

1991

Selected films from the "Glastnost Film Festival"

James H. Krukones

John Carroll University, jkrukones@jcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://collected.jcu.edu/hist-facpub>



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Krukones, James H., "Selected films from the "Glastnost Film Festival"" (1991). *History*. 27.
<http://collected.jcu.edu/hist-facpub/27>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Carroll Collected. It has been accepted for inclusion in History by an authorized administrator of Carroll Collected. For more information, please contact connell@jcu.edu.

And the Past Seems But a Dream. Directed by Sergei Miroshnichenko. Sverdlovsk Newsreel Studio. 1987; color; 67 minutes.

Theatre Square. Directed by Grigor Arutunyan. Armenian Film Studio, Division of Documentaries. 1988; black and white & color; 26 minutes.

This Is How We Live. Directed by Vladimir Oseledchik. Ukrainian News and Documentary Film Studio. 1987; color; 30 minutes.

Homecoming. Directed by Tatyana Chubakova. Moscow Central Documentary Studio. 1987; black and white; 17 minutes.

Marshal Blucher: A Portrait against the Background of an Epoch. Directed by Vladimir Eisner. East Siberian Newsreel Studio, Irkutsk. 1988; black and white; 70 minutes.

The Trial-II. Directed by Igor Belyayev. Moscow Central Television "Ekran" Studio. 1988; black and white & color; 55 minutes.

Adonis XIV. Directed by Bako Sadykov. Tadjik-film. 1977 [released 1986]; black and white; 9 minutes.

The remarkable student film *Adonis XIV* traces the brief career of a slaughterhouse goat. Decked out with bells and bribed with sugar cubes, the animal obediently leads herds of horses, cattle, and sheep--similarly unquestioning--to their deaths. When, at last, the goat sees the results of its work, it cries out in protest but not in time to save itself from becoming a victim. At the end, its horns are lacquered and mounted alongside those of earlier Adonises. The faceless executioner extends his hand to the audience, making a new offer of bells and sugar cubes.

Soviet censors detected the parallel between *Adonis XIV* and the USSR under Leonid Brezhnev and banned the film in 1977. Nine years later, Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost enabled it to see the light of day. Glasnost also opened discussion on a host of previously forbidden subjects. Little wonder, then, that the Soviet cinema has taken advantage of the new freedom to explore those long-untouchable topics by means of documentaries, with all of their directness and detail. Even filmmakers known for their dramatic features have turned to the documentary in an attempt to re-create the Soviet past and reexamine the present. The "Glasnost Film Festival" brings together twenty-two of those documentaries packaged as twelve videos, most about an hour in length. With the exception of *Adonis XIV* and another short, all appeared between 1986 and 1988 and represent studios from different parts of the Soviet Union, including several non-Russian republics. The films had their North American debut in 1989 under the aegis of the Citizen Exchange Council and the American-Soviet Film Initiative. Six of the videos, comprising ten films, form the basis for this review. All of them are in Russian with idiomatic, easy-to-read English subtitles.

While many of the "glasnost documentaries" manifest an interest in history, none takes a longer perspective than *The Temple*, a loving examination of the Russian Orthodoxy commemorating the one thousandth anniversary of the conversion of the country to Christianity. Its soundtrack suffused with liturgical chant and church bells, the beautifully photographed film visits some of the most picturesque and important religious centers in Russia, among them the

Trinity-St.Sergius Monastery, where in 1389 the forces of Dmitrii Donskoi received a blessing prior to their campaign against the Mongols. Indeed, the connection between Orthodoxy and Russia's history is a principal theme of the film, which points out that nothing of significance occurred before 1917 without the approval of the church. Its difficult experience under Soviet rule is conveyed through newsreel footage of the confiscation and destruction of church property in the years following the revolution. Its patriotic role during World War II also receives attention. Most of *The Temple*, however, tries to demonstrate the continuing vitality of religion in Russian society today. Speaking simply and movingly about their faith are believers such as seventy-eight-year-old Father Nikolai, the monk and renowned icon painter Zenon, and Mother Varvara of the Piukhtitskii Convent, whose agricultural output is the envy of the local collective farm. While acknowledging the indifference of many younger people to religion, the film takes heart from the throngs attending worship services and participating in the restoration of church buildings. It leaves little doubt that the church, now as always, remains a force to be reckoned with. In addition, it suggests the desirability of similar documentaries about the non-Orthodox churches in the Soviet Union, which also have benefited from glasnost.

