's character speculating about God in his foxhole.

Not only could the focus be shifted to a Russian-centric view, but the rise and popularity of the Chukchi jokes shows how Soviet society revived and still maintained a sense of Russian superiority over the minority. Russian humor was filled with ethnic jokes playing on age-old stereotypes and the realities of socialism. One of the most popular and common ethnic characters was the Chukcha, who was portrayed as a bumbling fool, less than human, and only good at hunting. The Chukchi in actuality are a small tribe living on the shores of the Bering Strait, but because of their funny sounding name and the play on words—Chukcha sounds like the Russian

[48] Peter Kenez. *Cinema and Soviet Society*, 200-201.

words *churka* (blockhead)—came to represent the clownish character for Russian humor, similar to Poles in American jokes.[49] The Chukcha's distance and unfamiliarity with Moscow also made him a useful character for jokes directly poking fun at bureaucrats and communism—his stupidity gave him an innocence that allowed him to humorously comment on life in the Soviet Union.

The Chukcha's innocence and honesty were endearing qualities that Russians connected with though. In many regards, as Draitser argues, Russians could identify with the Chukcha's situation. His misunderstandings of communism and Lenin were comical because they successfully played off the anxieties and everyday hardships that confronted normal Russians, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union.[50] This positive and sympathetic portrayal of the backward Asian was not limited to Soviet jokes, and some very significant Soviet films also presented the East as an exotic place, filled with mystery and strange people. The widely popular film, *White Sun of the Desert*, portrays the East as a barren desert filled with colorful characters. The Russian Sukhov does battle with the villainous Abdullah, an imposing character, and is joined in his battle by his sidekick Sayid. The film *Dersu Uzala*, which sold over 20 million tickets in the Soviet Union, featured as its title character a Chukchiesque woodsman who befriends a Russian officer traveling in Siberia. This film presents the Asian as a folksy, ineloquent tracker who earns the admiration and respect of the Russian officer.

The Soviet period was open to a wide variety of conceptions of the subaltern, but the inclusion of minorities into the heroic role marks a crucial turning point. Soviet ideology had incorporated the non-Russian as part of the nation. The Soviet ideology that had promoted the

[49] Emil A. Draitser. *Taking Penguins to the Movies: Ethnic Humor in Russia* (Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1998), 90.
[50] Draitser, *Penguins*, 95-99.

inclusion of the subaltern, however, slipped away when the Soviet state collapsed, leaving open a wide variety of possibilities of how the non-Russian would be represented.

Cinema of the 1990's: *Brother*, *Prisoner of the Mountain*

The realities of the Post-Soviet period were stacked against the inclusion of the Asian and the Caucasian in Russian film, namely because of the wars in the Caucasus. The Russians became bogged down in Chechnya, a conflict that brought national humiliation and shame. Rather than a resounding victory, the war featured hostage crises like those at Budennovsk as well as other acts of terrorism that were dramatically and horrifically broadcast to the country. The tragedies that occurred after the First Chechen War would be followed by waves of terrorist attacks throughout Russia, and the Second Chechen War would bring about horrors like the carnage at Belsan.

Russian directors were not undeterred from exploring the Chechen conflict on film, and some of the most studied and important films of the 1990's dealt specifically with the Chechen conflict. In fact, Sergei Bodrov's *Prisoner of the Mountain* was filmed in the North Caucasus while the war was still waging. The film places the subaltern into the role of the noble savage by having Abdul Murat peacefully end his blood feud with the Russians. Rather than executing Vania as revenge for his son's death, Abdul Murat shoots into the air and walks away. That act of mercy is unfortunately cut short, since Russian helicopters are seen at the end of film, presumably headed to bomb Abdul's village.

Other films of the period took a different route, placing the subaltern back into a role as hostile and savage enemy, without any noble qualities. One of the most significant films of the 1990's, both in terms of its cult status and its success, is *Brother*. The film depicts the return of a young soldier, Danila, from the war in the Caucasus. Searching both for work and the Soviet

band Nautilus' CDs, Danila's mother sends him to his brother Viktor's apartment in St. Petersburg. Danila settles in to the city, but in a way his mother probably had not imagined—as a contract killer. Danila's brother is an assassin-for-hire who asks Danila to take on his latest job. Danila kills scores of people through the course of the film, including the head of the local mob, and he eventually leaves St. Petersburg for Moscow, where he thinks there will be more action.

Brother places the Chechen in the role of the outsider and the threat. Viktor describes the situation to Danila in patriotic and fraternal terms to win him over, "describing the Chechen as a 'former terrorist' who is persecuting both Viktor in particular and the 'Russian people' in general."[51] The killing of the Chechen is the beginning of Danila's career as a criminal and hit man, but the Chechen's death is not presented in the negative light that later murder scenes elicit. As the film progresses, the killings and violence take a more horrific and brutal tone, gleaning commentary from the moral voice of the film, the German living in the Lutheran cemetery, as well as an incredibly unlucky and frightened film director. The German will not accept Danila's blood money, and the director, who is pulled into a hit in progress and is forced to aid in disposing the bodies, shakes and is wide eyed throughout his entire scene. In a way, he may act as a mouthpiece for Balabanov, representing his relationship of absolute fear of his killer characters and modern Russian audiences who enjoy such killers.[52]

Balabanov continues this aggressive killer 'hero' narrative in his 2002 film *War*, which has the Russian soldier, Ivan, fighting against a Chechen warlord and his band. That warlord, in the opening sequence of the film, beheads two Russian soldiers. This same Chechen and his gang go on to torture a Jew by cutting off his fingers and later rape a British woman. While Ivan originally is allowed to leave unscathed and could enjoy life at home, he decides to return to

[51] Susan Larsen, *National Identity*, 504.
[52] Ibid., 508. Larsen mentions that several Russian film critics look at it this way, though she argues a slightly different view.

Chechnya to save a crippled Russian sergeant he befriended and the Englishwoman. The film does portray one 'friendly' Chechen, but at the film's end it is revealed that he betrays Ivan to the authorities in order to get a cash reward.

Balabanov's 2002 film is the exception rather than the rule in 21st century Russian war films in terms of the role of the subaltern. While the subaltern appeared largely as the savage enemy again in early Post-Soviet film, the majority of the culturally and financially significant films of the 2000's return the minority to the heroic role. Chapter 3 will show how the Russian film industry has expanded quite dramatically in terms of domestic production, and has promoted the portrayal of non-Russians in heroic roles. Like the political realm in the 2000's the cinematic arena presents Russianness in very broad terms: service and love for the nation are the marks of true heroism in 21st century Russian war films.

