# FROM TABOO TO CONTROVERSIAL NARRATIVES OF WORLD WAR II IN RUSSIAN WAR CINEMA POST-GLASNOST`. ANTI-HEROES IN PENAL BATTALIONS

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**Abstract** The article aims to reveal de-heroicising patterns of World War II in recent Russian films about a previously forbidden topic in the Soviet period – Soviet penal battalions (*shtrafbats*). Still a controversial topic, the recent films and TV series on this topic disclose new heroic approaches and ways of constructing World War II's (unsung) heroes. On the one hand, these filmic productions represent tributes to the heroes of penal battalions; on the other, they bring forward the anti-hero as the new positive hero of the post-Soviet period. Therefore, these filmic productions may be seen as Postmodernist recycling attempts of Socialist Realism, as proposed by M. Lipovetsky. Additionally, they are attempts to re-ascertain Russian cultural relevance and revisionist efforts before the Russo-Ukrainian war. We focus on V. Novak's film *Gu-ga* (1989) which opened the path of discussing the penal battalion topic and N. Dostal's TV series *The Penal Battalion* (*Shtrafbat*, 2004). Our paper explores the public and critical response to these film productions and their role within Russian recent cultural history and the character construction of Boris Tiraspolsky (*Gu-ga*) and Vasily Tverdokhlebov (*Shtrafbat*) as reflections of the social, political and cultural changes.
**Keywords** Great Patriotic War, recent Russian films, penal battalions, de-heroicising patterns, anti-heroes.

## Introductory Aspects

World War II has remained a reference in Russian culture due to its significance in mobilizing Soviet society and myth-making capacity. Known as the "Great Patriotic War"/ *Velikaia Otechestvennaia Voina (VOV)*, World War II has generated over time heroicising and de-heroicising patterns in literature and films, depending on the political and cultural climates. It has prevailed as the legitimising military event for post-Soviet Russia and its heroic narratives in

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asserting its place as the main Soviet heir in the building process of a national state. It is a lasting symbol of Russian strength and military might to this day when more film productions about World War II are broadcast to boost the citizens' morale in the context of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war.

The *shtrafbats* (from *shtrafnoy batalyon*, which means "Penal Battalion" – "penbat") were mainly the result of Joseph Stalin's Order No. 227 issued on 28 July 1942 popularly known as "Not one step back!" (*Ni shagu nazad!*) That was prompted by the Soviet soldiers' panic facing the disciplined German army and its great conquests (Rostov-on-Don had just fallen and the Germans were heading towards Stalingrad and the Caucasus) so new tough disciplinary measures were introduced. These included imprisonment and execution for unauthorized retreats, cowardice, desertion, or even suspicious escape and survival from encirclements and imprisonment. It is relevant that the full text of the law was published only in 1988 by the Soviet press, during S. Gorbachev's *glasnost`* campaign, as it contradicted the Soviet indubitable heroism in World War II and the carefully crafted cult of victory.

Order No. 227 stated the creation of penal units, following the German example, and blocking units (*zagraditel`nye otriady* or *zagradotriady*), along with their role on the front. The penal companies and battalions included disgraced officers who were demoted of their titles and medals, with the possibility of earning them back. The command of penal battalions included Red Army officers and political officers that responded to NKVD and were known as *osobisty* ("specials" from *Osobyi Otdel Krasnoy Armii* – "Special Division of the Red Army"). The special blocking detachments were in the immediate rear of unsteady divisions and shot on-the-spot cowards, traitors, panicked soldiers and deserters in the case of disorganized and unauthorized retreats.[1]

The slogan of such penal companies and battalions was their duty for Motherland so that they would redeem themselves with their blood, "to the last drop of blood."[2] On the one hand, the Soviet penal units had an impressive concentration of professional soldiers, on the other, they were sent to achieve impossible tasks for regular army units: attacking and resisting challenging enemy positions; serving as diversion attacks; performing dangerous patrols; sacrificing during retreats of regular military units. This represented the difference between the German penal units serving as normal military units and the Soviet ones, reflecting the Soviet state's readiness to sacrifice its people as expendables.[3] Therefore, *shtrafbaty* and *zagradotriady* became taboo topics after the war, when the Soviet state imprinted a canonical narrative about the heroic and victorious Soviet people.

The subject was scarcely approached during Soviet times, mentioned in V. Grossman's samizdat novel *Life and Fate* (1960), or scarcely in the Soviet press before the *glasnost`* era. The only known literary works are V. Karpov's *Vziat` zhivym!* (1974) and Moris Simashko's story *Gu-*

[1] Evan Mawdsley, *The Stalin Years: The Soviet Union 1929–1953* (Manchester University Press, 2003), 139.
[2] Ibid., 137.
[3] Some sources state the impressive number of 427.910 people convicted to penal units: 61 battalions, and 1049 companies; very few survived the difficult and often suicidal missions – See G.F.Krivosheev, A.V. Kirilin (eds.), *Kniga poter`. Velikaya Otechestvennaya bez grifa sekretnosti/ The Book of Losses. The Great Patriotic War without Secrets* (Moscow: Veche, 2009), 303, 305.

*ga* (1982). The latter was adapted to screen by Villen Novak in the period of great social, political and cultural upheaval in the Soviet Union (1989), opening heated debates on the former taboo topic of *shtrafbats* and related ones to the cult of *VOV*. Though *Gu-ga* was initially divisive, its exploration of sexuality, war trauma, and historical reckoning has earned it a place in discussions of late Soviet cinema. It is appreciated for its unconventional approach to both history and human intimacy, and its portrayal of the emotional struggle to reconcile with the painful past and war trauma.

