

# Seeing the Bigger Picture: Conspiratorial Revisions of World War II History in Recent Russian Cinema

Boris Noordenbos

The “cinematic remembrance” of World War II in contemporary Russia is a contested topic among scholars. Some see contemporary war cinema as the medium *par excellence* for the rehabilitation of a Soviet-style patriotism. Mark Lipovetskii, for instance, has argued that war films of the Putin era tend to rub up against socialist-realist discourses about World War II, displaying a characteristic insistence on heroic self-sacrifice, a thanatological eroticism, and a blanket demonization of enemies.<sup>1</sup> Stephen Norris, by contrast, contends that several popular films and series of the past fifteen years have radically revised “the myth of the Great Patriotic War” and have broken the silence around Soviet taboos, thus impeding blind celebrations of the Soviet victory over Nazism.<sup>2</sup>

While differing in their reading of the critical distance recent cinema has taken from Soviet traditions, Norris and Lipovetskii agree that popular films of the aughts have often picked up and recalibrated Soviet-era myths. This article, focusing on several recent productions for the big and small screen, delves deeper into the particular narrative and visual techniques employed to restructure Soviet stories and myths about World War II. I argue that recent films and series frequently reconfigure Soviet war myths through a conspiratorial recontextualization, which seizes upon the “hidden contexts” of these myths, or of the events they refer to.

I start my analysis with Andrei Maliukov’s *The Match* (*Match*, 2012), which provides new perspectives on a mythologized game of football played in Nazi-occupied Kiev. I analyze the film in tandem with a 2012 television documentary by Aleksei Kitaitsev on the same topic. I will then turn to other recent television series and feature films, in particular Sergei Ursuliak’s *Liquidation* (*Likvidatsiia*, 2007) and Aleksei Andrianov’s *Spy* (*Shpion*, 2012), whose restructurings of World War II history are close to those of the films about the Kiev football match. Though belonging to various genres and making different claims to historical truth and accuracy, these films and series all develop suspicion-filled plots that reframe well-known war episodes. Fundamental is the conspiratorial intuition in all these productions that what we know about the past is merely a part of larger designs that are concealed from us.

The films and series discussed here do not offer the “classic” conspiracy narrative of “a powerful, evil and clandestine group that aspires to global

I would like to express my gratitude to Irina Souch, Esther Peeren, and four anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

1. Mark Lipovetskii, *Paralogii: Transformatsii (post)modernistskogo diskursa v russkoi kul'ture 1920–2000-kh godov* (Moscow, 2008), 735–45.

2. Stephen M. Norris, *Blockbuster History in the New Russia: Movies, Memory, and Patriotism* (Bloomington, 2012), 119.

hegemony.”<sup>3</sup> But for their reformatting of history, they rely on a conspiratorial fascination with secret histories, on a reflex to privilege agency over chance, and on a tendency, characteristic of conspiracy theory, to subsume received accounts as pieces in overarching tales of foul play and cover-ups. The analysis of these productions benefits from the growing body of Anglophone and Russian scholarly work on conspiracy theory.

The study of conspiracy theory has recently developed into an academic field of its own. Early approaches were keen to dismiss conspiracy theories as indications of individual or collective pathologies, the classic example being Richard Hofstadter’s pioneering essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” (1964). Hofstadter observed, on both the far right and far left of the American political spectrum, a “paranoid” inclination, characterized by a view that history was driven by the secret master plans of the country’s enemies. This style of explanation based itself on facts, but at some point in the recital of the events, took a “leap into fantasy,” producing overly coherent interpretations that left “no room for mistakes, failures, or ambiguities.”<sup>4</sup>

Recent scholars such as Clare Birchall, Mark Fenster, Peter Knight, and Jovan Byford have scrutinized the dismissive undertones of the term “paranoid style,” as well as those of “conspiracy theory.”<sup>5</sup> They concede that skepticism and suspicion are, to some measure, important and desirable attitudes in, for instance, investigative journalism, political punditry, and cultural studies.<sup>6</sup> Examining the current flourishing of conspiratorial perspectives in mass media, on the internet, in popular culture, and in critical theory, scholars have recently picked up Hofstadter’s efforts to analyze conspiracy thinking as a *style*, “a way of seeing the world and of expressing oneself.”<sup>7</sup> They no longer endeavor, however (as Hofstadter evidently did) to demarcate and police the boundaries of reasonable explanation, or to account for the

3. Daniel Pipes, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From* (New York, 1997), 22.

4. Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” in Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York, 2008), 11, 36.

5. Hofstadter’s adjective “paranoid” was indeed a deliberately pejorative borrowing from clinical terminology, see Hofstadter “Paranoid Style,” 3–5. According to Hofstadter, who was a consensus historian and fervent defender of a pragmatic political culture, the totalizing explanations and demonizations of opponents made by those espousing the “paranoid style” dangerously thwarted the resolution of political conflict through mediation and compromise. However, as Peter Knight reminds us, “conspiracy theory” is not a neutral term either. It is habitually used to reject certain interpretations as being far-fetched, absurd, or dangerous: “If a conspiracy theory turns out to be true, it is re-described as astute historical analysis (and, conversely, if a historical speculation turns out to be unfounded, then it is often dismissed as a conspiracy theory),” in Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files* (London, 2000), 10.

