

Grzegorz Łęcicki

Historical Film as a Tool of Russian Imperial Propaganda

Cinema, at first perceived as another attractive technical curiosity of the 19th C, so rich in invention, as well as an extremely popular form of entertainment, very soon became a vehicle of particular ideologies and world-views. Having strong impact on emotions and reaching the imagination of the spectators through suggestive images, soon it was noticed by politicians as a new, effective tool for propaganda. We mustn't forget that one of essential factors enabling the genesis and growth of European totalitarian systems in the first half of the 20th C was skilfully prepared propaganda, with which their leaders were influencing public opinion and shaping social consciousness through traditional and then still new mass media, that is cinema and radio, whose dynamic growth fell on the fundamental decades of spreading communist and fascist ideology. That was also the time of creating the first totalitarian states, that is, the Soviet Union, the fascist Italy and the III Reich (Thomson 2001). "Not without reason – the fascist movement in Italy, the Bolshevik regime in the Soviet Russia, the Nazi system in Germany had seduced social masses formed by mass propaganda and controlled by the use of mass terror" (Goban-Klas 2005).

Film proved to be one of the most important, and at the same time, the most efficient propaganda tools, used for the purpose of spreading totalitarian ideologies; the importance of cinema grew even more with the process of combining image with sound and the use of large screen, as well as shaping a specific model of a cinema séance, consisting in preceding the projection proper with a politicised film chronicle of instigating, indoctrinatory and persuasive character (Cieśliński 2006 and 2016; Drewniak 2011).

The Bolsheviks, who since 1917 had been creating the first in the world totalitarian state, quickly noticed the propagandist value of film. In pre-revolution Russia cinema was the favourite form of entertainment; in tsar's empire in 1916 there were 3000 cinemas and the number of spectators amounted to 150 million; in the years 1908-1917, Russian cinematography produced around two thousand pictures, and the cinemas showed also tens of thousands of foreign films. In 1919, the Bolsheviks nationalised cinematography and since the moment Lenin acknowledged cinema as the priority propaganda tool, they devoted tremendous sums of money for the production of film chronicles and feature films (Małek, Wawrzyńczyk 2001). Also the number of cinemas rose: in 1927 there were 17 000, and in 1937 – 31 000; in 1952, the number of film projectors amounted to 49 000 (Overy 2009).

In the Polish comedy „Miś” („Teddy Bear”) (Bareja 1980) considered a cult movie nowadays, this famous sentence by Lenin is quoted (however without giving credit to the author): film is the most important of arts. This of course was not meant to concern the art's artistic or aesthetic merits, but its value as propaganda tool. What is interesting, People's Republic of Poland's censorship postulated changing this scene, revealing one of the fundamental principles of communist propaganda (Łuczak 2007).

Historical topics belonged to an important stream in Soviet cinematography. Among films referring to not so remote past, there were pictures portraying the cruelty of the tsar's regime. An example was *Pancernik Potiomkin (Battleship Potemkin)* (Eisenstein 1925), which did refer to real events, that is, mariners' mutiny, but which contained also a fictitious scene of beastly cruelty, that is, the massacre on the Odessa steps and the image of the ghastly pop as a symbol of the enslaving religion, a supporting pillar of the severe authority. What is noteworthy, the famous dramatic scene taking place on the Odessa steps was then parodied in the Polish comedy *Deja vu* (Machulski 1989).

Early Russian historical cinema created a visual mythology of the Bolshevik breakthrough and the beginnings of the Soviet Union. It falsified history, because it suggested that the Bolsheviks overturned the tsar's rule and unleashed the revolution, whereas in fact the tsar's rule fell as the result of February 1917 and the Bolsheviks were the authors of the political overthrow, the *coup d'etat* against the liberal government, on the way to bring many reforms (Marples 2006, Kenez 2008). Another propagandist gesture of the Russian cinematography consisted of alleged pro-regime sympathies of the bourgeois government, overthrown by the Bolsheviks, allegedly only pretending to favour change and democracy. An example of a film containing such propaganda message was the monumental work *October* (Eisenstein 1927), realized for the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik overthrow, called in the propaganda "the great socialist October revolution". For its twentieth anniversary, the first film with sound, about the Bolshevik leader: *Lenin in October* (Romm 1937) was made. The picture, full of falsification and manipulation, belied the images of Lenin's old comrades, denied his Jewish origin and portrayed the personality and character of the Bolshevik leader in a false way. It portrayed him namely as a hard-working, fearless idealist, who made nothing of the hardships of existence of a conspirer and revolutionist sought by the police. In fact, Lenin, rather used to luxury and careless living, never really working, found the hardships of political combat and routine duties hard and however he called others to battle, he wouldn't expose himself to danger (Volkogonov 2006). The mythical image of the Bolshevik leader was strengthened by another film devoted to him, that is *Lenin in 1918* (Romm 1939), continuing the trend of presenting the author of the Soviet Union as a secular saint, embodiment of wisdom, prudence, resolution, far-sightedness.