CHAPTER 3: An Analysis of Six Films

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the possibilities that directors have in rediscovering and re-appropriating myths and symbols are limited only by their imaginations and their budgets. Those visions can and have taken a number of divergent paths; Susan Larsen's focus on the few blockbuster films in the early post-Soviet period showed several conceptions of the national hero that directors like Nikita Mikhalkov and Aleksei Balabanov were crafting in representing the nation. Mikhalkov's *Burnt by the Sun* portrayed a Soviet general as the film's hero, while his melodrama *Barber of Siberia* focused on the heroism of Imperial Russian soldiers. And as already noted, Balabanov's *Brother* presented a contract killer as Russia's 'hero'. Larsen's focus on the blockbuster in the 1990's was focused on picking out the views of Russianness that mattered: these were the films that were making a profit and were receiving both international and domestic attention. Russian audiences appeared to be voting with their pocketbooks, paying to see films putting forth some new vision. However, the messages these films were presenting were not very compatible. One set of heroes represented the glories of the past, Imperial or Soviet, while the other represented the miseries of the present. Which path would Russian heroism take, or would new heroes form? What was Russian heroism going to represent, and what was the ideology behind it?

Larsen's approach is useful here, especially in light of the rise of the Russian film industry in the 2000's. Larsen's analysis was limited by the number of true domestic hits, only a few films at that point had reached any level of financial or critical acclaim. But the 2000's have been marked by the rejuvenation of the Russian film industry through new talent, new funds, and greater government interest; in 2007 the Russian box office grossed around US $600 million, becoming the fifth largest film market in the world.[53] The sheer volume of domestic films has

[53] Birgit Beumers, *A History of Russian Cinema* (New York: Berg, 2009), 241.

increased dramatically as well. Instead of only three or four domestic blockbusters a decade, scholars of Russian film like Stephen Norris and Birgit Beumers have listed a slew of domestic blockbusters starting in the mid-2000's.[54] And not only are there blockbusters, but Russian films are gaining more fame among intellectual circles and the public, winning new domestic prizes and perhaps even being nominated for international awards.

The films selected for this thesis represent a sampling of some of the most significant films of the past decade (2000-2010). They are among some of the most successful and popular war films of the 21st Century: *9th Company*, *Star*, *Brest Fortress*, *72 Meters*, *1612,* and *Stormy Gates*. These films all represent a conscious effort on the part of their directors and crews to present a positive Russian hero for contemporary consumption; these films represent a new foray into the nation-building process by the cultural elite. Not only are the intellectual elites creating these films, but they are now more than ever involved with the political elite. In some cases the government is co-opting these films, either by broadcasting them on national holidays, commenting on them publically, or even in the case of *1612* and *9th Company* becoming a part of electoral politics and party strategy. What kinds of conceptions are being shown in these kinds of movies?

What is so unexpected is the consistency at which these very different films, about very different time periods and settings present a positive multi-ethnic conception of Russianness. The dominant theme of these films of the 1990's had been the exclusion of the subaltern from the heroic role. The films of the 1990's overwhelmingly featured the Chechen or the non-Russian as either terrorist, gangster, or in the case of Prisoner of the Mountains as the noble savage. In 21st Century Russian films, the majority of the blockbuster and award winning war films are

[54] See: Beumers, *History*, 256-259 and Stephen M. Norris, "Packaging the Past: Cinema and Nationhood in the Putin Era," *Kinokultura*, 2008, http://www.kinokultura.com/2008/21-norris.shtml (Accessed May 2, 2011).

resurrecting the multi-ethnic squad motif and placing the non-Russian back alongside the Russian. Directors of all different backgrounds have been including non-Russians as members of the squad—something they do not have to do. The Russian Federation is overwhelming ethnic Russia, yet some of the most financially successful and politically active directors include Jews, Ukrainians, Azeri, Georgians, Tatars, various Asian groups and even Chechens into the heroic role. The exact reasoning behind this inclusion are unclear, though the reaction to the media and film of the 1990's, with their anti-heroes and nonsensical violence, has been overwhelmingly negative among contemporary directors. The focus on the violence and criminal created a strong reaction among prominent filmmakers like Nikita Mikhalkov, and many of the films here had the stated objective of creating a positive Russian hero.

The exact role of the hero in 21st Century war films has taken divergent forms. Four the films analyzed here (*9th Company, Brest Fortress, Star and 72 Meters*) present the hero in terms of sacrifice. The heroic function in many Russian films has actually taken on a surprising level of carnage: almost the whole squad is annihilated by film's end. This massacre is not a reflection of Russian weakness, but rather a reflection of the Russian spirit. Russia's warriors will lay down their lives for the nation—even when the odds are stacked against them. This revised heroic function is certainly not unique to these four films, as Gregory Carleton has detailed quite clearly. He shows how this annihilation narrative has become a standard motif in recent Russian war films. Yet Russia's heroes do not all have to die to be victorious or heroic. The Russian and the Tatar duo of *1612* are not killed, but instead bring ultimate victory to the Russians. The subaltern can take on that victorious warrior position, rather than martyr.

What exactly these multi-ethnic heroes are fighting and dying for is often quite vague. While Russian heroism has taken a multi-ethnic bent, what is the purpose of the hero? Rather

than focusing on a specific ideology, these films often deal with broad values like duty and unity. While the setting may be Soviet or pre-modern, the heroes of the following films are often meant as symbols to instill a sense of pride and patriotism into a young Russian audience, focusing less on the ideology behind service, and simply the ideas of duty, loyalty and camaraderie, messages that are easily picked up by politicians eager to promote a healthy patriotic identity for the country.

Star

Patriotism and images of glorified sacrifice dominate Nikolai Lebedev's 2002 film *Star*, a film that marked a shift in Russian cinema. While the films of the 1990's had focused mainly on the war in the Caucasus, Lebedev's film was a remake of an earlier Soviet story, first a novel by Emmanuil Kazakevich and then a 1949 film by Aleksandr Ivanov. That remake marked a very different story from the original; the original story written during the Stalinist period featured a cowardly Russian and even a humanized German. The novel also left the squad's fate behind enemy lines unclear.

The squad featured in Lebedev's film is completely different. This band of scouts is sent on a mission behind enemy lines, and discovers that there are SS Panzer divisions getting ready to mount a full scale assault on the Russian lines. The scouts' success leads to their eventual demise, since the Germans are intent on killing them before they can return to base, sending what seems like the whole German army to track them down. Eventually, the entire squad is killed vividly on screen in a burning barn, but not before the intelligence is relayed to headquarters and allows the Soviets to repel the German advance.

Heroism in *Star* resides in a small multi-ethnic squad, which includes the Chukchi-esque Private Temdekov, played by Amadu Mamadakov. Temdekov is a token non-Slavic character,

representing what Mamadakov saw as the entirety of the Eurasian people. While never given a specific label—his nationality remains a mystery—his character is introduced as a country bumpkin. His first scene has him eagerly and profusely using both hands to greet an amused Lieutenant Travkin. Travkin proceeds to ask Temdekov why he is volunteering for the scouts, to which Temdekov replies, 'I can shoot'. He looks in the sky, then to a nearby pond, raises his rifle and shoots a fish. He replies in his accented Russian that he is an *okhotnik*, a hunter.

