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A HISTORY OF THE RED ARMY



A 2x52' documentary directed by Michaël Prazan

coproduced by ARTE France et ZADIG Productions (Céline Nusse & Paul Rozenberg)

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Director's Note

The history of the Red Army covers the whole of the last century. Everyone knows that Trotsky was involved in its creation, that it came into being as a result of civil war, and that it saved the nascent revolutionary regime. But contrary to popular knowledge, its history encompasses defeats and military failures. After the Second World War, it was a state within the state, and the armed wing of Soviet repression, keeping a close eye on any move towards emancipation in "brother countries". The reality is certainly more nuanced than the image given in Soviet propaganda, and almost totally overshadowed by its most dazzling military feat: The liberation of Europe and the victory over Nazism. Since that war was an unprecedented struggle for the survival of the USSR, both in terms of what was at stake and the staggering human losses it incurred (more than 20 million men in the ranks of the Soviet army), I propose breaking the story into two episodes, the first of which will be dedicated to that epic conflict.

We will begin the diptych with the breaking of the German-Soviet pact and the invasion of the USSR starting on 22 June 1941. The account of this long series of military defeats which took the Wehrmacht to the gates of Moscow, then the resurgence of the Red Army, its territorial gains and the race to Berlin will form the flashback structure throughout the chronology, allowing us to return to the foundations of the Red Army and the main episodes that marked its history until the Soviet Union went to war with Hitler's Germany.

The second episode will deal with operations within the Soviet bloc, proxy wars against the US enemy, and will conclude with the "one war too many", which led to the end of the Soviet Union and the creation of a post-bipolar world: The war in Afghanistan. The Red Army, hailed at the end of the Second World War as an army of liberation, 40 years later had become an imperial army, one of oppression. The Soviet population had believed in the idealized version of the Red Army, but it now woke up to the reality, breaking the bond which tied it to its armed forces.

The narrative approach of the embedded camera

Because the aim is not to retrace the history of the Soviet Union, nor that of 20th century wars, I have chosen to limit the historical context as far as possible to concentrate on the Red Army itself. To do this, a little like the narrative approach of the archive-only film about the SS-Das Reich division ("Das Reich: An SS division in France", Nilaya/France 3), we will depend largely on archive footage to get as close as possible to the troops, like an "embedded camera" which will bring to life this epic story in the most realistic and life-like way.

Seeing things from a personal level, the viewer will be immersed in the realities, whether glorious or tragic, which the Red Army's troops encountered. Without sacrificing any historical rigor, our narrative will be told through the voices of anonymous soldiers, testimony gathered by writers including Vasily Grossman, Ilya Ehrenburg, and Svetlana Alexievich. Their experiences, transformed by a lyrical yet realist pen, embody the hopes of liberation and equality of which the Red Army was a symbol, as much as the disillusionment, the exactions, and the lives sacrificed in the name of victory and the survival of Communism. These accounts give a face and an individual existence to these anonymous soldiers. They speak in the first person and do not dodge the contradictions of their engagement, encompassing both the exaltation and atrocity of war. Certain figures stand out in the

first episode, such as General Zhukov, or Khrushchev, who was then still a political commissary and head of the Ukrainian Communist Party. We will follow their careers in the second part, given that they illustrate the evolution of the Red Army.

The bravery of the fighters will be underlined in certain parts of this documentary diptych, notably concerning the “Great Patriotic War”, but nothing will be swept under the carpet. Neither the terrifying number of soldiers who fell in the first phase of the German offensive, most of whom were exterminated or who were swallowed up in the genocidal Nazi apparatus (not to mention the famous “vlassovski”, who, as prisoners of war, would have been shot or sent to the Gulag if they had survived captivity), nor the military vagaries and shortcomings, the taboos about cannibalism on the front, or the systematic rape of German women during the battle of Berlin.

Likewise, in the second part of the documentary, we will highlight the growing disparity between the “great, powerful and good army”, in the words of a political instructor during the war in Afghanistan, and the reality of conditions in the barracks, and the widespread violence and corruption which was rife in the Red Army in the post-war years. The memory of the “Great Patriotic War” and the internationalist ideal were still a powerful influence on engagement in the Red Army and the actions of soldiers, whilst forming a cloak of silence that was not lifted until *glasnost* under Gorbachev.



