

“I don’t want to watch every Sunday how I slash someone again”: The Memory of the Civil War, the Cinema, and the Viewer’s Reception in the 1920’s

Elizaveta ZHDANKOVA

Historienne indépendante

St-Pétersbourg (RU)

ezhdankova@gmail.com

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Abstract

During the 1920s in the USSR, the theme of the Civil War became an essential part of the mass culture of the period, and more specifically of **Soviet film production**. Produced in a context of shortages —experienced filmmakers and celluloid were lacking—, these films, which portrayed a simplified vision of events, had an essential propaganda purpose for the new Bolshevik regime.

This article analyses the reception of these films on the basis of public discussions and opinion polls in cinemas among moviegoers. This work deals with the generational gap concerning the reception of this production: films that aroused the enthusiasm of a young public were often more criticized by the older generations, survivors of the Civil War. Indeed, the latter considered that the productions did not do justice to their sacrifices during those years of conflict. The violence of some shots, the blood on the screen, as well as the fate of the main characters are at the focus of heated discussions.

This study focuses on the memory and commemoration of the Civil War in the first post-war decade.

Keywords: Civil War, Soviet cinema, reception, NEP, 1920s.

Résumé

Dans les années 1920 en URSS, le thème de la Guerre civile s’impose comme incontournable dans la culture de masse de cette période, et plus spécifiquement dans la **production cinématographique soviétique**. Produits dans un contexte de pénuries, – les cinéastes expérimenté-e-s ainsi que le Celluloïd manquent – ces films, qui mettent en scène une vision simplifiée des événements, ont un but de propagande essentiel pour le nouveau régime bolchevique.

Il s’agit dans cet article d’analyser la réception de ces films à partir des sondages d’opinion auprès des spectateur-ric-e-s et à partir des discussions publiques autour de ces œuvres. Ce travail traite de la rupture générationnelle concernant la réception de cette production : les films qui suscitent l’engouement d’un jeune public sont souvent plus critiqués par les générations plus âgées, survivantes de la Guerre civile. En effet, ces dernières considèrent que les mises en scènes ne font pas honneur à leurs sacrifices durant ces années de conflit. La violence de certains plans, le sang à l’écran, ainsi que le sort des personnages principaux se trouvent au cœur de vives discussions.

Cette étude se concentre donc sur la mémoire et la commémoration de la Guerre civile dans la première décennie de l’après-guerre.

Mots-clés : Guerre civile, cinéma soviétique, réception, NEP, 1920.

Introduction

When asked in 1928 whether she liked contemporary Soviet films, one woman answered:

I want to forget so dreadful past, but our directors vie with each other for showing the Civil War.¹

As this comment suggests, the theme of the Civil War was prominent in the Soviet cinema of the 1920s. This same tendency can be observed in other spheres of the Soviet mass culture of the period in the first decade after the Civil War. The films on this subject appeared during the Civil War itself and were supposed to solve primarily propaganda tasks. But did they achieve this goal in the post-war period? How did the Civil War appear through the lens of these films? And, most importantly, how did the people who survived the war or did not participate in it react to them?

Not many of the 1920s films about the Civil War have survived, even fewer of these films are widely known. Most of the surviving films that are better known are about revolutionary events, such as Sergei Eisenstein’s “October” (1927) or Alexander Dovzhenko’s “Arsenal” (1929) about the revolution and the Civil War in Ukraine. In the Soviet press, such as in the newspaper “Pravda” and the magazine “Soviet Screen”, these films were highly praised by critics; however, audiences could have a different reaction. “Arsenal”, for example, was not accepted by the audience due to the “complicated artistic expression of the film” (Альтшуллер 1929).

The films about revolution and civil war that are included in the top echelon of world cinema (Corney 2004, 183–199) were not necessarily too popular with the audiences at the time they were shown, as is clear from the audience reception of “Arsenal”. However, in the first decade after the end of the Civil War, more than a hundred films on the subject were produced. More than 13 films had already been shot by the first anniversary of the creation of the Red Army, in February 1919. A large number of films also appeared by the next anniversaries. But even in later times, film studios continued to use the theme of the Civil War, “easy” movies, such action films or comedies, were much more popular, although now they are unremarkable for art history. For example, the film “Oh, Yablochko” is one of the few cheerful films about the Civil War.

In this article, I will focus on the reactions of contemporary public to the numerous films about the Civil War and analyse the memory of the Civil War in the first decade after the establishment of Soviet power. First, I will describe the general state of cinematography and the plots of films related to the Civil War in order to reveal the

¹ “Самоотчет зрителя Московских кинотеатров”: сводки анкетного материала по изучению впечатлений зрителей. *Российский государственный архив литературы и искусства (РГАЛИ)*, ф. 645, оп. 1, д. 390, л. 7.

context in which these films were created and shown. I will then elaborate on the public and press reactions that allow us to consider the memory of the war and its political use.

I use New cinema history approach (Maltby 2011), an umbrella concept that involves the study of the social history of cinema, including the history of viewers’ reception. There are numerous studies on the role of cinema in soviet propaganda, including films about the Civil War, images of the warring sides (Волков 2009; Кондаков 2015), while the study of its reception has been an extremely rare subject of research (Sumpf 2004, 2015). The topic of reactions to films about the Civil War lies in several contextual historiographical frames.

On the one hand, reactions to films about the Civil War in early Soviet society had its own specificity (the Civil War was an internal war after the revolution, not the war of defence; the booming culture of the NEP period also had its peculiarities). On the other hand, it fits into the general historiography of the memory of war veterans—and more generally, participants and witnesses of any dramatic and large-scale events (Rauch 2020)—and the representation of war in cinema. This applies both to the Russian context (World War I, the Great Patriotic War, the Winter War, etc.) and to the global, primarily Hollywood, context (Broderick 2015). However, while the pacifist pathos of most 1920s European and American films aims to end wars, the pathos of Soviet films about the Civil War, by contrast, celebrates the heroism of struggle (as the struggle for Soviet project). The most similar case in this regard is the study of the Spanish Civil War and the perception of its representation in the cinema and German cinema of the Weimar Republic period after World War I. In most of the world’s cinema, cinematic reflection on the experience of war had mainly pacifist pathos; in Weimar Germany, it was a question of coming to terms with the war, while Soviet cinema had to address a radically different task: to continue the war and prepare for possible future wars.