The Soviet cinematography also called upon Russia's old past. Showing old Russian heroes and their fight with invaders was to serve the needs of the current political propaganda, identifying the heroism of old leaders and rulers with the position of the leader of Soviet Union of those days, that is, Stalin, called also "the Lenin of our times" (Kula 2003). The films: *Peter I* (Pietrov 1937), (*Alexander Nevskii* (Eisenstein 1938), *Ivan the Terrible* (Eisenstein 1944) were an example of propagandist idealisation of history, but first of all of rulers, and they promoted cult of the individual. What is noteworthy, the broadcast of the second part of the film about Ivan the Terrible – *Ivan the Terrible. The Boyars' Plot* (Eisenstein 1945), showing the tsar's too truly bloody doing away with opponents, and possibly evoking proper associations with Stalin's terror, was forbidden; the film's premiere took place as late as 1958 (Płażewski 2010).

One of the most important political results of the Second World War was the expansion of communism. In result of the Soviet support, the authority in middle-eastern Europe was taken by communists (Kersten 1997). Thus the next goal of communist propaganda was to justify the imperial politics of the Soviet Union, creating, together with the subordinated satellite countries, a new Soviet empire. An essential element of this imperial propaganda were film images of Stalin, the bloody dictator, whose power reached beyond the borders of the Soviet Union. Similarities and connections with Lenin's characteristics were obviously unambiguous. Stalin was portrayed not only, the same as Lenin, as an embodiment of wisdom, prudence, energy, resolution, far-sightedness, but also became an almost deified figure, an example of which was the film *The Vow* (Chiaureli 1946), presenting the image of Stalin as the new Messiah, as well as another film by the same dictator, namely *The Fall of Berlin* (Chiaureli 1949), where Stalin was again portrayed as saviour, this time coming by airplane from heaven to earth in bright robes, similar to angel's robes. Although Stalin's figure appeared in many socialist – realist movies, yet he was not the title hero, like the revolution's commander, that is Lenin. It does not mean that Stalin was not the main character of various films. The pictures *The Great Dawn* (Chiaureli 1938) as well as *The Unforgettable Year 1919* (Chiaureli 1952) exaggerated the role of Stalin during various episodes from the period of the Bolshevik revolution and were to serve the creation and preservation of the myth of the genius commander (Wojnicka 2012).

After the death of the despot (1953) and the revelation of his innumerable crimes, showing him on the screen involved many problems. The Soviet film artists, in spite of de-stalinization, were not always able to omit the figure of the tyrant, especially in the productions concerning the Second World War or rather the so-called Great Patriotic War run by the Soviet Union against Hitler's Germany in the years 1941 – 1945. The Soviet propaganda, as later propaganda in the People's Republic of Poland, was silent on the subject of the German – Soviet truce signed in August 1939, which was the genesis of the Second World War and the basis for the attack of both the totalitarian powers against Poland in September 1939 and its fourth partition (Moorhouse 2015).

