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Representation of the Nazi Crimes in Donbas in Soviet Documentary and Fictional Cinema (1943–1950)¹

Summary: Soviet documentary and fiction cinema of World War II and the first postwar years created several images related to Donbas. This region had played a significant role in Soviet socio-political discourse since prewar times. The article focuses on the peculiarities of the representation of Nazi crimes in Donbas. The author analyses the main fiction and documentary films that feature episodes of crimes committed during the German occupation, describes their historical context, and characterises the degree of influence these scenes had on the population. It is noted that the subject of Nazi crimes in Donbas first appears in the visual images of the destruction of industrial and social infrastructure caused by the Nazis. The issue of the murder of the population of the occupied territories is explored in documentaries related to the central site of mass crimes — the 4–4 bis mine in Stalino (today Donetsk).

Fiction cinema dedicated to the topic of the wartime Donbas is represented by the films *The Unconquered* (*Nepokorennyye*), *It Happened in Donbas* (*Eto bylo v Donbasse*), *The Young Guard* (*Molodaya gvardiya*), and *A Great Life* (*Bol'shaya zhizn'*). The key focus is on the issues of the struggle against Nazism and post-war reconstruction. The films show the torture and murder of members of the anti-Nazi Resistance movement, including juveniles, the executions of Soviet prisoners of war, the deportation of civilians to Germany, and, for the first time in Soviet cinema,

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a scene of a mass execution of the Jewish population. Despite several historical inconsistencies, as the films were usually based on literary works, these films were very popular among the population that survived the occupation. Both abstract and concrete images of victims of the Nazi regime evoked allusions to their suffering caused by the war and occupation. The images of the wartime Donbas are still an important source for the perspective of reflecting the historical processes of the past and for studying the system of influence on the outlook and value coordinates of the population in different historical epochs.

Keywords: Donbas, Nazi crimes, Soviet cinema, propaganda discourse, public consciousness

The experience of military conflicts shows that military propaganda has a significant influence on the moral and psychological state of the army and the population. As a rule, it is devoted to the exploits of one's army, as well as the war crimes of the opposing side. Such stories have a key impact on the formation of the enemy's image, increase the motivation of the army and the population to fight the enemy, and generally perform a mobilising function. This influence is multiplied and becomes more enduring if it is reflected in mass culture, primarily in fiction and cinema.

During the Second World War and in the first postwar years, films about Donbas, a region that played a special role in terms of realising the objectives of the Soviet government and in shaping the propaganda discourse of the fight against Nazism and postwar reconstruction, played a prominent role in this regard. In historical studies about Soviet cinema, these features of the cinematic image of Donbas are reflected.² However, historians and film scholars have not focused on the specifics of documentary and fiction cinema's coverage of Nazi crimes committed in Donbas. The only exception are the publications devoted to the film *The Unconquered* (*Nepokorionnye*).³ It depicts the events of the German occupation, including the genocide of the Jewish population, in an abstract city. The film was based on Boris Gorbатов's story, *The Unconquered*, about life in German-occupied Donbass, which makes it reasonable to allude to events in this region.

Given this, the objectives of the article will be to identify the main films, both fiction and documentary, which contain episodes related to Nazi crimes in Donbas, to determine the historical background of these episodes, and to characterise the degree of influence of these stories on the population.

The first attempts to recreate the image of the wartime Donbas were made in documentary cinema during the war, primarily in the work of the famous Ukrainian

2 Bol'shakov I. 1950; Kornienko I.S. 1975; Levchuk T.V. et al. (eds), 1987; Engel C. 1999; Hutchings S., Vernitski A. (eds), 2005.

3 Hicks J. 2012; Berkhoff K. 2023, 327–350.

director Oleksandr Dovzhenko, *The Battle for Our Soviet Ukraine* (*Bitva za nashu Sovetskuyu Ukrainu*). However, the subject of Nazi crimes is depicted there in the form of visual images of the destruction caused by the Nazis. A little-studied aspect of wartime documentary filmmaking, which included the image of Donbas, was filming in the region's settlements immediately after the liberation from occupation. Frontline cinematographers played a key role in these recordings. According to the recollections of the head of the film group of the Southwestern Front, V. Yeshurin, to the head of the Film Directorate, F. Vasilchenko, at the end of February 1943, they were tasked with filming material for the film *Liberation of Donbas* (*Osvobozhdenie Donbasa*). Still, no information about the release of this film on cinema screens could be found.⁴ This was due to the failures of Soviet troops in February–March 1943 during the Wehrmacht's counteroffensive on the southern part of the Soviet-German front and the loss of part of the previously liberated territory. Documentary filmmakers did much more in the summer of 1943. They managed to capture images of cities, industrial and social infrastructure during wartime hostilities, and the behavioural reactions of people who survived the occupation. In particular, the following was recorded in the editing sheet describing filming in Stalino on 7 September 1943:

