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# 7 Fighters of the Invisible Front: Reimaging the Aftermath of the Great Patriotic War in Recent Russian Television Series

Boris Noordenbos

Over the past decade, prime-time Russian television has been flooded with spy thrillers and police procedurals set in the aftermath of the Second World War. In the television series *Liquidation* (*Likvidatsia*, directed by Sergei Ursuliak, Inter/Rossiia, 2007), Odessa's criminal investigation department fights rampant gangs and former Nazi collaborators who plague the city in 1946; in *Black Cats* (*Chernye koshki*, Evgenii Lavrentiev, Channel One, 2013), crime fighters in Rostov-na-Donu uncover a US-Nazi conspiracy revolving around the production of a nuclear weapon; and in both *The Cry of the Owl* (*Krik sovy*, Oleg Pogodin, Channel One, 2013) and *Executioner* (*Palach*, Viacheslav Nikiforov, Channel One, 2015), murderous ex-collaborators, now posing as law-abiding citizens, cast a long shadow over postwar communities in provincial Russia.

While none of these television series are set during the war, the evil infiltrating the Soviet Union in their stories is invariably traced back to the Nazi occupation. These action-packed spy thrillers tell of a battle against the remnants of German fascism and the local and foreign sympathizers who affected scores of Soviet citizens and communities in the late 1940s and even in the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras. In the aftermath of the war, these series suggest that the enemy went underground to continue undermining Soviet society through connivance rather than naked force. Heroic roles are reserved for talented Russian spies or no-nonsense inspectors—"fighters of the invisible front" (*boitsy nevidimogo fronta*), as the Soviet phrase had it—keen to root out sinister fascist subversion.

These television productions adhere to the norms of popular culture, providing entertainment that does not aspire to historiographic accuracy or rigor. Their portrayal of intrigues and conspiracies makes no claim to be truthful but rather allows for the building of suspense and the unexpected plot twists essential to retaining a television audience week after week. However, as cultural

reimaginations of the past that are ideologically and historically rooted in the present, these series' fixation on the perennial struggle against foreign enemies and their local allies powerfully resonates with contemporary political and social concerns.

In proposing that the fight against German fascists and their sympathizers spilled over into the late 1940s, 1950s, or even 1960s, these series comply with the state-sponsored interpretation of the Great Patriotic War as the decisive event of the twentieth century. Moreover, the contemporary rediscovery of the spy thriller as a cinematic genre that flourished during the Cold War cannot be seen in isolation from Russia's escalated conflict with Ukraine or soured relations with the European Union and the United States.[1] This chapter argues that these contemporary spy and detective series, by forging intricate links and connecting disparate events, eras, and cultural narratives, engage in a form of cultural memory that leans heavily on the logic of myth.

The current mythologization of Soviet history, and specifically the Great Patriotic War, has received significant academic attention. Russian sociologists such as Dina Khapaeva, Boris Dubin, and Lev Gudkov have claimed that the state-backed memory projects of the Putin era have made the triumph over Nazism into one of present-day Russia's foundational myths. The emphasis on Russian war heroism, they argue, helps center the collective memory of the multifaceted Soviet experience on one congratulatory focal point, glossing over Stalinist crimes and cementing the new state-centered patriotism and nationalist consensus the Putin government has been cultivating.[2]

As Lev Gudkov observed in 2005, the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany has become a "symbol that functions, . . . for the entire [Russian] society, as the most important element of collective identification, [as] a yardstick offering a particular lens for evaluating the past and, in part, for understanding the present and future. The victory of 1945 . . . is the only positive pillar of national self-consciousness in post-Soviet society."[3] The mythologization of the Soviet victory over Nazism brings with it, according to these scholars, a self-righteous triumphalism and messianism (i.e., Russia as the only true victor that liberated Europe from Nazism) that are relentlessly held up to the countries of the former Socialist bloc that have less favorable memories of the Soviet era.[4]

Surprisingly, while *myth* is a recurrent reference point in academic discussions on remembrance in post-Soviet Russia, the term is hardly ever refined conceptually. For many, myths amount to forms of falsification or simplification that thwart fact-based historical investigation or nuanced analyses of Soviet history.[5] In addition, scholars have pointed out that war myths, ever since the late 1940s, have been instrumental in cementing political authority.[6] Valuable as these approaches are, they often overlook the particular presentation of historical time and collective belonging so characteristic of mythmaking. Later I will present

my own analysis of myth, but for now it suffices to say that mythic stories tend to rely on schematic "scripts" that imaginatively bind together collective identities through their "powerful cohesive force."[7] Furthermore, as the following analysis suggests, the schematic quality of myths means they can readily be transposed from their original historical contexts. Myths often serve as recurring cultural narratives employed to understand disparate historical eras and diverse political events.[8]

## Liquidating the Empire's Enemies

Sergei Ursuliak's *Liquidation* (*Likvidatsia*) from 2007 is perhaps the most acclaimed retro-style detective series of the Putin era. Attracting more than 40 percent of the television audience, the series proved wildly popular.[9] Set in 1946 Odessa, *Liquidation* offers a nostalgic picture of the city in desaturated colors. This romanticized Odessa brims with flamboyant characters, many of them Jewish, who employ local slang and speak in the region's melodiously intoned accent. Adding to the atmosphere are musical intermezzos set in bars, theaters, and a boarding school where a children's choir performs. Anachronistically, these musical scenes include a performance by Leonid Utesov of his famous 1951 song "At the Black Sea," which sings Odessa's praises.

*Liquidation*'s plot documents the efforts of Odessa's criminal investigation department to control the gangs who murder, steal, and engage in smuggling with impunity amid the chaos of the postwar years. The main character is the department's head, lieutenant-colonel David Gotsman, a streetwise Odessa local. He repeatedly clashes with Marshal Georgy Zhukov, who has been sent to Odessa after his falling out with Stalin in the spring of 1946. Now heading the Odessa Military District, Zhukov takes a straightforward approach to the city's crime problem, aiming to "liquidate" Odessa's thieves by whatever means necessary. Gotsman, however, rightly intuits that the real danger does not come from petty pickpockets. Thanks to Gotsman, one of his own men gets exposed as an Abwehr-trained anti-Soviet intelligence agent who is running Odessa's underworld disguised as a police official.