Furthermore, E. Volodarsky published a novel *Shtrafbat* in 2004 based on memoirs of surviving *shtrafniki*, while others followed.[4] Some other aspects of *shtrafbats* were clarified, explained and referred to in numerous articles and books. Intriguingly, most were reactions, negative comments, or denials of the depicted aspects in Volodarsky's novel and the subsequent script for the Russian TV series directed by Nikolai Dostal` (2004).

The 2004 Russian TV series *Strafbat* (the film adaptation of the famous Soviet screenwriter E. Volodarsky's novel) stirred a lot of mixed reactions and controversy, starting with bitter and harsh reviews to many historical articles, memoirs, interviews and documentaries on the subject. The ardent reactions and debates may be explained briefly by the fact that Russia is the heir of the USSR and its mythology and military glory, continuing the cult of the Great Patriotic War with its mythical ingredients. Among these ingredients, we remark the cult of victory, bravery, the united battalion like a harmonious family, the image of women as comrades and untainted virgins and some well-knitted myths of unhuman heroism and stoicism.

For example, the pilot Alexey Maresyev, portrayed as Meresyev in V. Polevoy's book and then in A. Stolper's film (1952), is the embodiment of the new Soviet man.[5] Another prominent example is the collective heroism of the anti-fascist organization *The Young Guard*, with the canonized version in A. Fadeyev's second edition of the novel (1951), and then S. Gerasimov's film adaptation (1948, edited in 1964). "The Young Guard" had a special place in the Soviet mythic pantheon. Nevertheless, the post-Soviet TV series inspired by the same events – S. Lyalin's *The Last Confession* (2006) and L. Plyaskin's *The Young Guard* (2015) – broke the canonical version involving demystifying and de-heroicising strategies. It proved that not the greatness of disputable heroic deeds at war and heroes' romantic and idealized aura matter nowadays, but the realistic approach in a relevant language.[6]

The gradual and inevitable erosion of Soviet myths included significant writings of V. Grossman, A. Solzhenitsyn, A. Adamovich, D. Granin and Svetlana Alexievich. These voices

[4] A. Pyl`tsyn's *Strafnoy udar, ili kak ofitserskiy shtrafbat doshel do Berlina/ Penalty Strike or How an Officer of Shtrafbat Reached Berlin* (2003) and *Pravda o shtrafbatakh/ The Truth about Shtrafbats* (2007), and M. V. Kustov's *Real`naya istoria shtrafbatov i drugie mify o samykh strashnykh momentakh VOV/ The Real History of Shtrafbats and Other Myth about the Most Terrible Moments of the Great Patriotic War* (2011).

[5] See details in Olga Gradinaru, "The Myth of the New Man in Soviet Cinema: A Story about a Real Man," *Caietele Echinox,* 28/2015, *Media Mythologies. Revisiting Myths in Contemporary Media* (Cluj-Napoca: Fundaţia Culturală Echinox, 2015): 197-207.

[6] See more in Olga Gradinaru, "Revisiting Great Soviet World War II Symbols. *The Young Guard* Now and Then," *Studia Dramatica* (2/2019): 101-118.

questioned the officially imposed narratives and offered a nuanced view of the myths concerning Soviet heroism. At the same time, films like *Come and See* (1985) and *Burnt by the Sun* (1994) represent challenging perspectives on Soviet war heroism, opening directions to explore de-heroicizing patterns and previously taboo topics. The penal battalion theme was also approached by B. Rytsarev's tragicomedy *The Name* (*Imya*, 1988), S. Mikaelyan's war drama presenting the penal battalions only briefly *One Hundred Soldiers and Two Girls* (*Sto soldat i dve devushki*, 1989), F. Petrukhin's television film *Victory Day* (*Den` Pobedy*, 2006), A. Atanesyan's *Bastards* (*Svolochi*, 2006) with a focus on teenage orphans and N. Mikhalkov's *Burnt by the Sun 2* (*Utomlyonnye solntsem 2*: (*Predstoianie/ Exodus, Tsitadel/ The Citadel*).

The paper focuses on *Gu-ga* and *Shtrafbat* as examples of a larger de-heroicising and demystifying trend in Russian cinema concerning the cult of World War II. Using the historical analysis method, we point out the heroic vs. anti-heroic tropes in constructing the main protagonists in the genre of military dramas which avoid the standard heroic lenses. These films represent the deconstruction process of the cult of victory, involving irony and self-reflexivity while handling historical narratives in a postmodern revisionist tone. The reuse of the Soviet myth of the "heroic struggle of the Soviet people" with a focus on the conflicts within the Red Army and the violence of the Stalinist state against its citizens is specific to the post-Soviet category of films called *post-sots* by M. Lipovetsky.[7] His study proposes specific *post-sots* traits relevant to *Shtrafbat* TV series:[8] the binary opposition of the plot set usually during a war with a developed main character undergoing a temporary death. In addition, male camaraderie plays a crucial role, while recognizable quotes from the Soviet period are sprinkled here and there in the film with familiar genre conventions (war drama) combined with Western features of a blockbuster.

**Soviet Glasnost` and Forbidden Topics**

The phenomenon of subsequent film adaptations of the same heroic Soviet heritage in Russian cinema signals a gradual demystification process of once-sacred military and/or heroic symbols of World War II. Furthermore, the post-Soviet approach of the *VOV* cult has been completed with the appearance of some new war facets merely known during the Soviet period, such as *shtrafbat*. The premiere of V. Novak's film took place in April 1990 and, like other films of the late '80s, it combines violent war and explicit sex scenes. The soldier's dramatic experience of the penal company has a bitter ending, unlike Simashko's brighter ending in the story.