Temdekov is further ethnicized as an animist, something stereotypically Eastern and Asian. Temdekov performs some type of fire ritual twice during the film. He lights some twigs on fire and waves them around his head while chanting in his native language, preparing himself to go behind enemy lines. The second occasion has him doing the same ritual, but this time he blows the fire out and stands over the dead body of Private Vorobiev, the timid German-speaking Russian soldier. He chants and waves the embers around Vorobiev's head. The authenticity of this particular ritual is questionable, but similarly described ceremonies are common amongst the animist Turkic people of Siberia, with the function apparently being to ward off evil spirits and guide the dead to the next world.[55] In the case of the film, the ritual appears to resurrect Vorobiev long enough for him to tell Travkin how to use the German radio. The ritual further highlights Temdekov's foreignness among the Russians. His appearance and introductory mannerism from the start set him aside as a rural Asian, but having him chant in a clearly non-Slavic language and waving fiery sticks re-emphasizes his non-ethnic Russianness. But for all his foreignness, Temdekov is not an incapable warrior, and not laughed at by his unit. His marking merely serves to re-emphasize to the audience the multi-ethnic nature of the squad.

This message of unity and brotherhood is underscored by this shamanist hunter's heroic death alongside his Russian squad mates. After resurrecting Vorobiev, Temdekov takes up a

[55] See: Yves Bonnefoy. *Asian Mythologies* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993), 345.

position in one of the barn's windows. Throughout the battle he can be seen shooting at Germans, and is wounded several times just as the others are. As they start running low on ammunition, and some of the Russians are mortally wounded, the end comes for Temdekov and Travkin. The importance here is that there is no hierarchy in the deaths of the soldiers; all the soldiers give their lives to save the nation and each other. Several scouts died before the final shootout in selfless acts—in fact, the Ukrainian soldier sacrifices himself in order to draw the Germans away from the rest of the squad so they could escape.

The annihilation of the group is framed at the end of the film as contributing to the ultimate liberation of Eastern Europe. The commander of the intelligence unit, who has been at headquarters the entire film, relates that the soldiers were posthumously awarded honors in the future. He also notes that because of the intelligence they transmitted back to base, the Russians were able to prepare for the German counterattack. Their deaths are even linked to victory in Europe; as the commander narrates that tens of thousands of soldiers like them would go on to die to liberate Poland and Czechoslovakia. Unlike the novel that the film is loosely based on, the role of the squad in the greater war effort is widely expanded, as is the ethnic diversity of the squad; no Asian exists in the novel—in fact Lebedev only added Mamadakov's character pre-production after watching reels of old documentary footage and seeing Asian faces.[56] The fate of the scouts was not relayed in the novel; Lebedev adds in a fiery and heroic last stand, and he expands the victory from a small local one, to contributing to the eventual Soviet victory in Europe.[57]

The film presents the Great Patriotic War in terms of simple to understand nostalgia. In a lot of ways, the film represents a return to the Soviet narrative seen in films like *One Two*

[56] See: "Amadu Mamadakov: o <<Zvezde>>, Sakha teatre I aziatskikh litsakh v kino," *Yakutiya*, April 4, 2010, http://www.gazetayakutia.ru/node/4657 (Accessed May 1, 2011).
[57] Carleton, "Victory in Death: Annihilation Narratives in Russia Today," *History and Memory* 22, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2010): 148.

Soldiers Were Going. One critic, Aleksander Shpagin, went so far as to label *Star* as, "wartime socialist realism comparable to what was turned out by the Dovzhenko Film Studios in the 1980s."[58] In effect *Star* revived the multi-ethnic squad motif and the Soviet perspective for a new generation to experience in an emotional way. Lebedev insists that the film is not so much a war film as a window for the audience to peer into a very personal experience: the death of these young men.[59] Lebedev is interested in pushing a positive hero and image onto Russian audiences largely in reaction to the criminality of the 1990's. His film did well in Russia at the time, making half a million. It would go on to be nominated for a Golden Eagle, and would, as Lebedev noted in an interview, played on national television and beating out the Sunday primetime showing of *Mission Impossible II*.

Brest Fortress

While *Star* focused on a small squad of soldiers, the 2010 Russian-Belorussian co-production *Brest Fortress* tells the story of hundreds of soldiers resisting Hitler's armies. The film is largely based on the events that occurred during the first days of Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the Soviet Union. In both the film and real life, the garrison at the old brick fortress was taken totally by surprise, though they quickly mounted a stiff resistance. Several pockets of soldiers held out for over a week with little ammunition and food. Eventually the garrison capitulated, leaving many dead and several taken prisoner. The survivors were stripped of their positions after the war, and many left destitute. It was only after Sergei Smirnov wrote an investigative history of the Soviet defenders, first published in 1957, that many of the soldiers who had been mistreated or become destitute were reinstated into the Party and honored for their service. From then on, Brest Fortress became a key piece of Soviet mythology. After

[58] Aleksander Shpagin, "Newly Sprouting Seedlings in the Rustling Field of Domestic Cinema," Trans. Vladimir Padunov, *Kinokultura*, no. 10 (October 2005) http://kinokultura.com/articles/oct05-kinotavr.html (Accessed May 1, 2011)

[59] Lebedev, Nikolai. Interview by Moskovsky Komsomolets, Online interview October 6, 2003. http://nlebedev.ru/intervu3.html (Accessed May 2, 2011).

1957, the defense turned into something Soviet youths, including the film's producer, grew up learning about.[60]

The film crew certainly wanted to play into the heroic mythology, crafting a film that attempts to produce a fairly historical accurate depiction with an emotional and violent narrative. Igor' Ugolnikov, the film's producer, stated that he hoped the film would present today's youth with their ancestors' trials and tribulations, and reveal the kind of potential that the Russian people have.[61] In order to complete that goal, the film crew took great lengths to keep the film historically accurate by gathering together firsthand accounts, Federal Security Bureau records and museum archives, and even hiring a professional historian. The film's primary heroes are mainly the actual commanders of the different pockets of resistance—Major Gavrilov, Captain Kizhevatov, Commissar Fomin—and the narrator Sasha, who according to the film's website is in fact based loosely on an actual child-turned-soldier. These characters' fates are accurately depicted too, with Fomin being executed by the Nazis while Gavrilov is taken prisoner and awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union only after 1957.

This actually upset some viewers, namely a veterans group, since the film was depicting Soviet soldiers surrendering and not having all of them die in the end. Ugolnikov deflected such criticism by playing with the language of sacrifice and heroism. He explained in an interview on *Lenta.ru* that in reality prisoners were taken, but hints at the contrast present in the film. While some soldiers did surrender, the ultimate taboo, other characters heroically fought on till the bitter end, as the film presents. The film is filled with scenes of ill-equipped soldiers forced to attack Germans with machine guns and tanks. Early on in the film the garrison rushes out with pieces of furniture, picture frames, and sticks to fight the Nazis. The body count reflects the odds

[60] "General'niy producer fil'ma 'Brestckaya krepost' Igor' Ugol'nikov: 'Ya oshelomlen uspekhom kartini." Perviy Kanal, November 12, 2010. http://www.1tv.ru/news/about/164816 (Accessed May 1, 2011)
[61] "Prem'era fil'ma 'Brestskaya krepost' sostoitsya 22 iunya v 4 utra". *Lenta*, January 5, 2010. http://lenta.ru/news/2009/10/29/brest/ (Accessed May 1, 2011)

—the Soviets are largely all killed off by the end—though these deaths are certainly glorified. The scenes of surrender are brief, and the remaining soldiers simply seem more resolved to fight to the death. The finale of the film, like the film's website, is splashed with imagery and slogans to the effect of "die but don't surrender". The numbers of soldiers that are killed during the last half of the film do exactly that, their sacrifice enshrined in the film's closing scene of the Brest defender's monument in Belarus.