The rivalry between Gotsman and Zhukov underscores the contrast between open warfare and the fascinating intricacies of the "invisible front" from which the series derives its suspense. While Zhukov embodies the military discipline and linearity that are vital in defeating the enemy on the battlefield, Gotsman is a man of wit and imagination—the qualities essential to fighting the insidious conspiratorial tactics of the Soviet empire's ideological foes. The Gotsman-Zhukov competition references the renowned multiepisode police procedural *The Meeting Place Cannot Be Changed* (*Mesto vstrechi izmenit nelzia*), directed by Stanislav Govorukhin and released in 1979. It is easy to see the similarities

between the shrewd Gotsman and the Soviet series' crowd favorite: the detective Gleb Zheglov, played by Vladimir Vysotskii. Another cult Soviet production, the legendary spy series *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (to which I will return), featuring the melancholic, intelligent Otto von Stierlitz (played by Viacheslav Tikhonov), serves as a recurring point of reference, too. Channel One's comedy show *The Big Difference* (*Bolshaia raznitsa*), for instance, staged a parody of *Liquidation* shortly after its release, featuring a delicate Stierlitz endowed with Gotsman's bravura and tuneful Odessa accent. According to Stephen Norris, with *Liquidation* Ursuliak sought to create a "composite character, a retrofitted hero whose actions and beliefs can serve as a model for present-day viewers looking for cinematic heroes."[10]

While many rooted for Gotsman and adored the romanticized version of "Odessa-mama," not all viewers found the plot's intrigues convincing. The aims of the main villain, the Nazi-trained anti-Soviet saboteur, remain obscure. Is he fanatically pursuing his subversive activities even after the Abwehr ceased to exist? Or, as one blogger wondered, are his attempts to undermine the reestablishment of Soviet power also motivated by a nationalist (Ukrainian?) and separatist political agenda?[11] Another viewer felt that *Liquidation* hinted at the presence of "Bandera adepts in [1946] Odessa" but considered this suggestion utterly farfetched and unconvincing.[12] While the central intrigue and the motivations behind it are never satisfyingly explained, the series paved the way for television productions showing an "invisible battle" against (former) Nazis and/or their local accomplices in fascinating detail.

The twelve-part *Black Cats* (2013) is widely seen as a loose remake of *Liquidation*. It is set not in Odessa but in Rostov-na-Donu, and the events take place one year later, in 1947. While *Liquidation*'s commentary on historical context was limited to a few voice-over remarks in the first episode, *Black Cats* goes to greater lengths to inform the audience about the era in which it is set. Each episode begins with period footage and a voice-over sketching the wider historical panorama of the (fictional) events. The voice-over's remarks—for example, on the nascent postwar rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States—explain that the future of the Nazi atomic program became one of the key issues in early Cold War competition: "Fighters of the invisible front used all available means to obtain secret information [about the former German nuclear weapon project]." The rivalry between American imperialists (and their tenacious fascist stooges) and Soviet intelligence officials to acquire nuclear know-how is indeed the central premise of the series. *Liquidation* merely hints at ongoing fascist subversion while *Black Cats* mines the full potential of such a scenario.

Like *Liquidation*, *Black Cats* gestures profusely to the Soviet classic *The Meeting Place Cannot Be Changed*, in which the protagonists fought a gang of robbers called "The Black Cat." Its hero, a major in Rostov's criminal investigation

department named Egor Dragun (Pavel Derevianko), shows striking similarities, in both his attire and behavior, to Captain Gleb Zheglov of *The Meeting Place*. The story, however, deviates from its Soviet precursor and is more closely aligned with that of *Liquidation*. Early on, Dragun's department is confronted with a series of brazen crimes, including the raiding of trucks, attacks on military men, and the plundering of food stores. According to Dragun, the sophistication of these actions points not to petty thugs but to military saboteurs or intelligence agents. Suspecting the involvement of (former) Nazis, Dragun confides to a subordinate, "That war of ours has not yet ended."

The higher-ups in the party and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, however, balk at the idea that there might still be German spies operating in Rostov. "These stories about fascists must stop!" fumes Prokhor Kuplenov, a regional party official. "They *are* not, and *cannot* be, among us!" Those in positions of power are more concerned with fighting ordinary criminals and preparing for the repatriation of German POWs from a camp in the Rostov region. The process of repatriation is supervised by the charming MGB colonel Pavel Burov (Pavel Trubiner), newly arrived from Moscow. He is to vet the German POWs prior to their release, ensuring that no war criminal goes back to Germany unpunished.

Meanwhile, Dragun and his men begin to suspect that the criminals terrorizing the city might be members of the so-called Brandenburg 800 subdivision, an Abwehr special forces unit (which actually existed) of men trained to infiltrate enemy territory. Dragun obtains top-secret film footage left by the Germans that sheds light on this unit's mission. After analyzing the footage (his Jewish friends' Yiddish helps translate from the German), Dragun concludes that the tactics of Rostov's enigmatic criminals resemble those of the Brandenburgers.

These Brandenburgers, it emerges, stayed behind in the Soviet Union and now seek to free the German atomic scientist Joost Hartl, who had managed to hide among the German POWs as a regular serviceman. When Colonel Burov identifies the scientist during his interrogations of the POWs, the pace of *Black Cats*' revelations accelerates and the story lines converge. Burov, it turns out, is himself a Brandenburger and a former SS Sturmbahnführer whose actual name is Karl Lange. He hopes to smuggle Hartl out of the country in an operation funded by the Americans, who want to recruit Hartl for their atomic program or at least keep him out of Soviet hands. Although Burov/Lange's ultimate loyalties (to American imperialism, German Nazism, or both) remain obscure, he persuades Hartl to cooperate by telling him that the former Nazi elite can "restore the Third Reich" to its previous glory through the development of an atomic weapon.