**Public and Critical Reception of *Gu-ga***

Novak's film received a range of reactions from both critics and the public, reflecting its controversial and provocative content since it questioned the Soviet heroicising patterns and

[7] M. Lipovestky, "Post-Sots: Transformations of Socialist Realism in the Popular Culture of the Recent Period," in *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (Autumn 2004): 364.
[8] Lipovetsky, 361-362.

demystified the cult of victory and similar mythologised aspects of World War II. Released during a more open examination of Soviet history and culture (*glasnost`* and *perestroika*), just a few years before the Soviet Union's eventual collapse, the film was part of the wave of films when censorship began to loosen. As a result, filmmakers were exploring previously taboo topics, including the trauma of Stalinism, the aftermath of the purges, and the (emotional) cost of World War II (and Soviet history in general). More specifically, Novak was challenging the cult of victory, starting the demystification process in filmmaking and opening a debate concerning the war trauma and other taboo topics: the penal units, the anti-heroes' heroism and femininity and eroticism, among others. Hence, the film's explicit content, including the sexual scenes between Boris Tiraspolsky and Tamara, was seen as quite bold and controversial at the time, challenging the norms of Soviet cinema, which had long been bound by restrictions on what could be portrayed on screen.

Consequently, many viewers, particularly those in more conservative circles, found the explicit nature of the film uncomfortable or even shocking. The portrayal of sexuality, especially within the context of the brutal Stalinist system, seemed to clash with traditional Soviet ideals about family, morality, and state-sanctioned representations of love. It was also critiqued for being too bold in its depiction of war trauma and its lack of idealized representations of Soviet life. There was significant debate about whether the film was appropriate or respectful in its treatment of sensitive historical issues, such as the use of penal battalions in absurd missions, lack of humanity on the behalf of military authorities and the sensitive topic of femininity and sensuality at war. Some felt it was a necessary and authentic exploration of human relationships under extreme war pressures, while others viewed it as an overindulgence in shock value and sensationalism.

Critics' opinions were mixed, with some praising the film for its bravery and realism, while others found its treatment of history and its emotional tone troubling. A segment of the critics praised *Gu-ga* for its willingness to engage with Soviet history in a raw, unflinching manner, especially in terms of portraying the emotional and psychological cost of the war in the aftermath of Stalinism. Some appreciated how the film dealt with the human cost of political terror (in the penal units' institution and management). Moreover, they valued Novak's characters, who were not simply victims or heroes, but rather complex individuals struggling to understand themselves and each other in the wake of immense trauma.

On the other hand, some critics condemned the film for what they perceived as a lack of subtlety in its portrayal of both historical events and human relationships. The explicit content was particularly controversial for critics who saw it as undermining the serious subject matters. Additionally, the film's ambiguous moral tone and portrayal of the relationship between Tiraspolsky and Tamara as imperfect left some audiences and critics dissatisfied. For some, the portrayal of sexual intimacy, combined with the film's dark, gritty atmosphere, might have felt disrespectful or unsettling, especially given the serious topic of World War II / *VOV*.

Predictably, some war veterans expressed their discontent with the director's inaccuracy with the historical truth regarding the penal companies. The negative reactions were directed toward the presence of NKVD behind the lines and the presence of criminals in penal

companies.[9] The animosity between the guard or the sergeant and the soldiers depicted in all the films about penal battalions, is significant, as it destroys the image of harmonious relationships within the brave, victorious Red Army.

**Tiraspolsky, a Soviet Anti-Hero**

The plot of *Gu-ga* is set in Tashkent 1943 where young men combine military training before being sent to the front with love and entertainment. After a romantic encounter between a married teacher Tamara and pilot Borya Tiraspolsky, Borya flew the military airplane to Tamara's village to see her again instead of returning to the military base. Consequently, Borya (along with three other comrades) was sent for a month to a penal company (*shtrafnaya rota*) to "redeem his fault with his blood." The hero's insubordination for a love affair sets him in the anti-hero category, especially when compared to Alexey Meresyev whose subtle insubordination, tempted by an easy target, led to his airplane crash and feet amputation after crawling for 18 days in the winter forest. While Meresyev fought to recover his place in the military despite his invalid status, Tiraspolsky ended up in the commander position (though of a penal unit) without aiming for or desiring it. Both films depict resilience and survival in different circumstances: Meresyev strived to survive on his own and face the system to get back to his previous pilot position but Tiraspolsky fought for his survival alongside his comrades in the penal unit, facing the absurd orders of the system. In Meresyev's case, redemption is symbolic, following the hero's path from spontaneity to consciousness;[10] in Tiraspolsky's case, the portrayal of redemption is rather cynical, as it refers merely to his second chance to redeem his blunt insubordination by surviving impossible military missions.

Set in a morally grey situation, Borya is portrayed with flaws and struggles with his own understanding of right and wrong. In a military context, he does not appear to be motivated by higher ideals, but more by pragmatic, often self-interested goals. His anti-heroic qualities come from his contradictions, his imperfections, and the way he operates outside traditional heroism norms. Tiraspolsky's lack of moral integrity before the period in the penal unit is unquestionable but his irresponsible and rebellious decision to fly off to his lover, Tamara, may be seen as a revolt against the Stalinist oppressive system and the imposition of a false sense of patriotism. Set in this perspective, his heroism stems from his psychological endurance, moral reflection and redemption. His psychological resilience despite the traumatic events exposed to during his service in the penal unit contributes to a different form of heroism. His moral integrity is shaped within the corrupt and violent Stalinist penal system through his journey of moral reflection. Although Borya's burden of guilt is not necessarily in the foreground of this film, his flashbacks to his love affair play the cinematic role of reflections on the consequences of insubordination and resources to cope with the mud and blood of the violently absurd missions of his penal unit.

[9] http://voenhronika.ru/news/gu_ga_1989/2016-03-08-905 (Accessed on September 1, 2017).
[10] Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, third edition (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 181-182.