Military reality and Soviet propaganda

Because the history of the Red Army is also one of a sub-culture encompassing major works (Roman Karmen, Grossman, Ehrenburg, Donskoy) and popular culture of all genres (musicals, comic strips, etc.), and because it was a key instrument of Soviet propaganda aimed at both the Russian population and the rest of the world, the documentary will give significant space to the continual dialog between war (whether armed or “cold”) and the situation back home; between military history strictly speaking and the exploitation of the army by a Union Soviet which did all it could to mask its economic failings and inevitable collapse.

Michaël Prazan

Narration and filmic approach

Given the difficulty of finding interview testimony for events that are already long past, at least for the first episode, and to bring to life the great historical epic that drives this project, this story will be told entirely through archives.



This means there won't be any room for analysis from historians or testimony from witnesses and/or survivors in interview form, but the point of view adopted by the narration will not be exclusively omniscient. Besides the narration, and to give flesh to the Red Army – not from the viewpoint of the regime but that of individuals – we will rely on authentic quotes, the testimony from simple soldiers who, in books, accounts, and memoirs, witnessed the various events in our account. These quotes will be used throughout both episodes.

We will also give space to propaganda images and speeches which accompanied the Soviet army throughout the century. Propaganda in its many forms, notably cinematographic, provides the voice of the regime, and thereby the link with the population and Soviet society. It illustrates a political will, a cultural occurrence, an ideology, and speaks volumes on the Soviets' perception of the world.

Examples of the directorial approach in the first three sequences:

Sequence 1

Archives:

The story opens with the presenter on a Russian network announcing the crash of a Tupolev aircraft on 25 December 2016 in the Black Sea off Sochi, carrying 64 members of the Red Army choir. The journalist declares a day of national mourning.

Then we see images of a crowd gathered the following day outside a Moscow theater and laying flowers in memory of the dead singers. The faces are taut; some of those present weep openly.

Narration:

On 26 December 2016, Russia was in mourning. A plane carrying the Red Army choir, founded in 1929 in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution, symbol of Russia's national army and its Soviet past, crashed into the sea. Among the 92 victims were 64 choir members. There were no survivors. Russia was in shock. The Red Army, which for 80 years has been performing standards from the popular and revolutionary repertoire, enjoys a worldwide reputation, as is the last link between the Russian population and its glorious military heritage, notably the "Great Patriotic War", the Soviet Union's struggle against Nazism which left 20 million dead. Yet despite the Russians' nostalgic attachment for their army, the history of the Soviet army is more nuanced than the propaganda discourse which accompanied its military feats.

Sequence 2

Archives:

We shift to color images filmed by Höffkes in the early days of the invasion of Russia by the German army.

Narration:

On 22 June 1941, Hitler's secret plan to invade the USSR was put into action, breaching the German-Soviet pact signed in 1939 by Ribbentrop and Molotov.

The announcer on Radio Moscow picks up the commentary:

"This is Moscow. Here is the news. Textile production has once again set records. The next harvest should be very good, if late. Fascist Germany is intensifying its raids on Great Britain. And now, gymnastics: Stretch your arms, bend, make some effort, one, two, one, two..."

Archives:

Archive footage shows the Soviet army routed by the advancing German troops. Wehrmacht uniforms swarm through towns that have fallen, such as Lemberg (Lviv). The cameramen filming the victory are taken on a visit to the abandoned NKVD buildings and other Soviet administration blocks.

Narration:

As this news bulletin broadcast by Radio Moscow illustrates, on that day the Russians were totally taken by surprise. While the Muscovites were doing their exercises, some 3.5 million Wehrmacht troops flooded into the Soviet Union. Nothing had been anticipated. The Red Army was overrun.

Archives:

View of Moscow, at night or dawn, in the early 1940s. Then the two generals, Timoshenko and Zhukov, either in the same archive footage or in photographic portraits.

Narration:

In Moscow, the news came through in the middle of the night. The people's commissar for defense, General Timoshenko, was thrown into panic, but did not dare to wake Stalin. He left this task to Zhukov, n°2 in the armed forces, who mustered all his courage and picked up the phone. On the other end of the line, Stalin, his breath short, took in the news. The "little father of the people" was stunned, but merely answered: "Assemble the whole politburo at the Kremlin."

Archives:

Exterior view of the Kremlin. We gradually zoom in until we enter the building, the camera coming to rest on Stalin.

