

# EYES WIDE OPEN

## A SOVIET CLASSIC REVISITS THE END OF A WAR

BY GREGORY FREIDIN

Old films are like a message in a bottle, mysterious and enchanting, even more so if written in a hidden code to elude the censor. Great Soviet filmmakers from Eisenstein to Muratova have made such coding part of their cinematic aesthetic. Marlen Khutsiev is among them.

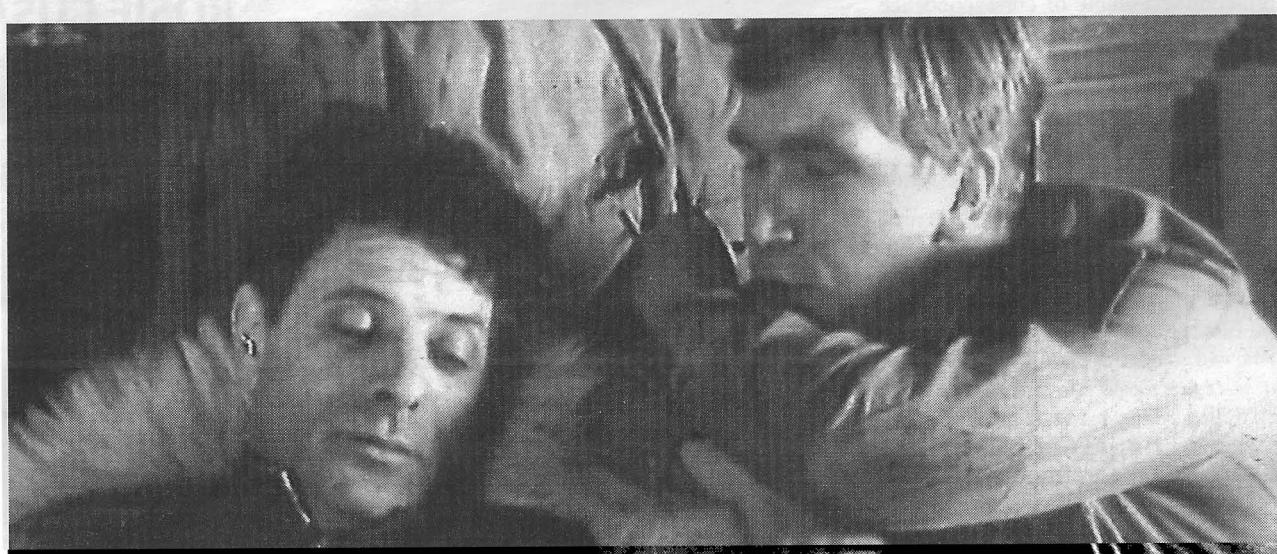
Khutsiev (his given name is a contraction of MARxLENin) was born in 1925 in Tbilisi, Georgia, to an actress mother and a Bolshevik revolutionary father who perished, like many, in the Stalinist purges. A graduate of the venerable Russian film school VGIK (1952), he became famous in 1956 with his third film, *Spring on Zarechnaya Street* (with Feliks Mironer).

Khutsiev is now working on his 13th film—about an encounter between Anton Chekhov and Leo Tolstoy. He is, perhaps, best known for his 1961 film, *I Am Twenty*, with its echoes of *La Nouvelle Vague* and Francois Truffaut, and *July Rain* (1966), with its cinematic vibe resembling classic Antonioni. In Russia, these two films became iconic for the 1960s generation.

Like them, *It Happened in May* (1970) is intensely contemporary. Released to mark the 25th anniversary of the end of World War II, it falls within the range of government-sponsored topics: the Great Patriotic War, victory over evil and vigilance in the face of the uneasy coexistence with the former foe.

By 1969, it was the World War II victory, not the revolution of 1917, that the regime mined for legitimacy. Accordingly, the theme monopolized movie houses, TV screens and other media. But not all war stories were equal: the Jewish Holocaust, for one, was passed over with silence—in line with Soviet “anti-Zionist” foreign policy, while Stalin’s role in the war was amplified in line with the regime’s effort to whitewash him and his record of mass terror. Khutsiev was among the prominent artists and scientists who petitioned against creeping Stalinism. No wonder, then, that he would inject his own—coded and subtly discordant—note into the official chorus of commemorative hosannas.

Paradoxically, *It Happened in May* is set on a bucolic German pig farm, untouched by war, a few days after the Nazi surrender. But Khutsiev opens with a five-minute montage of war footage, replete with a deafening battlefield soundtrack overlaid



with Tchaikovsky’s *Manfred* (the theme of tormenting memories) and culminating in the hoisting of the Red flag over the Reichstag. Then comes deafening silence—as the protagonist, a young Lieutenant (Alexander Arzhilovsky), wakes up on a sunny morning in a clean and puffy farmer’s bed. There were more surprises to come.

