Women and Martyrdom in Stalinist War Cinema

Women and Martyrdom in Stalinist War Cinema:

Russia's Eternal Quest for Messianism

By

Mozhgan Samadi

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Women and Martyrdom in Stalinist War Cinema:
Russia's Eternal Quest for Messianism

By Mozhgan Samadi

This book first published 2024

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-8913-7
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-8913-1

To the voiceless Soviet women whose immense suffering in WWII is still disregarded.

This monograph examines representations of women and martyrdom in Soviet war cinema of the Stalin era through an analysis of eight fictional films made between 1941 and 1953, that is from the German invasion of the USSR to the end of Stalin's regime. It challenges the narrative maintaining that traditional gender differences were radically undone within Stalinist political culture, by demonstrating the extent to which cinematic gender roles were deeply rooted in the Russian Orthodox religious tradition.

The findings of this monograph contribute to the key discourses on Soviet modernity which concur that Stalinist policies were not coherently shaped by Marxist-Leninist ideology, but rather by particularistic traits, above all, traditional Russian Orthodox values. This book examines the female and martyrdom theme as mediator between, on the one hand, ideal female heroism and patriotic duty, and on the other hand, the everyday responsibilities of Soviet women as citizens and as family members. This study sheds new light on the impact of Russian cultural heritage on the Stalinist Ideological State Apparatuses, revealing strong connections between Russian particularism and Soviet universalism.

Mozhgan Samadi is Associate Professor at the HSE University, Moscow. She received her PhD from the University of Manchester, UK. Her main research interests include state-nation relations, women studies, religious studies, and cinema studies in Russia and the Middle East.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would not have been possible without strong support, wholehearted encouragement, and scholarly advice. I hereby express my sincere thanks to the School of Arts, Languages and Cultures of the University of Manchester, UK for the three-year financial support without which this research would not have been conducted. I owe deep gratitude to Rachel Platonov and Vera Tolz for their valuable academic and research advice.

My especial thanks go to my mother Banoo Gharloghi, and my friends, particularly Oliver Bast and Touraj Atabaki, whose support, encouragement and academic guidance helped me to complete this research. My thanks also go to Julia Podziewska for insightful commentary on the academic language of the book.

Finally, I owe my loving thanks to my husband Denis and our son Dmitry Volkov, without whose love and wholehearted support this book would not have been realised.

A Note on Transliteration

The language of the primary, and some of the secondary, sources used in the book is Russian. The transliteration of Russian names (personal names, book titles, film titles, journals, newspapers, and organisations) is provided in accordance with the Sixteenth Edition of the Chicago Manual of Style. Bibliographical references also comply with the same style. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Russian are by the author.

PART ONE

FEMININITY AND COMBAT ON THE STALINIST SCREEN

1.1 Introduction

> Of all the arts the most important for us is the cinema.
> —Lenin

Soviet gender policy is presumed to have been based on anti-religious Marxist-Leninist ideology, and thus, it is claimed, to have been in conflict with religious traditions regarding women. Bolshevik leaders claimed that they strongly opposed what they called the oppressive role of all religions towards women. This book analyses representations of female combat in the most powerful cultural-ideological apparatus of the Soviet Union: cinema. By examining the constructive employment of Russian cultural heritage in creating cinematic images of women and martyrdom in Stalinist war cinema, this research yields two main overlapping outcomes. First, the first book-length analysis of representations of the female in Soviet war cinema; second, an identification of the employment of pre-revolutionary Russian cultural heritage in Stalinist cinema in the service of building an overarching common identity and state-citizens relations.

Why Stalinist War Cinema?

The 1917 Russian Revolution resulted in the establishment of the Soviet Union in 1922. In accord with Max Weber's identification of the *nation* as a specific sentiment of solidarity expressed by a certain group in relation to other groups,[1] the Bolsheviks systematically promoted national consciousness of the ethnic minorities using the slogan of the right of nations to self-

[1] Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, Vol., II (New York: Bedminster Press Incorporated, 1968), p. 922.

determination.[2] Large national republics, which displayed many of the characteristic institutional forms of the nation-state, were established under the Soviet Union.[3] Given inevitable emergent nationalist sentiments, solidarity was sought by the Soviet leadership, which ruled, according to the 1926 census, almost 200 nationalities under the name of the Soviet people.[4] During the 1920s, national consciousness among the Soviet ethnic minorities developed to such an extent that it increased conflict and mobilised forces against the Bolsheviks, thereby compelling them to devise a new nationalities policy.[5]

Despite serious disagreement over how it would be implemented, both Lenin and Stalin realised the necessity of creating a united non-Russian "national self-determination" to disarm nationalist tendencies on Soviet territory. From the late 1920s, Stalinist-forced industrialisation and collectivisation emphasised centralisation and a unified form of nationality.[6] The Stalinist rehabilitation of a pre-revolutionary Russian military and cultral heritage from the early 1930s onwards represented the Soviet state as heir to the Tsarist empire. This strategy led to a move away from the equality of all Soviet nationalities promoted by Lenin. The Russian nation was identified as the first among equals, leading the other Soviet nationalities to socialist Bolshevism.[7]

The Soviet Union was based on Marxist-Leninist materialist ideology. According to Lenin, 'throughout the modern history of Europe […] materialism appeared the only consistent philosophy loyal to all the teachings of the natural sciences and hostile to superstition, cant and so forth.'[8] Lenin and other Soviet leaders of the time relied on enthusiasm for rationalism and technology in Marxism, trusting that 'both sets of values would be implemented and make a harmonious alloy: [the] modern factory

---

[2] See Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North*, (Ithaca, New York, 1994).