There is a number of studies on how veterans of, for example, World War II reacted to Hollywood movies about the war (Burgoyne 2008; Landsberg 2004). Similar studies on the reception of wartime films on the Russian material are scarce. I am interested in the very mechanism of psychological reaction on the authenticity of the image of war. Another historiographical area to which this study contributes is the study of the place of the witness and eyewitness in the representation of the visual narrative. In this sense cinema is close to photography, which has a much higher status as an accurate document (this applies to documentary photography, while military staged photography is a separate genre). Thus early cinema art stands in two fields at the same time and has a binary status of authenticity: on the one hand as a conditionally

credible source close to photography, and on the other hand as a deliberately artificial artistic fiction, on a par with theatre, literature, and painting. The attitude towards cinema as a history textbook creates a certain conflict with regard to the personal memories of those involved in the war. Which memories are more authentic and more valuable —and for whom?

Important context of the study is the attitude toward cruelty and the legitimisation of violence after the long years of both the Civil War and the First World War. On the one hand, people were used to scenes of cruelty, which reduced the degree of sensitivity to them, but on the other hand, society grew weary of its abundance. This is a characteristic feature of psychological reactions not only for this period, but also for other post-war situations (Fitzpatrick 1989; Булдаков 2010, 2012). In general, researchers conceptualise the cinema of the post-war period through terms of trauma (Kaplan 2004; Turim 2015).

Compared to the reflections of wartime in the cinematography of several other countries, the specificity of the Civil War in Russia stands out in regards to its obvious militaristic pathos. The anti-war storylines typical of the events of World War I, in which there was a general tiredness of the war (which was reflected differently in the films of the winning countries versus the losing ones, and different still in Hollywood movies), rarely found a place in the creation of the myth of the Civil War. Although there were anti-war films about the Great War in the USSR, they were much less in demand than those about the Civil War, as the latter were victorious, aggressive, and gave value to the war.

In this perspective, early Soviet cinema is an interesting case to consider the memory of the Civil War of those who survived it. Reflecting on the wartime, military operations and their commemoration on the screen was perhaps the first such experience in the early 20th century around the world. Before that, the only possible reflection of the war was through literature, art, or theatre. In the 1920s, for the first time in history, cinema provided an opportunity to present ideas about the war and experience trauma using new expressive means. The specificity of this art form, only gaining the status of not just a technical attraction, but a new kind of art, in naturalism, the need to focus on alienating themselves from the image on the screen and to understand its fiction. This was not always easy for the viewers of early cinema.

1. Prehistory: Movies during the Civil War

The condition of post-revolutionary cinematography and the context of film perception in the 1920s should be briefly described in order to understand the film distribution conditions of this period. The specifics of this period were dictated not only by the political situation, but also by the economic and industrial situation. For example, during this period, there was a deficit of its own celluloid, as it had not been produced in pre-revolutionary Russia, and would not be produced in the Soviet Union until the 1930s (Ченцов 1929, 39). The established processes of buying film stock abroad were disrupted, both during the war and after it; due to the currency shortage it was too difficult and expensive to buy it, as the issue of film production was not a priority in public policy. The difficult conditions of lack of resources for filming during the Civil War required a choice to be made: to shoot propaganda films or something else. Due to this lack of celluloid, an agitfilm (agitation film) in which Lenin was filmed was not released on screens (Левицкий 1933, 3). Limited production of films with non-military/non-revolutionary themes in these years was the norm (Мачерет 1961). It was rational to use the available film for shooting short agitation films, to solve practical problems. In the history of Soviet cinema, the Civil War years entered as a time of chronicles and agitfilms (Братолюбов 1976, 38–42).

Short agitation films were widely distributed. Film solved very specific tasks during the Civil War itself: it had to stimulate action and mobilisation, in order to respond to current issues.² A large number of chronicles covered the events of the Civil War on various fronts. These films were made widely available in the army, shown with the help of agitation trains, and at agitation points. Reaching a civilian audience was more difficult. Most of cinemas in the cities were closed due to power outages, and the cinema network was largely destroyed. The first meeting with cinematography for some viewers —especially those from the peasant population— took place precisely in the Red Army or with agit-trains and, consequently, with films of pre-determined subjects.

During the war, five trains and one agitation steamship —“agitparokhod”— actively operated. Throughout 1919 and 1920 agit-trains and the steamship held almost two thousand film screenings. Only the barge towed by the agitparokhod “Krasnaya Zvezda” (“Red Star”) was equipped with a cinema for 600–800 seats. According to newspapers, the agit-train “October Revolution” held 70 film screenings for more than 42 thousand people during 9 months (Фомин 2004, 291). During the trip of another train in Siberia and the Urals in late 1919, the films were shown to more than half a

² Известия. 1918. 6 мая

million viewers.³ The material usually included specially-filmed agitfilms, military chronicles and screenings of pre-revolutionary screening of a classical literature (Сафронова).

After the Civil War, due to a change to the object of agitation, for a very short time there was a decrease in attention to the military theme in favour of shooting movies about peasants. But soon the Civil War occupied a significant place in the thematic plans of Soviet film studios; more than a hundred movies were filmed throughout the 1920s covering this topic in one way or another. With the help of films by both the Reds and the Whites, propaganda movies about the war became part of military daily life, and by the end of the war their main subjects were well familiar to viewers. Due to the fact that the Civil War in Russia had a much more complicated nature than the First World War, the image of the enemy, participants and conflicts was also much more ambiguous for the assessments of viewers, critics and ideologists. New films reflected the involvement of different ethnic groups in the war, the role of women and youth. These new characters, ethnic and gender aspects provoked new discussions on the experience, memory and meaning of the war (Игнатова 1924).

The period of the 1920s represented a new, unique approach to the role of film. On the one hand, the agitfilms made during this period were not as straightforward as those that were shot during the Civil War. On the other hand, it was the first chance for directors, screenwriters and actors (who experienced the war for themselves) to reflect on the subject; these reflections were often perceived by the audience, who were also contemporaries of events and could give their opinion. The heroisation and mythologisation of the Civil War did not yet have a certain canon that would emerge later (films like “Chapayev”, etc.), but it still very rapidly acquired some stamps for display the Civil War in the early years after the revolution.