Tiraspolsky exhibits moments of compassion and kindness toward his comrades that distinguish him as a hero in a morally distorted grey world. His heroism lies in his humanity rather than any grand ideological victory. He seems cheeky in his bold and blunt recognition of the command's question concerning the unit's singing while training: "Is there someone else who believes he's in Aleksandrov's choir and not in a penal battalion?" His reaction is a cheap and cheerful encouragement for the other soldiers, which has immediate consequences: he must clean the toilet and he gains an enemy in Seargent Kravets. However, command Vladimir Pravorotov assigns him as the head of the 2nd platoon and develops a fatherly relationship with him throughout the film.

Borya's heroism is more internal and personal, focused on survival in circumstances of utmost violence, pushed in suicidal missions by the military command under the ideological pretext of "guilt redemption by blood." He is a hero because of the way he attempts to maintain his humanity and sanity in an environment that has stripped away both. He admits to one of his comrades that he was also on the brink of losing his mind like other soldiers during the night surveillance in the swamps. Tiraspolsky's heroism is not celebrated or recognized by society or the military command; it is quietly subversive, hidden in his small acts of integrity and perseverance.

Although the Stalinist myth of a united Red Army as a micro-cosmos of the great family myth[11] is dismantled in the film, another Stalinist motive is present: the relationship father-son/ mentor-disciple,[12] which is largely present in the Stalinist films about World War I, the Russian Civil War and the Russian Revolution. The plot of these filmic productions usually presents a rebel "son"/ "disciple" (the embodiment of the spontaneity principle or *stikhiynost`*) and a patient and loving father figure (the symbol of consciousness or *soznatel`nost`*). This dynamic is one of the central facets of Socialist Realism, developed in the Stalinist period; more father figures sometimes in different stages of the hero's development from rebel status to the conscious, obedient mood (usually toward authority, pointing to the supreme authority - the state and/or Stalin as its ultimate symbol). *Gu-ga* has several father figures for the rebellious, emotionally unstable and unfaithful Borya from Odessa – the courageous Captain Pravotorov and the Ukrainian elder and resourceful soldier Dan`kovets. Another old soldier consoles the poor young soldiers under such dreadful circumstances, wishing them in a fatherly voice to "win and survive."

After Dan`kovets dies during the attack on the German pillbox, while the Captain is seriously wounded, Borya is assigned to replace the captain. In this way, another Stalinist myth of picking up the banner is depicted,[13] a myth focussed on the continuity of the same communist values between generations. Moreover, the death or near-death experience of both Borya's mentors plays a key role in Soviet narratives, becoming a symbol and an experience of transfiguration for the main hero in his initiatic path from spontaneity to consciousness. Nevertheless, the film's appearance on the brink of the Soviet Union's dissolution twists the

[11] Ibid., 114-124.
[12] Ibid., 114-125, 168-176.
[13] Ibid., 249.

previously established narrative and visual patterns. Thus, the closing scene of *Gu-ga* is yet another suggestive rebellious gesture of *shtrafniki* facing the NKVD authority – instead of handing over the guns, Boris and the other surviving soldiers of the penal company empty their guns and fire them in the air. This soldiers' last gesture of resistance toward the cruelty of the state represented by *zagradotriad* breaks the Socialist Realism narrative pattern from spontaneity to consciousness. It is also meaningful that this rebellious act is prompted by the penal battalion officer's suicide after being severely wounded. It is mis-en-scene by the metonymic close-ups of Borya and the *zagradotriad's* officer. Then the camera zooms out to the rest of the soldiers and Tiraspolsky is the first one to fire his gun in the air, followed by the rest. The image fades out concluding the end of the film.

The theme of *podvig* ("heroic deed")[14] is central to the Soviet mythology of *VOV* is also present in *Gu-ga* in a slightly reshaped form due to the ironic and rebellious tone of the late '80s. The de-heroization process of the great military deed in literature and cinematography had started in post-Stalinist Thaw (with the wave of new prose of young officers focused on depicting the war's psychological aspects[15]). Distinct signs of this process are present in Novak's film: depiction of harsh living conditions for soldiers, the absurdity of their position close to a mined swamp and their mission to take over the pillbox and maintain their position. The director spares no cruel images and scenes on the battlefield (especially one of the last images of mud and blood mixed with human body parts), continuing the line of war naturalistic scenes from G. Egyazarov to E. Klimov. Similar naturalistic images may be seen in Egyazarov's film adaptation *Hot Snow* (1972), where frozen corpses, destroyed tanks, body parts, snow and dirt form the landscape of a heroicised battle not far from Stalingrad. The utter brutality of the Eastern front was depicted in Klimov's *Come and See* (1985), constituting one of the pacifist manifestos of the Soviet period. The surviving heroes in these films have few reasons to celebrate their company's heroism, looking resigned and restless into the near future.

Some motives from *Gu-ga* appear in the post-Soviet *Shtrafbat*: the presence of the NKVD division behind the lines to "motivate" (with bullets) the soldiers seen only as *shtrafniki* and treating them as cannon fodder. Also, the conflictual relationships surface between the command and the soldiers, among the soldiers and the criminals within the same camp. Sergeant Kravets is the embodiment of an evil and harsh Bolshevik, turning against Tiraspolsky and aiming to kill him in the first aerial ride of the enemy. The first period of cohabitation between the soldiers and the criminals in the barrack ends with a fight between the two groups: Borya tries to protect someone from a criminal and then beats the latter up; the authorities turn

[14] The roots of *podvig* may be traced back to the epic *Slovo o polku Igoreve* from the 12th century (*The Tale of Igor's Campaign*) and its double origin (the climax in Lev Tolstoy's prose and the revolutionary writings with special stress on N. Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* 1863) – see Olga Grădinaru, "Making of Russian Heroes," in *Encyclopedia of Heroism Studies*, eds. Scott T. Allison, George Goethals and James Beggan (Springer, e-book 2023 and print book 2024), 1281-1286.