The subsequent plot developments are even more dramatic. In one of the city's underground bunkers, other Brandenburgers have hidden an atomic bomb's plutonium core, and Hartl's expertise has the capacity of turning it into a

Fig. 7.1. A still from *Black Cats*. In the underground bunker of the Brandenburger spies: MGB caps used for disguise have been lifted out of Abwehr store boxes.

superweapon. If Hartl and Lange escape with the device, the series suggests, the Soviet Union's fascist-imperialist enemies could achieve a triumphant *Endsieg*. Just in time, Dragun realizes that he had seen Burov in the film footage of the Brandenburg unit and grasps that the well-respected colonel is, in fact, the villainous mastermind behind the vast anti-Soviet conspiracy. In the series' final episodes, Dragun is assisted by well-meaning gangsters from the city's Jewish-run criminal underworld (who are eager to eliminate the fascist rogues). With their help, Dragun blocks Lange and Hartl's route to the Soviet border, although not before engaging in spectacular Hollywood-inspired shoot-outs and fistfights, parts of which are shown in slow motion.

## Mythologizing the "Invisible Front"

In essence, *Black Cats* articulates the "invisible front" more forcefully than *Liquidation*. Here nobody is what he or she appears to be. Even the charming secretary of the regional Communist Party leader turns out to be a ruthless Nazi Obersturmbahnführer. This insistence on disguised identities and subterranean battles against fascist enemies has far-reaching implications. In 2007, critics of *Liquidation* had already commented that the series recycled Soviet myths about deceitful ideological saboteurs. Maria Galina, for instance, contended that *Liquidation* harked back to "the myth from the Stalinist era about 'enemies of the people,' operating under the guise of trustworthy Soviet citizens."[13] This repurposed Soviet narrative is taken to its extreme in *Black Cats*, where the threat posed by

the "craftily camouflaged enemy" (*umelo zakonspirirovannyi vrag*), as one of the series' characters puts it, is omnipresent.

*Black Cats* is deeply anachronistic, not only in its identification of a Nazi threat in 1947 but also in its twenty-first-century recycling of Stalinist discourses and Brezhnev-era cinematic genres. Wrapping the Soviet myth of "fighters of the invisible front" in a Hollywood gloss, this production joins a much wider contemporary trend in which Soviet models and narratives have been adapted to the requirements of contemporary (postmodern) mass culture. The tendency was described at length by Mark Lipovetskii, who coined the term *post-sots* for such odd cultural hybrids.[14] Rehabilitating and adapting a socialist-realist aesthetics that revolves around self-sacrifice, heroism, and Manichaean oppositions between good and evil, the culture of *post-sots* presupposes an unproblematic durability of Soviet forms in the radically different cultural and ideological context of post-Soviet life and culture.

While Lipovetskii often refers to the persistence of Soviet "myths" in post-Soviet culture, he uses the term in a commonsensical way. The understanding of *post-sots* and its particular manifestations in the series discussed here benefits from closer scrutiny of its relation to myth. Building on work by Claude Lévi-Strauss, Georges Dumézil, Roland Barthes, and others, Bruce Lincoln argued that myth "packages a specific, contingent system of discrimination in a particularly attractive and memorable form," thereby guaranteeing its prolonged cultural life in variants that continually recalibrate the "sociotaxonomic order."[15] Creating simplified categorizations, myth shapes identities and legitimacies, presenting its structures and hierarchies as a fact of nature rather than an artifact of culture. In Lincoln's reading, the naturalizing and legitimizing effects of myth determine its status as "ideology in narrative form."[16] It is easy to see how the culture of *post-sots*, with its inclination toward schematic stories of good and evil and its tendency to recycle Soviet ideologemes as timeless truths rather than historically or ideologically determined narratives, relies on such a notion.

To better grasp the series' reformatting of history, we should keep in mind some interplay among myth, memory, and history. Of particular importance here are Mircea Eliade's remarks on the differences between modern conceptions of history and mythical efforts to make sense of time.[17] For Eliade, myth constitutes the "abolition of time through the imitation of archetypes and the repetition of paradigmatic gestures."[18] In the mythical worldview, events have no specific, contingent historical significance but derive their meaning from being a manifestation of a timeless scheme.[19]

This emphasis on myth as structured by reinstantiations of paradigmatic models has been further explored by Aleida Assmann, one of the key voices in memory studies since the 1990s. Building on work by the anthropologist Paul Connerton, Assmann sees repetition as an inherent part of memory that is

institutionalized, for instance, through anniversaries and recurring commemorative rituals. Periodic commemorations, however, do not necessarily involve mythologization. Myth emerges only when remembrance tends to erase the difference between past and present and/or blend historical events. Assmann submits that myth collapses different time periods, a propensity that ultimately elevates mythologized events out of historical linearity altogether.[20]

The series analyzed here, I argue, demonstrate such a mythic detachment of events from their original historical origins. This is not to say that the series entirely abolish a connection to historical time and to the Second World War in particular. In both *Liquidation* and *Black Cats*, the war marks the historical moment when Nazis and their accomplices gained sway over law-abiding Soviet citizens. Yet these series rely on a mythic vision of history as structured by simple, repeatable scripts that shape identities in unquestionable ways: the heroic battle of Soviet/Russian patriots against dastardly fascists is still being played out, albeit in a subterranean variant, even after the war's end. As one critic cogently put it, the central premise of *Black Cats* is that "fascists/spies are always among us."[21] It is precisely this double reading of the fascist threat—as a historical reality linked to the war and as a persistent scenario open to novel manifestations in other periods—that explains these series' numerous, puzzling anachronisms.

Turning the struggle against fascism into a repeatable script is not the only thing these productions do. By rehabilitating the cinematic genre of the spy adventure, they sever its ties to the political and ideological context of the Cold War from which the genre sprouted. The historically and culturally specific myth of the "fighters of the invisible front" heroically combatting devious Nazi plotters and their supposed Western allies is uncritically transposed from the Soviet Union of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s to the post-Soviet media landscape, despite the obvious incommensurability.