To understand what films were available during the peacetime of the 1920s — the period of NEP, or the New Economic Policy— it should be emphasised that the censorship was at a minimum. The available films included Soviet, Hollywood, French, German, as well as pre-revolutionary films; they came from a variety of genres, including westerns, melodramas, comedies, detectives from different countries. In this case, all genres had their fans, but their loyalty to the themes of the films also depended on a number of factors.

Sources that allow scholars to discuss cinema reception are specific to the period of the 1920s. They are sources that cover different levels of perception or influence that perception of films. One of the most important is the press, including specialised film press, which contained film critique and audience reviews as separate regular

³ Правда. 1920. 14 января.

columns. This source gives an opportunity to consider official position taking into account the editorial policy. When I refer to criticism, I mean, first and foremost, the critique that viewers could read, which was addressed not to directors and film scriptwriters but to their audience. It is important to underline that I am not concerned with the internal cinema industry, but with an external discourse.

The other type of source is the discussions of films during public preview. During this period, the audience was often composed of ordinary workers, rather than professional critics, therefore their judgments are especially interesting. Such film screenings were often organised by the Association of Revolutionary Cinematography; they also discussed these films among cinematographers at other meetings.

Perhaps the most meaningful source is the results of sociological surveys of cinema visitors. These are primarily derived from sociological surveys of cinema-goers (in the 1920s there was a significant increase in sociological research in various fields). The defeat of sociology and raising censorship in the 1930s makes these sources unique for analysing the reception of the audience. It is difficult to find such materials for the later period. These are comprehensive questionnaires with closed and open questions about movie preferences, repertoire requirements and genres, personal data and so on, for both adults and children. I use both statistical data and direct statements of the audience (the second, of course, the most useful source). Due to the fact that during the 1920s a lot of films about the Civil War were shot, this topic was often mentioned in these and other sources.

2. The Audience

When analysing reactions to Civil War films, it should be particularly noted which audience we are talking about, since the available sources do not allow us to evaluate all cinema-goers in the USSR or abroad. In this article I will examine these films through the prism of an audience that was relatively loyal to the new ideology and to the new repertoire of Soviet cinema; this audience was composed mainly of workers, employees, students, and housewives. I intentionally leave the issue of cinema reception in the countryside beyond the scope of this text, since the situation with cinema screenings in rural areas was fundamentally different from that in urban areas, due to the lack of stationary cinemas there and a number of other factors. Thus, I will proceed from the attitude that the public that I describe using my sources was generally ready to watch new Soviet cinema and did not reject the topic of the Civil War as such, but in a certain way reacted to it as quite sensitive and relevant.

It is important to highlight the different categories of these viewers. These movies brought in people with a wide range of experiences. The audience included people who

had experienced the Civil war as direct participants, witnesses and a contemporary —as well as those who did not take part in the fights and did not directly remember these events, and therefore perceived it through the prism of ideological construction of the war that was already in process.

The last group was primarily made up of children, especially street children. The fight against homelessness, and welfare work among children in general, has received much attention, not only because these children posed a danger to society, but also because they were “building materials” for the new society, with which it was possible to work without intermediary in the form of a family. We will address the children’s audience and their taste preferences in more detail later on.

Before turning to the reaction of the audience, I will give a brief account of the main themes of films and the reaction of critics to them. Throughout the 1920s, the tasks that needed to be solved with the help of Civil War movies were changing. During the war itself, films intended to provide a practical purpose; the films could be primitive, but needed to have bright messages. After the end of the war, a number of main plots were gradually formed and myth construction began, but the tasks of mobilisation were already being completed.

The traumatic experience of the Civil War differed from the experience of the First World War first of all by internal family dramas, when the watershed of political convictions was held within the family and between generations —this became the subject of the first films about the Civil War of the post-revolutionary period. Criticism of the film “Enemies” (which was shot in 1924) was published in the digest “Proletkino” (“Proletarian Film”) in 1925. Critics commented on the plot, which was built around the drama inside the family: father monarchist, son of a revolutionary. The main criticism of the film was that it had little coverage of the Civil War itself and paid more attention family breakdown (Враги 1925, 18–22). Despite this critique, films about how the Civil War had destroyed families was quite a common plotline. This category of films in general did not meet a bright reaction from the audience but was criticised in the press as not revolutionary and agitational enough.

Some film plots were criticised by the press because they were operated solely within the categories of agitation and propaganda. Consider the characteristic criticism of the adventure film “Missing Treasures”, directed by Bek Nazarov in Georgia, which was a story about the priests who contributed to the counterrevolution during the Civil War era. The film was called fascinating, interesting because of tricks, and was given the following description: “ideologically, it is almost acceptable, and although it is not harmful, it is not at all agitation. Is this the plot of the Civil War?” (Пропавшие сокровища 1925, 48–49). But sophisticated viewers, such as young cinephile Anatoly

Starodubov from Dnepropetrovsk (he described all the films he had watched) even found this film boring (Стародубов 1925).

The theme of Civil War occupied a significant place in cinema, and remained among the most popular plot lines. They were among the type of films that were recommended for showing in workers’ clubs. If we turn to the list of films acceptable to the workers’ clubs in 1925, we find that approximately 1/3 of the list of are films devoted to the history of the Civil War. It is enough to mention some of them in order to understand the variety of topics in the movie repertoire. In particular, the film “Batka Knysha’s Banda”, a comedy about the war in Ukraine. “The Struggle for un Ultimatum” —a picture in the spirit of an American detective about the struggle of Soviet workers at the “Ultimatum Factory”, facing off against a gang of White Guards trying to blow up the factory. Another film buff, military engineer Alexander Yakovlev, rated the film as “pretty good” (ЯКОВЛЕВ 1925). Other examples include the film “Enemies”: “An intelligent drama depicting the collapse of petty bourgeois family under the influence of revolutionary events”; six episodes of the film “From a Spark to Flame”, “which showed some events of the struggle against the Tsarism that preceded the Civil War”. Finally, the main early Soviet film dedicated to the Civil War, titled “The Little Red Devils”, to which we will return later. It was described as one of the best Soviet film, “from the era of the fighting horse troops against the gangs” (ФИЛЬМЫ ДЛЯ КЛУБОВ 1925, 41–42).