6. These scholars, however, do not uncritically celebrate conspiratorial explanations as a desirable form of counterknowledge (as some other critics have been inclined to do). See for instance Fenster’s convincing discussion of the dangers of an excessively favorable reading of conspiracy theory as a discourse that has the potential to disrupt hegemonic explanations, see Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Minneapolis, 2008), 279–89.

7. Hofstadter, “Paranoid Style,” 4.

psychological deviations of the individual conspiracy theorist.<sup>8</sup> The thrust of their work is rather to explain the particular mechanisms and attractions of a western tradition of conspiratorial thought.

Conspiracy theories are proposed explanations of events which insist on the secret manipulations of history and politics by malevolent agents who act in concert to achieve their reprehensible plans.<sup>9</sup> These explanations (whether they are true or not) are driven by a fascination with intentionality, secrecy, and subterranean connections. To start with the first, Karl Popper, in his *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, famously remarked on agency and intentionality in the explanation of social phenomena. What he called the “conspiracy theory of society” tended to downplay the role of impersonal forces and “unintended repercussions” in social processes, insisting instead on all-determining human influence.<sup>10</sup> Apart from intentionality, conspiracy theories typically fixate on secrecy, and relegate political influence to a *hidden* realm of manipulations, thus construing, in their interpretation of events and developments, a doubling of reality. As Luc Boltanski has recently demonstrated, the conspiratorial outlook perceives the day-to-day surface realities of social and political life as mere shadows of the “real” dimensions of power, which are, according to conspiracy narratives, carefully kept out of sight.<sup>11</sup>

Lastly, the obsession with agency and secrecy is often combined with a thrust to connect apparently unrelated events and assimilate them into an encompassing narrative frame that reveals these hidden links.<sup>12</sup> This connective, integrative process of piecing together information also determines the accelerating rhythm of many conspiracy stories, and it often resists closure. As ever more events and people are subsumed into the conspiracy narrative, its scope keeps expanding, and typically the alleged conspiracy itself is, at some point in the story, revealed to be part of even larger schemes.<sup>13</sup> This impetus

8. A notable exception to the growing academic sensitivity for the fuzzy boundaries between healthy scrutiny and paranoia is Daniel Pipes, who is keen “to distinguish the solid ground of fact from the swamp of fantasy.” Pipes is confident that such a distinction can be made using three critical tools: “common sense, a knowledge of history, and the ability to recognize the distinct patterns of conspiracism,” in Pipes, *Conspiracy*, 38. For a critique of psychologism in research into conspiracy theories, see Jovan Byford’s article “Beyond Belief: The Social Psychology of Conspiracy Theories and the Study of Ideology,” in Charles Antaki and Susan Condor, eds., *Rhetoric, Ideology and Social Psychology: Essays in Honour of Michael Billig* (London, 2014), 83–94.

9. Brian L. Keeley, “Of Conspiracy Theories,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 96, no. 3 (March 1999): 116–18; Jovan Byford, *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction* (New York, 2011), 20–37; David Coady, “Conspiracy Theories and Official Stories,” in David Coady, ed., *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate* (Aldershot, Eng., 2006), 117.

10. Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London, 2002), 352.

11. Luc Boltanski, *Mysteries & Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Eng., 2014).

12. Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, 121.

13. As Fenster explains, “each act by the conspiracy is itself part of a larger conspiratorial project. In other words, each small revelation is to the larger interpretive project what each conspiratorial act is to the entire conspiracy,” see Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, 101. Clare Birchall, too, adduces ample examples of this procedure. She points to conspiracy theories that present Princess Diana’s death in 1997 as a cover-up for “something even bigger” and she reminds us that “[e]vents like September 11 are usually seen by conspiracy theorists as just one element in an ongoing, much larger plot that will only fully come to

to disclose ever wider horizons of manipulation guarantees the theory's endless expandability, but also marks its failure, as the revelation of "the ultimate secret" often remains "just out of reach."<sup>14</sup>

While by no means unique to the post-Soviet realm, conspiracy theory has in the twenty-first century progressively moved from the fringes of Russian culture and politics to its centers, where it has become a widely-used interpretative lens, employed to explain a diverse range of contemporary developments in culture, society, and politics.<sup>15</sup> Today, the Russian government routinely instrumentalizes conspiratorial skepticism to shape public opinion, and conspiracy theory has never been far away in official (and unofficial) explanations of the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, the Euromaidan Revolution, or even the doping scandals that preceded the 2016 Olympic Summer Games in Rio de Janeiro.<sup>16</sup> In their attempts to account for the current ubiquity of conspiratorial thought, scholars have pointed to the contemporary climate of political tensions between Russia and the west, as well as the distrust expressed in Russian media toward dissenting political voices and civil society in general. This situation comes with pervasive references in journalism and politics to "traitors," "secret puppeteers," and "foreign agents." As Eliot Borenstein suggests, such notions partake in a wider contemporary discourse of "plots against Russia," according to which Russia is continuously besieged by hostile, in many cases western, powers.<sup>17</sup>

Others have taken a wider view and have pointed to the uncertainties and losses wrought by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Important for the study of Russian conspiracy theories after 1991 has been the work of anthropologist Serguei Oushakine. He argues that these theories, knitting together seemingly unrelated people, objects, and events often produced new frames of meaning that were particularly welcome in the context of a post-Soviet sense of dislocation and fragmentation.<sup>18</sup> Marlene Laruelle has traced a similar conspiratorial thrust to impose sense on Russia's disorienting (recent) history. In nationalist circles, she explains, "[o]nly the idea of a plot and its presupposed

---

light in the future." Clare Birchall, *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip* (Oxford, 2006) 54, 62.

14. Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, 103.

15. In his opening speech to the conference *XII Malye Bannye Chteniia: Teoriia zagovora: Optika "istinogo" znaniia* (Saint Petersburg, April 22–23, 2016), Il'ia Kalinin characterized conspiracy theory precisely as a particular "optics" that has surprising applicability and helps to structure knowledge into apparently unified and understandable forms.

16. Kevin Platt argues that state-supported discourses of the Putin-era have increasingly co-opted conspiracy thinking, thereby depriving conspiracy theory of the critical edge it often had in the period immediately after the demise of communism, see Kevin M. F. Platt, "Flickkunstwerk Putin: Zagovor, ironiia, postmodernizm" (paper presented at the *XII Malye Bannye Chteniia* Conference, Saint Petersburg, April 22–23, 2016). Conference program available at [www.nlobooks.ru/node/7050](http://www.nlobooks.ru/node/7050) (last accessed March 20, 2018).

17. See Eliot Borenstein's blog post "What Not to Wear: Discarding the Emperor's New Clothes," *Plots Against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy After Socialism*, February 29, 2016, at [www.plotsagainstrussia.org/eb7nyuedu/2016/2/29/what-not-to-wear-discarding-the-emperors-new-clothes](http://www.plotsagainstrussia.org/eb7nyuedu/2016/2/29/what-not-to-wear-discarding-the-emperors-new-clothes) (last accessed March 20, 2018).

18. Serguei Alex Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia* (Ithaca, 2009), 67–78.

secret manipulations provide interpretive grids to explain the sudden disappearance of the Soviet Union, which was equated to the empire.”<sup>19</sup>

While these approaches present valuable contributions to the study of conspiracy theory and its flourishing in Russian culture, the focus is often on the more extreme examples of conspiratorial thought. Marlene Laruelle’s main case study is Anatolii Fomenko’s New Chronology movement. Fomenko purports that the conventionally-accepted chronology of global history is a deliberate falsification by the Catholic Church and west European countries, who since the Renaissance have been keen to downplay Russia’s leading role in history. Laruelle is right in asserting that the New Chronology Movement presents one of the “textbook cases” of conspiracy-based alternate history in Russia today, but it also is a relatively marginal example of conspiratorial historiography. Scholars often acknowledge that conspiracy theory has been appropriated in popular culture and in the Putin government’s strategies toward the media.<sup>20</sup> Their analyses, however, tend to address the extreme and marginal cases, and pay less attention to the more subtle and “mainstream” instances of conspiracy-based explanation.

Even the compelling work of Eliot Borenstein often engages with the excessive and sweeping examples. Borenstein has recently boosted research into Russian conspiracy theories with his book project *Plots Against Russia*, which he develops (at least in its initial phase) through weekly blog posts. Borenstein discusses myriad conspiracy-related phenomena, and he is particularly interested, as he explains in one of his posts, in theories that work as a “myth of origin” and that explain Russia’s historic “alternations between greatness and betrayal.”<sup>21</sup> As a result, Borenstein’s case studies often focus on the hobbyhorses of ultra-nationalist, neo-Eurasianist, or anti-Semitic subcultures, rather than on the percolation of “conspiracy” into mainstream culture.<sup>22</sup>

The cinematic reformattings of World War II that are examined here are significant precisely because they are *not* textbook cases of conspiracy theory, and because they target a wider public than the more “classic” examples of conspiratorial interpretation. As products of popular culture they aim to cater to as large an audience as possible, and their rewritings of history work more subtly than the theories discussed by Laruelle, Borenstein, and others. This article examines how these productions employ the discourse of conspiracy to restructure the history of World War II and to identify Russia’s supposed (historical) enemies. An analysis of these issues, I argue, requires a close reading

19. Marlène Laruelle, “Conspiracy and Alternate History in Russia: A Nationalist Equation for Success?,” *The Russian Review* 71, no. 4 (October 2012): 579.

20. See for instance Kevin M. F. Platt “Flickkunstwerk.”

21. Eliot Borenstein, “Punch-Drunk History,” *Plots Against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy After Socialism*, January 18, 2016, at [www.plotsagainstrussia.org/eb7nyuedu/2016/1/18/what-a-country](http://www.plotsagainstrussia.org/eb7nyuedu/2016/1/18/what-a-country) (last accessed March 20, 2018).

22. An important exception is Borenstein’s post of August 3, 2016, where he writes about “more mainstream entertainments that naturalize and domesticate conspiracy,” “Fascism with a Human Face,” *Plots Against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy After Socialism*, at [www.plotsagainstrussia.org/eb7nyuedu/2016/8/3/fascism-with-a-human-face](http://www.plotsagainstrussia.org/eb7nyuedu/2016/8/3/fascism-with-a-human-face) (last accessed March 20, 2018).

not only of the historical explanations offered by these films and series, but also of the narrative and visual devices they employ.