[15] See Olga Grădinaru, "World War II in Soviet Prose – An Overview," *Philobiblon. Transylvanian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research in Humanities* no 2, volume XXVI (2021): 227-242,
DOI: https://doi.org/10.26424/philobib.2021.26.2.07.

a blind eye to the situation. Additionally, sensitive topics like the lack of food supplies and exhausting marches with no food for *shtrafniki* and their mistreatment are depicted.

Regarding the image of the "enemy within," the officer in charge of the blocking unit benefits from a long shot in the film – a descriptive camera movement from shiny boots to strict facial expression. Surprisingly, the number of neatly dressed soldiers, called the "tidy ones" (*chisten`kie*), from *zagradotriad* is the same as penal soldiers (*shtrafniki*); their role is to "encourage" with bullets the penal battalion to carry on their mission when they stop. The tense relationship between command Pravorotov and the *zagradotriad* command is shown in the critical moment of the battle. Soldier Dan`kovets, who is in a *shtrafbat* for the third time, has also a conflictual relationship with the same officer.

Finally, the approach of such a thorny subject as adultery at war, implying female de-sanctification, ends the list of previously taboo motives in the Soviet culture. Although the presence of the adultery theme had been present in Soviet literature and cinema only after the Thaw, explicit love scenes were censored, and only ellipsis could have suggested the outcome of some encounters. Novak's 1989 film indulges the viewers in explicit erotic scenes, using ellipsis to suggest the time passing.

The love story between the young and handsome Borya and the unfaithful teacher Tamara is the only bright experience in V. Novak's film. Intriguingly, the two barely speak to each other; sometimes Tamara tells Borya to wait or exclaims when she sees him at her house, surprised: "Madman!" The flashbacks build this affair that constituted the reason for Tiraspolsky's redemption in the penal company: the camera captures their passionate glazes while dancing and the gross plans on their faces on their first night in the orchard. These memories are Borya's reason for not breaking down like the other two soldiers while surveying the area at night near the mined swamps. The bright memories from the night spent in the orchard and then in the vineyard with Tamara contrast the muddy and nauseating reality of the *shtrafbat* mission in the swamps.

The adultery topic is mis-en-scenes simply: Tiraspolsky finds out about Tamara's marriage only after the beginning of their relationship. Although tempted by another young woman who told him Tamara left to see her husband, he refused her invitation. When visiting Tamara, Borya sees her washing her husband's clothes and notices his soldier's boots and clothes at the entrance: the close-up of his face, then the husband's boots and clothes is the only shown aspect on the topic. Then the two go to the vineyard and spend a steamy afternoon – the image of the grapes in different shades of sunlight till the evening light suggests the time passing.

In hindsight, *Gu-ga* may be regarded as part of the cultural shifts of the 1980s. The film's attempt to deal with war trauma and the emotional scars of Stalinism, as well as its portrayal of human vulnerability, fits into a larger pattern of films from the *glasnost`* era that explored previously hidden aspects of Soviet life. The controversial themes of the film, including the raw sexual content, are now viewed as symbolic of the breakdown of Soviet cultural taboos.

### *Shtrafbat* – Post-Soviet Ideology and De-heroization

*Shtrafbat* (2004) is a Russian military drama TV series, directed by N. Dostal`, set during World War II, depicting the lives of soldiers in penal battalions. The series paints a grim, realistic picture of the hardships, suffering, and moral dilemmas faced by these soldiers as they are sent to the frontlines under harsh conditions.

The plot follows a group of soldiers who are forced into these battalions as punishment. The series explores their personal struggles, the brutality of war, and their interactions with the commanding officers, who often view them as expendable cannon fodder. The soldiers must endure the harsh discipline, deprivation, and constant risk of death on the battlefield. Through this narrative, *Shtrafbat* delves deeply into themes of survival, loyalty, and the human cost of war, challenging canonical narratives of the cult of victory and associated *VOV* myths and thus continuing the controversial path opened by *Gu-ga*.

Visually, *Shtrafbat* presents a bleak and gritty portrayal of the Eastern Front during World War II, focusing on the moral issues of the war and the theme of "ours against ours," introduced and developed by the second wave of war writers in the post-Stalinist era. The series also highlights the theme of redemption, as some of the penal soldiers seek a way to earn back their honour while others fall deeper into moral decay, resigned to their fate. The TV series starts with the scene of Soviet prisoners of war filmed with a shaky camera movement, followed by a montage of images focused on the German camp and the German soldiers and officers. The use of colour grading produces the effect of older coloured Soviet films and induces the effect of temporal distance between the viewer and the fictional events set in the war period. This also gives the impression of a documentary film, increasing the veracity feeling.[16]

### Critical and Ideological Reactions to *Shtrafbat*

While *Shtrafbat* is primarily focused on the soldiers' experiences, it also sheds light on the political and military realities of the time, offering a critical view of Soviet military practices during the war. The series is known for its strong performances, realistic portrayal of wartime conditions, and exploration of difficult moral and psychological issues faced by soldiers in such extreme circumstances. Dostal`'s series won the Nika Award for Best TV Movie or Miniseries, cementing its place in Russian television history, and the Golden Eagle Award. It was also nominated at the International Television Festival "Golden Rose" (Bulgaria) which also helped gain international visibility. The series' cultural impact has been significant, both in Russia and abroad, due to its raw portrayal of war and critique of the Soviet system, generating ardent debates about World War II legacy and Soviet history.