3. Blood on the Screen

In 1927, the influential magazine “Soviet Screen” published an in-depth article titled “Blood on the screen”, criticising “excessive cruelty in Soviet films”. The article was richly illustrated with shots from several “bloody” films.

Indeed, the issue of violence in cinema, especially films covering the subject of the Civil War, regularly became a topic for discussion in the press. The authors of the article wondered whether contemporary filmmakers were too fascinated by death and horror on the screen. The reporter addressed the question of how acceptable it was, by surveying a number of Soviet public figures and participants of the Civil War, professors, directors and writers. The first respondent was Semyon Budyonny, commander of the First Cavalry Army, one of the key figures in the Civil War.

Budyonny’s reaction and response were very harsh:

We are surviving in a harsh revolutionary era, in which there is no place for sentimental whimpering about the “sacred” drop of human blood. A naturalistic depiction of blood, murder, horrors, and other things, if it clearly underlines the revolutionary intent of the picture and is not anti-artistic, is absolutely permissible and necessary (КРОВЬ НА ЭКРАНЕ 1927, 4).

Thus, Budenny, who opened the discussion, entirely justified the amount of blood and scenes of cruelty in the films, explaining it by the fact that in the harsh revolutionary era the attitude to human life and the price to be paid for the success of the revolution is completely different from in other times. Therefore, the large number of violent scenes were not an exaggeration, but only showed what the struggle for revolution was really like. Did the viewers of Soviet cinema stand in solidarity with him?

3.1 Reactions to Movies

“It was a time when the screens of Petrograd overflowed with foreign films, reaching working areas, which caused protest and indignation of the working class, demanding their own, Soviet, revolutionary films”, said Sergei Bratolyubov, head of the scientific and propaganda department of the Petrograd film studio “Sevzapkino”, when describing the events of 1923 (Братолюбов 1976, 57–58). This construction of workers’ increased interest in revolutionary topics, of course, little reflected the real situation. According to sociological surveys, neither workers nor clerks had any objections to foreign films. However, they were also quite loyal to Soviet films on historical and revolutionary subjects. For example, a 30-year-old Red Army soldier in a survey at a cinema in the city of Tula even asked to screen more films on the subject of the Civil War⁴ (but this request can be considered an exception rather than a rule). Even with this loyalty from some viewers, the reviews of many films were critical. The Civil War films received many complaints from spectators, critics, and officials. The set of reactions that can be identified from available sources. In general, according to the surveys (question “do you like Soviet films, films on contemporary topics?”), the public was ready to watch films on current topics, but was particularly demanding about the way the image of the Civil War was presented.

3.2 Cruelty and Re-traumatisation

One of the key points in the discussion of Civil War films was their excessive brutality and the savouring of violence scenes. For example, the film “The Trypillia Tragedy” (1926) was based on real events and dedicated to the death of the Komsomol detachment near Kiev in 1919. During the offensive, Denikin’s Ataman faced the Kiev Komsomol members, surrounded them, pressed them to a cliff on the bank of the Dnieper and destroyed the entire unit. “Kino-gazeta” published a reader’s review of the film highlighting a number of inconsistencies in the film, which made it ridiculous: “Is it normal that the regiment went to the bandits, having a brass band instead of patrols and other intelligence agencies?” (Ренард 1926). Such pratfalls

⁴ Сводка анкетного материала по тульским кинотеатрам. РГАЛИ, ф. 564, оп.1, д. 358, л. 17.

were noticed by many viewers but did not have a significant impact on the overall impression. Much more important was the abundance of brutality in the film. “If the director meant to capture the nerves of the viewer, showing him chain of the bloodiest moments for two hours without interruption, he reached his goal. But if he set ideological goals at the same time, he had less success here”, noted a Simferopol viewer, who criticised the film for its excess of cruelty (Ренард 1926).

Another example comes from the transcript of the pre-screening the film “Heavy Years” (directed by Alexey Razumny), which took place in January 1926 in the club of the weaving factory “Zindel”. One of the workers responsible for showing the films in the clubs, describing the traumatic experience of the Civil War:

And having looked at this motion picture, I, of course, take these adults, who are about my age, who have survived all of these wars —tsarist and civil— and ask them if they like this picture. As I tell everyone, I am also a soldier, and I don’t like it, because such a picture is extremely difficult for us soldiers, who have been through all of these beheading of corpses, shootings, gallows, death, and so on. We saw all of this and we dream about it every night; a lot of time has passed, but all the same, some nights, we throw ourselves at things and cry out. If children or young women say they like it [the film], then it is unlikely the adult workers will too, considering all that they have been through. And people still had all these remnants in their memories, mutilated heads, broken limbs, and so on. For those of us who ran clubs, this presented a question: are we giving maimed soldiers a break with this picture? This picture isn’t fit for a workers club. It may be made very well, which is all well and good, but with all we have left in our hearts, it is very difficult for us to experience it over again. Especially within Soviet cinema, modern cinema, every Sunday or Saturday, we have to keep watching how you are slashing at someone, or how someone is slashing at you, and for a soldier, that is very difficult to endure...⁵

How common was this reaction? Surveys among movie-goers show that many people did not want to see barbarities on the screens —not only in war films, but especially in them. As some viewers emphasised their clear reluctance to relive these scenes in their memory, it is possible to talk about this reaction in terms of trauma. Semyon Budyonny denies the public’s desire for sentiments, but many obviously did desire such a form of cinema.

Film critics and the press considered unreasonable brutality in Civil War films as a way to attract the public with sensations and bright scenes. For instance the very poster for the film “The Trypillia Tragedy” depicted the corpses of drowned Komsomol members floating in the river. One of the shots from the film, a close-up of the fingers severed by an axe, circulated in newspapers. Correspondents of the Leningrad newspaper “Kino” and Irkutsk newspaper “Vlast Truda” compared this film

⁵ Дискуссия по картине “Тяжелые годы”, реж. А.Е. Разумный. 2 января 1926. Рабочий просмотр в клубе ткацкой фабрики “Циндель”. РГАЛИ, ф. 2494, оп. 1. д. 63, л. 6-6 об.

to the “Grand Guignol” Theatre in Paris, which was known for attracting audience by its naturalistic horror shows (Герман 1926; Ли, 1929). At the same time during the whole period of peaceful times “there was no other such successful film in Ukraine”, as the officials of the Ukrainian film studio, that produced the film, claimed during the discussion about “The Trypillia Tragedy”. 13,000 viewers watched the film during six days in a small movie theatre with 420 seats in Kharkov. Due to the crowds, the administration was forced to hold five showings every day instead of the normal three ones (Письмо 1924).