I am particularly interested in what I will call “metonymic re-employment,” a narrative technique that presents received historical knowledge, or well-worn historical myths, as mere pieces or effects of comprehensive, yet allegedly hidden designs. As the analyses below will show, such a device has various repercussions. Recontextualizing episodes from the war by portraying them as parts or results of a “bigger historical picture,” the discussed films and series amplify the supposed impact of events from World War II, and identify historical enemies in ways that often resonate with current political feuds. Metonymic re-employment also facilitates a rehabilitation of (discredited) war myths, implicitly proposing that these myths were not in fact false but simply failed to encompass the *whole* story. Episodes and myths from Soviet history are thus adapted and offered up to Russian audiences as “usable pasts” that contain valuable messages and have ongoing reverberations in the present. The examples discussed subscribe to very different generic traditions (historical drama, espionage adventure, historical documentary), but nevertheless share this inclination to recontextualize events from the war by speculatively presenting them as a parts of larger, secret histories.

### The Death Match

The release date of Andrei Maliukov’s state-sponsored feature film *The Match* (*Match*, 2012), about a famous game of football (soccer) played in Nazi-occupied Kiev, was loaded with symbolic significance.<sup>23</sup> Premiering in Russian cinemas on May 1, 2012, the film debuted seventy years after the events portrayed, six weeks before the start of the European Football Championship co-hosted by Poland and Ukraine, and eight days before the annual military parades of Victory Day. The film relates to all these events, as it develops controversial perspectives on Soviet football history, on the Great Patriotic War, and on Russia’s strained relations with Ukraine in the twenty-first century. *The Match* revives the myth of the so-called “death match” as it is depicted in many novelistic and journalistic accounts from before the 1990s.

The actual match was part of a Nazi-organized football competition, featuring local clubs and teams drawn from German and Hungarian military units. Taking place a little more than a year after the German invasion began, the tournament aimed to restore an atmosphere of normalcy in the city and to relax tensions between the occupiers and the local population. Towards the end of the season Flakelf, a German football team of Luftwaffe or anti-aircraft personnel, lost a match against the stellar team Start, made up of workers from a local bread factory, most of whom had played for Dynamo before the war. The Germans demanded an opportunity for revenge, and on August 9, 1942, they played once more against Start in Kiev’s Zenit stadium.

According to many Soviet versions, the Nazis pressured the Kiev players to lose, warning them that a victory of Slavic *Untermenschen* over Aryan players

23. The film received financial support from the Russian Ministry of Culture and from the Federal Fund for Social and Economic Support of the National Film Industry.

would not be left unpunished. The players, allegedly, ignored the threats and consciously gave their lives for a symbolic exhibition of Soviet superiority over Nazism. In these Soviet interpretations the actual arrest of a part of the team in the late summer of 1942, and the subsequent execution of footballers in the Syrets concentration camp near Kiev, was depicted as a direct retaliatory measure for Start's "self-sacrificing victory."

While newspaper articles on a heroic "death match" appeared already during the war, the authorities were initially uncomfortable with celebrating the Kiev players as heroes.<sup>24</sup> Playing sports with the enemy while compatriots died on the battlefield could be taken as a form of collaboration. In the Brezhnev era, however, the propagandistic potential of the story was increasingly exploited. The heroic account of the events developed into a widely-circulated propaganda story, exemplifying Soviet determination and self-sacrifice in the struggle against fascism. Several of the players were posthumously awarded medals for valor, and the episode was further popularized through monuments near the Dynamo and Zenit stadiums, as well as through novellas and film scenarios.

At the dramatic culmination of the novella *The Last Duel (Poslednii poedinok, 1959)* by Pëtr Severov and Naum Khalemskii, the goalkeeper Nikolai Rusevich (the pseudonym of the actual Mykola Trusevich) shouts to his executioners: "We won, bastards, on the football pitch, and we will win on the battle fields." As machine-gun bullets pierce his heart he defiantly shouts, "Red sport will never die!" (da zdravstuet krasnyi sport!).<sup>25</sup> The feature film *The Third Half (Tretii Taim, 1962)*, directed by Evgenii Karelov, leaves even less doubt about the team's self-chosen martyrdom. Here the footballers are POWs forcibly recruited from a Nazi detention camp to play an exhibition match against a professional German team. Well aware that winning will result in dire consequences, they beat the Germans regardless—and after their victory we see the entire team being instantly escorted through a cordon of heavily armed SS soldiers to certain death.