[3] Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), pp. 1,2.

[4] Viktor Kozlov, *The Peoples of the Soviet Union*, trans. by Pauline M. Tiffen (London: Hutchinson, 1988), p. 15.

[5] See Ronald Suny, *The Revenge of the Past* (Stanford, Calif., 1993).

[6] Martin, *The Affirmative Action,* pp. 25-30.

[7] David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist mass culture and the formation of modern Russian national identity, 1931-1956* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 43-62.

[8] Vladimir Lenin 'Tri istochnika i tri sostavnykh chasti Marksizma' in *Prosveshcheniye*, No. 3, 1913, pp. 43-47 (p.43).

and the Athenian agora would somehow merge into one.'[9] There is no doubt that this view of modernity appeared to promise, as Marshall Berman argues, 'to heal the wounds of modernity through a fuller or deeper modernity.'[10]

Lenin's admiration for materialism, however, did not correspond to the reality of the Soviet Union on the threshold of its establishment, even to that found in its most progressive republic, Russia, the rule of which up to that point had mainly been based on seventeenth-century law.[11] Limited property, legal, and political rights had continued to determine the lives of the majority of the population.[12] The Church had been the most influential social institution, strongly supportive of central state power.[13] There was a huge gap between the backward Russian peasantry, which composed around 90 percent of the population, and the working class as defined by Marx. Given this social, economic and historical context, as well as the crucial impact of the Orthodox Church on different aspects of Russians' lives, the overarching research questions of this book are how Stalinist leadership exercised control over the numerous Soviet ethnic minorities and how it was able to inspire tens of millions of Soviet citizens to sacrifice themselves and their dearest ones in support of a central ruling system established on Marxist-Leninist materialist ideology?

Given that cinema functioned as the most powerful Soviet cultural-ideological apparatus (in terms of its tremendous power),[14] this book searches for answers to its overarching research questions in Soviet cinema.

---

[9] Leszek Kołakowski, "Modernity on Endless Trial," *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 10.

[10] Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1988), p. 9

[11] See Hellie, 'The Structure of Russian Imperial History', *History and Theory,* 44/4 (2005), pp. 95-100.

[12] See Tracy Dennison and Steven Nafziger, 'Living Standards in Nineteenth-Century Russia', *Interdisciplinary History*, 43/3 (2013), 397-441 (p. 422).

[13] Vera Shevzov, *Russian Orthodoxy on the Eve of Revolution*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 3-12.

[14] Richard Taylor, *Film Propaganda: Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998); Neia Zorkaya, *The Illustrated history of the Soviet Cinema* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1991); Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society*, *1917-1953* (Cambridge: University Press, 2001); Lynne Attwood, *Red Women on the Silver Screen: Soviet Women and Cinema from the Beginning to the End of the Communist Era* (London: Pandora Press, 1993); Nicholas Reeves, *The Power of Film Propaganda: Myth or Reality?* (London: Cassell, 1999); Peter Rollberg, *Historical Dictionary of Russian and Soviet Cinema* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2009).

By encouraging the people to suffer for the Soviet state and the Motherland, war-themed films were remarkably important to Soviet cinema. Despite the prominent historical role of World War One and the Russian Civil War (1918-1921), it was, however, with World War Two (known as the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945) amongst Russians, henceforth, the GPW) that Soviet war film truly took shape.[15] It was the war genre that had the potential to represent heroic and mythical images of suitable figures (either historical or constructed) based on an ideological reading of patriotism, heroism and cultural heritage. The same genre also had the capacity to link mythical ideals, and heroes of the Revolution and the Civil War, with the GPW.

Cinematic Heroines and Soviet Identity-Building

Female role models played a crucial function in Soviet nationalities policy. Cinema was a prominent means of representing these role models to a mass Soviet audience. War cinema was a particularly crucial tool for creating the image of women and martyrdom as a role model of submission to the central state.

The Soviet Union was established on the basis of a Marxist theory of state power, whose worldwide impact promoted world revolution through the Third International.[16] Marx construed state power as equal to the state apparatus, which ensured ruling class domination over the economic base.[17] Both Marx and Lenin held that the stability of the state was secured precisely by its resting on the lower social layers, and through the reproduction of their submission to the upper (ruling) layer.[18] Louis Althusser (1937-1984) explicates this idea by distinguishing between state power and the state apparatus. The latter, according to him, contains two subsets: the collection of politico-legal institutions representing the 'Repressive State Apparatus',

---

[15]Zorkaya, *The Illustrated History*, pp. 170-172; Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society*, pp.165-167; Denise Youngblood, *Russian War Films: On the Cinema Front, 1914-2005* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2007), pp. 55-56.

[16] The Third International (Communist International, or *Comintern*) (1919-1943) was an organization of national communist parties which aimed to promote world revolution.

[17] Allen Wood, *Karl Marx*, (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 66-71.