One should pay close attention to the content of this recycling of Soviet discourses and, in particular, to the mythic categorization of enemies as a process inextricably bound with the construction of an imagined Soviet/Russian "we." *Black Cats*, *Liquidation*, and the other series analyzed here use *fascism* as a catch-all term for "the enemy" and as an antithesis of Soviet/Russian patriotism. Lev Gudkov traces this cultural mechanism back to the Soviet mantra of "anti-fascism," a vague Cold War notion that increasingly came to stand for the Soviet rejection of all things West, including capitalism and liberalism. Through a process of "negative identification," the "struggle against fascism" became essential to Soviet (and later Russian) notions of collective belonging and "social wholeness."[22]

Both *Liquidation* and *Black Cats* make use of this mechanism. They insistently counterbalance "fascist" hatred with multiethnic Soviet solidarity. Both series feature sympathetic Russians, Jews, Ukrainians, and Armenians—easily identifiable by their dress, accent, and music—who, within the framework of the

Soviet state, engage in friendly, tolerant, and harmonious relationships with one another. As a powerful antimodel, "fascism" helps cement a multiethnic "imagined community" that sometimes reminds the viewer of the Soviet notion of "fraternity of peoples."[23]

As a validation of Gudkov's analysis, the struggle against "fascism" in these series leaves the exact identity of the enemy open to interpretation. As the critic Andrei Arkhangelskii pointed out, the plot of *Black Cats* is indebted to the Soviet spy films of the Cold War decades that revolved around collusion between former fascists and Western intelligence services. According to Arkhangelskii, late Soviet cinema strove to provide a "genealogy of evil [by connecting] past evil (Nazism) to contemporary evil (America)."[24] Imperialist-fascist collusion is indeed repeatedly invoked in *Black Cats*—for instance, when Burov/Lange admits to Hartl that the Americans have promised him one million dollars if he delivers Hartl to them alive and 30 percent of that sum if he can prove that Hartl has been killed.

A brief detour illustrates the extent to which *Black Cats* and several other recent series dust off, in their categorization of enemies, the pet subjects of the Soviet espionage genre. A paradigmatic example is the twelve-part miniseries *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (*Semnadtsat mgnovenii vesny*) from 1973, a production that boosted the popularity of the spy thriller for generations to come and became a persistent cultural reference point during the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. Directed by Tatiana Lioznova and based on Iulian Semenov's novel of the same title, it was "one of the most important 'low' culture events of the Brezhnev period."[25] Over the decades, the series—shown every year in the run-up to Victory Day—became, according to Steven Lovell, the "biggest cult phenomenon in the history of Soviet (and indeed Russian) television."[26] Set during the last months of the Second World War, the film chronicles the adventures of a mole, the Soviet spy Maksim Isaev (Viacheslav Tikhonov), who has infiltrated the Nazi elite under the false identity of SS Standartenführer Otto von Stierlitz. His bosses in the GRU (Soviet military intelligence service) have tasked him with thwarting the secret plans for a peace treaty between the United States and Germany that, if realized, would treacherously cold-shoulder the Soviet Union.

Unlike his counterparts in series like *Black Cats* and *Liquidation*, Stierlitz is perhaps a more passive hero (an emblematic figure of the period of so-called stagnation under Brezhnev, according to Elena Prokhorova).[27] Furthermore, these contemporary productions represent a reversal of the Stierlitz model, featuring Nazi spies infiltrating Soviet institutions rather than the other way around. They share, however, *Seventeen Moments*' fascination with crafty agents who cunningly conceal their real identities and patriotic Soviet intelligence officers who almost single-handedly save the motherland from its enemies. Crucially, *Black Cats* borrows from cultural texts like *Seventeen Moments* a vision in which the

hot war against German Nazis seamlessly merges into the cold war against capitalist adversaries.

In *Seventeen Moments*, secret rapprochement between German fascism and American imperialism dangerously harms the Soviet Union's interests.[28] Toward its finale we learn that Heinrich Müller and Martin Bormann aim to use the Nazi party's gold reserves to secure the future dissemination of Nazi propaganda. The cynical Müller explains to Stierlitz that the Nazis "must have storytellers who'll remold the message for those who'll live twenty years from now." The series thus anticipates the danger of a fascist-capitalist repackaging of Nazi ideology but also explains postwar, and Cold War, realities through the enemies' wartime intrigues.

While *Seventeen Moments* perfectly aligns with Arkhangelskii's remarks about a Soviet spy tradition that endeavored to provide a genealogy of evil, in *Black Cats* and *Liquidation*, the exact nature of the "enemy" is much vaguer. *Seventeen Moments* still keenly (although not always successfully) insisted on historical accuracy—including historical figures in its plot, meticulously reproducing the uniforms of various Nazi ranks, and relying profusely on documentary footage. In *Black Cats* and *Liquidation*, by contrast, adversaries are collapsed into one ill-defined category composed of American imperialists, Ukrainian separatists, Nazi spies, and SS Obersturmbahführers—all of whom engage in treacherous, loose alliances. In *Black Cats*, for example, the audience never gets to learn why defeated fascists would quixotically cling to the idea that the Third Reich could be restored. And while the Americans are said to be complicit in the nefarious scheme, the nature of their involvement remains unclear. In presenting a befogged revision of history, these series unmoor the narrative of an "invisible front" from its specific historical (Cold War) anchoring and reformat it as a mythic struggle against vaguely defined Western forces.

## Extending the Myth into the Postwar Decades

Two other recent detective adventures, *The Cry of the Owl* (*Krik sovy*, Oleg Pogodin, 2013) and *Executioner* (*Palach*, Viacheslav Nikiforov, 2015), set the struggle against fascism much later than *Black Cats* and *Liquidation*—in 1957 and 1965, respectively. But the ingredients of the ten-part *Cry of the Owl*, dubbed "*Liquidation* lite [*sic*]" by the critic Dmitrii Cheremnov, are surprisingly similar to those of the productions discussed earlier.[29] Here, too, crime fighters in provincial Russia (the town of Ostrov near Pskov) suspect that aggressive thugs are involved in a fascist conspiracy.