The heroism the film portrays is not relegated to Russians, or even Slavs, but is quite multi-ethnic. The film features a medley of ethnicities, and its website features a note written by Gavrilov, who mentions that the heroes of Brest were made up of over 30 ethnicities, including Bashkirs, Tatars (Gavrilov himself was an ethnic Tatar), Uzbeks, Georgians and Circassians.[62] The multi-ethnic nature of the company is often visible through background images—in the opening scenes a group of soldiers can be seen dancing in a circle, a type of stereotypical Caucasian dance. The film even includes an Armenian soldier for much of the first half of the film as one of the more primary characters, though he is severally wounded at one point, and shown lying in the hospital, which is historically accurate according to the character's biography posted on the films website.[63]

The Asian-Siberian soldier is another symbol of the multi-ethnic range of the regiment. Asian characters make their presence known during the battle with the German tanks. The company is forced to do battle with oncoming German armor and supporting infantry without any anti-tank weaponry (and for some not even with rifles). As the company begins to take fire, a sudden shot slams one of the approaching tanks, diverting its attention. A small artillery piece in

[62] P.M. Gavrilov, "Podvig geroyev beccmerten," *Brestskaya krepost'*, http://brestkrepost-film.ru/history/heroes/index.html (Accessed April 29, 2011)
[63] "Geroi: Matevosyan Samvel Minasovich," *Brestskaya krepost'*, http://brestkrepost-film.ru/history/heroes/3734.html (Accessed April 29, 2011)

the distance gets off only a few more rounds, but the bravado of the gunner gives the company the resolve to charge the Germans. As they begin reaching the Germans, Asiatic soldiers can be seen quite clearly; at one point one Asian soldier does a martial arts-like attack, lunging feet first into a German.

After successfully 'kicking' the Germans back, it is unfortunately revealed that the soldier manning the cannon is killed, which prompts a burial ceremony. It is revealed that the gunner is Private Akimov, the narrator's teenage brother. An Asian seen during the battle is present during the scene, acting as a marker of the multi-ethnic nature of the squad. During the burial ceremony, he chants over Akimov's grave in a manner quite similar to what was seen in *Star*. The character chants and waves some fire around the grave, while the Russians stand off to the side in solemn silence. By performing this ritual, the Asian is again being ethnicized, not in a negative fashion, but to highlight the group's multi-ethnic character. The heroes and martyrs of Brest Fortress were not all blond haired Russian teenagers; the film crew wanted Russian audiences to remember that.

This sentiment is further solidified by the end of the film, when the Brest defenders are mostly killed and the main heroes' fates are sealed. As Gavrilov leads the charge along the river bank, an Asian character behind him is clearly riddled with bullets. After regrouping, during Gavrilov's closing scene, Gavrilov shakes hands with those under his command. In a touching scene, he heartily embraces not a Russian, but a weeping Asian character. The executions and defeat of Brest Fortress are not presented as failure in these last scenes, but as symbols of the unity and sacrifice of the Soviet generation; a generation that the film intends to be an example for contemporary Russian youth. The film's message is not about the victory of the Soviet government (which is shown here failing the defenders and then persecuting them after the war),

but about the Soviet people, who resisted and eventually won against the evil fascists. As the film shows in its final scenes, these are heroes that still walk among and their presence is still felt. Their sacrifice is being displayed here as a reminder to Russians that they need to be proud of their multi-ethnic and multi-cultural past, a message that has brought the film more than expected financial success and a nomination for a Golden Eagle. The Ministry of Education even bought a copy of the DVD to screen for students and soldiers, and Channel 1 has already bought the rights to show the film on Victory Day with extra documentary footage included.[64]

9th Company

Heroic sacrifice and the multi-ethnic squad extend beyond the context of the Great Patriotic War—one of the most popular and successful Russian war films in recent years, *9th Company*, takes the heroes over the border into Afghanistan. The film is the epitome of the Russian blockbuster; it is one of the most expensive Russian films ever made, shattered box office records, and has been co-opted by the administration to a significant degree.[65] What Bondarchuk has produced, however, is a film that depicts Russian heroism in incredibly broad terms.

The film, broken up into two parts, depicts the stories of several soldiers from training to death. The first half of the film details how a group of young Russians of various backgrounds—an artist, a street urchin, a school teacher—begin their lives as soldiers training with Dygalo, a mentally and physically scarred drill instructor. These soldiers are then joined by other, including a Ukrainian and a Chechen from Grozny. When the group reaches Afghanistan in the second half of the film, the primary Russian heroes are grouped with three veteran soldiers of the

[64] "General'niy producer fil'ma 'Brestckaya krepost' Igor' Ugol'nikov: 'Ya oshelomlen uspekhom kartini." *Perviy Kanal*. Nov. 12. 2010. http://www.1tv.ru/news/about/164816 (Accessed May 1, 2011)

[65] Shown on Victory Day (May 9th) the film was the highest rated program on Channel 1 for 2006. Over 13 million people watched it that day. See: Irina Poluekhtova, "Mozhno li oboytis' bez reytingov?" *Iskusstvo Kino*. (Nov. 11. 2007). http://kinoart.ru/2007/n11-article19.html (Accessed May 1, 2011)

9th Company, Khokol (played by Bondarchuk, the film's director), Afanasiy, and Kurbashi. This group's camaraderie is galvanized over the course of the film, ending with all but one of the soldiers dying in a dramatic hilltop battle against hundreds of attackers.

Bondarchuk's film is both a heroic tribute and a purposely crafted, explosion-filled blockbuster. Bondarchuk has commented on occasion that this film is a tribute to his generation —to the young men who were conscripted to fight in an 'alien country'. On the film's website, Bondarchuk notes that the film is, "not about how the country lost the war, it's about how those lads won their own internal battle. It goes on in all men. Each one of them has to decide for himself - what is love, what is treachery, comradeship, and heroism."[66] Bondarchuk's film definitely shows a stark version of heroism based on patriotic sacrifice and national unity. Yet Bondarchuk's heroes are more of a motley, multi-ethnic crew than Soviet supermen. They are school teachers, painters and one is even an orphan that grew up on the streets. And the heroes include non-Russians. Not only is there the aforementioned Chechen from Grozny, nicknamed Pinochet, but the group later includes the Asian Kurbashi, who is the squad's medic.