[18] See Jacek Tittenbrun, *From Marx to Warner: Class and Stratification Under Scrutiny* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017) pp. 210-217; *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, Essential Works of Lenin: What Is to Be Done? and Other Writings*, Henry M. Christman (Editor), (New York, Dover Publications Inc., 2012) pp. 53-176; Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2001), pp. 92-5.

and the group of institutions, representing the dominant ideology of the state. For the latter subset, Althusser uses the term 'Ideological State Apparatuses' (ISAs). Althusser suggests that the reproduction of labour power's submission to the state is largely ensured by the ruling ideology, represented mainly through the ISAs. He indicates that the long-term stability of the state, and the submission of labour power to it, are secured only by the state exercising hegemony through the ISAs.[19]

The Althusserian thesis is particularly appropriate to this research as in the mid-1930s, the Soviet state increasingly focused on constructing a new identity based on the historical, cultural and traditional heritage of the dominant/Russian nation of the Soviet Union. Proclaiming a new Soviet identity, in the name of and underpinned by the international ideals of the Revolution, was in fact, expedient for the construction of the policy of 'socialism in one country' adopted in 1924 to achieve the aims of the 1917 Revolution in a single country, without a broader proletarian revolution.[20] This policy, which weakened 'proletarian internationalism' in favour of Great Russian nationalism, or 'National Bolshevism',[21] required the Soviet people's complete submission in the service of the realisation of Stalinist National Bolshevism.

Amongst feminist and feminist-influenced scholars of the nation and national identity, there is broad consensus that the concept of nation is gendered, and that national politics and nation-state relations are also gendered.[22] Because of this gendering, even though the Soviet people did not belong to a specific nation, it can be argued that women participate even more broadly than men in the process of building overarching community identity. Women not only participate in national, economic, political, and military struggles, but they also underpin biological reproduction, reproducing

---

[19] See Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, pp. 95-126.

[20] Katerina Clark, *Moscow, The Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931-1941* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 7.

[21] Ibid, p.7.

[22] See Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (University of Nevada Press, 1991), pp. 1-19; Susan Hayward, 'Framing National Cinemas', in *Cinema and Nation*, ed. by Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 81-94; Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie, ed. 'Themes of Nation', in *Cinema and Nation* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 95-110; Julie Mostov, 'Sexing the Nation/Desexing the Body: Politics of National Identity in the Former Yugoslavia', in *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*, ed. by Tamar Mayer (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 89-112; Cynthia H. Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 1-36; Nira Yuval-Davis *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage, 1997) pp. 21-25.

boundaries amongst national groups and signifying national differences. As Nira Yuval-Davis argues, if a nation is considered to be a natural expansion of family and kinship relations, based on men's protection of women and children, then the general expectation of the roles women play in the nation/community overlaps with those they fill in the family: caring for others, bearing and raising children, and so forth.[23] As a result, women may play a significant role in the transmission of ideological and cultural reproduction in the collective. Given that virtually all spheres of life were heavily gendered in pre-revolutionary Russian society,[24] special attention to gender roles, in both family and society, was necessary for the construction of Soviet identity.

Keenly aware that an individual's worldview can be influenced by institutional and artistic realities,[25] the Bolsheviks set out to structure an appropriate social and cultural context within which the new Soviet identity would be shaped. The hegemony of the Stalinist state in its ideological apparatuses accordingly exercised the doctrine of 'Socialist Realism', the aim of which (as presented by Zhdanov in his speech to the first All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in April 1934) was to lead to a genuinely dialectical art by depicting 'reality in its revolutionary development.' Thus, it was maintained, the main function of Soviet artists was to 'combine the most austere matter-of-fact work with the greatest heroic spirit and grandiose perspectives.'[26]

Did the Female Martyr Matter in Stalinist Cinema?

Given the Socialist Realist essence of the Soviet cultural product and the high rate of illiteracy (more than 80 percent) amongst the working class at the beginning of the Soviet era, cinema with its heavily visual (and aural) nature and its significant novelty value, was a more powerful ideological apparatus for the masses than literacy-dependent tools such as books and

---

[23] Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation,* pp. 26-29.

[24] See Barbara Clements, Barbara Engel, Christine Worobec, ed., *Russia's Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation,* pp. 29-207; Joanna Hubbs, *Mother Russia*: *the feminine myth in Russian culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 3-143.

[25] Shlapentokh, Dmitry, and Vladimir Shlapentokh, *Soviet Cinematography, 1918-1991: Ideological Conflict and Social Reality* (New York: A. de Gruyter, 1993), pp. 3-11.

[26] A. Zhdanov, 'Rech' Sekretarya TSK VKP(b) A.A. Zhdanova', in *Pervyi Vsesoyuznyi S'ezd Sovetskiikh Pisatelei, 1934: Stenograficheskii Otchet*, ed. by Ivan Luppol, Mark Rosental and others (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel, 1990), pp. 2-5 (p.4).

newspapers. Indeed, Lenin himself suggested, 'Of all the arts the most important for us is the cinema'.[27] Meanwhile, as Hobsbawm argues, the reinterpretation of tradition, such as the use and re-working of popular folklore as religious-cultural heritage, is a recurring identity-building strategy.[28] In keeping with this strategy, the Bolsheviks drew on the long-standing Russian tradition of iconology in their visual propaganda; in cinema, the visual was combined with both technological novelty and the novelty of revolutionary values, making cinema the most effective instrument in the service of building an overarching common identity,[29] and of exercising the hegemony of the dominant ideology. According to Hayward, national cinema does not represent what *actually* exists but rather asserts what is *imagined* to exist.[30] Drawing on Hayward, and taking into account that Socialist Realism was mandated as the sole artistic method for all arts in the Soviet Union, it can be argued that a replacement of reality with revolutionary "reality" became the common feature of different genres of Soviet cinema. To achieve this synthesis, Soviet cinema had to be capable of dealing with two different realms simultaneously: first, the realm of myth and imagination, which had to be harnessed to popularise abstract, patriotic ideas in the structure of concrete, visual models of heroism, and second, the everyday lives of ordinary Soviet citizens.