The Soviet cinema in the era of the so-called Khrushchev's Thaw after the 20th Rally of Party Committee of the Soviet Union focused on showing in possibly the most suggestive way the dramas of single, ordinary participants of the war, usually privates and their families. The pictures produced in those times, e.g. *The Cranes Are Flying* (Kalatozow 1957), *Ballad of a Soldier* (Chukhrai 1959), *Destiny of a Man* (Bondarchuk 1959) were characterised by clear anti-war message as well as shunning the problem of the Soviet system. However, in the so-called super-productions created later, which showed the great battles hour after hour, it was impossible to skip the person of the chief commander of the Red Army, that is, Stalin. In great film epopees like *Liberation* (Ozerov 1969) and *Battle of Moscow* (Ozerov 1985), the Kremlin dictator appeared of course not as a political criminal, the maker of tragedies of millions of people, terror-using autocrat, but as an embodiment of calm, prudence, wisdom and military knowledge, that is, a genius commander taking exclusively the right decisions, which, however, not always corresponded with the historical truth (Sokolov 2013). The TV series *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (Lioznova 1973) also showed Stalin exclusively as an incisive politician and an outstanding tactician and strategist.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian cinematography gained the possibility of creative freedom and showing the subjects previously forbidden by censorship. The TV series *Children of the Arbat* (Eshpai 2004) showed first of all the years of great terror (Baberowski 2009) and the horror of a system in which nobody was safe except for the dictator. Against the background of the title characters, the main political events from the history of the Soviet Union of the years 1934 – 1943 were reminded, as well as the first years of the war with the Germans; into the plot one would also interweave some striking information about the tremendous size of the Soviet crime. The series also showed Stalin, who, otherwise then before, was shown as a fallible politician and mediocre strategist, cunning and treacherous master of intrigue, able manipulator, swaying limitless power. Such an image, close to historical truth, can influence the credibility of the whole series. One should therefore emphasise the elements of propaganda still present in the film: the series showed the horror of being sent into exile, but not the terror of the camp, and completely skipped the fact of Soviet aggression against Poland in September and against Finland in December 1939. The use of silence as a technique of manipulation thus solidified the propaganda image of the war. The scene showing Stalin watching in the first half of 1941 the German film chronicles presenting Hitler's triumphs contained the words of the Kremlin dictator: "We are going to make friends with him". The future tense did not correspond with historical truth; for almost two years Stalin and Hitler had been bound by a pact, sealed by the partition of Poland and division of the zone of influences in Middle-East Europe. The German-Soviet cooperation was thus a fact, which the series seems to deny. One can consider it a lie, aiming at concealing the imperial, aggressive politics of the Soviet Union.

In the nowadays Russian films showing Stalin's epoch one can notice a kind of ambivalence. Showing crime and terror is sometimes accompanied by a kind of rehabilitation of even a sort of justification of Stalin. In the last part of the film cycle *Burnt by the Sun* (Mikhalkov 1994, 2010, 2011), telling the story of a Bolshevik idealist, a colonel of the Red Army, unfairly arrested, tortured, sentenced for things he was not guilty of, there is a scene of his meeting with Stalin, needing experienced commanders on the front. Stalin was perfectly aware that the officer was innocent and as if precluding his victim's natural questions about the cause of the persecution and then rehabilitation and advance, he asked perversely: "For what you (...) were put in prison, sent to a camp, almost shot. You want to ask why you have been freed now and given the rank of general, right? But: for what and why – these are wrong questions. The right question is: what for? And you were sent to jail in order to be set free in the right time". The Machiavellian logic of the dictator was preceded by a postulate of making up for the mistakes made in relation to this old Bolshevik, who also was guilty of many crimes from the period of revolution and civil war. Such a vision of Stalinism could suggest certain historical determinism of universal dimension, blurring the borders between good and evil, the victim and the executor, convincing of the smallness of human life in the face of the tragic character of the history of the state (Demby 2009). This interpretation seems to be justified by the history of the NKGB officer who first arrests this Bolshevik main character and then on Stalin's order seeks him to clear him of all charges and promote him. The NKGB officer finally falls victim of the system himself, in spite of having been its functionary before. In such a picture, the border between guilt and innocence, reason and absurd, sense and nonsense, seems almost inexistent. Blind fate, destiny, force, created the ideology of historical necessity, justifying Stalin and the system of crime created by him. Such an image, still present in popular culture after the fall of communism and the collapse of the USSR not only falsifies historical truth but is also one of the elements of the current propaganda of relativist world-view and imperial ideology.

Some recent works of Russian cinematography belonging to various film genres, e.g. the musical *Hipsters* (Todorovsky, 2008) or the political drama *A Driver for Veray* (Chukhray 2004) outspokenly remind that communism remained a totalitarian system also after Stalin's death; the change of the governing team did not mean they had renounced the criminal methods and practices of the system, still threatening all the citizens. The war series *On a Nameless Hill* (Nikiforov 2004), *Penal Battalion* (Dostal 2004) showing the horror of the Soviet totalitarianism were silent on the importance of its maker, that is, Stalin, which should be considered deliberate omitting aiming to hide the essence of dictatorship and its imperial goals.

Critical analysis of medial messages, including cinematographic works of art, is not only an irrevocable condition of modern education, postulated by the European Parliament, but it is also a form of defence from the propaganda using non-objective information, transferred in many different forms, thus also in films and TV series (European Parliament 2016).

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Grzegorz Łęcicki – Professor of the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University, Ph. D., apologist, theologian of culture and media; the head of the Faculty of Theology of the Media; researcher of audio-visual media, mainly of feature films and TV series.