In this period, in general, there is normalisation or even sacralisation of cruelty; the concept of protecting someone, including children, from watching atrocities was not on the agenda of artists. In both pedagogical circles and among the police, there were fears about the amount of crime scenes in the cinema and their impact on children. “Don’t trade horrors”, in the words of the writer and critic Viktor Shklovsky (Кровь на экране 1925, 4). Because of such stories, films were seen as an “academy of banditry” —but not just because of the cruelty of cinema in general. The problem of violence in cinema became especially prominent during the campaign against hooliganism from 1926 after the “Case of Chubarov Alley”. Ilya Trajnin, one of the most influential figures in cinema sphere (head of the Main Repertoire Committee, member of the board of “Sovkino”, “Proletkino”, editor of the magazine “Soviet Cinema”), criticised the Civil War films for showing too many bloody scenes in a morbidly pathological way, with a relish for sadism:

We are not prudes and, if necessary, we kill in the interests of the class and there is nothing impossible to portray this topic in theatres and films. We just need to make sure that the facts of the murder are not savoured. ... All these bloodbath scenes are just apologetics of abstract “tough” and hooliganism (Трайнин 1926).

In 1928, a 23-year-old worker in the fashion Moscow movie theatre “Ars” asked to show more films about the life of workers and peasants, but with tricks or in the genre of light drama, because: “otherwise everything is re-experienced and have to deal with such paintings too creepy and bloody, you have to clench your eyes”.⁶ He was echoed by a young Komsomolka: “We have seen enough blood. In the movies we come to rest, so less blood”.⁷ “I want to see pictures that inspire vivacity, a joy for life. I want to forget the nightmarish past, but our directors are in competition with each other to keep rehashing the Civil War. We saw all the horrors of war, saw it for real, and to watch how the blood spills is fake, ostentatious, even nauseating”,⁸ said a 28-year-old housewife who was a teenager in the wartime wrote.

⁶ “Самоотчет зрителя Московских кинотеатров”: сводки анкетного материала по изучения впечатлений зрителей // РГАЛИ, ф. 645, оп. 1, д. 390, л. 7.

⁷ Там же. Л. 5.

⁸ Там же. Л. 31

3.3 The Image of the Enemy and the Devaluation of the Victory

The next important insight for understanding the reception of these films is the distorted portrayal of the enemy and the corresponding devaluation of the heroism of Soviet soldiers. Exaggeration of White guard images was understandable during the war, when films were agitational and it was important not to intimidate audiences but to inspire active and future soldiers by showing the enemy as weak, ridiculous, incompetent, and easy to defeat. The dichotomy “Strong Red Army – weak enemy” was used purposely in wartime. After the war, however, to those who were direct participants in the battles, such images were considered, humiliating. If the enemy was so weak and foolish, what courage was needed to defeat him? Similar reactions could be observed later among other war veterans, when antiheroes were portrayed improbable or as parodies, which diminished the military accomplishment of having defeated them.

One worker thus explained his view of a Civil War movie, and, judging by reactions in newspapers, very many viewers agreed:

The Whites were presented in such a way that it seemed like they were not people but worms, while the Reds always turned out to be the best. If it had actually been like this, we would not have spent so much time defeating the Whites. Based on the films, it turns out it is simply a game.⁹

Those in the audience who had taken part in the war were outraged by this interpretation of military events.

3.4 The Happy Ending

In the 1920s, both viewers and journalists stressed the absence of a happy ending, in contrast to many Hollywood films. In the article “In Defence of Happiness” one author noted that Soviet cinema offered no inspiration; the protagonist died from his wounds, and this was wrong:

Showing to people what we are calling them to, what we would like them to turn into “the truth of life” and in the same breath warning them: “Look what we are calling you to leads to a sad end” —this is very bad agitation” (Шип 1927, 10).

The author described, for example, the reception of the film, “Forty First” directed by Yakov Protazanov (1926), about the love between Maryutka, a Red Army sniper, and a captured White Guard officer at the front in Central Asia, where they found themselves together on a desert island in the Caspian Sea. Maryutka shot her lover in the back when the Whites neared the island by boat and he ran toward them; he became her forty-first victim.

⁹ Голос рабочего кино-зрителя по вопросам кино. РГАЛИ, ф. 645, оп.1, д. 363, л. 11.

The author called this ending a happy one:

Instead of kissing him, she gives him a bullet. But this is a happy finale, because before that, we are afraid that she will let him leave out of feminine weakness and release him to the Whites with his head full of orders from Kolchak to Denikin.

Yet Maryutka is herself caught by the enemy. The author reasoned that heroes of films should be honored at the end, otherwise they would not serve the purpose of agitation:

Let us show the viewer the White Guards or traitors in a cosy atmosphere, with delicious food and drink, surrounded by beautiful women. But first our Soviet hero will be dragged through agony and torture, and then, at the end, either buried or left to the mercy of fate (Шип 1927, 10).

This is just one example, but the lack of a positive ending to the films was often the subject of discussion. Incidentally, Boris Lavrenev, the author of the story on which “Forty First” was based, was outraged by the screening and the way the ideologists had reworked the script:

I claim that, thanks to the work of the director and ideologists, the film became counter-revolutionary not in the shallow or corrupted sense of that word but in its very origin (Лаврeнeв 1927).