Soviet history has no more compelling a chapter than the Stalinist era, whose content and legacy have inspired many contemporary filmmakers. Three works from the "Glasnost Film Festival" deal with those turbulent and controversial years. Of them, the most ambitious is *Marshal Blucher: A Portrait against the Background of an Epoch*. It sets itself the task of explaining Stalinism through the story of Vasilii K. Bliukher (1890-1938), one of the most compassionate and popular of Soviet military leaders, who met his end during the Great Terror. Rich in archival footage from the Soviet army and other sources, the documentary moves back and forth between the career of Bliukher, who served with distinction in China and the Soviet Far East, and Stalin's economic and social transformation of the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s. This material is counterpointed with the reminiscences of Bliukher's second wife. Her account of the arrest of her husband and children is heartrending. Although the film fails to offer fresh insights into the causes of Stalinism, it effectively portrays the dilemma of a decent man caught in the gears of a machine that he inadvertently helped to build. Bliukher's advice to his Civil War officers-"Be in no hurry to punish"-stands in direct contrast to the hysterical cries for blood that loyal citizens voiced at the height of the Purge.

The other two works about the Stalin era deal with the attempts of present-day Soviets to come to grips with it. *And the Past Seems But a Dream* follows a cruise ship sailing out of Krasnoyarsk up the Enisei River. Its passengers are bound for a reunion in the Siberian town of Igarka, where, as children of arrestees in the Great Terror, they had been exiled in the 1930s. Blissfully unaware of the real situation back then, the children amused themselves by staging theatrical performances and publishing a newspaper. Now, as adults, they recall a darker side of their past-the miserable living conditions, separation from parents, and sometimes even arrest and penal servitude. The prevailing tone of sadness is a far cry from the angry, accusatory character of *The Trial-11*. Its witnesses to history "have learned to say out loud what has long been kept inside." Among them are participants in the Bolshevik Revolution, who condemn in the sunlight of Red Square the repressions of the 1930s, even as they regret their own acquiescence in them. Nikolai Bukharin's widow reads his last testament, in which he exhorted future leaders of the party to set things right. "I repeated that letter like a prayer," she recalls, "every day in camp." Teachers discuss the need to inform their students about the Purges. Addressing public forums, members of the intelligentsia and army officers advocate a thorough reexamination of Soviet history. When an economist urges that "we must rid ourselves of the fatal heritage of the past or we'll be a people without a future," it becomes clear that this "trial" has turned the tables on the executioners of old and put them in the dock. Yet both of these films, like *Marshal Blucher*, note that the "heirs of Stalin" remain nostalgic for his strong leadership and indignant at his detractors.

The remaining films in the collection focus on more recent history, offering a documentary look at some of the most pressing problems that continue to confront the Soviet Union. The longest and most informative-Chernobyl: *Chronicle of Difficult Weeks*-deals with the nuclear explosion of April 1986. It was directed by the late Vladimir Shevchenko, whose crew was the

first to arrive at the scene of the accident. At its most basic level, the film provides a detailed and fascinating account of the attempts to cope with a disaster of still-undetermined proportions. Shevchenko surveyed the initial damage (with the "voice of radiation" clicking on the soundtrack), interviewed officials at the site, attended emergency meetings of policy makers, and accompanied repair and rescue teams on their around-the-dock missions. *Chronicle* pays tribute to those who helped contain the tragedy, sometimes at the cost of their own lives--the scientists, engineers, army and medical personnel, and volunteers from all over the USSR, many of them women. The experience caused people "to discover in themselves something they had never suspected" and elicited quick results, without the usual paperwork. Shevchenko's film is especially provocative for criticizing the incompetence that allowed the accident to occur in the first place and then worsen in the absence of an immediate response. His cameras capture remarkable scenes at party meetings where workers accused of abandoning their posts are chastised and dismissed. The film stops short of blaming Gorbachev and the party for delays in publicizing and treating the problem; indeed, the party receives praise for censuring responsible officials in the press. Nonetheless, the evenhandedness and honesty of the documentary ensured it a difficult time with government agencies, which held up its release. In the end, *Chronicle*, with its spectacular aerial views of the ruined reactor, is a sad and sobering reminder that "the atom has two sides," a warning that all governments ignore at their own risk.

