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Lenin's Guard. Zastava Il'icha

Alexander V. Prokhorov
College of William & Mary, axprok@wm.edu

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LENIN'S GUARD

Zastava Il'icha

Completed 1961, released 1965 in censored version titled *I Am Twenty*; original director's cut released 1989

189 minutes

Director: **Marlen Khutsiev**

Screenplay: **Marlen Khutsiev and Gennadii Shpalikov**

Cinematography: **Margarita Pilikhina**

Music: **Nikolai Sidel'nikov**

Production Company: **Gorky Film Studio**

Cast: **Valentin Popov (Sergei Zhuravlev), Marianna Vertinskaia (Ania), Stanislav Liubshin (Slavka), Nikolai Gubenko (Kol'ka Fokin), Petr Shcherbakov (Chernousov), Andrei Konchalovsky (Iurii), Andrei Tarkovsky ("Turnip," jerk at the party), Nikolai Zakharchenko (Friend), Bella Akhmadulina, Evgenii Evtushenko, Rimma Kazakova, Robert Rozhdestvenskii, Boris Slutskii, Mikhail Svetlov, Andrei Voznesenskii as themselves**

Like Alexander Pushkin, Marlen Khutsiev (1925—) played a major role in integrating the subjects of a vast Eurasian empire into European culture. And also like the nineteenth-century poet, Khutsiev seems at times banal to western critics because his ways of seeing (neorealist and auteurist) are too familiar to European cinephiles. However, Khutsiev was instrumental in giving post-Stalinist viewers the new visual language that allowed them to identify themselves as individuals who shared a common visual idiom with world cinema of the time. Perhaps that is why Pushkin, the creator of Russia's literary language, is Khutsiev's favorite poet, and why he has always dreamt of making a film about him.





Fig. 81. Sergei, Slavka, Kol'ka

Khutsiev has consistently broken new ground in Soviet cinema. As a result, he has made few films, many of them with a difficult release history. In his 1957 *Spring on Zarechnaia Street* (*Vesna na Zarechnoi ulitse*), together with Petr Todorovskii (director of photography) and Felix Mironer (scriptwriter), he successfully adopted neorealist aesthetics to depict Soviet life. Khutsiev completely overhauled the visual and aural worlds of Soviet cinema in order to focus on the everyday life of the Russian provinces and their non-heroic inhabitants. Like the neorealists, Khutsiev used non-professional actors next to professional ones. Instead of an epic musical score written for a non-diegetic symphony orchestra and professional singers (a staple of Stalinist cinema), he used diegetic guitar and the non-professional individual voices of his actors. This new sound created an atmosphere of authenticity and immediacy unfamiliar to the Soviet viewer of the time. His next film, *Two Fedoras* (*Dva Fedora*, 1959), challenged the received wisdom about the heroic myth of World War II and was one of the first films about the daily grind of the late Stalinist era.



Khutsiev's *Lenin's Guard* established auteurism as the new film practice of Soviet cinema. While *Lenin's Guard* is a poetic film about the hopes of the Thaw, *July Rain* (*Iul'skii dozhd'*, 1967) creates an atmosphere of disappointment and disillusionment. Through the story of a couple's breakup, the filmmaker comments on the end of Soviet utopianism and the rise of both individualism and its darker side—alienation. *It Was in May* (*Byl mesiatz mai*, 1970) is not well remembered but was an important statement about the multiplicity of memories of World War II. In a society where the heroic myth of victory was on the rise as the official story of origins of the Brezhnev-era leadership, the film came across as a dissonant voice by a filmmaker who undoubtedly had seen Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (1955). Khutsiev continues making films in post-Soviet Russia. Since 2003 he has been working on an art house picture about the relationship between Anton Chekhov and Leo Tolstoy. He notes that in Soviet times it was easy to make a film but hard to release it, but that now, even for a living classic, it is hard to get sufficient funding to make a film, especially an art house picture.

Lenin's Guard (or *Il'ich's Gate*) is Khutsiev's visual poem about Thaw-era Moscow. The film's title refers to a working class neighborhood east of downtown Moscow, *Il'ich's Gate* (*Zastava Il'icha*). The area is named after Lenin but refers to the revolutionary leader via his patronymic (Il'ich, the son of Il'ia), evoking one of the key themes of the film: continuity of individual and national stories with Lenin as the true father of the revolutionary spirit. The Russian word "*Zastava*" means both "gate" and "guard." At the beginning of the film viewers see three revolutionary red guards on the streets of post-revolutionary Moscow. Later we see three soldiers in World War II uniform walking the streets of modern day Moscow. There is a living link between these ghosts from the times of epic wars that shaped Soviet identity and the characters in the main narrative of the film: three friends living in modern day Moscow—Sergei, Slavka and Kol'ka (Fig. 81). They come of age and try to understand the meaning of the past: the Revolution, the Great Patriotic War, and the Stalinist purges. For each of the three, the relationship to the past is an individual and unique experience, not a state-sponsored story one has to follow.



Inspired by Khrushchev's destalinization, Khutsiev depicts Soviet rituals as meaningful events that create a genuine sense of collective identity. Two key scenes in the film (the May Day parade and the poetry reading at the Polytechnic Museum) evoke two fundamental myths of Soviet origins (the story of the October Revolution and martyrdom and victory in the Great Patriotic War). The great past is alive in the ideals and aspirations of the three working class friends. Sergei and his girlfriend Ania attend both events and their personal story becomes part of the communal experience. Josephine Woll points out that "On May Day, climaxing the first half of the film, people throng the streets in joyous celebration of the Soviet utopia, the scene one of stunning harmony between individuals and society"¹ (Fig. 82).