3.5 Monopoly on Interpretation

The reception of film as ahistorical truth —the study of history through films— was a characteristic feature of viewers’ understanding of cinema at a time when cinematography was just becoming an art and affirming its status. It was as if the audience had delegated to directors the right to interpret historical events and the category of “learning”, “learning of the new”, and the reception of film as of a history textbook was fairly standard, unlike the understanding of the conventionality of feature films:

We are often oversaturated with pictures such as “The Mark of Zorro”, which interest young people but only superficially attract the attention of the elderly. Now, as for Comrade Shmelev —one comrade declared to him that, not only have we already seen all of this, sometimes even lived through all of it (for example, the years of the Civil War), but we also study history. It should be noted that history is also necessary for those who experienced these moments.¹⁰

In other words, interpretation of history was being given over to directors or censorship authorities, even if viewers themselves participated in the events described. “The picture plays a huge role in agitation. Many peasants came home and started talking and telling stories, reminiscing, shedding bitter tears while condemning themselves

¹⁰ Дискуссия по картине “Тяжелые годы”, реж. А.Е. Разумный. 2 января 1926. Рабочий просмотр в клубе ткацкой фабрики “Циндель”. РГАЛИ, ф. 2494, оп. 1. д. 63, л. 9.

for lacklustre participation in the revolution”,¹¹ indeed the most important function of cinema regarding the Civil War was to convey the values and the high cost of what the new state had achieved.

3.6 Fatigue from Civil War stories

“There has already been enough blood on the screen in the Civil War. Why aren’t there films about university life?”,¹² —wrote a 23-year-old Komsomol student in 1928. She expressed the opinion of many. The revolution had been achieved, Soviet power had been defended, and films about the Civil War were moving aside, giving way to more current topics. To make representations of the war fascinating without traumatising viewers by reviving painful memories of it was becoming difficult. Filmmakers at once had to please those who wanted to see heroism, those who did not want to see bloodshed, and those who wanted to see the Civil War not as a background but as the main subject while avoiding clichés. Moreover, movies had to be commercially successful to compete with foreign movies for viewers’ money amid the conditions of the NEP.

Sociological studies of audiences in the 1920s clearly revealed some tension with regard to films on revolutionary themes in their current form, but they were interpreted —insofar as it was difficult to ignore them— as follows:

it is significant that the disdainful and negative attitude toward Soviet cinema comes only from certain social groups (Дубровский 1925).

To that category the author-researcher of cinema-goers’ opinions included all utterances that films about the Civil War and the fight against counterrevolution had become tiresome. However, the 1926–1927 production plan of Sovkino, the main film studio, really did change incrementally:

Before Sovkino, Soviet cinematography dealt primarily with portrayals of the Civil War and revolution, and moreover, it did so in a manner replete with scenes of battle, torture, murder, etc., and the modern Soviet viewer, including workers and peasants, is tired of such agitation and does not want to watch agitation or heartbreaking scenarios anymore.¹³

An adjustment to the thematic plan: “Less blood on screen, less erotica, a more minimal role of criminality and sadism, a more vivacious, joyful film”.¹⁴ And Sovkino gradually refocused on other topics. The reaction of the press to this statement was

¹¹ “Самоотчет зрителя Московских кинотеатров”: сводки анкетного материала по изучению впечатлений зрителей // РГАЛИ, ф. 645, оп. 1, д. 390, л. 17.

¹² Там же. Л. 16.

¹³ Материалы к партийному совещанию по кино-делу. РГАЛИ, ф. 645, оп.1, д. 363, л. 81.

¹⁴ Там же.

also noteworthy: “from naked propaganda in bloody films to naked pornography in bourgeois films” (Карпов 1928).

Turning to the interview with screen celebrities in 1927, we began with the words of Semyon Budyonny in “Soviet Screen” magazine. Who should be the main audience for films if at least part of the audience, already loyal workers and employees who attend inexpensive cinemas, were tired of movies about the Civil War and if Sovkino itself was focused on cheerful films? We find the answer in Budyonny’s remark:

Our younger generation, which will have to participate in future brutal class skirmishes, needs to know the truth about how the bourgeoisie cracks down on their class enemies. This generation needs revolutionary tempering, the development of a strong and healthy feeling of hatred for the capitalist system and its defenders (Крoвь на экране 1925, 4).

4. Children and Young People as the Main Consumers of Films

Indeed, it happened that the main, most loyal audience of films about the Civil War were children and young people. Numerous questionnaires taken among children confirm this point. Children liked the movies about the Civil War because they had a lot of action, tricks, adventures, and dynamism—children were said to be attracted primarily to the genre itself, not just the theme (Стачинская-Розенберг 1927). The popularity of revolution films among children was considerable, largely because films specifically for children were not created for a long time, and when they did begin to appear, they employed not fairy-tale plots (just as with literature) but rather historical and revolutionary stories (Штейнер 2019, 103–109).

In 1925, when a questionnaire was conducted among more than 600 teenagers, 70 per cent of children said “yes” to the question whether they liked films on a revolutionary theme. Children in their responses wrote that they liked plots with a revolutionary spirit, learning about events in which they had not participated, such as heroic deeds and tricks. Some children as well as adults noted poor filming, an unrealistic balance of the strong Red Army and weak enemies, and identical plots in various films.

In 1923, the first Soviet western movie, based on the novel by Pavel Blyakhin, appeared on cinema screens. Known in the press then as “The Little Red Devils”, it was remade in 1967 under the title “The Elusive Avengers”, and it remains very well-known film. The story tells the adventures of three youngsters —Misha, Dunyashi, and Tom Jackson (a black street acrobat), who are members of the First Cavalry Army that struggled with the forces of Nestor Makhno. “War, drama and heroism are all here”, said



reviews (Толстова 1929). “Little Red Devils” was reportedly Moscow’s most popular film, according to a survey of 1000 children in city theatres.

The film enjoyed immense popularity because of its genre and atmosphere of revolutionary romanticism:

Bright and colourful fiction and historical and social narrative, red romance and revolutionary truth, tragic and comic elements —all of this is intertwined in the most fantastic way in film and tied together in one strong revolutionary and agitational knot (Вайншток, Якобзон 1926).

“Little Red Devils” was not shot as a film for children, but it nevertheless became very popular primarily with the children’s audiences. Film historian Evgenyi Margolit explains the film’s popularity by its conventionality, belonging to the genre of American westerns, then popular in film and literature, despite its absolute inconsistency with historical events:

The viewer knew very well that no one ever caught Makhno. Moreover, the viewer remembered that three years ago Makhno was an ally of the Bolsheviks and a Chevalier of the Order of the Red Banner. But the genre of adventurous fairy-tale, in which Makhno turned out to be just an embodiment of evil, chthonic creature with the same picturesque assistants-executioners (with German surnames!) —all this explicit conventionality attracted first and foremost the children’s audience (Марголит).