During Perestroika and in the 1990s, historians disproved these heroic stories as yet another instance of Soviet propaganda: contrary to what most Soviet versions asserted, there were no heavily armed German forces surrounding the field during the game. The Germans did not knock out the goalkeeper, or break the leg of one of the Kiev players, and no professional German players were sent by Göring from Berlin to reinforce Flakelf, as many variants of the tale asserted.<sup>26</sup> More importantly, the players were not threatened, and eyewitnesses even recall that after the match "the teams shook hands, posed for a photograph together, and went off home."<sup>27</sup> This particular photograph

24. The writer and correspondent Lev Kassil' coined the term "match smerti" in *Izvestiia* in 1943.

25. Petr Severov and Naum Khalemskii, *Poslednii poedinok: povest'* (Moscow, 1959), 253.

26. Aksel' Vartanian, "Futbol v gody voiny. Chast' piataia. Mifo 'match smerti,'" *Sport-Èkspress Futbol*, February 16, 2007, [www.sport-express.ru/newspaper/2007-02-16/9\\_1/](http://www.sport-express.ru/newspaper/2007-02-16/9_1/) (last accessed March 20, 2018); Sergei Kulida, "Razvenchannye mify 'matcha smerti,'" *Svoboda*, May 10, 2005, available at <http://archive.li/RuLX> (last accessed March 20, 2018).

27. James Riordan, "The Match of Death: Kiev, 9 August 1942," *Soccer and Society* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 88.

has been preserved, and it seems to conclusively undercut any version that insists on animosity between the teams or on death threats by the Gestapo: the picture shows carefree, smiling faces, with Kiev and German players amicably standing shoulder to shoulder.<sup>28</sup>

Also, it was revealed that the players were arrested not immediately after the match, but more than a week later. The reasons for their arrests remain obscure, but most likely they had nothing to do with the victory over Flakelf. The footballers may have been incarcerated due to their supposed association with the NKVD (Dynamo was originally its football club).<sup>29</sup> Alternatively, their suspected involvement in an act of sabotage in the bread factory where most of these players worked could have been the reason for their arrests.<sup>30</sup> Nine players were sent to the Syrets concentration camp, three of whom were executed half a year later, under circumstances that remain befogged. Moreover, contrary to the myth's insistence on the team's anti-fascist heroism, several players, including Georgii Timofeev and Lev Gundarov, openly worked as auxiliary policemen for the Nazi authorities. In 2005, the prosecution office in Hamburg, which had been investigating this case intermittently since the 1970s and had also spoken to one of the surviving players (Makar Goncharenko), concluded that there was no evidence that the deaths of the men were connected to the game against Flakelf.<sup>31</sup>

### Collusion and hush-ups in *The Match*

While this would seem to put a heroic interpretation of the football game to rest once and for all, *The Match* fully rehabilitates Soviet versions of the events, creating, in the words of Stephen Norris, a “contemporary recycling of the Soviet myth.”<sup>32</sup> The myth, however, is given a pronounced Hollywood gloss through the addition of battle scenes, eroticism, and a sentimental love story. Although the box-office revenue lagged far behind expectations, it is significant that the filmmakers and producers risked such a large investment (\$8 million according to the popular film database KinoPoisk) in this politically charged retelling of the death match tale.<sup>33</sup>

28. Kulida “Razvenchannye mify.”

29. Karel C. Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), 202–3.

30. Riordan, “Match,” 89–90.

31. Vartanian, “Futbol.”

32. Stephen M. Norris, “Andrei Maliukov: The Match (Match, 2012),” *Kinokultura* no. 39 (January 2013), at [www.kinokultura.com/2013/39r-match.shtml](http://www.kinokultura.com/2013/39r-match.shtml) (last accessed March 20, 2018)

33. The Ukrainian journalist Oksana Faryna felt that the ultimate tragedy behind the film was precisely the fact that the Ukrainian film industry lacked the financial means to make large productions that could counter or nuance the cinematic interpretations of history coming from Russia. *The Match*'s budget—partly financed by the Russian State Cinema Fund, which ensured a stellar cast, impressive special effects, and a soundtrack by a pop star—was on a scale simply not available to Ukrainian filmmakers, see James Marson, “‘Death-Match’: Why a Nazi-Era Soccer Movie is Making Ukraine Angry,” *Time*, May 31, 2012, at <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2116038,00.html> (last accessed March 20, 2018).



*The Match* presents a long prelude to the game and begins just before the German invasion. After Dynamo captain and goalkeeper Nikolai Ranevich (Sergei Bezrukov)—modelled after the actual Nikolai Trusevich—and his lover Anna (Elizaveta Boiarskaia) have spent the night together, a bombardment wakes them up. Once the news of the German invasion seeps through, Nikolai and his team reflexively sign up to be volunteers in the Red Army. We see how they fight bravely, but Nikolai and his friend Andrei are captured. From then on the film's focus alternates between their detention in a Nazi camp and developments in occupied Kiev. While one Kiev storyline chronicles the annihilation of city's Jewish community, another depicts the fate of Nikolai's fiancée Anna. Pavel Barazii, the collaborationist mayor of the city (played by Stanislav Boklan) has forced her into a relationship, and Anna uses the liaison with the mayor to successfully press for Nikolai's release. Meanwhile, Nikolai's other rival in love and sport, Georgii Shevtsov (Aleksandr Kobzar'), is in charge of sport affairs in the occupied city. He has assembled a team of Ukrainian nationalists called Rukh, and also organizes a football competition. Finally, an hour and a half into the film, this tournament culminates in the fateful match between Start and the German team Flakelf. Its depiction repeats many standard features of the Soviet myth. For the game, the Gestapo flies in professional players from Germany, armed SS troops surround and guard the football field, the Germans play aggressively, and the referee is biased towards Flakelf. *The Match* also leaves no doubt that the players consciously gave their lives for their victory. During the break, Ranevich persuades his teammates, with tears in his eyes, that "there are things worth dying for."