Soviet troops are entering the town of Stalino. The townspeople are meeting the soldiers. Pensioner Natalia Kazantseva hangs the coat of arms of the Soviet Union, which she hid from the Germans. Residents read the latest issue of the Soviet Ukraine newspaper. This is the issue of September 7. Workers, employees, and housewives are heading to the building where the city's military commandant and the Party Regional Committee are located. [...] Girls with flowers met the fighter scouts who were the first to enter the city...⁵

Particular attention was paid to filming the sites of the occupiers' crimes against the local population. It was a kind of shock for both the cinematographers and the residents who witnessed it. The description of the exhumation at the place of execution of civilians in Donbas, recounted by the frontline cinematographers V. Tomberg, is quite eloquent:

In Donbasugol (*Donbass Coal Trust – O.T.*), I learned that in abandoned old mines on the outskirts of Stalino, many corpses, entire cemeteries, and brutally tortured people were found. I was given a car and went to film. The remains of tortured and shot local residents were being lifted from the drift along a vertical shaft in a large

⁴ Mikhaylov V.P., Fomin V.I. 2010, 566–567.

⁵ Mikhaylov V.P., Fomin V.I. 2010, 572.

tub... The mutilated bodies were carefully laid on the snow. Townspeople and villagers gathered around, mostly exhausted old women. They moved gloomily, silently, or stood, intensely peering at what was left of the people...⁶

V. Tomberg was describing the process of lifting corpses from the pit of the 4–4 bis mine in Stalino where, according to the Extraordinary State Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes, more than 75,000 people were killed.⁷

Much of the footage filmed by the cameramen did not survive the war and was used without backup copies to edit certain films. This is how O. Dovzhenko characterised this state of affairs in his report at a meeting on documentary filmmaking in 1946:

When I came to the studio, I really found disrespect for the material. The footage of documentary material that I used was taken somewhere, and then it was impossible to find out who took it and where. It was a whole trauma in my mind, and from the first day, I raised the issue of stopping these unworthy methods of work.⁸

Although not all of these materials have been preserved and made available to the viewer, the objects that were filmed, the very fact of filming on the streets of the liberated settlements of the Donetsk region (there is evidence of the work of cameramen in Stalino, Makiivka, and Kramatorsk⁹), and the participation of the population in them have become additional arguments in favour of the local population's high level of interest and trust in feature films and wartime newsreels.

With the liberation of the region from occupation and the end of the war, Soviet documentary cinema faced new challenges, including the reconstruction of Donbas. However, in the 1946 documentary film *Donbas*, which, along with several others, 'focuses on the triumph of reconstruction',¹⁰ there is a fragment dedicated to the largest site of Nazi crimes in Donbas — the aforementioned 4–4 bis mine in Stalino. In addition to the visuals — shots of the destroyed mine — the voiceover text states the number of dead — 75,000 people, and also mentions the only person who survived being thrown into the mine — engineer O. Polozhentsev.¹¹ The film also contains motion pictures from the mass grave of members of *The Young Guard* (*Molodaya gvardiya*) underground organisation that operated in the Voroshylovhrad (now Luhansk) region and recounts the story of one of the dead members of the Donetsk underground — S. Skoblov.

6 Tomberg V.E. 2003, 572.

7 USHMMA, RG-22.002; SARF, F. P-7021. Op. 71. D. 33. L. 208.

8 CSAMLAU, F. 690. Op. 4. Spr. 86. Ark. 28.

9 Mikhaylov V.P., Fomin V.I. 2010, 572–575.

10 Roberts G. 1999, 138.

11 Donabas 1946.

An important factor influencing the consciousness of the population and fostering their patriotic feelings was the ability of cinema to respond to viewers' needs for empathy and engagement with specific types of social behaviour. From 1945 to 1948, a series of films was produced that became long-standing symbols of wartime Donbas. These films addressed the political and ideological demands of the state. Although Nazi crimes were not overlooked in these films, it would be incorrect, given the political and ideological context of the time, to see these films as fully reflecting the phenomenon of occupation.