The reactions have been different, mainly depending on the age, education and degree of Soviet ideologization. If *Shtrafbat* aimed to raise awareness and interest in not-so-glorious

[16] K. Shergova, A. Muradov, "Artistic features of Russian TV serials about the Great Patriotic War," *Journal of Flm Arts and Film Studies* tom 11, No. 2 (40) (June 2019): 147, 149.

facets of the greatly valued *VOV*, then the aim was surely fulfilled, as the debates concerning the tactically silenced in Soviet times controversial subjects are still ardent and ferocious. While reading the online reactions to *Shtrafbat* by a former *shtrafbat* command who was stating a list of "don'ts" concerning the topic, inaccurately presented in the TV series, one can easily point out the main complaint motives. Among them, we mention nostalgia for the Soviet manner of depicting *VOV*, harsh critical comments on filmmakers' unprofessionalism and distorting the war heroism, as well as history itself and negative consequences on the Russian youth (especially the negative attitude toward Soviet times). This leads to another crucial failed aspect – the educational role of the films, as in this case, the TV series has played the role of a so-called ideological diversion.

On the other hand, other viewers expressed pertinent arguments regarding the fictitious character of the filmic work and the script writer and director's artistic freedom in representing aspects of the past. Moreover, some viewers stated that testimonies of several commanders of penal battalions or companies do not reveal the entire truth and that the aim of the film was fulfilled, raising the spirit of the Russian people and military (despite a different angle on events due to different times).

Among the discontents with the TV series *Shtrafbat* there's one that deserves attention – the ideological dimension in times when there was no ideological pressure, censorship and mandatory consultation of historians or professionals of various fields. According to N. E. Markova,[17] after a total ideologization, the post-Soviet period is characterised by a shift in artistic principles, values and stream of consciousness, "building a new man with the help of new technologies," causing "invisible catastrophic shifts in the basis of society." Analysing the core ingredient of any artistic work – the positive hero – heavily indebted to the Socialist Realism canon, Markova points out that the "social mechanism heroic deed (*podvig*) – hero – reward puts into action the system of social learning." From this perspective, Markova is concerned with the fact that other characters, apart from Vasily Tverdokhlebov, among the criminals from *shtrafbat* may have a negative influence on younger generations. This "purposeful dilution of moral-ethical norms" brings her rather meandering argument to the point that the purpose of the new ideology is society's criminalization. And this criminalization is seen in the tendency of the TV series to present criminals as equals to the status of soldiers in a program of "criminal propaganda." Exaggeration seems to be the measure of many vehement reactions to Nikolay Dostal`'s film, and Markova's tirade is no exception. Nevertheless, Markova's care for the educational dimension of television is laudable, focused on detecting the "various destructive informational influences and manipulation techniques."

Her negative reaction is also directed toward the depiction of women's availability to indulge in erotic scenes, given her/Soviet "well-known fact of women's chastity during *VOV*" so that all the amoral scenes (cut from the first TV broadcast[18]) appear "untruthful" to Markova. All

[17] http://www.r-komitet.ru/smi/shtrafbat.htm (Accessed 20 August 2017).

[18] See the director's interview about the film and the censorship https://en.topwar.ru/31903-rezhisser-shtrafbata-nikolay-dostal-istoriya-dolzhna-byt-takoy-kakaya-ona-est.html (Accessed 20 January 2024).

these arguments may be understood from the Stalinist deeply-rooted patriarchal ideas of a family as a comrade communion rather than a relationship with ingredients such as chemistry, love and sex. This may be supported by the gradual post-Stalinist Thaw when it was possible to represent adultery in literary works. Furthermore, femininity began to be depicted differently than a gradual process of masculinization, a comrade so that the union with a Soviet (often emasculated, blinded, maimed war invalid) man would be possible.[19]

As for the ideological tendency of *Shtrafbat*, Markova points out the soldiers' hatred for Bolsheviks and communists (nick-named *krasnopyorye*) openly expressed either in ironic, sarcastic speeches or debates (Glymov and political prisoners) or jokes and songs. NKVD practices depicted in the film are also telling of *shtrafniki*'s animosity toward the Soviet power: waiting for cowards and wounded behind the lines to kill them coldheartedly or the specially assigned arrogant Major Kharchenko of a special division of the army arresting at any sign of party treachery. The aspect of openly speaking against the Soviet government and Bolsheviks is also denied by Vladimir Karpov (a previous *shtrafnik*, author of the literary work *Vzyat` zhivym!* 1974),[20] as no one would have the courage to speak his mind in Stalinist times.

First of all, *Shtrafbat*'s focus is on the Soviet criminals and political prisoners arrested in 1937 during the Stalinist purges – they couldn't share the all-embracing (politically correct) love for the party. However, as the script beautifully unveils, despite their unfavourable status, they all share a delicate love for the Homeland. In the first episode, one of the political prisoners after sharing his family's tragic fate due to collectivization, motivates his willingness to fight in the war: "Homeland is calling. It is my homeland, after all." Secondly, in such a colourful environment, jokes, irony and sarcasm concerning the Communist Party and NKVD seem natural; it would have been unnatural to witness typical speeches of party activists on the lips of such peculiar people. Thirdly, verbal clichés are widely present: Vasily Tverdokhlebov's speech at a celebration of the 1st of May and many blunt and obtuse statements of the NKVD employees (Lenin's quotation on religion and even Stalin's quotation on "death of many people as statistics" remembered by a political *shtrafnik*). Thus, the historical atmosphere of the Soviet times is not distorted or diluted due to the great attention to detail in every scene.