This group of soldiers is displayed quite differently from those in *Brest Fortress* and *Star*, since Bondarchuk immerses the audience in the boorish humor and lifestyle of this band of soldiers. The group wildly celebrates New Year's together, kid each other about women they have slept with, and crack offensive jokes at one another. These ethnic slurs and jokes, along with Kurbashi's mannerisms, play upon popular held stereotypes, including the Chukchi-Asian. Amadu Mamadakov again plays the 'Chukcha', who, as one interviewer put it, is constantly chewing on bones or food in the background like an idiot.[67] What might seem offensive, however, is not in this context. Bondarchuk uses the ethnic humor and stereotypes in a non-

[66] Fyodor Bondarchuk, "From the Director," *9th Company*, http://www.9thcompanymovie-us.com/ (Accessed April 24, 2011)
[67] Amadu Mamadakov, Interview by Sayana Ondur, Online interview with *TuvaOnline*. http://mamadakov.ru/archives/172 (Accessed May 1, 2011)

serious fashion to mark the multi-ethnic nature and to be comical. Kurbashi might act like the doltish Chukcha in some scenes, but he is also the squad's medic—a job that would presumably require some intelligence and talent. Bondarchuk plays with these kinds of dichotomies throughout the film, including another noteworthy scene in which the Chechen character claims he got into a fight over being called a swine, hinting to his Islamic roots, but immediately asks for a drink. These scenes play on racial stereotypes in a humorous way, becoming vignettes on the unity and friendship of his heroes.

In one such scene, an exchange between Khokhol and Kurbashi appears ethnically tinged, but is an example of the strength of the soldier's friendship. After learning that Dygalo was the drill instructor for the new recruits, Khokhol asks Kurbashi why Dygalo was discharged in the first place. Kurbashi states his prognosis as a *kontuziya* (concussion), which elicit some silly chuckling on his part. Khokhol, unamused, tells him he would have expected something more intelligent from a *churka*, a blockhead. Kurbashi becomes upset, but nothing comes of it. The squad quickly moves on to talk about women, and the friendship between Kurbashi and Khokhol is in no way threatened. Instead, this scene presents how the ethnic slurs used—*churka* and *khokhol* (a common slur for Ukrainians)—are not meant as hurtful insults, but as terms of endearment. These are soldiers who are comfortable enough to say such things to each other, reinforcing the kinship they have as brothers-in-arms.

Kurbashi is by no means the primary hero of the film, but is shown as an integral member of the squad and appears prominently in the hilltop battle. Like in the other films, the Asian character plays a secondary character. He only appears in the second half of the film after the trainees get to Afghanistan and meet the battle hardened veterans of 9th Company. His lack of dialogue is not, however, indicative of his status in the group, and as Mamadakov claims in an

interview, was the result of necessary editing.[68] As the medic, he is called out several times by squad members, and he shows himself a capable warrior in the film's hilltop conclusion. He is a savage fighter—at one point saving Chugun, one of the young Russians from Siberia, by repeatedly stabbing the attacker with a hastily pulled dagger.

The carnage of the hilltop battle does not spare Kurbashi, and he is included in the hilltop sacrifice. Throughout the battle he can be seen carrying wounded soldiers, but is nowhere to be found when Khokol is apparently killed or wounded. Lyutyy calls out for Kurbashi, and when he searches for him, eventually stumbles upon the body. Kurbashi is covered in blood, and Lyutyy puts his head on Kurbashi's chest, mourning his loss. As in the previously studied films, there is no hierarchy of death in the hilltop battle. All of the members of 9th Company, save Lyutyy, die heroic deaths. Kurbashi is an equal part of that, being no less significant than the Russians who died on that same hill.

And what exactly did all of these characters die for? Soviet ideology is not repeated throughout the film or prominently featured; when the soldiers are asked why they fight in Afghanistan, they shout off that it is in their international obligation to the Afghan people, but that shouting routine only appears once and is even partly cut off. Rather than a Soviet victory, the films presents a version of Russian heroism that is digestible for today's audience, and was perhaps even meant as an allegory for the war in the Caucasus. According to Denise Youngblood, a source she considers reliable told her that the film was initially conceived of as a war film set in Chechnya.[69] Instead of relating how the Soviet mission to Afghanistan was a worthwhile mission or the glory of Soviet ideology, the film as Gregory Carleton argues is placing a maximum emphasis on duty as the marker of heroism.[70]

[68] Amadu Mamadakov, Interview by Sayana Ondur, Online interview with *TuvaOnline*. http://mamadakov.ru/archives/172 (Accessed May 1, 2011)
[69] Youngblood, *Russian War Films*, 208.
[70] Carleton, "Victory," 150.

This message of national unity and service to the country has been easily co-opted by United Russia. Though the film has nothing to do with the defeat of the Nazis, the film was broadcast on Channel 1, the most widely received television station, on May 9th, Victory Day, 2006. The film was immensely popular, taking in an impressive USD 25 million, and the regime's decision to promote and be attached to the film became increasingly blatant. When Amadu Mamadakov decided to screen the film in his hometown in the Altay Republic to honor local Asian war veterans of the conflict, a situation erupted in which Mamdakov became publically disgusted and vocally outspoken against United Russia. Local United Russia officials requested that before Mamadakov host the event he would need to join the party, which he did, and that the event's date was to be set before a parliamentary election. According to Mamadakov's side of the story, he felt betrayed and embarrassed by the United Russia politicians, who hijacked the event to talk politics.[71] Mamadakov was so upset, that he actually cut off his relations with the Altay Republic.

72 Meters

The subaltern hero and martyr is not regulated to films solely about the Red Army or the Soviet Union. Again, Amadu Mamadakov plays an Asian-Chukchiesque character in Vladimir Khotinenko's *72 Meters*—a film that comments on life after the Soviet Union through the woeful story of the sinking submarine *Slavianka*. The relationship between Russians and the Asian is again framed as an ethnicized Asian sacrificing himself along with the ethnic Russian heroes. What separates this film from the others is the anti-Ukrainian stereotypes and tone that exists—one group is being singled out in a negative fashion and being labeled 'unworthy'. One of the

[71] See: "Amadu Mamadakov razrugalsya s Respublikoi Altai: podrobnosti konflikta," *Bankfaks*, March 1, 2006, http://www.bankfax.ru/page.php?pg=34143 (Accessed April 31, 2011).

Ukrainian characters is portrayed as weird and not worthy of death, while the Asian, a non-Slav, is labeled placed the 'true heroes' and "true Russian sailors"[72].

In order to understand the Asian character and his portrayal in *72 Meters*, it is necessary to analyze the anti-Ukrainian sentiment that arises throughout the film. The dislike for Ukrainians first manifests itself in a flashback to a humiliating ceremony held in Ukraine after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which is attended by the crew of the submarine. A Ukrainian official recites a speech extolling the greatness of Ukraine, and asking for Ukrainian sailors from the *Slavianka* to pledge allegiance to the new country. Captain Yanychar, a stereotyped burly and patriotic Russian, is unable to bare the humiliation any longer, and orders those loyal to Ukraine to take two steps forward, and marches those that remain from the square to the tune of "Farewell of the Slavianka". The scene presents an ethnically tinged dichotomy between those that serve the country, and those that betrayed it—between those that stayed with Russia, and those that disowned it.