A significant event in Soviet wartime and postwar cinema was the release of the film *The Unconquered*, based on the novel by Boris Gorbатов. The story was first published in the newspaper "Pravda" in 1943 (the newspaper version, however, was titled slightly differently — *The Family of Taras* — O.T.) and soon it was published in a large print run for wartime — 200,000 copies.¹² The work is based on the author's impressions, who entered the cities of Donbas together with the advanced units of the Red Army. The recognition of both the high artistic merits of the novel and its significant mobilisation potential (this, in the context of the time, was more important for the authorities) was evidenced by the awarding of the USSR State Prize in 1946. It made a huge impression not only on the public but also on the filmmakers who took the opportunity to film the work.¹³ Based on the novel, film director Mark Donskoy made a feature film of the same name in 1945 at the Kyiv Film Studio, which won the main prize at the VII International Film Festival in Venice in 1946.¹⁴

The main idea of the work is to depict the resistance to the occupiers by ordinary people, residents of Donbas. Thus, the film fits perfectly into the framework of the approach already established in Soviet cinema: the Germans must be resisted because they leave no alternative.¹⁵ This film encompasses several aspects of the occupation, including partisan warfare and the dilemmas facing the local population under Nazi rule. A new element of the film was that it presented not only the theme of heroism, which was typical for Soviet propaganda discourse, but also suffering in a rather detailed way. Its most remarkable dimension emerges in a secondary plot-line, the Jewish doctor Aron Fishman. The directors of the film, Donskoi and Gorbатов, gave much greater importance to Dr Fishman than the character enjoys in the novel.¹⁶ Thus, the tragedy of the Jews in the occupied territory acquires a distinctly personalised character. The film directed by M. Donskoy includes an episode of the mass shooting of Jews, which, according to the historical context, took place in Voroshilovgrad (now Luhansk) in November 1942. The victims were about 1,800 Jews

¹² Berkhoff K. 2012, 204.

¹³ Galanov B., Karaganova S. (eds), 1982, 303.

¹⁴ Kornienko I.S. 1975, 136.

¹⁵ Kenez P. 1992, 199.

¹⁶ Hicks J. 2012, 136.

living in Voroshylivhrad and surrounding towns.¹⁷ The shooting was carried out in Kyiv, which was liberated at the time, at the actual site of Nazi crimes, Babyn Yar (although the story takes place in Donbas). It was the first depiction of the Holocaust tragedy in a fictional film. Film critics noted the exceptional documentary value of these shots, not to mention their emotional component.¹⁸

In the summer of 1945, the fiction film *It Happened in the Donbas* (*Eto bylo v Donbasse*) was filmed in Stalino. One of the authors of the script was B. Horbatov, and the film was directed by one of the cult Soviet filmmakers, L. Lukov, the creator of one of the most important pre-war Soviet films, *A Great Life*, who, 'like Horbatov, knows Donbas and its wonderful people well.'¹⁹ It should be noted that the scripts of the films *It Happened in Donbas* and later *The Miners of Donetsk* were written in Donbas, in Stalino, where B. Horbatov worked every summer from 1946 to 1954.²⁰

The film, in the spirit of the political demands of the time, tells the story of the heroic struggle of young people who resisted the invaders in the occupied Donbas during the war. The hyperbolisation of the scale of resistance to the Nazis and a certain sacralisation of the victims, especially members of the anti-Nazi resistance movement, became inherent features of war and postwar cinema, justified by the context of the time and political goals. For example, one of the film's storylines shows the selfless refusal of miners to restore a blown-up mine and work for the occupiers, even though their comrade, Komsomol member Fedir, dies.²¹ One of the most vivid and dynamic episodes was the execution of captured Soviet sailors at the gates of the prison camp. The execution takes place to the sailors' song, performed in front of hundreds of townspeople. Most likely, the scene of the execution of sailors, a canonical example of Nazi crimes against prisoners of war, had a historical basis. Several residents of Stalino (Donetsk) witnessed the convoy of captured sailors, who were rumoured to have been shot, through the streets of the city.²² This episode is connected with a moment that characterises the moral and psychological state of the population that survived the occupation: the inhabitants of the city, remembering its terrible realities, did not immediately realise that a film was being shot and almost attacked the actors in German uniforms.²³ The film also touched upon the topic of deportation to Germany for forced labour, a Nazi crime that destroyed the lives of 2.5 million Ukrainians and began to be studied by historians and artists only in the late 1980s.

17 USHMMA, RG- 22.002; SARE, F. P-7021. Op. 56. D. 681. L. 2; Kruglov A.I. 2004, 138.

18 Zorkaya N. 2005, 752.

19 Bol'shakov I. 1950, 68.

20 Bol'shakov I. 1950, 69.

21 "Sotsialisticheskii Donbass" August 4, 1945.