Naivety? Gullibility? Unawareness? No one dares utter these words during the meeting. And yet, the signs were there. Stalin had not listened to warnings from the British intelligence services, nor to the accounts by deserters from the Wehrmacht taken to Moscow. Now, all the members of the Politburo agreed, including Stalin: This is no provocation, but a full-blown invasion. This is a matter of survival, calling for decisive action.

Archives:

Back to the front, in the form of German archives. The Wehrmacht is shown welcomed as liberators by the local population. Smiling, tanned German soldiers parade through towns, garlands of flowers around their necks. We then switch back to Hoffkes' color footage showing convoys of German armor moving along the sandy roads of Ukraine. Bodies of Soviet soldiers are scattered on the ground. Huge numbers of prisoners follow the German troops in long columns.

Narration:

At the front, it was total chaos. The supply lines were cut, Soviets troops fled the German offensive wherever their lines had been breached. The Wehrmacht was advancing simultaneously on three fronts. In the Baltic countries and Ukraine, which had been under the yoke of the Soviet Union, the

Germany army was welcomed as a liberating force. But in Russia, the German invasion was turning into a military disaster. One Soviet soldier was dying every two seconds. After several weeks, fatalities topped 200,000, and more than 100,000 had been taken prisoner.

Archives:

Archive footage: A close-up of Stalin. The commentary continues over this portrait. Then we see images of repression and executions (source: Russian archives in Krasnogorsk). The footage then illustrates the constitution of the Stavka. We then move on to military archives before seeing footage of Lavrenti Beria, one of the members of the Komsomol Communist youth movement.

Narration:

The peril was at the gates of the empire. For Stalin, the threat was also at the heart of the regime, which was on the verge of collapse after such destabilization. To calm his rage, he spent his time in the Kremlin looking for scapegoats. Repression was merciless. Stalin had all the top brass who had failed to halt the German advance arrested. Of the 40 generals arrested, nine were shot for treason or sabotage. Having taken all powers into his own hands, the dictator created the Stavka, a personal high command that would oversee the army. And to keep a closer eye on the troops, Stalin attached political commissars from the NKVD to each unit – a feared intelligence service run by Lavrenti Beria, alongside 500 party members and Communist youths. Their mission was to raise the troops’ morale while at the same time monitoring them for the slightest false move.

Sequence 3

Archives:

We may use a fade-out to signal the flashback to archives of the Revolution of 1917, then the civil war.

Narration:

Such exceptional measures, designed to ensure the survival of a regime under attack from all sides by powers intent on its annihilation, had previously been employed by the USSR, notably during the civil war which broke out in 1918 in the wake of the Bolshevik revolution.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

During development, we gathered accounts which will give a voice to the soldiers of the Red Army. Alongside the key figures like General Zhukov, whose career spans both episodes from the civil war to the climax of the Cold War, the soldiers’ words will sketch an alternative history of the Red Army. They provide an individual voice to those whose existence was long swallowed up in a collective entity, its image shaped by propaganda.

The writers **Ilya Ehrenburg** and **Vasily Grossman**, correspondents on the front, would later investigate Nazi crimes against Jews. Their notebooks from the war and their articles provide an

account of the chaos of the war, the emerging patriotism, the fondness for the Red Army, and the horror of Nazi crimes. They also recount the seizure of the proofs of their work, “The Black Book”, and repression suffered by the Jews towards the end of Stalin’s reign.

Mikhail Kalashnikov: Mobilized in the Red Army barely out of his teens, he was caught in the giant pincer movement of the Wehrmacht’s stunning assault in the fall of 1941. He managed to escape and join the rail depot where he had worked before the invasion of the USSR. There, he observed the infernal pace of work and began his research into light weapons. He developed the AK-47 – the Kalashnikov – in 1947 as the world slipped into the Cold War. This robust and light assault rifle would equip the national liberation movements supported by the USSR, and also those financed by the USA.

Soldier Plotnikov: He fought in the 49th division and could not believe that the Germans were being roundly defeated at Stalingrad.

Leonid Rabichev: First lieutenant in the signals corps, he recounts how he was in charge of propaganda in his unit and how his couplets on collectivization were met with skepticism by his soldiers, who were farmers before the war. He took part in the Red Army advance on the Reich and justifies the widespread pillaging. He also recounts the systematic rape of German women by Red Army troops.