In the cinematic image of the martyr, however, there is tension between the evocation of myth and imagination i.e., popularising abstract, patriotic ideas in the form of concrete, visual models of heroism, on the one hand, and the everyday lives of ordinary Soviet citizens, on the other. These two simultaneous functions generate tension because martyrs are at once idealised models of heroic devotion to a patriotic cause, and extreme exceptions to normal patterns of behaviour, which throw those patterns into sharp relief in contrastive fashion (though martyrdom appeared to be more normalised during the 1930s and the GPW).

With regard to the relationship between women and martyrdom, this tension acquires a second important dimension: a conflict emerges between patriotic duty to the state and the particular responsibilities that traditional societies assign to women in relation to their families. National defence was proclaimed to be the duty of each and every citizen and Soviet cinema was mobilised to raise the morale of the Soviet people and steel

---

[27] Quoted in Zorkaya, *The Illustrated History, p. 3*

[28] Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 180-182.

[29] Shlapentokh, Dmitry, and Vladimir Shlapentokh, *Soviet Cinematography, 1918-1991*, pp. 73-125.

[30] Hayward, 'Framing National Cinemas', pp. 88-92.

them against the enemy.[31] Because of the urgency of this task, it is with the GPW that Soviet war film truly took shape.[32] Moreover, for exercising the hegemony of the state in its ideological apparatuses, war-themed films were exceptionally important to Soviet cinema. They had the potential to represent heroic and mythical images of suitable figures (either historical or constructed) based on an ideological reading of patriotism, heroism, and cultural heritage. The fruitful alliance between an appropriate patriotic-heroic reading of the past and present offered a very suitable setting in which to implement the policies for building Soviet identity, as Soviet war films had the capability to significantly strengthen state-sanctioned narratives about the past which the Party wanted to promote among Soviet citizens.[33]

Despite widespread propaganda around equal gender rights after the October Revolution, and 1930s declarations about Soviet women playing an equal role in fighting alongside men, military heroism remained limited to the arena of Soviet men.[34] As Kazimiera Cottam observes, there was an indirect connection between Soviet socioeconomic development and Soviet women's access to military service.[35] Accordingly, as Roger Markwick notes, the predominant image of Soviet women before June 1941 corresponded to the demands of the dominant pre-revolutionary patriarchal role as the wives and mothers of male soldiers.[36] One of the reasons underpinning this attitude is the nationalist structure of the Stalinist regime. As Cynthia Enloe notes, 'nationalism has typically sprung from masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation and masculinised hope', and women, as the symbol of protection of the honour of men and the nation, have been historically subordinated in nationalist movements and politics.[37] For that reason, on the cusp of the GPW Soviet culture still lacked female idols who could rally young women and encourage them to join partisan units to

[31] Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society*, pp. 165-182.
[32] Ibid*,* pp. 165-167; also see Youngblood, *Russian War Films*, p. 56.
[33] Youngblood, *Russian War Films*, p. 3; Shlapentokh, *Soviet Cinematography,* pp. 117-118.
[34] Karen Petrone, 'Masculinity and Heroism in Imperial and Soviet Military-Patriotic Cultures', in *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture*, ed. by Barbara Clements, Rebecca Friedman and Dan Healey (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 172-93 (pp. 184-190).
[35] Kezimiera Cottam, *Women in War and Resistance: Selected Biographies of Soviet Women Soldiers* (Nepean Canada: New Military Publishing, 1998), pp. xvii-xxv.
[36] Roger D. Markwick and Euridice Charon Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline in the Second World War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p 18.
[37] Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, p. 45.

contribute to the war effort.[38] Accordingly, Soviet scholarship considers the creation of role models of women-combatants and women-martyrs by Soviet artworks as an essential tool for generating patriotic feeling in war time and the widespread resistance of Soviet women against the Nazi invasion. Scholarly works on Soviet art identify Stalinist war cinema as the medium that best depicted women resisting the German forces and sacrificing their bodies for their Motherland. In contrast to the above-mentioned scholarship, Anna Krylova, one of the historians to have focused on Soviet women and warfare, sees the reason for the mass participation of Soviet women in the GPW not as a response to manpower shortages in the early stages of the war, but rather as an 'experimental logic that relied on the conceivability and feasibility of the female combatant.'[39]

Despite the Soviet regime's claim to be in conflict with any religious heritage, research reveals that elements of the traditional Russian values expected of the female were resuscitated in the representation of the ideal woman propagated by the Soviet ideological system.[40] Given how prevalent religious and traditional expectations of women were amongst the masses, especially peasants, this project suggests that Soviet war cinema employed the Russian Orthodox tenet of female suffering and self-sacrifice for the family in the service of Bolshevism, which enabled the exercise of dominance over the imagination of Soviet citizens with the aim of unifying them around the central state. This study suggests that cinematic representations of Soviet women and combat, on the one hand, were compatible with a religious and traditional legacy that identified woman's obligations as located within the framework of the family. On the other hand, they created a chain of heroism that linked cinematic heroines with characters from pre-revolutionary history, folklore and myth, who had sacrificed themselves for the Motherland. These cinematic female images presented a compound of contradictions, which awaits comprehensive analysis. This project aims to present a comprehensive image of Soviet women and martyrdom in Stalinist war cinema, exposing that there was no real conflict between the pre-revolutionary traditional obligation that Russian women sacrificed themselves

[38] Anja Tippner, 'Girls in Combat: Zoia Kosmodem'ianskaia and the Image of Young Soviet Wartime Heroines', *The Russian Review*, 73/3 (2014), 371–388 (pp. 371-2).