22 Titarenko D.N., Penter T. (eds), 2013, 95, 98.

23 Forum.

A special place in postwar cinema related to Donbas belongs to L. Lukov. A native of Mariupol, he graduated from a labour school and knew the life of miners well. It was his films about miners' labour, *A Great Life* and *The Miners of Donetsk (Donetskii shakhtyory)*, that earned Lukov two Stalin Prizes in 1941 and 1952.²⁴ However, not all of Leonid Lukov's films were so successful in terms of their reception by the political leadership. Among them was the second episode of *The Great Life*, which was filmed in 1946 and was subjected to extremely harsh criticism. The film was released only 12 years later.

The director tried not only to depict the romantic part of the restoration of Donbas but also to show the harsh realities of the postwar Donbas and to touch upon some taboo topics, such as collaboration during the occupation and the lack of competence of a number of responsible workers in the mines.²⁵ However, Lukov desired to make a film as close to everyday life as possible, which led to the critical assessment of the film by the party leadership.²⁶ The resolution of the Central Committee of the CPSU (b) of 4 September 1946, emphasised the film's viciousness in ideological and political terms and its weakness in artistic terms. Regarding the issue of collaboration raised by the director, the resolution contained a separate paragraph: 'The main characters of the film are people who served in the German police. The film depicts a type of alien to the Soviet system — Usynin, who remained with the Germans in Donbas, whose provocative activities remain unpunished.'²⁷ This approach reflects, on the one hand, both a simplistic approach to the phenomenon of collaboration and an irreconcilable attitude towards people who, from the perspective of the government's discourse, were accomplices of the occupiers and, therefore, complicit in Nazi crimes.

For many years, the film *The Young Guard*, released in October 1948, became a symbol of wartime Donbas. It was widely publicised in the media as a film 'dedicated to the 30th anniversary of the Lenin-Stalin Komsomol.'²⁸ 1,500 copies of the film were shown in all major cities of the Soviet Union. On October 11, the first day of the screening, 175,000 viewers watched the film in Moscow, 130,000 in Leningrad, and 8,500 at the central Taras Shevchenko cinema in Stalino.²⁹ The next day, key Soviet newspapers published reviews and feedback from viewers, which were enthusiastic. Some publications devoted entire issues to the film, including not only reviews but also shots from the film with relevant comments. The memories of respondents, who watched the film as children, are very revealing in this regard:

²⁴ Gromov E.S. 1998, 381.

²⁵ Tytarenko O. 2017, 174.

²⁶ *Kulturne budivnytstvo* 1961, 138.

²⁷ Anderson K.M., Maksimenkov L.V. (eds), 2005, 764.

²⁸ "Sotsialisticheskii Donbass" October 1948, 8.

²⁹ "Sotsialisticheskii Donbass" October 1948, 13.

In the 9th grade, there was already a movie about *The Young Guard*, and I remember that we all wanted to watch this movie, but we were told that we were not old enough for the evening screening.... But we watched the movie anyway. It was an extraordinary experience. This Oleg, this Lyubka. In general, everyone was ready to... as if to repeat this movie, the feat and all. That's how they felt about it.³⁰

Another respondent recalls the following:

Oh... *The Young Guard* — we read it! And when the movie *The Young Guard* came out, listen, it was a bomb! Oh, I'll tell you that directly... We went 5, 10 times, I swear to you! After *The Young Guard*, we played in Oleg Koshovoy, Tyulenin, and *The Young Guard*. We made dugouts, so we were running and hiding there. They were looking for us, and we played war games. Oh, it was something like that...³¹

The activities of *The Young Guard* became one of the most important examples of social mythmaking in the wartime and postwar periods, being imposed from above and apparently meeting with an enthusiastic response among the population of the region due to the geographical proximity of the scene.³² In 1948, the film took first place at the box office, and a year later, the creators of *The Young Guard* received the honorary Stalin Prize. In March 1949, a meeting of Soviet cinematographers assessed the film, along with several other films, as one that '...has a deep ideological content, life truthfulness, and high artistic merit.'³³ The sacrifice and tragic fate of the members of the youth underground evoked particularly strong emotions. The key scene in the film was the execution of *The Young Guard*, which gives an idea of the peculiarities of the public's perception of cinematic images created from local material.