While *The Match* reinvigorates the tale's customary elements, it also invests the Soviet myth with a new, nationalist content of deep contemporary significance. Early in the film, when German troops invade Kiev, we see how they are being warmly received by Ukrainian crowds, many of whom wave Nazi flags and carry portraits of Hitler. Women in folk Ukrainian dress welcome the Nazi generals with bread and salt, and throughout the film almost all the Nazi sympathizers and collaborators speak Ukrainian, which is dubbed in Russian, once more underscoring their foreignness. Visual elements assist to hammer in the film's message of Ukrainian collaboration, for instance in those instances when the camera lingers on the bandages of the uniforms of Ukrainian auxiliary police, bringing into sharp focus the blue and yellow colors of the Ukrainian flag.<sup>34</sup>

34. The film's portrayal of Ukrainians collectively as Nazi collaborators and sympathizers caused a stir in Ukraine. The Ukrainian State Film Agency initially planned to ban the film, on grounds that it would promote ethnic strife. When, after due consideration, it was released, screenings were restricted to after 6 pm, and to audiences older than 18. Members of the nationalist party Svoboda nevertheless disrupted the premiere, making it clear that they considered the film an aggressive cultural product from the "Moscovite occupiers." Marson, "Death Match." Politicians, too, entered the fray. Andrei Parubii, Ukrainian Member of Parliament representing the Fatherland Party, reacted to Maliukov's repeated statement that the film was merely about "love and football" and abstained from politics. Parubii contended that the romantic and sport themes in the film were nothing but a background "for this propaganda from the Russian world." In his view, the film was motivated precisely "to show that every man in Ukrainian dress is a

Collaboration and collusion play a major role in the portrayal of the events leading up to the match. The main traitor is Nikolai's rival, the opportunistic Rukh captain and organizer of the tournament Georgii Shevtsov (modelled after the actual Georgii Shvetsov). When the Nazi leadership set themselves the secret task "to organize our victory," as they put it, Shevtsov suggests that they may use Anna to blackmail Ranevich into losing the game. On the eve of the match the Gestapo, indeed, not only threaten to kill the players if they win, but also tell Ranevich they will murder Anna if he does not cooperate with their efforts to fix the outcome of the game.

While the Soviet film *The Third Half* depicted primarily an ideological struggle (showing unscrupulous fascists and collaborating religious devotees), *The Match*, allotting a central role to Nazi-Ukrainian collaboration, anachronistically reinterprets the events along ethno-linguistic lines: while most speakers of Ukrainian are depicted as Nazi sympathizers, the Start players are, notwithstanding their Ukrainian accents, Russified and offered up for identification with contemporary Russian audiences. The film deliberately overlooks the complex issues of the "ethnicity" and "nationality" of Russian-speaking Kievans during the Soviet era, a problem that stands out in the film's motto, "Victory is ours" (*pobeda za nami*). The phrase cannot but raise the question of who is this victorious "we." The Kiev players? Or also contemporary generations of Russian (and Ukrainian?) viewers?

This issue of the players' "national" status is only partially solved by stressing their self-sacrificing commitment to the Soviet motherland, for instance in the scene in which the players collectively enlist as Red Army volunteers. Notwithstanding the ambiguous ethnic or national status of the actual players, historical guilt is unequivocally ascribed to ethnically-defined enemies, both internal and external—not least to treacherous Ukrainian nationalists. At the same time, the status of victims or, more precisely, heroic martyrs is saved for "our" "Soviet Russian" players. Ukrainian historical guilt is given additional moral weight through the addition of the Jewish storyline, which focuses on the deportation of the Jews to the killing grounds of Babi Yar. The horrific slaughter itself is portrayed through the use of fairly kitsch Holocaust iconography, including long takes of piles of shoes and dead bodies.

The film thus reformats the Soviet myth of the death match for Russia's current "memory wars" with Ukraine. Drawing parallels between the fate of the Jews and the martyrdom of the players, *The Match* evidently aims to discredit nationalist and anti-Russian sentiments in present-day Ukraine. The shared suffering of "Russians" and Jews at the hands of German Nazis and local nationalists underlines the dangers of Ukrainians' treacherous

---

collaborator." Oleksandr Ivancheskul, "Parubii: fil'm 'Match'—eto propaganda russkogo mira," *Obozrevatel'*, May 9, 2012 at [www.obozrevatel.com/politics/74350-parubij-film-match-eto-propaganda-russkogo-mira.htm](http://www.obozrevatel.com/politics/74350-parubij-film-match-eto-propaganda-russkogo-mira.htm) (last accessed March 20, 2018). In 2014, when Russian-Ukrainian relations had reached a new low due to the war in the Donbass and the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine's State Film Agency prohibited the dissemination and screening of *The Match*. The agency's chairman described the film as one of "the most odious examples of contemporary Russian propaganda" in the Ukrainian newspaper *Glavnoe* on September 30, 2014.

alignments with Moscow's adversaries.<sup>35</sup> In the light of Russia's soured relations with Ukraine ever since the Orange Revolution, it is indeed hard to miss the resonances with contemporary patriotic discourses in Russia that cast Ukrainian nationalists as puppets in the hands of evil western forces.<sup>36</sup>

Certainly, not all speakers of Ukrainian are collaborating nationalists in *The Match*. Some Ukrainians, including a bona fide janitor, turn a blind eye to Anna when she takes care of an orphaned Jewish girl, feeding and protecting her from further persecution by the murderous auxiliary police. Even the collaborationist mayor Barazii, to whom Anna has been married off, repents his treason at the film's end and turns against the German authorities. Barazii confesses to Anna that the idea of a "free Ukraine" (vil'na Ukraina) under German auspices has failed. Anna's attitude towards the mayor now softens, and she begins, for the first time, to use the familiar form in addressing him. Rapprochement, it seems, is possible, but only if Ukrainians give up their misplaced and treacherous ambitions for independence.