**Tverdokhlebov's Anti-Heroic Struggle**

Such a controversial topic requires controversial characters and although Vasily Tverdokhlebov is not a rebellious and irresponsible young man like Borya Tiraspolsky from *Gu-ga*, he can be also viewed as an anti-hero. Taken prisoner and refusing to fight on Vlasov's side "for Russia against the Bolsheviks," Tverdokhlebov survives a near-death experience and is stripped of his military position and severely beaten up upon returning to the Soviets. He is offered the possibility to redeem his guilt by commanding a penal battalion. His sin was to allow himself to become a

[19] Lilya Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet Man Was Unmade. Cultural Fantasy and Male Subjectivity under Stalin* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008).
[20] V. Karpov, *Vzyat zhivym! / Take Alive!* (reprint: Moscow: Veche, 2022).

prisoner, thus betraying his motherland and violating Stalin's Order No. 227. After such suspicious treatment, his actions and motivations are not driven by ideals of heroism or glory, but more by survival, guilt, and redemption. He often struggles with his own morality, and while he is not a villain, he is not a typical hero either. His character's complex relationship with duty, sacrifice, and his recent distrustful past makes him an anti-hero. He may not possess the clear moral virtues of a traditional hero, and his decisions and behaviour can be seen as morally ambiguous within a mistrustful punishment Soviet system at war. Grounded in the brutal realities of the penal battalion system and the Stalinist regime, Vasily fits the mold of an anti-hero in a slightly different way than Borya, becoming guilty without guilt (*bez viny vinovatyi*).[21]

The main protagonist of *Shtrafbat* is constructed in a nuanced manner since he is a man trapped in a system that offers little to no hope for personal redemption, and yet he rises above the brutal reality in which he is placed. At the core of Tverdokhlebov's heroism is his ability to survive within the oppressive and dehumanizing penal battalion system. He survives by navigating the brutality around him - his survival itself is an act of defiance against the system that seeks to discard him. Although the penal battalion soldiers are often treated as expendable, Tverdokhlebov holds on to a sense of personal integrity. He does not allow himself to be completely consumed by the viciousness of the system, maintaining a moral compass throughout the film (despite his suicide attempt). His quiet resistance to becoming a mere pawn in the Soviet war machine positions him as a reluctant hero, someone who seeks to remain human in a dehumanizing environment.

Additionally, Vasily's heroism is also constructed through his ability to defy authority. The penal battalion system is designed to break the spirit of the soldiers, but he withstands the constant physical and psychological violence. His ability to question and challenge the oppressive military system, even if subtly, makes him a figure of resistance. Tverdokhlebov does not embody the hero of grand victories but of steadfast refusal to break under immense pressure. After being severely beaten up by the Soviets upon his return from imprisonment, when asked if his wounds were healed, he laconically answered: "Ready for being shot" ("*K rasstrelu gotov*.") In the same way he decided to become command (*kombat*) of a *shtrafbat*, while the camera lingers on his swollen and wounded face. He also demonstrates valour in his willingness to take risks for others, making him a model of selflessness in the harshest of circumstances. This willingness to protect and fight for his fellow soldiers elevates his bravery beyond mere survival to one of camaraderie and moral righteousness in a harsh, immoral, absurd and unnecessarily

[21] In essence, "guilt without guilt" in Russian culture reflects the tension between personal innocence and the heavy burden of societal impositions, collective responsibility, and historical forces. It is a concept that grapples with existential questions about human nature, free will, and the complex interplay between the individual and society. This motif refers to a deeper understanding of the human condition, where guilt can exist as a psychological burden, even when one is not directly at fault. Although present in F.M. Dostoevsky and M. Bulgakov's writings, the concept gained a political connotation during the Soviet era, in the context of Stalinist purges when individuals were accused of crimes they had not committed. The atmosphere of suspicion, moral ambiguity, and self-doubt in the military milieu at war is well depicted in N. Dostal`'s film.

violent world. He proposes to give medals to his soldiers after successfully taking German officers as prisoners and is trying to negotiate when ordered the last deadly task for his battalion. Finally, Tverdokhlebov's character arc in the film is driven by internal conflict and growth. Throughout the narrative, he grapples with the trauma of becoming a war prisoner, facing death at the hands of real traitors of the motherland, being treated as a traitor by his own and ending up in the penal battalion while facing the moral ambiguities of war. His journey is one of redemption - not in the sense of clearing his name or seeking honour, but in striving to maintain his humanity in the face of overwhelming violence and injustice. This redemption is also mentioned by Mayor Kharchenko announcing Tverdokhlebov's arrest to his unit: "That's why he is imprisoned. For your sins." Furthermore, by the end of the film, due to the prophetic presence of a priest in the penal battalion, Vasily (along with other soldiers), finds faith in God, adding depth to his character development.

Tverdokhlebov is portrayed as a soldier who is not driven by a sense of patriotism or selflessness but by the grim need to survive under the oppressive Stalinist regime. He, like many soldiers in penal battalions, is caught in a cycle of punishment and survival rather than a pursuit of nobility or moral righteousness. His personal history and his actions reveal a character who is flawed and deeply disillusioned with the system. Although he is not a traditional hero, Tverdokhlebov exhibits moments of resistance against the oppressive military authority. For example, he does not follow the ideological dictates of the Soviet system but instead pursues his own code of conduct, which is often at odds with the demands of the military. When taking *vlasovets* Sazonov as a war prisoner (whom he knew in the German prison and who decided to fight against the Bolsheviks by shooting Vasily and others who refused this compromise), Tverdokhlebov did not immediately execute him. Instead, he gave him a pistol with one bullet to commit suicide. From this perspective, he can be seen as an anti-hero, as he is not a loyal soldier who blindly follows orders.