According to eyewitnesses, this scene was filmed in the evening, but in the middle of the day, residents of the town gathered around the destroyed mine headframe. People stood silent, holding back their tears, and the young actors had to do several takes to fix the inevitable technical problems. However, the best fragment that correctly conveyed the artistic meaning of this scene was the first take, filmed immediately, without rehearsals, in the state of emotional turmoil that prevailed at that moment. It was included in the film. In this context, an interview with the actress Inna Makarova, who played the role of Lyuba, is particularly interesting, as she stated:

³⁰ Interview with P. L.O.

³¹ Interview with Sh. V.V.

³² Aralovets N.A. et al. (eds), 2010, 221.

³³ Anderson K.M., Maksimenkov L.V. (eds), 2005, 815.

After all, we treated the material itself, the story of these guys, with incredible enthusiasm and purity. [...] It did happen. I remember how people from neighbouring villages came and watched the execution scene being filmed. The pit was concreted, and it was about two meters down. A mat was laid down below. But many guys felt the rock was sticking out. Someone broke his head, and someone dislocated his arm. We spent four nights filming. We all walked around the stage in torn dresses, barefoot. And it was already autumn, and it was cold.³⁴

It should be noted that the book was written in a hurry (according to Fadeev himself, without claiming to be historically accurate³⁵), so the film *The Young Guard* has many factual flaws. After the novel was published, Fadeyev was criticised for not showing the 'leading and guiding' role of the Communist Party sufficiently. The author had to change the book, and some changes were made in the film. It was O. Fadeev's book and the film that for a long time preserved the one-sided, distorted, and unrealistic perception of *The Young Guard*, and made both the underground *The Young Guard* members themselves and residents hostages to the legend created by him and S. Gerasimov. For example, several of them were labelled traitors for no reason at all, and their families were persecuted. This, in particular, concerned the first commissar of *The Young Guard*, Viktor Tretyakevich. Only later was it revealed that the accusations of treason were groundless. The name of Viktor Tretyakevych, a victim of Nazism and, at the same time, a mistaken target of the Soviet investigation, was rehabilitated, and the ending of the film was re-voiced, with Viktor Tretyakevych named among other underground members who died at the hands of the Nazis.³⁶

Despite the retreat from historical truth and the tension of some episodes, and a high level of ideologisation (an immanent feature of Soviet cinema of the war and post-war period) the film became a notable phenomenon in Soviet postwar cinema. The film was actively shown abroad, especially in the countries of the socialist camp. The heroism and sacrifices of young people in the fight against Nazism fostered sympathy for the Soviet Union.³⁷ S. Gerasimov's *The Young Guard* portrayed heroic images of ordinary citizens who were ready to die for their country. After this film, the tendencies of further development of the heroic theme in Soviet postwar cinema evolved. The theme of the deaths of members of the anti-fascist resistance movement is central to the film. At the same time, the film's content presents several other categories of victims of Nazi crimes: Soviet prisoners of war, civilian hostages, and people deported to Germany for forced labour.

34 *Molodaya gvardiya*.

35 Aralovets N.A. et al. (eds), 2010, 221.

36 Mussskiy I.A. 2007, 170.

37 Borovikova V.N., et al. (eds), 1970, 255–256.

The image of the Donbas as one of the key regions of the Soviet Union's industrial power, formed and mythologised to a certain extent in the pre-war period, was actively developed by propaganda during the war and in the first postwar years. In documentary cinema, the topic of Nazi crimes in Donbas first appears in the form of visual images of the destruction of industrial and social infrastructure caused by the Germans. For the first time, the number of victims at the largest mass crime site in Donbas, the 4-4 bis mine in Stalino, was announced based on NDC materials. Feature films dedicated to the topic of the war-torn Donbas are represented by the films *The Unconquered*, *It Happened in Donbas*, *The Young Guard*, and *A Great Life*. The key emphasis is placed on the issues of the national struggle against Nazism and postwar reconstruction. This was consistent with the political and ideological agenda of the state authorities, but it excluded the depiction of the survival strategies of millions of inhabitants in wartime. The films feature the following categories of victims of Nazi crimes: representatives of the anti-Nazi Resistance movement, including minors, Soviet prisoners of war, civilians, and residents of the region deported to Germany for forced labour. For the first time in Soviet cinema, a scene of a mass execution of the Jewish population was depicted.

Despite several historical inaccuracies, these films evoked allusions to the population's own suffering among those who had survived the occupation. This resulted in high audience demand. In general, the cinematic images of the war-torn Donbas remain an important source for understanding the historical processes of the past and for studying the system of political and ideological influence on the worldview and the values of the population in different historical epochs.

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