While *The Match's* emphasis on Nazi-Ukrainian collusion and the Germans' secret attempt to orchestrate their victory already suggests a conspiratorial orientation, we must turn to the film's finale to grasp its full use of conspiracy theory. After the Kiev team's victory, titles appear: "Nikolai and his comrades were given seven more happy days of life." This text implies that the players were killed seven days after the game, but then come words with a different message: "In 2005 the prosecutor's office in Hamburg put an end to its twenty-year death match case. The German investigators found no connection between the execution of the football players of Dynamo and their victory over Flakelf in that match." Coming just after the film's tragic ending, this message contrasts sharply with the story we have just seen: everything in the film unambiguously points to the interpretation that the players were executed precisely because of their victory against Flakelf. What to make, then, of this reference to the contradictory results of the Hamburg investigation? Is

35. This shared suffering is underlined through the story of an orphaned Jewish girl who is secretly cared for by Anna. Another Jew, Mikhail (Vladimir Nevel'skii), a friend of the Dynamo players, also loses his entire family to the Nazi slaughter. The Start players later hide him among their ranks, telling the Nazi authorities he is Polish. These scenes recycle a motif of "interethnic harmony" described by Jeremy Hicks in his analysis of Mark Donskoi's film *The Unvanquished* (*Nepokorenyye*, 1945). "Mark Donskoi's Reconstruction of Babyi Iar: The Unvanquished," in Jeremy Hicks, *First Films of the Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and the Genocide of the Jews, 1938–1946* (Pittsburgh, 2012), 135. *The Unvanquished* includes (surprisingly early) depictions of compassion among Soviet citizens for Jewish suffering, and some of its scenes anticipate, as Hicks points out, the trope of "the Jewish child hidden by Gentile resisters, in essence the story of Anne Frank." *Ibid.*, 140. While *The Match* closely replicates such visions of parallel Soviet-Jewish victimhood as well as Soviet resistance against the prosecution of Jews, Maliukov's film also postulates new moral and political dichotomies, not least between faithful Soviet citizens and devious Ukrainian nationalists.

36. Eliot Borenstein, "The Devil Next Door," *Plots Against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy After Socialism*, April 24, 2016 at [www.plotsagainstrussia.org/eb7nyuedu/2017/4/24/the-devil-next-door](http://www.plotsagainstrussia.org/eb7nyuedu/2017/4/24/the-devil-next-door) (last accessed March 20, 2018). See also Eliot Borenstein, "Punch-Drunk History," *Plots Against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy After Socialism*, January 18, 2016 at [www.plotsagainstrussia.org/eb7nyuedu/2016/1/18/what-a-country](http://www.plotsagainstrussia.org/eb7nyuedu/2016/1/18/what-a-country) (last accessed March 20, 2018).

it intended to be a corrective to the film's story, or is it the film that is meant to correct the conclusions of Hamburg inquiry?

The latter scenario is more plausible, especially in light of an earlier scene. When Ranevich is summoned to the Gestapo headquarters on the evening before the match, he is warned by one of the Nazi officials: "None of your players will live to the end of the war. . . . They will not die as heroes. We will kill them one by one. And there will be nothing that links their deaths to this football match." The scene testifies to a conspiratorial insistence on hidden links and nefarious intentions, according to which the players' apparently unconnected deaths were actually part of a carefully-orchestrated plan by the Gestapo. The scenario proposed by *The Match* thus subscribes to the irrefutable and unfalsifiable logic of conspiracy theory: the apparent absence of connections between the match and the players' deaths is, allegedly, a result of the Nazis' efforts to efface the traces of this crime;<sup>37</sup> The lack of evidence itself is made to support a theory in which the culprits benefited from hiding such evidence.<sup>38</sup>

It is essential that, according to the version presented in the film, the Nazis not merely organized the death of the football players, but also endeavored to cover up their crime and block historical truth-seeking by later generations of historians. In proposing such a theory, *The Match*, both on the story level and (as we shall see shortly) through its imagery, teaches its viewers that what we think we know about historical events is only a fragment of a "bigger picture" of insidious manipulation. In order to grasp the full scale of the Nazis' carefully-planned crime, *The Match* suggests, one must extend one's interpretive scope and see how apparently unconnected events fit in a larger, unified scheme. Indeed, the film implicitly invites viewers to widen the story's speculative horizon even further. From the theory suggested in *The Match* that there was a Nazi plan to kill the players (a scheme subsequently covered-up by the Gestapo), one has merely to take a small step to arrive at other speculations that cast the 2005 Hamburg investigation as a whitewash. On the one hand, the message conveyed through the final reference to the Hamburg investigation resonates with recent Russian narratives about western "foul play," allegedly committed precisely through its well-respected institutions of justice and arbitration.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, the titles at the film's finale teach the audience