[39] Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 28

[40] See Mary Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1989); Lynne Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Woman: Women's Magazines as Engineers of Female Identity, 1922-53* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1999).

for their own families and that of Stalinist cinematic heroines sacrificing themselves for the Great Soviet Family.

Existing Scholarship on Women in Stalinist War Cinema

Despite the significant contributions of Soviet women to the GPW[41] and the multidimensional potential of cinema to represent them, cinematic representations of Soviet women in this war remains an understudied topic. In Russian-language scholarship, work on Soviet women's roles in the GPW is very limited, with V.S. Murmantseva's *Sovetskie zhenshchiny v Velikoĭ Otechestvennoĭ voĭne 1941-1945 (Soviet Women and the GPW 1941-1945)* (1975) and Svetlana Aleksievich's *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* (*War Has no Female Face)* (1985) the only substantial contributions produced during the Soviet era. More recently, Al'mira Usmanova's *Zhenshchiny i iskusstvo: politiki reprezentatsii,* (2001) and *Kino i nemtsy: gendernyi sub'ekt i ideologicheskii 'zapros' v fil'makh voennogo vremeni,* (2002) have offered important insights into Russian scholarship on the cinematic image of Soviet women in the GPW.

In Western scholarship since the late 1980s, significant interdisciplinary studies that bridge the gap between Soviet cinema and Soviet politics and history have been published.[42] Of particular relevance to this research is Judith Mayne's *Kino and the Woman Question* (1989), which discusses the image of women in conflict in 1920s Soviet cinema and

[41] During the GPW more than 800,000 Soviet women served in the Red Army and a larger number participated in the war as volunteers. The role of Soviet women in the war was so significant that they were described as *great forces* (see Mary Buckley 'The 'Woman Question' in the Contemporary Soviet Union' in *Promissory Notes; Women in the Transition to Socialism* ed. by Sonia Kruks, Rayna Rapp, and Marilyn Young (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989), p263.

[42] See the works Richard Taylor, *Film Propaganda*; Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents, 1896-1939* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988); Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, *Inside the Film Factory* (London: Routledge, 1991); Judith Mayne, *Kino and the Woman Question: Feminism and Soviet Silent Film* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989); Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society*; Shlapentokh, *Soviet Cinematography, 1918-1991*; Attwood, *Red Women on the Silver Screen*; Richard Stites, *Soviet Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society in Russia Since 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Denise Youngblood, *Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era, 1918-1935* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991); *Movies for the Masses; Popular Cinema and Soviet Society in the 1920s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); 'A War Remembered: Soviet Films of the Great Patriotic War', *The American Historical Review*, 106/3 (1994), 839-56.

emphasises the impact of traditional, pre-revolutionary attitudes towards women in popular Soviet films of the 1920s, such as *Mother* (1927). Mayne focuses on the relationship between narrative and aesthetic and ideological projects in five films (made between 1925-1929), in terms of equally complex tensions concerning gender and sexual politics as well as the cinematic representations of women. Analysing the nexus between Soviet cinema and the woman question, Mayne observes that the traditional Russian mother-child bond serves the socialist public sphere, where we see that women are only significant to the extent that they embody nurturing roles in society; and that, as in traditional patriarchy, a woman's social function (for example as a revolutionary) is secondary to her domestic roles.[43] Mayne's work thus extends the argument (common in scholarship on the status of Soviet women in the ideological context of the Soviet Union) that the new ideology was rooted in the cultural values of Russian peasant households of the nineteenth century and that traditional values ascribed to women in the pre-revolutionary period were resuscitated in the representation of the ideal woman propagandised by the Soviet ideological system.[44] In a similar vein, a number of scholarly analyses of *Chapaev* (1934), the most popular Socialist Realist film of the Soviet era,[45] focus on the depiction of Anna, the film's heroine, in conflict. Although the film aims to display Anna as the incarnation of the New Soviet Woman and her role in a Civil War battle as equal in significance to that of men, Lynne Attwood observes that the heroine provides, rather, a romantic interest by accepting, instead of confronting, the traditional demands of women. Moreover, both Attwood and Youngblood highlight the fact that the film draws on the involvement of women in masculine practices, such as fighting, only in critical situations.[46]

As regards the cinematic image of Soviet women in films of the GPW period, there is broad agreement amongst Western scholars that films of this period emphasise traditional, patriarchal gender expectations (i.e., the purity, loyalty and morality of female characters) and allocate Soviet women a central place as icons of the heroic suffering of a wife or mother

[43] Mayne, *Kino and the Woman Question,* pp. 91-110.
[44] Mary Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union*, pp. 2-4.
[45] The film was the biggest box office hit of the 1930s and endorsed by Stalin and the critics (see Kenez, Peter, *Cinema and Soviet Society*, p 155).
[46] Attwood, *Red Women on the Silver Screen*, p. 64-5. Youngblood, *Russian War Films*, pp. 40-41.

who sacrifices everything for the sake of revenge on the enemy.[47] The majority of these works emphasise the resurrection of traditional symbols and myths in the films of the GPW era and present the heroines as icons of sacrifice, morality and Motherland. Film critics see the purity, loyalty, and morality of female characters in these films as a symbol of "Holy" suffering Russia, the Russian nation and her "daughters" under attack and subjected to violence by the enemy.