“The Little Red Devils” was not only fundamentally a film for children as a generic mythology of the Civil War, but it also influenced all of children’s culture in the 1930s. In it, the events of the Civil War turn into a fun game, albeit an extremely specific one. Heroes of corresponding films destroyed countless enemy hordes, which was perceived quite naturally. So for young people the Civil War, with its tragedy, blood, and filth, turned into a revolutionary adventure story.

“We should pay serious attention to the making of this type of Soviet adventure movies”, wrote one author in an article about cinema for youth. One review in the Komsomol newspaper, *Smena*, about the film “The Struggle for an Ultimatum” claimed:

The film is well made, fascinating. The director of a factory-former worker, Lashkin, who left the building to die alongside his beloved factory, Komsomolka Tanya, who chased a diabolical machine across rooftops, hungry workers, exhausted by a little welding, but resistant to the end, all are as vibrant as if they were real (Вайншток, Якобзон 1926).

Such heroic images were meant to inspire the young audience.

Studio “Goskino” particularly accepted screenplays on the topic of youth participation in the Civil War, but this was not solely the idea of Soviet authorities. The theme of young people and children in war had been in demand since the First

World War. Such movies presented a fascinating picture of war as a daily triumph, without its horrors. The idea of dying young, having lived a short but bright life, was emphasised as laudable. Critics, especially from pedagogical circles, then reacted harshly to this type of war propaganda, but the general militarisation of society made such representations acceptable. In early Soviet society, the militarisation of childhood was expressed in many ways, starting with matinees for servicemen’s children. Ubiquitous references to blood and cruelty became a cultural norm among children. The “Pioneer Alphabet” of 1925 included expressions such as “We have achieved jubilant freedom at the price of blood”, “Sickle and hammer welded together with blood”, “Remember that the banner is bloodied by the red blood of October”, and so on (Каринский, Масленников 1925). In this sense, Budenny’s appeal seems to correspond to the general mood of his time. As early as 1924, the Communist Party workers claimed that films about the Civil War should primarily attract persons who regarded the Civil War as historical events, but not as a personal experience: pioneers and Komsomol members, children and teenager (Соколова 1924).

In turn, cinema had generally been criticised for its surfeit of cruelty and violence. Likewise, references to blood and cruelty, along with corresponding imagery, were staples of advertising even in the pre-Revolutionary period. But whereas in other cases this was a question of ethics and taste, then in the case of the Civil War such scenes were reminders of traumatic experiences for those who had actually witnessed the horrors of war. The psychological moment and the need to relive terrible memories were elements distinctive to the reception of war films, unlike the subjects of feature movies. In the case of children and adolescents, this element was absent.

“The Little Red Devils” was one of the most successful Soviet cinematic projects of the first years after the Civil War. It was well received across the entire Soviet territory. Thus, describing the situation with the spread of Soviet cinematography in Samarkand (then Turkestan), one article’s author stressed that local Muslims were little attracted by feature dramas and that, rather, films featuring derring-do were popular: “Mostly German and American films are watched in private cinemas in the old city, and ‘Little Red Devils’ from Soviet ones” (Зингер 1924). The film’s maximal adherence to conventions of the day provided it with a popularity that many other recent war films did not enjoy. In the 1920s, a survey among pupils about the facts of the revolutionary events and subsequent period of war showed that schoolchildren knew the history of the revolution poorly and had difficulty explaining the causes and course of the Civil War. Films about the war formed a certain heroic image but they did not automatically introduce new factual knowledge. Ten years after the release of “The Little Red Devils”, another well-known movie, “Чапаев” (1934), gained popularity with a different approach to the image of the Civil War.

5. “Stuck in the Civil War”

Film scripts about the Civil War described its events as “modern” until the mid-1920s, but gradually they began to be called “historical-revolutionary”. The farther the events of the Civil War receded, the more frequently critics, viewers, and officials spoke out in favour of films on other topics, having grown weary of the Civil War theme for a variety of reasons.

Film officials and critics criticised Soviet film studios for the monotony of their productions and their predilection for the subject of the Civil War soon after the war ended. Ilya Trajnin expressed himself sharply about the plots of films on the Civil War in 1925:

The themes of our films have become stuck mainly on the theme of Civil War, always with Soviet hurrah-patriotism, always with a tendency to emphasise that there is no one braver, stronger than we – we can get the better of everybody. And the beginnings of our movies are already clichéd. If, for example, Komsomol members are shown, their purpose always revolves solely around catching this or that crook or the White Guard. As though this is the only thing the Komsomol members live for and have nothing else to do? (Трайнин 1925)

A 1929 article about audience requests once again mentioned that:

The Civil War is still highly regarded at Sovkino and other film production organisations (in such films as “Mutiny”, “Two Days”, “Her Way”, “The Moon Is on the Left”, etc.). The cliché prevails in all of those films (except perhaps the last one), developed by our cinematography, of showing the heroic era of the revolution” (Черо требует рабочий 1929).

As a result of the so-called “repertoire and screenplay crisis” —a phenomenon that equally affected different types of art, including cinema and theatre, by the end of the 1920s— the Civil War slowly faded into the background compared to the post-revolutionary period (Орлинский 1929, 6). By 1929, the Civil War as a subject was well worked over, and films about the current situation of the Red Army moved to centre stage; the Civil War was described as a special theme —and in some respects an irrelevant one (Кациграс 1929, 29–30). On the agenda of the “most important of the arts” emerged other tasks that were focused less on interpreting the past than they were oriented toward the present and future. This was primarily concerned with the re-orientation of film production from historical-revolutionary topics to current subjects of everyday life (“byt”) and socialist construction. This process was already declared in 1924, when the first articulated requests for films about “byt” appeared (Вопросы быта 1924) as well as the first words that there were enough Civil War films: “we should finish with the battle movies of the Civil War era and turn to the topic of everyday life” (Пожелания к советскому кино к 7-ой годовщине Октября

1924). Throughout the 1920s, these themes displaced the theme of the Civil War from the list of the most topical on Soviet screens and in repertoire plans.