The war veteran and police captain Iurii Sirotin (Evgenii Diatlov) ends up in the hospital after being shot and wounded in a confrontation with a criminal gang. The physician on duty hears his comatose patient mumbling in flawless

German, and the local KGB captain, Ivan Mitin (Sergei Puskepalis), is summoned to investigate the case. Mitin soon concludes that Sirotin was not the law-abiding war hero he pretended to be. In fact, he was involved in a secret operation to provide the region's leading gangsters with German passports. Mitin regularly clashes with the unpolished police major Andrei Balakhin (Andrei Merzlikin), who insists Sirotin is trustworthy and tries to convince Mitin that he is on the wrong track. Even greater resistance comes from Ostrov's inhabitants. After Khrushchev's condemnatory speech to the Twentieth Congress, respect for the intelligence services has reached a historical low. The KGB captain is feared and despised in the town, and even the town's children pelt him with stones and mud.

Sirotin, it turns out, is but one member of a well-connected spy ring active in the town. The main villain is Alexander Gorobets, the apparently sympathetic director of the local war museum who had been an infamously cruel executioner in the concentration camp Salaspils during the war. The museum, housed in the former Nazi headquarters, harbors an extensive German archive in its cellar. Gorobets now wants to trade the archive, which has attracted the interest of foreign intelligence services, for German passports for himself and other collaborators-cum-criminals, which will allow them to flee abroad.

*The Cry of the Owl* brims with citations from both *The Meeting Place Cannot Be Changed* (especially the duo Mitin-Balakhnin, which evokes the Sharapov-Zheglov relationship) and *Seventeen Moments*. The latter series resonates in various plot twists. In addition, the even-toned voice-over, which in *The Cry of the Owl* regularly articulates the thoughts of Mitin (whose character seems inspired by Stierlitz's contemplative traits), is obviously borrowed from the intrusive narrator's voice in *Seventeen Moments*.[30]

This alignment with the Soviet spy tradition comes with an outdated Cold War rhetoric. In compliance with the late Soviet obsession with fascist-Western collusion, the series emphasizes the foreign contacts of these ex-collaborators: they use a wartime radio transmitter from the museum, presumably to tip off their contacts abroad; their plan is to obtain German passports and cross the border; and the spy ring is apparently in touch with unspecified "Western intelligence services." On the other hand, the tone of *The Cry of the Owl* is not as triumphant as its compliance with the Soviet espionage tradition might suggest. The series lacks the typical celebration of the intelligence services. Instead, it directs attention to the long-lasting, detrimental social impact of the NKVD-orchestrated repression of the 1930s, during which Mitin's own mother was arrested and executed.

By the same token, Mitin ultimately abstains from adopting revanchist attitudes toward ex-collaborators. In Ostrov, it is emphasized, almost everyone worked for the Germans; the Nazi archive on which the story's intrigues hinge contains invaluable information on the local inhabitants' wartime activities.

Fig. 7.2. A still from *The Cry of the Owl*. "Hände hoch!" When KBG captain Mitin arrests the Nazi collaborator and "Western" spy Gorobets in 1957, he addresses him in German.

Mitin, however, decides not to pass the files to his KGB superiors, pretending that the archive has been lost through his mistake, even though this decision will irreparably damage his career. With the main villain behind bars, forgetfulness, the series suggests, is the only possible remedy against the shadow of fascism that looms large over the town. For one reviewer, this nuanced treatment of historical guilt (acknowledging both collaboration and Soviet repression) and its legacies made *The Cry of the Owl* the "most important Russian television series produced in the last twenty years."[31]

*Executioner* (*Palach*), aired on Channel One in January 2015, is a more recent example of the current emphasis on a prolonged battle against fascist elements. This police procedural was inspired by the story of Antonina Makarova, better known as Tonka the machine gunner. The actual Antonina had enlisted as a Soviet nurse. In the aftermath of a German attack in 1941 that decimated her unit, she ended up in the semi-autonomous Lokot region in Central Russia and was eventually hired as an executioner for the collaborationist police forces. In 1942 and 1943, Tonka reportedly machine-gunned hundreds of Soviet POWs, as well as Soviet partisans and their families (although the judge in her 1978 trial concluded that she had personally killed 160 people).[32]

*Executioner* revolves around Tonka's arrest, which it sets in 1965 rather than in the late 1970s, when the actual Tonka was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to death. In a village near Moscow, a number of brutal murders are committed, the first during the twentieth-anniversary celebrations of the Soviet victory in the

Fig. 7.3. A still from *Executioner*. The moment of disclosure: in one of the wartime scenes, Tonka the machine gunner finds a carnival mask she will later wear during the executions. The viewer here identifies Tonka as Raisa, the music teacher from the 1965 storyline.

Great Patriotic War. The victims are all killed in the same fashion: a gunshot to each of their eyes. The protagonist, police major Ivan Cherkassov (Andrei Smoliakov, who was also featured in the television series *Mosgaz* [2012] and *Spider* [*Pauk*, 2015]), begins to suspect the crimes are connected to the history of Tonka the machine gunner, who apparently killed injured POWs in this fashion. The series offers a succession of clues that culminate in the revelation that the village's sympathetic music teacher, Raisa, is actually Tonka.

At the war's end, she had cleverly tricked the arriving Soviet troops into believing she was a partisan fighter. The acts of murder she had committed in the postwar years, including that of her own stepson Petia on Victory Day, were supposed to prevent her true identity from being disclosed. As she later admits, Petia and several other young villagers had gone too far in ferreting out her past, and she wanted to protect her blood relatives from the shame and prosecution that would have followed had her secret been revealed. Raisa/Tonka's wartime activities are shown in flashbacks. However, since she is wearing a carnival mask during the executions—a liberty taken by the makers of the series—the viewer does not know for sure which of the postwar characters was the real Tonka.

Unlike *Liquidation*, *Black Cats*, and *The Cry of the Owl*, *Executioner* centers not on politically driven subversion but on an individual Soviet citizen whose crimes are mitigated by her status as a victim. Certainly, Tonka's past acts of

treason are presented as despicable and her contemporary crimes as monstrous. Yet the flashback scenes, which begin when she gets separated from her unit during the German attack, vividly portray her suffering. While wandering through the forests of Briansk Oblast, Tonka meets another lost Soviet soldier, who rapes her. More suffering follows after she is captured by the Nazis. She is again raped, she is beaten for days on end, and she is thrown into a locked pit and deprived of food and water. Only after a failed suicide attempt, and after she is forcibly made to drink schnapps, does she consent to work as an executioner.