English-language scholarship on the GPW era has main focused on the three films: *She Defends the Motherland* (1943), *Zoia* (1944), and *Rainbow* (1944). It contends that these films aimed to inspire both those at the front and those at the rear to resist the invasion of the Germans, as well as to perpetuate the myth of female role models for subsequent generations.[48] One Soviet film critic noticed a connection between the woman and nature in the early films of the GPW period, according to which heroines like Praskov'ia in *She Defends the Motherland* symbolised the assaulted and raped Russian soil.[49] The most widely analysed film of this period, *Zoia*, which was based on the life story of the famous Soviet GPW martyr Zoia Kosmodem'ianskaia, is used to exemplify the view that Zoia and other women-martyrs of the GPW, who serve as a feminine version of the defender of the Motherland, are still regarded as an inspiration for young people seeking guidance.[50] Western scholars, in general, see the huge capacity for self-sacrifice in the lead heroines in these three films merely as an inspiration for the Soviet people to fight the enemy, not a device to reveal their subjectivity. In *Russian War Films: on the Cinema Front, 1914-2005*, the most detailed English-language study of Soviet war cinema, Youngblood points out how memorable these heroines were in Soviet wartime cinema, although she stresses that it would be a mistake to overemphasise their

---

[47] Zorkaya, *The Illustrated History of the Soviet Cinema*, pp. 185-9; Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society*, 175-9; Shlapentokh, *Soviet Cinematography, 1918-1991*, pp. 118-9; Attwood, *Red Women on the Silver Screen*, 67-8; Youngblood, *Russian War Films,* pp. 61-71; David Gillespie, *Russian Cinema* (Harlow: Longman, 2003), pp. 131-2.

[48] Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society*, pp. 175-179; Attwood, *Red Women on the Silver Screen*, pp. 67-68; Gillespie, *Russian Cinema,* p. 131; Youngblood, *Russian War Films*, pp. 66-67.

[49] Rostislav Iurenev, *Kniga fil'mov: Stat'i i Retsenzii Raznykh Let* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1981), p. 85.

[50] Tippner, 'Girls in Combat'; Adrienne M. Harris, 'The Lives and Deaths of a Soviet Saint in the Post-Soviet Period: The Case of Zoia Kosmodem'ianskaia', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 53/2-4 (2011), 273-304; Mikhail Gorinov, 'Zoia Kosmodem'ianskaia (1923-1941)', *Otechestvennaia Istoriia*, 1 (2003), 77-92; Mikhail Gorinov, ed., *Zoia Kosmodem'ianskaia: Dokumenty i Materialy* (Moscow: Patriot, 2011).

significance.[51] In this respect, Attwood argues that the women in these films played the same role in war as the heroines in 1920s Soviet films, only with more emphasis.[52] Kenez similarly observes: 'By showing the courage and suffering of women, these works aroused hatred for the cruel enemy and at the same time taught that men could do no less than these women.'[53] Nevertheless, he finds the heroines too idealised for the audiences to be able to identify with them.[54] Shlapentokh, like Kenez, remarks that these films represent the heroines as idealised avengers.[55]

Furthermore, David Gillespie in *Russian Cinema* and Anya Tippner in *Girls in Combat* offer an analogous argument, according to which the display of violence against the heroines in these three films was employed just to appal the audience and encourage hatred of the enemy.[56] Regardless of her belief in the lack of female subjectivity in these heroines, Youngblood implies that reference to religion in such films marks a key change from the anti-religious cinema of the previous decades,[57] and can be perceived as a risk taken by Stalin to open up the cultural space.[58] In this respect, Youngblood notes an emphasis on the concept of Motherland in such films, as opposed to that of Fatherland (*otechestvo*) in 1930s Soviet cinema.[59] This underscores Youngblood's main point, according to which there was an evolution in the representation of female heroines in the Soviet cinema of the GPW and that lead heroines played an essential role against the fascist invaders.[60] Youngblood, however, notices no significant difference between the lead heroines of these three films, namely Praskov'ia, Olena and Zoia, and merely sees Zoia and Olena as not as fortunate as Praskov'ia to have survived.[61]Lisa Kirschenbaum and Wingfield present an idea similar to Youngblood's. They consider heroines in Soviet war films as representatives of an important ideological shift which was opposed to Party discipline and devotion to Stalin. Moreover, they remark that female characters, either as mothers, soldiers or war workers, function as part of

[51] Youngblood, *Russian War Film*, p. 67.
[52] Attwood, *Red Women on the Silver Screen*, pp. 67-68.
[53] Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society*, p. 177.
[54] Ibid, p. 178.
[55] Shlapentokh, *Soviet Cinematography*, p. 118.
[56] Gillespie, *Russian Cinema*, p. 130-131; Tippner, 'Girls in Combat', p. 371.
[57] Youngblood, *Russian War Films*, pp. 62-63.
[58] Youngblood, 'A War Remembered', p. 843.
[59] Ibid, p. 841.
[60] Youngblood, *Russian War Film,* p.64.
[61] Ibid, pp. 61-67.

the 'counter-narrative' of individual initiative.[62] Such interpretations ignore the incompatibility between traditional perceptions of femininity and subjectivity in war and do not explain how the resurrection of traditional features in female protagonists was permissible alongside their 'essential role [fighting] against the fascist invaders'.