Made for television, which explains its generous use of close-ups and a spare setting, the film is based on “The Wages of Horror” (1962), a short story by Georgy Baklanov (1923–2009), a chronicler of World War II who was much admired for his authenticity and honesty. In the story, an old veteran recalls how he was stunned when, as a young officer, he came face to face with the Nazi extermination camps concealed behind Germany’s civilized veneer. Khutsiev appropriated Baklanov’s straightforward narrative, ostensibly about a Polish victim, and infused it with an extraordinary resonance and depth.

A small detachment of Red Army scouts, led by a 21-year-old lieutenant, is quartered on an idyllic German farmstead visibly untouched by the war. The soldiers make friends with the farm’s German owners, who are eager to put the war behind them. The camera focuses on the simple pleasures of peace: sleeping late, a hearty meal, sharing a carafe of cider, the soldiers making simple conversation, their clumsy courtship of the farmer’s pretty wife.

The farm raises pigs, and the soldiers are eager to help the farmer’s wife in her chores around the well-tended pigsty. But come evening, the farmer, mindful of the soldiers’ gallantry, takes his family overnight to his relatives in a nearby village. All is peaceful but the camera’s in-your-face gaze, awkward silences, strained exchanges and the scene’s flat lighting lend an uncanny air to the opening episode. Are we in a Gothic fairytale castle, its ghosts too shy for the light of day?

Early in the evening, the young lieutenant is summoned by his superior to a nearby estate to celebrate the end of the long war. He mounts a trophy motorbike and speeds to the party along a beautiful wooded alley. Within sight of his destination, an opulent German country house, he fumbles and crashes. For a moment he looks dead. After he gets up, dazed but uninjured (Khutsiev needs this shock to ready him for his eventual descent into hell), he joins other partying officers in raising melancholic toasts in honor of fallen comrades and singing tearful Russian songs. They have seen too much grief and lost too many friends and family to abandon themselves to a victory celebration.

As the party comes to an end, the host, a senior lieutenant (the filmmaker Pyotr Todorovsky, wearing his own wartime uniform), invites officers to go for a ride in a captured German convertible. They run into a strange gate, not quite realizing they have arrived at the portals of hell. Inside, still clueless, they enter the dark camp buildings, their flashlights illuminating mysterious empty cans (the gas Zyklon-B), mounds of abandoned footwear, spoons, and finally, heavy oven doors of the crematorium that the visitors take for the camp’s heating system.

Only later that night, when the camp’s former inmates wander onto the pig farm, does the lieutenant learn the truth about the death camp: the gassing and burning of the victims, the use of human ashes to fertilize the nearby fields. Now aware of the farmer’s complicity in the gassing of a Polish laborer, they go searching for him in the nearby village. But the family is gone. In one of the final shots, the lieutenant stands, dazed and bewildered by the horror of the revelation, while all around him are the farm’s well-tended pigs—a fairytale substitute for the disappeared German family.

The film’s final segment holds the key to the hidden code. Like the introduction, it consists of a montage of documentary footage, but this time, the clips show street life of modern European cities—Berlin, London, Paris, Moscow—replete with well-dressed men, women and children hurrying on their way along avenues pulsating with traffic.

Weary by the story’s horror, the eye feasts on these ordinary scenes until, without warning, the human traffic begins to flow onto the grounds of a concentration camp museum. Now the moving images get interspersed with some of the most famous stills of the Jewish Holocaust. The camera lingers, moves on, and then returns to one of the iconic Holocaust images—a 7-year-old Jewish boy from the Warsaw ghetto, his arms raised in a gesture of surrender. As the present-day footage resumes, the camera picks out a charming boy of the same age and fixes on his wide-eyed gaze before fading into the credits.

This silent acknowledgement of the Jewish Holocaust escaped the censor but not the Soviet viewers. For them, it would have also resonated with another enforced silence—the unmourned millions of victims of Stalin’s Great Terror. Baklanov must have felt ecstatic for the way Khutsiev “unpacked” the impulse behind his “The Wages of Horror.” In a rare tribute, he renamed the story “It Happened in May.”

*A native of Moscow, Gregory Freidin is Professor Emeritus of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Stanford University and author of a critical biography of Osip Mandelstam, *A Coat of Many Colors* (University of California Press, 1987, 2010) and, forthcoming *A Jew on Horseback: Isaac Babel in Life and Art*. His writings on Russian literature, culture, and politics have appeared in *The New Republic*, *The New Criterion*, *The Los Angeles Times* and the *Times Literary Supplement*. ©Gregory Freidin, 2016.*

### IT HAPPENED IN MAY

U.S.S.R., 1970, 115m

**Director:** Marlen Khutsiev

**Presented By:** Volker Schlöndorff