Instead of portraying Tonka as the opportunistic collaborator she may have been, these scenes point to her unfathomable suffering as an explanation for her treason. According to a reviewer in the journal *Iskusstvo kino*, the history of the *actual* Tonka is horrific precisely because it recalls the "banality of evil": the real Antonina Makarova never showed remorse and even explained to her KGB interrogators that her work as an executioner was "just a job"—and not a particularly demanding one, at that—because she "did not know" the people she had killed. The series, however, takes away this most unsettling part of Tonka's story (her unrepentant killing of innocent people) by casting her cruelties as an effect of wartime abuses, largely by the Nazis.[33]

Like *The Cry of the Owl*, *Executioner* is more concerned with the impact of fascism than with a continued battle against it. At the same time, the myth of the "invisible front," prominently featured in both series, blurs the distinction between the war and its insidious continuation. In *The Cry of the Owl*, Mitin remarks that it is as if the war "has ended only yesterday" in Ostrov, and in *Executioner* the cat-and-mouse game between inspector and villain is framed as an extension of the war itself: Raisa still uses her trademark method of shooting her victims in the eyes, the villagers are murdered with a German Walther gun, and Cherkassov understands that the recent shots (metaphorically) "come from the war." Furthermore, the opening scenes of *Executioner*, in which the villagers cheerfully celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the victory over Nazism, merely underscore that, even two decades later, the fascist threat has not entirely abated. The heroes do not celebrate their victory as professionals until the final episode, after the identity of Raisa/Tonka has been uncovered. First the inspectors are congratulated personally by Leonid Brezhnev, who toasts "to our victory." Later, Cherkassov, together with his son and colleague, celebrate their achievement by singing war-themed songs. These moments mark the men's decisive triumph "on the invisible front."

Even though *The Cry of the Owl* and *Executioner* both deal with the delicate issue of collaboration, their applications of the myth of the "invisible front" have different undertones. The former series clings to an idea of a fascist-Western conspiracy while acknowledging the cruel and arbitrary persecutions of the NKVD under Stalin and the collaboration of opportunistic Soviet citizens during the

war. Collective guilt in the series functions as unmourned collective trauma, which explains the story's melancholy tone.[34] *Executioner*, however, while portraying atrocities carried out by Nazi collaborators in vivid color, is significantly more triumphant in its message. Tonka/Raisa's individual trauma (aesthetically highlighted in some scenes through her flashbacks to wartime brutalities) does not allow for a treatment of collaboration as a social problem.[35] In *The Cry of the Owl*, wartime collaboration raised questions about the social cohesion of a postwar community, but in *Executioner*, the myth of a struggle against fascist danger effectively solidifies the social harmony of a rural microcosm that allegorically signifies the Soviet community as a whole.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I analyzed the myth of a subterranean war against insidious fascist aggression as it appears in contemporary Russian historical television series. In these popular-cultural revisions of history, the Soviet triumph over Nazism is elevated from its specific place in history and transposed, in real or symbolic form, to other moments in time: to 1946, when fascist-separatist subversion was rooted out by a devoted Soviet inspector in Odessa (*Liquidation*); to 1947, when the restoration of the Third Reich through the acquisition of nuclear weapons was decisively forestalled (*Black Cats*); or to 1965, when a rural Russian community was cleansed of its insidious fascist poison and victory could finally be celebrated (*Executioner*). Here I turn to examine the political utility of a mythologized cultural memory that takes the struggle against fascism and its supposed allies beyond the contingencies of space and time.

Much has been written about Russia's memory wars with Ukraine, which tend to pivot on the Second World War and, in particular, the role of Stepan Bandera's Ukrainian Liberation Army (which revolted against Soviet power and, at least for a short period, allied itself with the Nazis).[36] By way of conclusion, I discuss a recent media event that illuminates the political dimensions of the cultural obsession with the "invisible front" and its relevance to Russia's ongoing (memory) war with Ukraine.

Aired on Rossiia One in March 2015 on the first anniversary of Crimea's annexation, Andrei Kondrashov's documentary *Crimea: Homeward Bound* (*Krym: Put na rodinu*) attracted a vast audience.[37] In two and a half hours of epic storytelling and spectacular visualizations, the film presented testimonials of pro-Russian fighters, an interview with Vladimir Putin, and slick reconstructions of the heroic efforts of the Crimean People's Defense Forces to protect the peninsula from "Ukrainian nationalists." Earlier, Putin had denied the direct participation of Russian troops in the conflict, but now he openly boasted that the annexation of Crimea had been a well-executed special operation that involved Russian GRU

troops, marines, and airborne forces and was personally overseen by the president himself.

The documentary emphasizes the strategic wit and personal involvement of the president, who is shown to be always one step ahead of the new government in Kiev. The image of the operation as a "triumph of security planning and execution, with Mr. Putin at its heart," taps into Putin's reputation as a former KGB officer.[38] As Stephen Norris pointed out, since the turn of the century, Putin's popularity has been boosted by his KGB career in Germany, which aligned him with the patriotic aura and exciting adventurism à la Stierlitz.[39] Thus, as Mark Lipovetskii wrote in 2005, "precisely the shadow of Stierlitz helped this faceless nobody to become the people's favorite. . . . Russian collective unconsciousness elected Stierlitz for President."[40]

Putin unwittingly gave further credence to the Cold War espionage myth when he stated in the interview with Kondrashov that the "real puppeteers" behind the Ukrainian regime change and subsequent events were "our American partners and friends." This notion is further elaborated in a scene that suggests that NATO-trained Ukrainian marines in Feodosia "were in touch with the US consulate-general in Kiev" and that "large sums of money were transferred to their commander's bank account." Many of these troops refused to surrender, and the film asserts that these marines later committed horrific crimes against the civilian population of the Donbass region, "as if that was precisely what they were trained to do."[41]

Notwithstanding the accusations of US intervention, President Putin's remarks in the interview were still fairly diplomatic, stressing the legal foundations for the Crimean referendum and the right of the peninsula's population to self-determination. Other interviewees—among them members of the Crimean defense forces, Russian Cossack volunteers, and Crimean citizens but also the prosecutor general of the new Crimean Republic—routinely cast the struggle for Crimean self-control as a fight against "fascists," "Bandera men" (*banderovtsy*), or "Nazis."