Graham Roberts, in his research 'Men and Masculinity in Soviet Cinema', argues that the importance of gender and gender difference in Soviet war films made in the 1940s was downplayed.[63] In this respect, Anna Krylova, unlike Youngblood, Kirschenbaum and Wingfield, sees representations of the compatibility of Soviet women with combat and violence in terms other than that of an ideological shift opposing Stalinist cultural policies. Her book *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front* (2011)—one of the most notable English-language studies of Soviet women in the GPW – refutes the idea of a return to the old-fashioned view of women in war under the Stalinist regime. She supports her interpretation of gender relations in war by heavy reliance on Soviet archival sources including military memoirs, diaries, correspondence and newspapers and by focusing on a small group of educated, military women, who sought to prove themselves equal to men in combat. As the result, the war is depicted as "bloodless" without any sign of rape, wounding and death and an opportunity to accelerate a shift in the meaning of combat and the feminine. Krylova argues that 'the conceivability of women's compatibility with combat, war and violence was a product of the radical undoing of traditional gender differences that Stalinist society underwent in the 1930s'[64]

Yuliya Minkova's *Making Martyrs: The Language of Sacrifice in Russian Culture from Stalin to Putin* (2018) is the most recent study of the prevalence of the language of heroic martyrdom in Soviet and post-Soviet discourses. Minkova aims to show how sacrificial heroes have been used to 'sanctify the state's mythology'.[65] The idea of connecting victimisation to the creation of national role models in the service of perpetuating nationalist language is central to Minkova's book. However, the primary sources she uses in her analysis of the language of martyrdom developed under the

[62] Lisa A. Kirschenbaum and Nancy M. Wingfield, 'Gender and the Construction of Wartime Heroism in Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union', *European History Quarterly*, 39/3 (2009), 465-489 (p. 465).
[63] Graham Roberts, 'From Comrade to Comatose: Men and Masculinity in Soviet Cinema', in *Cinema and Ideology: Strathclyde Modern Language Studies*, ed. by Eamonn Rodgers (Glasgow: University of Strathclyde, 1996), pp. 70-84 (p. 74).
[64] Krylova, 'Stalinist Identity from the Viewpoint of Gender', p 628.
[65] Yuliya Minkova, Making Martyrs, p.3

Stalin regime are Pravda articles from the 1930s and 1940s. The book contains no real justification for choosing these particular sources, which make the analysis abstract and without any direct connection to sacred victims. Likewise unaddressed by the book is the fundamental issue of the conceptualization and implementation of a common socialist language of sacrifice with which Soviet citizens from different nations might identify.

While there is no agreement amongst English-language scholarship about female representations even in the three mentioned war films, more ambivalent issues exist around the cinematic image of Soviet women in the majority of films of the GPW period. For instance, some scholars observe that, despite the general claim about the role of women in wartime cinema, young heroines in home-front films made during the GPW and immediately afterwards were not a grim symbol of sacrifice and tragedy.[66] Moreover, Youngblood observes that many films about the home-front made during the later stages of the war kept a distance from Soviet cinematic tradition and closely resembled films on the same subject in American and British cinema.[67] Youngblood's observation is close to Shlapentokh's argument about the Soviet films of this period when he says: 'Never was Soviet cinematography so close to its Western counterparts'.[68]

Regarding post-war Soviet films, various English-language scholarship observes that the mother-heroines of Stalinist wartime cinema vanished after the end of the GPW, and that the traditional expectations of women in wartime became dominant.[69] Youngblood suggests that 'even before the victory, women and partisans disappear from the film annals of the Great Patriotic War',[70] and that 'the post-war cinema starts, gently and amusingly, mocking the contributions of fighting women to the war and foreshadows their removal from war cinema'.[71]

The accounts of representations of women in Soviet war cinema surveyed above omit several fundamental points. First, while some scholars find strong representations of female suffering in Soviet war cinema of the GPW era, others do not recognise a grim symbol of sacrifice and tragedy in its young heroines. Moreover, the former group focuses solely on heroines

---

[66] Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society*, pp. 175-179; Gillespie, *Russian Cinema*, p. 132; Youngblood, 'A War Remembered', p. 844.
[67] Youngblood, *Russian War Films*, p. 69.
[68] Shlapentokh, S*oviet Cinematography, 1918-1991*, p. 117.
[69]Gillespie, *Russian Cinema*, p 132-133; Youngblood, *Russian War Films*, pp 69-71; Jill Steans, 'Revisionist Heroes and Dissident Heroines: Gender, Nation and War in Soviet Films of 'the Thaw'', *Global Society*, 24/3 (2010), 401-419.
[70] Youngblood, *Russian War Films*, p. 69.
[71] Ibid, p. 84.

as sufferers, while not paying any attention to other aspects of the multi-faceted notion of women and martyrdom. Likewise unaddressed by the former group is the fundamental issue of the appearance of influential lead cinematic heroines only at the last stage of the war, when the Red Army regarded itself as victor. Second, while incompatibility between the traditional perceptions of femininity and subjectivity in military operations is ignored, some works, on the one hand, highlight the role of Soviet women in combat and their adaptation to masculinity in times of war, on the other hand, they emphasise a resurrection of pre-revolutionary features in these heroines. Third, regardless of the opposition of Russian Orthodox culture to social authority for female believers, and its emphasis on women's complete obedience to men and restricting women's obligations to within the framework of family,[72] some scholarly works have considered the revival of traditional expectations about women in Soviet war cinema as an expression of individualism in opposition to the official collectivist approach. Fourthly, regardless of the strong representations of religious and traditional expectations of women, observed by Western scholars in both the GPW period and post-war Stalinist war cinema, the available scholarship does not address any constructive interactions or potential systematic employment of pre-revolutionary patriarchal expectations of women in Soviet war cinema.