Under Gorbachev, the era of Brezhnev officially became known as the "period of stagnation." *The BAM Zone: Permanent Residents* tries to justify this label by inspecting one of Brezhnev's most ambitious projects, the construction of the Baikal-Amur Main Line railroad through central Siberia. It focuses on a single settlement, one of many to which volunteer construction workers, often Komsomol members, flocked in the 1970s. Newsreels portray the optimism and enthusiasm of these early arrivals, their banners proclaiming "We will reap the taiga's riches!" Instead of riches, the settlers have had to put up with a lack of housing, a denuded landscape, outdoor plumbing, unpaved streets, and even a rundown cemetery. They feel cheated and abandoned. "Siberia is beautiful," says one resident, "but it needs a real master." In the film's view, Brezhnev was not that man. The Soviet leader goes unmentioned, but a volume of his writings on a desk in an abandoned house establishes his culpability. Short but potent, *The BAIvl Zone* might qualify as a Soviet version of *Roger & Me* (1989), Michael Moore's popular documentary about General Motors. Its tone, however, is mordant rather than jocular. Only in the final scene does the bleakness give way to resolve, as Soviet voters go to the polls, presumably to throw the rascals out.

Disillusionment is also rife among Soviet youth, according to *This Is How We Live*. The film consists mostly of interviews with several groups of teenagers. Punk rockers and heavy metalists complain about their parents' phoniness and materialism. Two young fascists rail against "Jewish democracy" and the Communists' "lousy humanism," advocating sterilization and the breeding of a race of supermen. A model Komsomol student speaks pessimistically about the chances for perestroika. Commenting on these disparate responses, a sympathetic teacher sees in them the rejection of forced conformity to a stale ideology and empty rituals. If this provocative work is any indication, the Soviet Union has little to hope for from its younger generation.

Finally, two short films deal with developments out of yesterday's headlines. *Homecoming* is the first Soviet film to interview soldiers who served in Afghanistan. Their somber reflections, enhanced by black-and-white photography, will sound familiar to viewers who recall the Vietnam era in this country. Within the context of traditional Soviet patriotism, however, these sentiments are little short of subversive. One veteran, for example, recalls the excitement of the kill and compares it with hunting a hare. Another remembers the cold reception back home: "All those complacent mugs . . . I felt like smashing everything." Powerfully shaken by the experience, still another soldier volunteers his services at a home for blind, deaf, and mute children. A bereaved mother declares her pacifism. "Maybe the Afghans have learned the true value of their country from this war," a veteran concludes, "but what are we to do with our memory of this war?" *Theatre Square* depicts a hunger strike held in the Armenian capital of Erevan in 1988 to protest Azerbaijan's rule over the Armenian-inhabited

Glasnost Film Festival

region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Interspersed throughout are newsreel clips of visits made to Armenia by Nikita Khrushchev and Brezhnev, as well as a Theatre Square memorial service for Stalin, then recently deceased. Politicians may come and go, these scenes suggest, but the will of the people remains constant. During the strike, the people grow in number, their behavior peaceful, their mood confident, as suggested by a banner that reads "Historical justice will triumph!" At the end, however, the riot police march into place, and a breathtaking aerial view frames the massive crowd and a situation awaiting resolution.

Indeed, all of the situations depicted in the "glasnost" films await resolution, as does glasnost itself. That may help to explain the traditional style of these documentaries. While frequently artful, they prefer content to form, because there is so much to tell. In these works, a people seek to reclaim their past, no matter how painful, so as to chart a more secure future. Focusing on various aspects of Russian and Soviet history with unprecedented openness, the "Glasnost Film Festival" at once becomes a historical document as well as a historic event.

James H. Krukones

John Carroll University