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Tarak Barkawi: The Globalisation of the Hollywood War Film

Blog editor

For a long time, people in other countries had to watch American war films. Now they are making their own. Recently, Russia and Germany have produced dueling filmic visions of their great contest in World War II.

Paid for with about \$30 million in state [money](#), *Stalingrad* (dir. Feder Bondarchuk) grossed around \$50 million within weeks of hitting Russian screens in October, 2013. Earlier that year, *Our Mothers, Our Fathers* was shown as a three part miniseries on German and Austrian television. On its final [night](#) 7.6 million Germans, 24 per cent of all viewers, watched it.

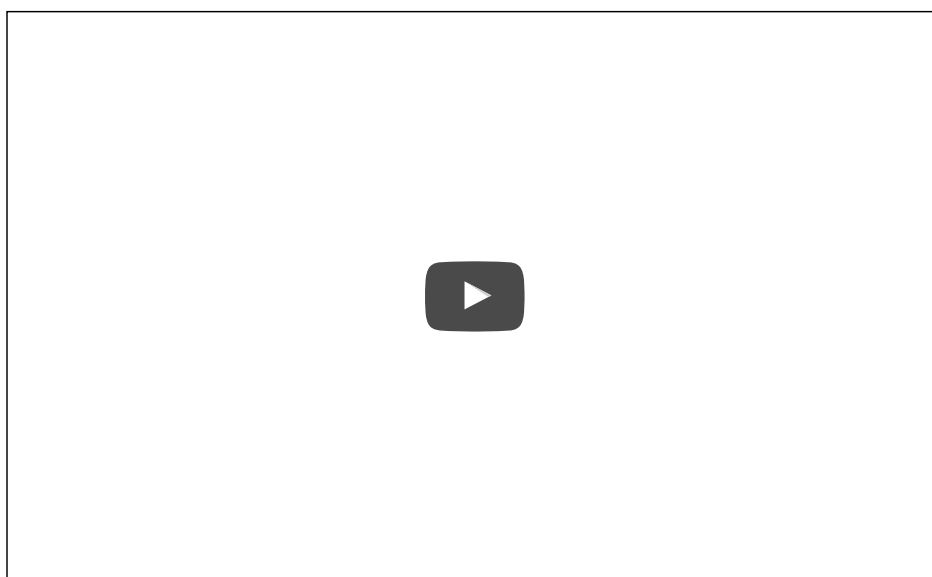
The duty of the classic Hollywood war film is to make war meaningful. It orders events in a satisfying narrative, with the message that it was all worthwhile. The sacrifices were rational, and for a purpose. Private Ryan had to be saved, so that America could live on and prosper after the war.

War films like this try to shape public memory of the nation and its wars in particular kinds of ways. The idea is to reproduce in the future a conservative vision of the country and its patriotic values. Soldiers of the past, and their wartime sacrifices, are made to embody this vision.

To perform their function, and make for good entertainment, such films have to deliver up fantastical accounts of wartime events. While US filmmakers now go in for the hyperrealism of *Band of Brothers* and *The Pacific*, not so in Germany and Russia.

It as if these countries, in their quest to be ordinary today, need to turn the Eastern Front into something other than a monstrous catastrophe, at least on film. In doing so, what is most revealing is the violence these films do to wartime events.

Stalingrad Official Trailer:



Stalingrad starts off by turning the war into a disaster movie, as if it were out of human hands. Incongruously the film opens with Russian aid workers rescuing German teenagers from a Tsunami-hit Japanese city. This move recoups in imagination some Russian pride from a far more economically advanced Germany.

Bondarchuk viscerally connects his present day viewers to the battle of Stalingrad: one of the aid workers was conceived during the battle, and becomes the film's narrator. Through this crudely literal but compelling cinematic maneuver, the battle is



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turned into the womb of the contemporary Russian nation.

As always with war films, gender is key. In the situation *Stalingrad's* writers set up, the role of the women is to sleep with the right men. Only in this way can the battle give birth to people of good character.

The film is loosely based on the defense of Pavlov's House, a stout four story building which stood between German lines and a stretch of the bank of the Volga in the fall of 1942. As elsewhere in the city, a group of civilians stayed on in the house during the fighting.

Mostly under the leadership of Sergeant Yakov Pavlov, a platoon held out in the building for nearly two months before relief by counterattacking Red Army troops. One of the civilians, Mariya Ulyanova, played an active role in the fighting.

A few gestures in this direction aside, in the film the Ulyanova's character's main job is to be protected by the men, in two senses. She must of course physically survive, but also her virtue must be guarded, at least until the appropriate moment.

Bondarchuk [thinks](#) his film allows "those who have forgotten history" to "experience what happened at that time". Apparently, this only goes for the men. Some 800,000 Soviet women served in uniform in the Second World War, many in combat roles.