This review of the literature reveals that there is no in-depth analysis of different aspects of the representation of women in Soviet war cinema. Available accounts are key descriptions that are not supported by systematic analysis or do not apply methodologies derived from film theory. As a result, the picture of Soviet women in war cinema, shown by these works, is generalised (largely observational rather than analytical) and ambiguous. There is a lack of systematic analysis in the English-language scholarship that encompasses both categories of Soviet and pre-revolutionary expectations of women in wartime, while most scholarly works on the New Soviet Woman, before and after the GPW period, have observed a compound of contradictions in her image.[73] In such works, the contradictions

[72] Hubbs, *Mother Russia*, pp. 87-110; Natalia Pushkareva, *Women in Russian History From the Tenth to the Twentieth Century*, pp. 7-121; Georgii Fedotov, *Sviatye Drevnei Rusi* (http://predanie.ru/fedotov-georgiy-petrovich/book/69666-svyatye-drevney-rusi/#toc15 , accessed on 11/11/2023); Kirichenko, O. V., Zhenskoe pravoslavhoe podbizhnichestvo v Roccii (XIX-seredina XX v) (sviato-Aleksievskaia Pustyn', 2010), pp 415-453.

[73] Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union*, pp.226-233; Linda Edmondson, *Women and Society in Russia and the Soviet Union* (Cambridge:

in the image of Soviet women in war are regarded to be because Soviet gender policy is presumed to have been based on anti-religious Marxist-Leninist ideology, and thus, it is claimed, to have been in conflict with religious tradition regarding women. Bolshevik leaders claimed that they strongly opposed what they called the oppressive role of all religions towards women. They encouraged Soviet women to participate in social affairs on equal terms to men.[74] However, research on Soviet women reveals that at different periods of Soviet history, and under the pressures of specific policies, certain elements of official ideology were emphasised differently.[75] Accordingly, in keeping with scholars such as Buckley, Lapidus and Attwood, this research points to how a patriarchal understanding of gender differences, moulded to the requirements of economic, political and demographic policies, was dominant in the Soviet Union under Stalin's regime.

Aims and Objectives

This book highlights how essential it is to move beyond the frameworks that separate Soviet planning from social reality, ideal intentions from real consequences. By examining representations of Russian Orthodox values in cinematic female role models, this study aims to reveal the direct impact of Russian particularism on the civilisational or developmental trajectory of Soviet culture. The main objective of this book is to provide an analysis of the representations of women and martyrdom in Stalinist war cinema. This entails an examination of the constructive employment of Russian culture and Orthodox tradition in relation to the notion of martyrdom and women's domestic and societal obligations. This study argues that examination of the

---

Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 1-4; Wendy Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 214-254; Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Woman,* pp.79-149; Olga Issoupova, *Motherhood and Russian Women: What it Means to Them and Their Attitudes Towards it* (PhD Thesis, University of Manchester, 2000); Katherine Eaton, *Daily Life in the Soviet Union* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2004), pp. 153-175; Natasha Kolchevska, 'Angels in the Home and at Work: Russian Women in the Khrushchev Years', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 33/3 (2005), 114-137; Timothy Johnston, *Being Soviet: Identity, Rumour, and Everyday Life under Stalin 1939-1953* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 43-125.

[74] Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union*, pp. 25-26.

[75] Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union*; Gail W. Lapidus, *Women in Soviet Society: Equality, Development, and Social Change* (University of California Press, 1979); Lynne Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Woman.*

image of the female and martyrdom in Stalinist war cinema leads to two main overlapping outcomes. First, an examination how Soviet women's role in the GPW was represented by one of the most significant Soviet ideological apparatuses—cinema; second, a depiction how the employment of war cinema as a platform for exercising the state's hegemony ensured the submission of Soviet citizens to the ruling ideology. Drawing on the Althusserian theory of Ideological State Apparatuses and post-1970s psychoanalytic film theory, the study prepares the ground for an examination of the three-way nexus of (a) the female and martyrdom theme as mediator between the ideal female heroism and patriotic obligations, on the one hand, and everyday citizen and family responsibilities, on the other; (b) Stalinist Socialist Realist cinema and the Soviet people's submission to Bolshevik ideology; (c) nationalist Bolshevism and Russian cultural heritage.

My argument works through three overlapping stages. First, through an identification of representations of female suffering and self-sacrifice in the primary sources. This stage involves a close textual reading of the films. They belong to classic narrative cinema, in which cinematic aspects serve the narrative. Accordingly, the focus at this stage is mainly on a close reading of narratives, plots, visual and acoustic aspects, editing, mise-en-scène and sound. Taking into account the impact of pre-revolutionary heritage on cinematic representations of women and martyrdom, this section shows how the films under consideration emulate or directly reference the female expectations in these forerunners.

The second stage consists of an examination of the outcomes of the reading of the films undertaken in the first stage, drawing on the Althusserian theory of Ideological State Apparatuses and post-1970 psychoanalytic film theory with the aim of identifying cinematic representations of women and martyrdom. At this stage, interrelations between the representations and their ideological significations will be identified.

The third stage consists of an analysis of the findings of the two earlier stages, taking into account the outcomes of studies of the Russian Orthodox tradition of martyrdom and state-nation relations, Russian traditional perception of the ideal woman, the Great Soviet Family and the New Soviet Woman. In this respect, the insights relating to the Russian people's purported belief in their own universal messianic 'role', as the 'chosen' nation, which has been a widespread conviction amongst Russian Orthodox believers for centuries, are of significant interest to this research.[76]

---

[76] See Mikhail Cherniavskii, *Tsar and People: Studies in Russian Myths* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961/2011), pp. 101-128; Nicolai Berdiaev, *The*