Igor Trapitsyne: A soldier captured by the Germans in the first hours of the war. He describes the conditions for Soviet prisoners of war in German camps, the hunger, ill treatment and sickness, which by some miracle he survived – one of the few prisoners who did. When he returned to the USSR in 1945, he was sent to the gulag, the counter-espionage services finding him “suspicious”. He was liberated in April 1946 and learned that his wife and daughter had died during the siege of Leningrad.

Elena Bonner: Aged 18, she was sent as a military nurse to deal with the evacuation of the wounded during the siege of Leningrad. She had no other choice but to fight to avoid falling into the hands of the Germans or military counter-espionage. She remembers how propaganda films showed soldiers going into battle shouting “For Stalin!”, whereas the actual war cry was quite different. In the 1970s, she was invited to Poland and realized she was considered part of an occupying force. Along with her husband Andrei Sakharov, she was one of the leading dissidents during the 1970s and 1980s.

Daniil Al’: An interpreter in the 2nd division of the Leningrad people’s militia, he left his mother and sister under siege in Stalingrad. He tells how life was gradually choked off in the second city of the USSR, besieged and starved. He also recounts the harsh living conditions in the Red Army, notably the cannibalism in his own division, but also the protection of his political officer, who described the soldiers’ heroism to their parents. After the war, he was sent to the gulag for four years due to his association with the head of the Leningrad siege museum. He was freed after Stalin’s death, when the situation of veterans of the Great Patriotic War improved, with back pay and pensions being paid.

Grigori Pomeranz: He signed up as a student in the Red Army to save Moscow in winter 1941. In his lyrical manner, he tells of the emergence of the patriotic feeling that took hold of him. After the war, he describes how veterans were dismissed by Stalin, and the humiliation of having no social status after risking one’s life for one’s country and ideals.

Anatoly Guenatulin: Aged 14, he was working on a collective farm when the war broke out. With the village in the grip of famine, he worked himself to exhaustion to feed the soldiers on the front. He then worked in a foundry in appalling conditions. He recounts the forced youth labor. Recruited into the army, he fought in Karelia, then in Germany in 1945, taking part in pillaging. He paints a sorry portrait of these young soldiers robbed of their youth.

Elena Rjevskaya: A translator with the general staff, she wept with joy when she heard that Moscow had been saved in January 1942. She was part of a secret commando sent by Stalin in May 1945 to Berlin to confirm that Hitler had committed suicide. While Stalinist propaganda had raised some doubts, it was she who, in the 1960s, informed Zhukov that Hitler had indeed killed himself on 30 April 1945 in his bunker.

Baruch Schub: As a young Jew in Vilnius, he managed to escape the ghetto, where he was part of a resistance network, seeking refuge in a forest in Rudnicki. He fought with one of four battalions of Jewish partisans. He took part in operations to derail trains and blow up bridges. After the war, he emigrated to Palestine.

Nina Kovelonova: A former stretcher-bearer, she recounts the psychological trauma of her experiences fighting, like other veterans of the Great Patriotic War.

Olga Vasilievna: Former munitions specialist in the navy, she was decorated for bravery. But some people reproached her for wearing her medals and she ended up putting them away.

Zinayda, the sister of Olga Vasilievna, was a nurse during the war. She could not stand seeing the state of war invalids, who received no aid from the Soviet administration and who were reduced to begging.

VA Shmelev: Parachute officer in the Red Army, he took part in the Warsaw Pact intervention in Prague in 1968. He recalls the hostility of the Hungarians and the incomprehension of the Russian soldiers, who were convinced of the fairness and legitimacy of the intervention.

Leonid: An officer's son who grew up in the 1970s, he discusses the housing problems his father faced when posted to Minsk, when four of them lived in a single hotel room.

Irina: Married to an officer posted to the region of Murmansk, north of Scandinavia, she ended up cracking after seven years without water, electricity, or heating. Food was essentially powdered vegetables and canned goods, flown in once a month by helicopter. Since her husband could not get himself transferred, she left him to return to Moscow.

Evgeni Koltenikov: A young recruit during the war in Afghanistan, he witnessed the difference between the official discourse and the reality of combat in Afghanistan. He realized they were considered as invaders and he was tortured by his roommates. When he was demobilized, he was forbidden from discussing his experiences on the pretext of not discrediting the army.