The alleged threat of "fascist" Ukrainian aggression (supposedly backed by Western money) is further dramatized through a scene about a "penal expedition" from Kiev. The film asserts that at the end of February 2014, Ukrainian troops, "hardened by Maidan" and "armed to the teeth," planned to come to Simferopol by train to crush the Crimean resistance. The reconstructions leading up to the train's arrival show volunteering blacksmiths forging shields for the Crimean resistance fighters. The images are accompanied by foreboding music and an ominous voice-over ("zero hour had arrived"), enforcing the impression of an imminent epic battle. In the subsequent reconstruction, a Crimean commander receives a text message from the leader of the Crimean resistance, Sergei Aksenov: "The train with Banderas [*poezd s Banderami*] is here." Notwithstanding

the dramatic buildup, the scene is ultimately anticlimactic: the train is empty, as the troops from Kiev supposedly backed off when they learned what awaited them. As the local commander comments in an interview, on that day "we closed our ranks, so that the fascists could not enter our land."

History is omnipresent in Kondrashov's documentary. The aforementioned scene paints the recent conflict along the lines of Soviet narratives about the need to bar the advance of fascism; other episodes emphasize the heroic role of the Red Army and the Black Sea Fleet during the Siege of Sevastopol, and President Putin explains that some of the Ukrainian marines agreed to sign the resignation papers that would formalize their surrender to Russia only after he had personally sent in Russian veterans of the Second World War to talk to them. These references to the Great Patriotic War go beyond simple historical analogy and work to present the recent Russian success in Crimea as a new phase in a paradigmatic struggle against fascist Western encroachments.

In Kondrashov's documentary the war is acting itself out in the present. As Eliot Borenstein cogently formulates it in his commentary on the Russian media coverage of the war in Ukraine: "The fighting in Ukraine [is] recast as a long-delayed sequel to World War II, with crypto-fascists emerging from their bunkers after seven decades of presumably cryogenic suspension."[42] It is no coincidence that in one of the documentary's reconstructions, the commander of the Crimean Defense Forces is warned about a train full of Banderas, a term that blends the historical figure and his alleged contemporary supporters (Banderovites). In her work on historical mythologies in post-Soviet Russia, Liudmila Mazur argued that a key "feature of myth is its ability to revive the past, bring it closer to the present, and pose as a viable option for the future."[43] Kondrashov's documentary pushes this procedure to the point where the boundaries separating the past, the present, and an anticipated future fascist threat become blurry.

The film borrows from the myth of "the invisible front" an emphasis on furtive fascist-Western collusion, a celebration of the supposed strategic supremacy of (former) Soviet intelligence agents, and a cultivation of a timeless Soviet/Russian triumphalism that forms the basis of a shared Russian identity. In the documentary's finale, the mythologized victory over fascism (rather than the right to self-determination emphasized by Putin) is what legitimizes the annexation of Crimea. Presenting the conflict over Crimea as a manifestation of Russia's perpetual struggle against (largely invisible) fascist-imperialist encroachments, it incorporates the pro-Russian inhabitants of Crimea into a mythic narrative of shared belonging.

In a particularly crass manner, *Crimea: Homeward Bound* thus subscribes to the same *post-sots* logic as the television series discussed earlier. The culture of *post-sots*, according to Lipovetskii, integrates the "post-Soviet experience into a 'well-worn' and familiar Soviet 'frame.'"[44] One may add to this that in all the

cases analyzed here—albeit to a different extent and with differing degrees of success—the ideological underpinning of *post-sots* resided precisely in its reliance on myth—that is, in its obfuscation of the incompatibility of Soviet cultural "frames" and incommensurable post-Soviet experiences.

## Notes

1. The history of Soviet espionage cinema goes back to the late 1940s and includes such classics as *Secret Agent* (*Podvig razvedchika*, 1947), *The Shield and The Sword* (*Shchit i mech*, 1968), and *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (*Semnadtsat mgnovenii vesny*, 1973).

2. Boris Dubin, "Pamiat, voina, pamiat o voine: Konstruirovanie proshlogo v sotsialnoi praktike poslednikh desiatiletii," *Otechestvennye zapiski* 43, no. 4 (2008), http://www.strana-oz.ru/2008/4/pamyat-voyna-pamyat-o-voyne-konstruirovanie-proshlogo-v-socialnoy-praktike-poslednih-desyatiletiy; Dina Khapaeva, "Triumphant Memory of the Perpetrators: Putin's Politics of Re-Stalinization," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 49, no. 1 (2016): 65; Dina Khapaeva, "Historical Memory in Post-Soviet Gothic Society," *Social Research* 76, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 368; Lev Gudkov, "'Pamiat o voine i massovaia identichnost rossiian,'" *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 40–41, nos. 2–3 (2005), https://magazines.gorky.media/nz/2005/2/pamyat-o-vojne-i-massovaya-identichnost-rossiyan.html.

3. Gudkov, "'Pamiat o voine.'"

4. Khapaeva, "Triumphant Memory of the Perpetrators," 65; Gudkov, "'Pamiat o voine.'"

5. Cf. Aleksandr Kustarev, "Mifologiia sovetskogo proshlogo," *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 89, no. 3 (2009), https://magazines.gorky.media/nz/2005/2/pamyat-o-vojne-i-massovaya-identichnost-rossiyan.html; Teddy J. Uldricks, "War, Politics and Memory: Russian Historians Reevaluate the Origins of World War II," *History & Memory* 21, no. 2 (2009): 60–82; see also Lisa Kirschenbaum, "Introduction: World War II in Soviet and Post-Soviet Memory," *Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 38, no. 2 (2011): 97–103.

6. Cf. Nina Tumarkin, "The Great Patriotic War as Myth and Memory," *European Review* 11, no. 4 (2003): 595–611; Amir Weiner, "The Making of a Dominant Myth: The Second World War and the Construction of Political Identities within the Soviet Polity," *Russian Review* 55, no. 4 (October 1996): 638–60.