How did audiences react to films about the Civil War? Reviews, transcripts of screenings, and surveys show that the ostensibly working-class public was generally positive about the theme of the Civil War itself, but viewers were dissatisfied with the films’ quality and interpretations. Of course, another segment of the public remains outside the scope of my analysis, namely, those not loyal to the Soviet authorities as such and who, it must be assumed, certainly reacted negatively to the cardboard images of Whites in the first Soviet films (later such examples became more contradictory and sophisticated). According to contemporaries, films covering the topic of the Civil War, intended for licensing abroad, were far less ideological.

Thus, the subject of the Civil War was eventually pushed from the cinema in the 1920s, and in the middle of this period criticism came both from the professional community and journalists as well as from spectators who were tired of it as a theme, its inadequate reflection, the excesses of cruelty, the absence of a positive agenda, and constant reminders of past traumas. At the state level, the Civil War had become a less relevant theme than the “defence films” (*oboronniye*) of the 1930s, which prepared society for the future war more than reminding it of the previous one. By the early 1930s the themes of industrialisation, collectivisation and links with the countryside, the fight against homelessness, and other topics related to the tasks of the first five-year plans (*pyatiletki*) had become much more timely than the historical revolutionary films of the first decade after revolution. Meanwhile, audiences wanted films in light genres and comedy, while complex avant-garde productions remained in poor demand among mass spectators. The Civil War as a theme appeared to be most popular among children and youth audiences, for whom war films were transformed into productions about entertaining adventures, limits were set on generic conventions, and for whom scenes of cruelty were not perceived as realistic.

It is important to emphasise that much audience criticism, both in opinion polls and in the press, was directly related to battles and military actions. The social context of the Civil War (discord in families, love stories, and so on) did not —as it did from critics, journalists, and ideologists— evoke particular reactions from viewers. Sources reveal that the largely simplified representations of war and the dichotomy “weak enemy and brave Red Army man” diminished the value of actual military exploits. In the specific conditions of a developing cinema in the 1920s, there was a dearth of experienced directors, time, and film to meet the demand for high-quality films. Those films that were suitable for mobilising youth (children were the most loyal audience) were often rejected by people who had survived the war. Part of the audience

wanted not to be reminded of the war at all. Traumatic experience, its devaluation, twisting the facts or inadequate presentation of events and fighting conditions, and, most importantly, the outrageous cruelty and realistic depictions of violence (the article “Blood on the Screen” was illustrated with images from the film “The Tripillia Tragedy” showing the dismemberment of fingers, execution of Komsomol members in a well, and corpses floating in water) affected the way adult viewers perceived these films and remembered the Civil War. The Civil War—at least for a specific part of the public—was definitely not a topic that invited reminiscence. If we consider cinema in the difficult post-revolutionary period as a form of urban leisure and, more widely, escapism, the theme of the war quickly bored the audience. “A worker goes to the cinema to rest,” viewers repeated. The weekly reminder of the terrible events hardly contributed to such relaxation. For the younger audience, however, the Civil War was not a part of personal memory; it was not so traumatic; and it could be seen as grotesque, with a certain degree of separation and conventionality.

As Frederick Corney noted in “Telling October”, a single narrative of the October Revolution mythologising the foundation of the Soviet Union did not emerge during the first decade of the regime. That said, people who did not witness the historical events of October were able to connect with them through monuments, renamed streets, and other forms of commemoration. Similarly, people who were not active participants on the fronts of the Civil War “got involved” with its history through cinema. The formation of a unified narrative of the Civil War was intended to serve as a foundation for the New Soviet Society, but in a certain sense, films of the Civil War served as a catalyst for its dissociation.

Cinema was either able to narrow or intensify the generational gap, depending on the readiness to share or deny the new myth. War veterans (or contemporaries) and their children had different images of the war, which were often shaped by films. Children and teenagers were the ones to whom films about the Revolution and the Civil War were shown in a targeted way. To a significant part of the children’s audience, the events of the Civil War and adventure films based on its plots became the context in which they grew up and formed their views on life, heroes and role models. This is especially relevant to those children who came into the care of the state as a result of the large-scale campaign against homelessness.

Immediately after the end of the Civil War, its events became one of the key themes in literally all forms of art: literature, poetry, posters, art exhibitions, and public events. However, the status of cinema, as a technological art form, can be seen as very special because of the specific perception of this visual medium. The status of war veterans and witnesses and their understanding of the Civil War came into conflict

with the image of war that was projected on movie screens and provoked discussion, resentment, and a kind of competition for a “truthful” image of the war. This conflict of positions surfaced with a certain authority of visual sources, which had existed since the arrival of documentary photography and the documentary chronicle —these were sources that recorded reality “as it was”. Partly for this reason, the fictional nature of the films was not always well-recognised by moviegoers (especially by viewers with scant experience with cinema). In addition, the film as a visual technical art form a priori pretended to a greater degree of truth than, for example, theater or literature. The “truth” and authenticity in the representation of military events and conditions on the screen was important to the cinema viewers-contemporaries of the war. In this context, the case of the Civil War and the reception of the military theme is typical of similar cases in other spatial and temporal perspectives. In other contexts, however, traits more characteristic of Soviet post-revolutionary society can be seen.

In early Soviet cinematography, the First World War was poorly reflected. The world’s experience of the war was actively reflected in their cultures in the 1920s. Compared to the culture of Europe and the United States, the USSR’s “lost generation” did not have such an opportunity to reflect on the tragedy of wartime in terms of personal experience. Cinematography, as part of the newly forming mass culture, did not provide an escape for the personal feelings of Soviet citizens, but focused on new ideological constructs. Instead of denouncing the tragedy of military action and spreading a pacifist message, Soviet culture developed another cult: the cult of struggle and heroism of the Civil War. On the one hand, in this context, cinematography served as a means of artistic reflection on the Civil War (many filmmakers had war experience). However, on the other hand, the attitude toward cinema as an attraction and entertainment determined the expectations that viewers had when they would go to the cinema. The audience’s encounter with tragic plots, memories of traumatic pasts and experiences took place in the space of the cinema, which itself is intended for leisure and entertainment, in other words —for amusement. Part of the audience (generally loyal to Soviet power) was strongly opposed to bringing up memories of the war in the very place where they came for positive emotions. Too little time had passed for them to enjoy tragic plots on the theme of the Civil War and it was still impossible for them to disengage from the subject.

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