Tatiana Gaysenko: A nurse during the war in Afghanistan, she describes the widespread black market operating in the army, the effects on soldiers of drugs, which meant they were not able to go into combat and no longer cared about the terrible conditions and widespread scurvy. She remembers they were given instructions to not record the real reasons for deaths.

Valentina Melnikova: In the 1970s she lived in the GDR and was stunned to see the meltdown of the Red Army, the gulf between its powerful image and the reality, with soldiers fighting over a box of matches. She realized the whole institution was rotten. Under Gorbachev, she founded the committee of soldiers' mothers, which denounced the harsh conditions faced by young conscripts sent to Afghanistan.

Konstantin: He lived for several decades in the closed city of Ozyorsk, witnessing the material advantages that such research centers offered and the pride of being part of the Soviet elite.

We have also mentioned a certain number of anonymous accounts, mostly gathered as part of American studies or by the Nobel literature prize-winner Svetlana Alexievich during her research for "The Last of the Soviets" and "Boys in Zinc". Alexievich moreover collaborated on the project. These testimonies seem pertinent to capture the hopes that accompanied the thaw under Khrushchev, and also the education in sacrifice which young Soviets underwent, and the despair of the parents whose sons died in Afghanistan.

EPISODE 1: THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR (52')

EPISODE 2: THE COLD WAR (52')

ARCHIVE SOURCES

Documentaries – film news

From the start of the invasion of the USSR by the Third Reich, the Soviet propaganda machine had sent top Russian directors to the front, such as Roman Karmen and Alexander Medvedkin. Nearly 260 filmmakers fed their images to the cinema news. We will draw on this memorable body of work.

These images have also been used in other works, like *“Sang pour Sang”*, in which Dziga Vertov used these rushes to call for vengeance for the death and destruction. They have also been the subject of documentaries which retrace the war’s great battles, like *“The Defeat of German Troops outside Moscow”* (1942) by Leonid Varlamov and Ilya Kopalin, which was widely shown abroad, notably in the United States, where it won an Oscar in 1942. Some of these images were shot by Roman Karmen, who combined actual footage with reconstructions. Certain recreated sequences have become iconic, coming to represent these events in the global collective memory, like the line of German prisoners of war after their surrender at Stalingrad, or the taking of the Reichstag during the battle of Berlin.

We will use the body of filmed newsreel *«L’Oural de Staline»*, which retraces the contribution behind the lines to the war effort.

We will also use extracts from short movies that deal in a more-or-less romantic way with the exploits of the partisans and Nazi exactions. These were made by some of the greatest Soviet directors of the period, like Mark Donskoy.

Fiction feature films

Below is a selection of the fictionalized movies we will use, which gives an idea of the variety of forms and narrative approach of this key source to explore the rapport between propaganda and the Soviet people, and the way the Red Army’s image was shaped.

“The Rainbow” (Mark Donskoy, 1943) depicts the atrocities committed by the Nazis and the many forms of collaboration, and hails the determination of the Soviet population in the face of all adversity.

“No Greater Love” (Fridrikh Ermler, 1943) recounts the fate of a female partisan.

“Once There Was a Girl” (Viktor Eysymont, 1944) shows daily living conditions during the siege of Leningrad.

“The Taras Family” (Mark Donskoy, 1945) is the only Soviet fiction film made before the 1960s that evokes the Holocaust. It tells the story of a working-class Ukrainian family during the German occupation who do not flee due to the sickness of one of their children. The father barricades himself into the home. Soon, the whole family is part of the resistance. They take in the young daughter of a doctor who was killed in the Babi Yar massacre.

We will also look to curios like *“Six PM”*, a musical by Ivan Pyryev, the inventor of the kolkhoz musical genre, which blends folklore and propaganda. Sung in verse, the film tells the story of a gunner and Varia, a nursery nurse, who promise one another to meet again on the day of the armistice, at six in the evening. As Varia joins the anti-aircraft troops on the front, her betrothed is injured and has to have a leg amputated. Thinking he can no longer honor his promise, he decides to pretend he was killed in combat. Some 26.1 million Soviets saw this film in 1945.

The studios transferred to Kazakhstan also produced burlesque comedies ridiculing the occupier such as *“The Career of Lieutenant Hop”* directed by Nikolai Sadovich, as well as period films like *“Ivan the Terrible”* by Eisenstein, which provided an echo to the on-going war.



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