This anti-Ukrainian bent continues throughout the film, since the character Chernenko, a civilian scientist aboard the submarine, is revealed to be Ukrainian. After much persistence from one of the Russian characters, Chernenko finally reveals to the crew that he is a Ukrainian through his mother's side, as he prepares to escape from the submarine and leave the Russians to die.[73] This is the culmination to an entire film's worth of Chernenko being defined as an un-heroic and strange outsider. From his first minutes aboard the ship he is shown as inept and socially incompetent. He does not understand military humor and he looks and acts nervously

[72] Настоящие русские моряки. I thought it was significant to point out that the exact word here is *russkii*, which is the ethnic term for Russian, rather than *rossiiskii*, which has civic connotations.

[73] Chernenko says his mother was Ukrainian, while his father was "no one knows". Oleg Sulkin states in his review of the film that, "It is clear to all Russian viewers that this alien stinker is disingenuously alluding to his father's Jewishness." See: Oleg Sulkin, "A Non-Standard Yardstick: 72 Meters As the Rehabilitation of Russian Heroism," *Kinokultura*, http://www.kinokultura.com/reviews/R74seventytwo.html (Accessed May 1, 2011)

when talked to by the Russian crew. At one point he blurts out in a conversation that no one likes him, and that even that taxi drivers stop talking to him after awhile.

Chernenko represents the marker between the non-heroic and the Russian hero; his survival and appearance sets up a contrast between the heroic 'Russians' and those that have turned their backs on Russia . According to Oleg Sulkin, excluding Chernenko from this sacrifice, "the collective of submariners-martyrs expels from the holy depths the hateful alien element."[74] The socially inept and awkward civilian is allowed to live, while the sailors—as Chernenko describes them the true Russian sailors, the true heroes—are left to die in the submarine. Russian heroism is surely being defined in terms of service to the state, but this ignores the fact that the crew of the submarine is multi-ethnic. A Ukrainian actually remains aboard the submarine—the senior warrant officer played by Vladislav Galkin. He decided to stay aboard the *Slavianka* during the Ukrainian ceremony, though the Captain understood if he wanted to leave. Furthermore, the ethnic issue is more vividly blurred by the inclusion of the Asian sailor Mukambetov. Mukambetov's portrayal in the film is very much in the vein of the Chukchi, which Sulkin labeled the 'beloved Mongoloid half-wit'. The audience is first introduced to Mukambetov in the opening scenes of the submarine, in which he is painting some sort of mat with orange paint. The warrant officer tells him that he was supposed to wash them off, not paint them, to which Mukambetov goofily replies that they will look pretty painted. When the warrant officer replies that the paint will crack, Mukambetov with a hefty grin says that "we'll paint them again", to which Captain Yanychar smirks. Mukambetov is an animated and comical character. He knocks over his paint can while trying to fetch the captain's hat from the water, and begins dancing wildly on a box screaming about the soccer team Spartak. He also gets into a humorous exchange with one of the Russian sailors, in which it sounds as if he is

[74] Sulkin, "Non-Standard."

replying *gde* (where) in Russian, but is actually speaking in his own language, replying with a simple 'yes'.

Though he remains a background and comical character, Mukambetov's humor and portrayal is not unlike the silliness and humor of the ethnic Russians, and like those Russians he dies aboard the submarine. The Russians are shown as comically foolish, amiable and good natured—in one flashback Captain Yanychar and his compatriot Orlov strap a grenade to a cow's head in order to humanely slaughter it for an old babushka. Just like the comical Russians, Mukambetov is duty-bound and loyal to country, representing the Asians that remained within the Russian Federation.

Russianness is being defined here in civic terms, albeit with a very ethnic bent. It is Chernenko who sets this dichotomy up. During his speech, when he calls the sailors true heroes and true Russian sailors, the camera actually pans to Mukambetov's face. Those that love Russia and serve it are its heroes, even if they are Asian or Ukrainian. Heroism and the nation in *72 Meters* are defined by service to the Russian Federation; those that betrayed service to Russia, or take no part in that service, are shown as repugnant and strange. The film and its message did well with critics, winning the Golden Eagle for Best Picture. And even though the film deals with Kursk-like disaster (which Khotinenko denies), the film's message is on the resilience and duty of its Russian members, not on pointing fingers, which probably explains why the film has been shown on national television on Navy Day.

1612

Khotinenko presented a different version of heroism in his 2007 film *1612*. The film focuses on the events of the Time of Troubles, when the Poles invaded Muscovy after the collapse of the Rurik dynasty. Rather than relating the story from the perspective of the historical

heroes of the period like Kuzma Minin or Prince Pozharsky, Khotinenko creates a fictional hero: Andrei. Andrei is a young Russian serf who is able to free himself from his bondage, and learns with the help of a Spanish ghost to sword fight. He guides the Russians in defending against the Polish Lord Osina, who is attempting to place himself on the Russian throne through a marriage to the last surviving Rurik family member, Andrei's love interest Princess Ksenia. By the end of the film Andrei defeats Osina in a sword fight and is almost made Tsar until it is discovered that he was originally a serf.

Khotinenko's film received considerable support from several prominent members of the Russian elite. The film was partly financed by Viktor Vekselberg, an oligarch famous for buying several Faberge eggs in the United States and repatriating them to Russia. The film's producer was Nikita Mikhalkov, who had only a few months before the release of the film published a public letter to President Putin asking him to stay on for a third term. The film was even slated to come out the relatively new holiday National Unity Day, which celebrates the Russian victory over the Polish forces.

Many were quick to jump on the statements that Khotinenko made himself about the film. He stated, "It's important for me that the audience feel pride […] That they didn't regard it as something that happened in ancient history but as a recent event. That they felt the link between what happened 400 years ago and today."[75] The film has thus been seen as a political allegory for the calamity that befell Russia post-collapse, and how Putin rose up and solved the country's problems. Putin's aides have played up this allegory, and the film's release shortly before upcoming elections was also not a coincidence, and was seen as a possible boost for United Russia's popularity at the polls.

[75] "Kremlin-funded blockbuster casts Putin in tsar role," *Herald Scotland*, November 3, 2007, http://www.heraldscotland.com/kremlin-funded-blockbuster-casts-putin-in-a-tsar-role-1.829539 (Accessed May 1, 2011).