7. For a general discussion of the cohesive, identity-shaping force of myth, see Duncan Bell, "Mythscapes: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity," *British Journal of Sociology* 54, no. 1 (March 2003): 63–81.

8. Cf. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 54.

9. On the popular cinephile website Kinopoisk, users gave the series an 8.4 out of 10.

10. Stephen Norris, "A Kiss for the KGB: Putin as Cinematic Hero," in *Russia's New fin de siècle*: *Contemporary Culture Between Past and Present*, ed. Birgit Beumers (London: Intellect Books, 2013), 163.

11. Mikhail Magid, "Retsenziia na film 'Likvidatsiia': Odesskie povstantsy v abrikosovyx dzhungliakh," Live Journal, December 31, 2007, http://shraibman.livejournal.com/10126.html?thread=80782.

12. Alexei Gorodetskii, "Slona ne zametili," Kinopoisk, December 25, 2015, https://www.kinopoisk.ru/user/6666134/comment/2336164/.

13. Mariia Galina, “Replika odessitki,” Booknik, February 26, 2008, http://booknik.ru/today/all/replika-odessitki/.

14. Mark Lipovetskii, *Paralogii: Transformatsii (post)modernistskogo diskursa v kul’ture 1920–2000-kh godov* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2008), 720–34.

15. Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 147, 150.

16. Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 147.

17. Eliade’s work is controversial for its reduction of myth to a phenomenon of archaic or primitive cultures and their supposed affinity for the sacred, among other reasons. Regardless, his analysis has inspired the work of a new generation of students of mythography.

18. Mircea Eliade, *Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 35.

19. Eliade, *Myth*, 33–48.

20. Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2014), 231–34. Cf. Roland Barthes’s analysis of myth as a form of signification “constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things.” Barthes further argues that “myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History.” Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage Books), 169, 178.

21. Andrei Arkhangelskii, “Urka-patriotizm,” *Kommersant*, March 10, 2014, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2422164.

22. Gudkov, “‘Pamiat o voine’”; Lev Gudkov, *Negativnaia identichnost: Statii 1997–2002 godov* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2004).

23. Surprisingly, this aspect of *Liquidation* was enthusiastically welcomed by the journalist and writer Alexander Prokhanov, who has a controversial reputation for his antisemitic and neo-Stalinist views. Aleksandr Prokhanov, “Kartina maslom v imperskoi rame,” *Zavtra* (blog), December 26, 2007, http://zavtra.ru/blogs/2007-12-2611.

24. Arkhangelskii, “Urka-patriotizm.”

25. Catharine Nepomnyashchii, “The Blockbuster Miniseries on Russian TV: Isaev-Shtirlits, the Ambiguous Hero of *Seventeen Moments in Spring*,” *Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 29, no. 3 (2002): 257.

26. Stephen Lovell, “In Search of an Ending: *Seventeen Moments* and the Seventies,” in *The Socialist Sixties: Crossing Borders in the Socialist World*, ed. Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 305.

27. Elena Prokhorova, “Fragmented Mythologies: Soviet TV Miniseries of the 1970s” (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2003), 811–22.

28. In its pre-détente view of Soviet-American relations, *Seventeen Moments* seems less aligned with the early 1970s than with the late 1960s.

29. Dmitrii Cheremnov, “Ia znaiu, chto vy delali v 1957-m,” Gazeta.ru, November 7, 2013, https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2013/11/07/a_5741193.shtml.

30. This voice, in the words of Elena Prokhorova, “often replace[d] characters’ words, thoughts, and memories.” See Prokhorova, “Fragmented Mythologies,” 84.

31. Gektor, “Ostrov nevedeniia,” Kinopoisk, November 12, 2013, https://www.kinopoisk.ru/user/53467/comment/1913109/.

32. Iurii Solovev, *Kratkii ocherk istorii sudoustroistva na brianskoi zemle* (Bryansk, Russia: Ladomir, 2014), 161.

33. Natalia Sirivlia, "Treugolnik Karpmana: 'Palach,' rezhisser Viacheslav Nikiforov," *Iskusstvo kino* 12 (December 2015), http://kinoart.ru/archive/2015/12/treugolnik-karpmana-palach-rezhisser-vyacheslav-nikiforov.

34. Cf. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

35. See Roger Luckhurst's remarks on the traumatic flashback in *The Trauma Question* (London: Routledge, 2008), 177–208.

36. See, for example, Iurii Ruban, "The 'Great Patriotic War' as a Weapon in the War against Ukraine," *Euromaidan Press*, April 22, 2015, http://euromaidanpress.com/2015/04/22/the-great-patriotic-war-as-a-weapon-in-the-war-against-ukraine/; Sergei Medvedev, "Russkii resentiment," *Otechestvennye zapiski* 63, no. 6 (2014), http://magazines.russ.ru/oz/2014/6/3m.html; and Eliot Borenstein, "Undead Ukrainian Nazis (and the Americans Who Love Them)," Plots against Russia, May 16, 2017, http://plotsagainstrussia.org/eb7nyuedu/2017/5/16/undead-ukrainian-nazis-and-the-americans-who-love-them (site discontinued).

37. In Moscow alone, three million viewers tuned in to the film. Andrei Sinitsyn, "Vladimir Putin oboznachil novyi etap i uroven samoizoliatsii Rossii," *Vedomosti*, March 16, 2015.

38. Neil MacFarquhar, "Putins Says He Weighed Nuclear Alert over Crimea," *New York Times*, March 15, 2015.

39. Norris, "A Kiss for the KGB."

40. Mark Lipovetskii, "Iskusstvo alibi: 'Semnadtsat mgnovenii vesny' v svete nashego opyta," *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 53, no. 3 (2007), http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2007/3/li16.html.

41. "Krym—Put na rodinu," Rossiia 24, March 18, 2015, video, 2:01:38, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-ttlj-T2Uc&ab_channel=АндрейАкименко.

42. Borenstein, "Undead Ukrainian Nazis."

43. Liudmila Mazur, "Golden Age Mythology and the Nostalgia of Catastrophes in Post-Soviet Russia," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 3–4 (2015): 232.

44. Lipovetskii, *Paralogii*, 725.

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