Much like Tiraspolsky, Tverdokhlebov has become deeply cynical about the war and the state that sends him to fight. His path may be regarded as reversed: from consciousness to spontaneity. He doesn't adhere anymore to the glorified narrative of Soviet heroism but instead seeks personal redemption and survival in the midst of an inhumane system. Broken after being imprisoned and charged with treason again in the light of Sazonov's case, the camera lingers on his beaten-up face and glances toward the ceiling where the possibility of suicide appears. After starting to tear up his shirt, the camera moves from the ceiling, following the improvised rope to Vasily's face, carefully arranging it around his neck. Ellipsis is used; the next scene is the timely discovery of his attempt by the guard. Asked why he wanted to commit suicide during the subsequent interrogation, Tverdokhlebov said: "Before I had a goal – to fight, then to hug my wife and son. But now all I want is to die." The general's reply is symptomatic of the violent Stalinist state: "You have to earn even death here." This dialogue between Vasily, the general and the commissar is composed only of close-ups of their faces, revealing their attitudes, state of mind and personality: resignation in Vasily's case, determination to save him in the general's and malevolence in the latter's. After receiving the order to go back to his *shtrafbat* as a simple

soldier, the camera follows Tverdokhlebov's surprise and gratefulness in a close-up until bursting into tears after closing the door.

However, in general, his actions are motivated less by grand ideals and more by his own sense of self-preservation and pragmatism, leading sometimes to morally ambiguous decisions. Vasily's position – guilty without guilt – sets him on this anti-system path, deepening his animosity toward the military command and displaying resistance to authority. Discussing his arrest after Sazonov's episode, two military authorities express their admiration for his resilience and trustworthiness, along with his stubbornness (that is also reflected in his surname – *tverdyi khleb* meaning "rough bread"). These aspects shape his emotional complexity despite his primary motivation of survival rather than sacrifice for the cruel, distant and uncaring state.

Grounded in the historical reality of Soviet penal battalions during World War II, *Shtrafbat* takes liberties with the personal stories and emotional arcs of its characters. The director uses historical context as a backdrop for a dramatic narrative, but the focus is more on character and theme than strict historical accuracy. As Stephen M. Norris mentions, "Dostal` and Volodarsky attempted to do more than just adhere to strict historical accuracy; they attempted to offer a panorama of Stalinism itself. This is a depiction of a society traumatized by the state's violence."[22]

**Concluding Ideas**

As we have shown, the Soviet cult of the Great Patriotic War with its mythical components started to be eroded in the *glasnost`* period. In this sense, Novak's *Gu-ga* has had a lasting influence on the way films in the post-Soviet era approach issues of historical trauma, identity, and war memory. It may be considered part of the cinematic legacy of the period in which filmmakers began to reflect openly on the consequences of the Stalinist violent state. Often viewed with a sense of historical curiosity, the 1989 Novak's film provided a lens through which to examine the emotional consequences of the victorious war and revealed a more complex, often darker side of Soviet history that had been suppressed for decades. Deeply uncomfortable for the older generation due to its portrayal of sexuality in the war context and emotional rawness, *Gu-ga* was considered controversial and contentious in a previously ideologically pure Soviet cinema.

*Shtrafbat* delves further into the grim and complex reality of the war, presenting the penal battalion as both a brutal military system and a tool for punishment, with complex interactions between the soldiers and military authorities. Dostal` and Volodarsky's film lingers on the climate of fear and resentment among the soldiers due to the power dynamic and the dehumanizing treatment of penal battalion soldiers. These trigger moral conflicts, ranging from resignation to rebellion, showing the soldiers' collective struggle to assert their humanity while facing overwhelming fear and brutality. In addition, the sensitive topic of intimate relationships at war, including violence against local women, was subjected to censorship by the Russian

[22] Stephen M. Norris, "The Great Patriotic Serial," in A. Prokhorov, E. Prokhorova, R. Salys, *Russian TV Series in the Era of Transition. Genres, Technologies, Identities* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2021), 63.

broadcasting channel, cutting some explicit scenes. This demonstrates that women's sanctity at war is still one of the mythologizing ingredients of the cult of *VOV*, resistant to demystification, in a context of persisting patriarchal values. His particular censorship attempts to reinforce Soviet myths regarding the portrayal of women in wartime, limiting artistic freedom and reinstating partial ideological control.

The characters of Tverdokhlebov from *Shtrafbat* (2004) and Tiraspolsky from *Gu-ga* (1989) are constructed as complex figures whose heroism is shaped by the harsh systems they exist within - Stalinist purges, war, and post-war trauma. While both characters exhibit qualities typically associated with heroes, such as courage, resilience, and moral integrity, their heroism is not straightforward or traditional. Instead, it is layered with ambiguity, reflecting the moral and psychological complexities of their environments. Their heroism is, in fact, often forged through suffering and difficult choices, making them anti-heroes in the classical sense but heroic in their own contexts.

Unlike typical Soviet war heroes, Tverdokhlebov and Tiraspolsky are constructed as heroes in ways that defy conventional, idealized notions of Socialist Realism heroism. Tverdokhlebov's bravery is more overt, grounded in physical action and resistance against the Soviet wartime system. Tiraspolsky's heroism is quieter, based on moral endurance and psychological resilience in the face of war trauma. Both are heroic in their capacity to resist, endure, and retain their humanity in the face of overwhelming, oppressive systems. In different ways, they both confront their circumstances with courage, making them compelling anti-heroes whose heroism is defined by the unique challenges of their respective environments.

The two analysed films contribute to the deconstruction of Soviet-era narratives concerning the cult of the Great Patriotic War in the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods, respectively. They remain reference points, contributing to the broader themes of war trauma and war memory in Russian cinema. Both films confer nuances of their anti-heroism versions to the ongoing conversations around Soviet ideology.