If the film is an allegory for the modern day, the setting and imagery of the film appears to be defining the Russian people in terms of Russian Orthodoxy. A major part of the film's plot is the contrast between Orthodoxy, which is seen as pure and natural, and the Latin faith which is regarded as a heretical. The princess is being forced into converting into Catholicism; she does resist and seeks out the guidance of an ancient monk, who has set himself up in a tower with a large iron harness weighed down by iron crosses until the Russian people are free. Unfortunately for the princess her efforts to avoid accepting Catholicism are not enough to avoid the insults and death threats of an angry mob. A crowd of people clamors for her hanging when it is discovered that she took part in Catholic rituals; she is only spared by Andrei's protests and his killing of Osina, but is exiled to a nunnery. *1612*'s subplot of the Catholic missionary also highlights the superiority and purity of Orthodoxy over Catholicism. The missionary questions his faith, and is seen throughout the remainder of the film wandering on foot through Russia, until he finally returns to the Vatican to question the Pope in the film's closing scene.

These plotlines would suggest a very solidly, ethnically defined cultural conception of Russianness, but that is undercut by the inclusion of the Muslim Tatar Kostka, played by the Russian actor Artur Smolyaninov, as a positive hero in the film. Andrei is joined in his quest by an easy going Muslim who functions as his sidekick. Rather than placing a Russian character by Andrei's side, Khotinenko decides to include a Tatar, a choice that creates situations that contradict the religious message of a film that is so vehemently anti-Catholic. In a way it is almost nonsensical how in the middle of the film Kostka marries an Orthodox Russian woman through a Muslim tradition of saying that the couple is married three times. No mob forms to call for their death. Rather than hiding Kostka's Muslim origins, the films actively plays with them

during the siege of the city, since Kostka can be heard yelling Allah Akhbar as the leather cannon is fired at Osina's forces.

Khotinenko appears to be trying to have it both ways; he presents an ethnically defined Russianness based on Orthodoxy, yet is also presenting a Muslim hero who is in stark contrast to that religious agenda. Kostka the Tatar seems almost out of place in the film, yet the fact remains that he is an active and heroic part of the defense of Muscovy against the Poles. Rather than creating a coherent ideological structure, the film is presenting two narratives that do not seem compatible, yet somehow co-exist.

Stormy Gates

Stormy Gates, the made for television four part film directed by Andrei Malyukov, presents another example of a Kremlin-backed positive non-Russian hero. The film is based on an actual battle that occurred in 2000, where the 6th Company, 76 Airborne Guards Division, fought against Chechen insurgents over four days with low supplies. The fighting was incredibly fierce; the remaining soldiers on Height 776 went so far as to call in artillery fire on themselves. The film is just as action packed as the actual encounter, focusing on the stories of several Russian soldiers. *Stormy Gates* is very similar to *9th Company* in its action sequences and overall message of military service as a positive manly experience; in fact the film's working title was *6th Company*, until Fyodor Bondarchuk asked that the title be altered.[76]

Like *9th Company*, *Stormy Gates* includes a Chechen among the group, Shakh, but the context and portrayal are quite different. Shakh is billed as former Chechen general who is on very friendly terms with the commander of the *Spetnaz*, Russian special forces. Rather than being based on any actual participant in the battle, Shakh represents a completely fictionalized

[76] "Kak vy lodku nazovete, tak ona i poplivet!" *Noviye Izvestiya*, October 5, 2006, http://cinema.newizv.ru/news/2006-10-05/55322/ (Accessed May 18, 2006).

character placed into the battle. And rather than portraying him as a seedy or possibly traitorous character that cannot be trusted, he is seen throughout the film as an excellent fighter and comrade. He is willing to remain behind to fight in the hilltop defense, but is charged with leading the handful of wounded soldiers through the mountain pass.

Shakh is presented as more than just a brave side kick to Major Igor', commander of the *Spetnaz*. The opening scenes of the film show a number of costumed men entering the home of a young Russian woman during the winter holidays somewhere in Russia proper. These men are revealed to be Caucasian terrorists and they brutally kill the Russian woman and several children; the film goes so far as to gruesomely show one child being broken over a man's knee. This murdered family is later revealed to be that of Shakh, and he joins 6th Company in tracking down 'The Arab' who killed his family. Major Igor' asks Shakh about blood feuds at one point and revenge killings, but Shakh does not simply disappear when the deed is done. He remains with 6th Company, and even returns to the site of the battle in the film's finale.

That finale reveals more truths about the war in the North Caucasus and Shakh, presenting him as a part of a greater struggle between Russia and the Caucasians. In the closing scenes, Shakh sits next to an enormous wooden cross erected on the hill where almost all of the Russian soldiers died, directly next to a stone cross from the 1700's. A Russian soldier comes racing down a path and asks Shakh to join the Victory Day festivities, celebrating as the soldier puts it the victory over Berlin. Shakh replies that his father was there, and was a Soviet war hero re-imagining the Soviet mythos. But he then notes that his father was a part of Stalin's deportations, a black mark in Chechen and Russian history. Rather than avoiding such realities, the film constructs this finale scene to present them in a poignant way—the film is placing the aftermath of the battle on May 9th, Victory Day, when the actual battle did not occur in the spring.

Shakh is presented as an introspective positive hero, who shows that the fight in the Caucasus is not merely a clash of civilizations. The Caucasian has been a hero in the past and can be a hero contemporarily.

The film and its heroic portrayal brought Malyukov success and greater fame. The film went on to win a Gold Eagle for best television serial, a highly prestigious prize. Not only was it lauded by the intellectual community, but it also received praise from the government, this time from the military. Sergei Ivanov, the Russian Federation's Minister of Defense, commented that the film was a convincing portrayal of the war that showed real heroes. He awarded the director and some of the cast with commemorative medals for building better ties with the military.[77]

The film certainly presents military service as a purifying process, notably through the story arch of the rich kid, Constantine Vertov, who matures after his time in the army. He is shown as a long haired partier who takes drugs and is coddled by his mother. Joining the service, he learns self-respect and becomes good friends with another soldier from Siberia, Nikolai. These two stick together in the mountain pass, both being wounded and about to be overrun before help arrives. The end of the film shows Constantine being accepted back into his family as a hero, and the resentful stepfather who did not see as a man is now happy to see him. But that service is not limited just to Russians. Not only is Shakh a part of the fight, but another Caucasian character is actually an officer in the army. That officer is shown as friends with another one of the major characters, lieutenant Doronin, though he is only briefly seen in the series. He is, however, shown during the hilltop battle as dying and calling out to Doronin. As before, war brings the many people of Russia together, even the war in Chechnya.

[77] "Ministr oborony Sergei Ivanov vstretilsya s avtorami filma 'Grozoviye vorota," *Pervyi kanal*. May 6, 2006. http://www.1tv.ru/news/social/98739 (Accessed May 2, 2011)

Future Developments

This thesis has explored an unexpected and significant phenomenon occurring in 21st century Russian film: the inclusion of non-Russians as heroes in Russian cinema. This inclusion of the minority challenges scholarly expectations and conventional views on Russian film. The inclusion of the minority in the Soviet period and even contemporarily has been largely marked as insignificant by scholars like Peter Kenez and Denise Youngblood. Non-Russians were secondary token characters with little dialogue and screen time, and these authors focus their attention on rising Russian nationalism in Soviet film. That view needs to be challenged, since it ignores the monumental shift that had occurred in regards to how Russians related with the subaltern peoples of the empire. Early Russian folklore and history is filled with villains and enemies from the East: the pagan hordes of the steppe, the Mongols, and later the peoples of the Caucasus and the Russian Far East. The non-European and non-Christian had always been savage, either as the barbaric enemy or as the uncivilized subject of the empire. Beginning in the

Soviet period, that traditional role was uprooted. The Asian and Caucasian were now the ally and comrade of the Russian, not the enemy. A new role had been created for the subaltern, one that was of a secondary nature, but was nevertheless positive and heroic.