Khutsiev favors the documentary potential of film as a medium and downplays its illusionist power. He shot actors against the background of real events in order to give his film a documentary look. For example, we know the exact date when film production began because the filmmaker started shooting his picture at an actual May Day parade in Moscow on 1 May 1961.

Many characters in Khutsiev's film play themselves such as, for example, the famous Thaw poets Bella Akhmadulina, Evgenii Evtushenko, Rimma Kazakova, Robert Rozhdestvenskii, Boris Slutskii, Mikhail Svetlov and Andrei Voznesenskii. Some performers are not professional actors and play representatives of their social circle rather than specific characters. Near the film's end, the working class protagonist attends a party organized by Ania's friends, who belong to the Soviet elite. In this scene, Andrei Konchalovsky and Andrei Tarkovsky play not individual characters but rather social types. They appear as spoiled brats from the Soviet ruling class. In a similar vein, Khutsiev chose Valentin Popov for the lead role because his acting career had working class origins: Popov began performing at the ZIL Auto Works amateur theater. Finally, even the names of Sergei's friends coincide with the names of the actors who play their parts: Kol'ka is played by Nikolai Gubenko;

¹ See Josephine Woll, "Being 20, 40 Years Later," in Further Reading.





Fig. 82. May Day

Slavka (Ivan in the original script) is played by Stanislav Liubshin. The filmmaker consciously blurs the line between actuality and staged scenes.

In order to create an atmosphere of freedom and give his film a quasi-documentary look, Khutsiev and his director of photography unchain the camera. Margarita Pilikhina combines handheld camera with complex mobile long takes. She observes rather than guides characters. If accidental people or events materialize in the background, interfering with the main action, she does not use editing to erase the aleatoric aspects of shot composition. While camerawork seemed to showcase primarily the director and cinematographer's craft, the visual style of the film became a political statement about present-day urban modernity beyond the constraints of ideological dogma.

Three social issues brought up in the film raised censors' eyebrows. First, Khutsiev depicts the KGB as an institution associated above all with human baseness and the dictator's crimes. In one of the scenes, Nikolai's boss tries to recruit him as a secret

police informer. In disgust, Kol'ka rejects the offer, viewing it as a survival of Stalinist times. Second, the director presents Soviet society as plagued by class divisions and ruled by Stalin's heirs. Ania's father is a party functionary who lectures Sergei about the necessity of Stalin's methods. The filmmaker depicts the children of this elite as enjoying a life of privilege and despising their own people and their sacrifices. Third, Khutsiev dared to propose a plurality of interpretations of the Soviet historical past. In the film, multiple fathers from the Stalin era have different visions of its meaning. The new generation is not homogeneous either. In a symbolic scene at the film's end, Sergei meets the ghost of his father, who was killed during the war. When Sergei asks him how to live, his father tells him that he cannot advise him because he died much younger than Sergei is now. Sergei must come up with his own meaning of life instead of following his father's prescriptions. This scene enraged the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev because he saw it as undermining the ideological unity of Soviet society, splitting it along generational lines. Moreover, the Soviet leadership was disturbed by the film's celebration of individual agency as an alternative to state-enhanced uniformity of thinking.

The story of the film's production and release highlights the key ideological turns in the history of late Soviet culture. With his neorealist scriptwriter Felix Mironer, Khutsiev started working on the picture in 1959. Soon he realized that he needed a different collaborator, a contemporary of his characters, who better expressed the spirit of the era. In September 1960 he hired Gennadii Shpalikov, at the time a student from VGIK's Scriptwriting Department. The film was completed during the height of the destalinization campaign in 1961 and had the influential backing of Ekaterina Furtseva, Soviet Minister of Culture. Khutsiev was allowed to go beyond the budgeted 90 minutes and make a three hour-long art cinema film. During preliminary screenings for the filmmaking community, colleagues praised the film as a major artistic accomplishment. Notably, Viktor Nekrasov recalls that Andrzej Wajda saw the film with him and was impressed by Khutsiev's virtuoso filmmaking. One of the leaders of the Soviet filmmakers' community, Mikhail Romm, told the filmmaker simply: "Marlen, you've justified

your existence on this planet." Not surprisingly, the conservative backlash against the intelligentsia in 1963 touched Khutsiev's film too. Khrushchev himself criticized the film during his meeting with Soviet intellectuals on 8 March 1963. Khutsiev was told to cut many scenes in which, according to the censors, young people were either too pessimistic or unruly. The episode of the poetry reading evening was among the scenes to be removed. While Khutsiev was struggling with the censors, his major critic, Khrushchev, was himself voted out of office in 1964, and the new leadership decided to release a censored version of the film. Ironically, the last footage that Khutsiev had to remove just before the premiere in January 1965 was the shots of Khrushchev himself. The film appeared under the title *I am Twenty* four years after its completion and after many other filmmakers had already taken advantage of the new quasi-documentary style invented by Khutsiev.²

During perestroika, Soviet filmmakers led the movement for dismantling political censorship in art and the mass media. The Fifth Congress of the Filmmakers' Union established the Conflicts Commission with a mandate to release films banned for political reasons. Among the key films that have made an impact on the evolution of Soviet film language and had been disfigured by Soviet censors, the commission mentioned Khutsiev's masterpiece. In 1989 the director's cut was released in Moscow under the original title. In the ultimate poetic justice, the film that changed Soviet film language during the Thaw played a major symbolic role in abolishing political censorship in the Soviet Union during perestroika.

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² Other filmmakers used Khutsiev's discoveries mostly for commercial ends and much less successfully. Among Khutsiev's imitators are Georgii Daneliia with his *I Walk around Moscow* (1963) and El'dar Riazanov with his *Give me a Complaint Book* (1964).

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