For Bondarchuk, Sgt. Pavlov's successful defense of his position was not sufficient cinematic grist. In a climax reminiscent of *Saving Private Ryan*, the final, apparently unstoppable German tank attack is defeated by the godlike intervention of air power (at least as rendered in English subtitles; the filmmakers may have intended artillery). Unseen Soviet planes (or guns) bomb the building and its environs into oblivion, killing all the film's remaining characters in a 3-D sacrificial fete, but for Ulyanova.

She had been carried off to safety by a soldier in love with her, who consummates the business necessary to the plot before returning to sacrifice his life usefully in the final combat. The Ulyanova character has intercourse—unseen like the planes—only once and at a morally sanctioned moment. She survives to pass on her values to her son the narrator.

Ulyanova's counterpart across the lines, shackled up with a German officer, has more and more visible sex and is duly killed off by a Russian sniper. This fallen female character is racialized as blond-haired and blue-eyed like the *Wehrmacht* officer she sleeps with.

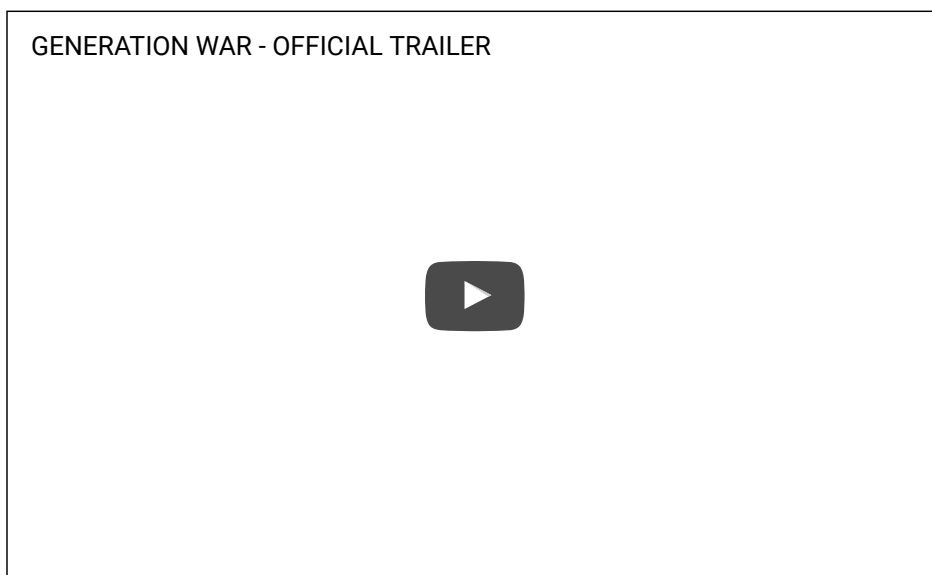
The film cannot acknowledge that many women caught up in the war and its mass rapes had little choice in their sexual partners, whatever their degree of chastity.

In another flight from reality, the film promotes the Pavlov character to Captain. This is presumably to identify with the professional and well-off classes in today's Russia, those who can afford to see first run films.

The actual Sgt. Pavlov figured out that the panzers could not elevate their cannon high enough to hit the top floor of his building. There, he placed his obsolete anti-tank rifles, which could penetrate the thin armor on the turret tops. His soldiers saw off many tank attacks quite on their own. He survived the war to become a Russian Orthodox mystic with a large and faithful following who know little of his wartime heroism.

The complexities and disjunctures of real war stories lack the satisfying resolution of filmic ones.

Our Mothers, Our Fathers/Generation War Official Trailer:



Our Mothers, Our Fathers also seeks to make death in war meaningful by meting it out according to scales of virtue. The brave officer brother who fights well until he turns against the war's insanity survives. The sensitive, cowardly brother who later becomes a brutal killer chooses suicide. This tidily excuses viewers from apportioning responsibility for the character's all too human acts.

The innocent and enthusiastic nurse, who makes a tragic mistake but later feels appropriately guilty, survives to marry the conscientiously objecting ex-officer. They are the upstanding national couple who, as in *Stalingrad*, go on to give birth to today's citizens/viewers. The vivacious nightclub singer who takes up with a Nazi in order to save her Jewish lover is executed, not unlike Ulyanova's counterpart.

Meanwhile, in a swipe at Germany's eastern neighbor, the main purpose of the film's Jewish character seems to be to show up Polish partisans as anti-Semitic. German death camps are nowhere to be seen in the film. The Anglo-Americans are almost entirely excused from their favored form of the delivery of mass death, for the film makes hardly any reference to the bombing campaigns that flattened and burned Germany's cities.

Real war is capricious and democratic in the way it hands out suffering and death; there is no rhyme or reason as to why some die and others survive. This is why survivors are often tortured with inconsolable guilt.

On film, death in war is part of a rational and moral order. The bad guys mostly die, and if the good ones do too, their sacrifice is purposeful and worthwhile, not random. Only in this way can the war film become a vehicle to tell stories about the nation, about its purpose and meaning in the world.

Tarak Barkawi is Reader in the Department of International Relations, London School of Economics and Political Science

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