The collapse of the Soviet Union could have marked the end of that new role. The Russian Federation is far more homogenous than the Soviet Union, and the corruption of Soviet ideology raised questions about which direction the Russian Federation would take. There were multiple conceptions of Russianness, but no single one was fully adopted by the elite, whether intellectual or political. Many scholars focused on the nativist and xenophobic trends in Russian politics and society. Russian cinema reflected that shift, specifically in the cult favorite *Brother* that depicted the Chechen and the Caucasian back in the role of the foreign threat. That vision of the subaltern has not totally disappeared from recent Russian cinema; Aleksei Balabanov's 2002 film *War* opens with Chechen insurgents beheading Russian soldiers. But that film is the exception rather than the rule in 21st Century Russian film. Non-Russians are being shown in positive heroic roles within a wide variety of settings and time periods: the Time of Troubles, the defense of Brest Fortress, a sinking submarine, and a hilltop battle in the North Caucasus.

These films are re-imagining Russian patriotism in multi-ethnic terms that are often co-opted as part of a larger elite-level nation-building project, one that is often as ambiguous in its ideology as the Russian legal code or politicians' speeches. What is different here than in the Russian legal code or in those speeches is the consistency in which non-Russians are being included. The films selected for this thesis represent some of the most successful war films of the 21st Century—successful in intellectual circles, in the commercial sphere, and with the government. The Kremlin has had its own film premieres and screenings, and the films analyzed in this thesis have been largely praised by officials in the Ministry of Defense and by President

Putin himself. These films have gone on to be featured on state-run television, often on holidays like Victory Day, Navy Day and National Unity Day. And on some occasions, as with *1612* and *9th Company*, can be screened before parliamentary elections with the hope of invigorating the public with patriotic symbols and images.

The ease with which these films are co-opted is largely due to the message of these films. Rather than dealing with specifics, these films largely present loyalty and service as the key qualities involved with being Russian. While Orthodoxy is certainly a large part of *1612*, any cultural unity message is undercut by the inclusion of a positive Muslim character who marries an Orthodox Russian woman mid-film. The films set during the Soviet period focus less on Soviet ideology or the government, and more on the camaraderie and sacrifice of a group of soldiers. That message is the same in the films set post-collapse like *72 Meters*. Rather than pegging Russianness to a specific ideology, these films speak to a general message of sacrifice and national unity.

The inclusion of minorities in the war film is the most obvious example of expanding the idea of who is Russian, because these films aim to show national sacrifice and to create heroes. But the inclusion of the redefining of the subaltern goes beyond the war genre. In the crime drama and action films the subalterns have often been the criminals or terrorists. That role is being reversed in the new television serial *Primary Lead*, which places an Asian in the role of the crime fighting detective.[78] The plot of the show revolves around a detective duo, one Russian and one Asian, solving sometimes horrific crimes, including hate crimes as seen in episode 11, while building a strong partnership that has to get past some early misunderstandings.[79] Even more

[78] *Primary Lead* is my own translation of the series' name: *Osnovnaya versiya.*

[79] This episode had a demagogic figure giving press releases about how there was a 'war' going on, and Russians needed to take matters into their own hands. Eventually this woman is tied to a rash of murders against Caucasian immigrants, who were stabbed and even lynched. An interesting side note—Mamadakov's character at one point tells his Russian partner to stay behind at HQ, since he can use his appearance to infiltrates a meeting in a Caucasian café to gather intelligence.

interesting is Aleksei Balabanov's new film *Stoker*, which focuses on the life of an elderly Yakut war hero who disposes of bodies for a Russian criminal. Not only is the inclusion of the Yakut as the protagonist in a Balabanov film significant since Balabanov is infamous for his negative depictions of non-Russians, the Yakut goes on to rebel against the criminals and tries to do the right thing.

The inclusion of minorities is also occurring in less action-packed or hero-focused genres, like comedy. The very popular REN-TV comedy series *Soldiers*, which ran from 2004 to 2010 and had several spinoffs, focused on the daily lives of soldiers in and around their barracks. While the majority of these soldiers were boisterous and silly Russians, the cast included Asians and Caucasian soldiers. Amadu Mamadakov played the role of Private Ivan Vakutagin for several seasons, while the upstart actor Nazar Al-Samarai played Private Aslahan Kichibekov, a fresh Dagestani conscript. What of melodrama and romance? The focus of this thesis was not these genres, but do they present a multi-ethnic message? Inter-ethnic marriages and relationships did occur in *1612* and *Stormy Gates*, but has an inter-ethnic relationship been prominently featured in Russian romances or dramas? Is that a genre taboo that has yet to be challenged?

As non-Russians expand in presence on the big screen, more research will be needed to look at its evolution. The role of the subaltern is still rather limited in Russian film, even in the war films analyzed for this thesis. While the Asian and Caucasian have found their way into the role of war hero, they remain lowly privates. Will Russian directors expand the role of the non-Russian into the chain of command? *Brest Fortress* developed a storyline for the Azeri character, making him an early, more primary figure; it would be the next step in a future film to make the subaltern the commanding officer. Another issue related to the inclusion of the subaltern in the war films genre is setting. Films about the wars in the Caucasus are more likely to feature the

non-Russian in the role of the enemy, though non-Russians can join the fight. If films continue to focus on the Great Patriotic War, the role of minorities may or may not be played up. The conflict remains largely a European conflict in Russian films. Perhaps a later director will shift the focus on the Great Patriotic War from the European theatre to the fight against the Nazis in the Caucasus, where non-Russian divisions could be more prominent.

What will the future hold for Russian cinema and the subaltern? The past decade revealed a shift that was unexpected in relation to films coming out in the 1990's. Could the next decade begin a new step in the reimagining of Russianness, or will the ethnic-squad motif remain largely unchanged? The political realities of the county changed with Putin, who advocated a policy of 'common values'. Perhaps that will change in the near future as political realities change? For example, surveys conducted after the war in Georgia showed that Russians viewed Georgians in very negative terms.[80] Could that disdain manifest itself in future Russian films by showing the Georgian as the enemy? Or perhaps multi-ethnic squads will place some other Caucasian into the token role, avoiding the Georgian? Tracing the evolution of the role of the subaltern after another decade could reveal very interesting findings, and would be a worthwhile project to undertake.

[80] Levada Center, "Kak rossiyane otnosyatsya k drugim stranam (yanvar' 2011)," http://www.levada.ru/press/2011020104.html (Accessed May 1, 2011).

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