37. See Keeley, "Of Conspiracy Theories," 121, on the unfalsifiable logic of conspiracy theories.

38. As Jovan Byford has pointed out, conspiracy theories often incline towards a paradoxical logic, in which "the lack of proof about a plot, or any positive proof against its existence, is turned around and taken as evidence of the craftiness of the secret cabal behind the conspiracy and as confirmation of its ability to conceal its machinations," in Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, 36. Such rhetorical gestures make it almost impossible to contest conspiratorial explanations.

39. The tenor of the film corresponds with that of more recent Russian narratives about western "foul play." In 2016 and 2017, some Russian media outlets reported, in a marked conspiratorial tone, on the ban of Russian athletes from the Olympic Summer Games of 2016 in Rio de Janeiro. A few months after the games, the Petersburg-based Channel 5, for instance, revealed an "Olympic conspiracy against Russia." The WADA report of July of that year about a state-run Russian doping program, as well as the subsequent efforts by various sports authorities to issue a blanket ban on Russian athletes, were, according

the basic conspiratorial lesson that historical events cannot be fully understood unless one finds out what our enemies have hidden from sight.

### Re-plotting the Story

Before returning to *The Match*, and to the visual means it employs to support its fascination with hidden contexts and manipulations, we must consider another recent reworking of the myth. On April 16, 2013, Rossiia 1 broadcast a documentary entitled *Executed for Victory?: The Truth about the Death Match (Za pobedu rasstrel? Pravda o matche smerti)*. The documentary, written by Ol'ga Bulle and Liliana Grebneva and directed by Aleksei Kitaitsev, was aired again in spring 2014 on various channels. Though obviously inspired by Maliukov's film, the documentary's speculations are wilder than anything proposed by *The Match*. Featuring Ukrainian and Russian historians and sport commentators, and presenting historical footage as well as snippets from *The Third Half*, the film steadily builds up clues that culminate in its major revelation. The mystery-filled voiceover confides that "the players of Dynamo had a special, secret mission in occupied Kiev." Seizing upon Dynamo's status as the football club of the NKVD, the film speculates that all the players were actually infiltrators on assignment with the NKVD: the team was "a well-organized intelligence unit that stayed in occupied Kiev for expanding subversive activities against the fascists." A pivotal scene in the film shows a rotating computer animation of a building in Kiev's "Kuznechnaia Street" (actually Gor'kii Street since 1936) that allegedly hosted the recruitment agency of the Abwehr, as well as an underground Soviet intelligence unit. As the proximity of these antagonistic intelligence centers is shown, the voiceover exclaims: "How is that possible!?"

Here, as often in the "hyperactive semiosis" of the conspiracy theory, the guiding principle is "[t]he hope—but also the fear— . . . that every seemingly insignificant fact or detail might turn out to be a clue to a larger plot, if only one could see the hidden connections."<sup>40</sup> This presumption of overarching connectedness allows the documentary to give a new twist to the fact that some of the Start players worked for the Nazi authorities. Collaboration with the Nazis, the film argues, was part of an all-encompassing scheme hatched by the NKVD in Moscow: the NKVD had their own men in the Abwehr and

---

to the channel, part of a larger western attempt to torpedo Russia's success at the games. In the beginning of 2017, the Russian sport channel Match TV launched a new weekly program entitled "Conspiracy in Sport" (*Sportivnyi zagovor*), in which the presenter, Kirill Kiknadze, scrutinized and triumphantly disproved allegations of systemic state-dictated doping programs in Russian sport. The program also pointed to western doping scandals which had been treated leniently by the same sport authorities that had been eager to ban Russia from the Rio Olympics. As in *The Match*, in these media reports the sportive test of strength is not merely a metaphor for military and political conflict (as it has been in many other contexts), it becomes a stake precisely *in* such conflicts. Sport is unveiled as an extension of (cold) war and ideological conflict, and its circumstances and outcomes are, according to these accounts, secretly doctored by unfair western institutions keen to stain Russia's glory.

40. Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, 95; Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, 204.

in the *Polizei*, and they secretly passed on information to Soviet intelligence agents in Kuznechnaia Street.

Speeding up its torrent of revelations and hypotheses, and expanding its conspiratorial scope ever further, the documentary finally suggests that the players' bread deliveries to the Germans, from the bakery where most of them worked, provided the Soviet authorities with invaluable information about every movement of the German military. The voiceover posits that Stalin must have learned about the precise date of the German attack on Stalingrad through the information collected by none other than the Start players. They, allegedly, passed on their observations to a Soviet spy in the Abwehr, who had a direct line to the supreme commander. Without the footballers, the outcome of this crucial battle in the war could have been different: "If this information would not have been there, the course of the Battle of Stalingrad could have been entirely different." This suggestion was taken even further on the website of Rossiia 1. Announcing the documentary, the channel stated that the film revealed how "the outcome of the entire Great Patriotic War" could have been different had the footballers not done what they secretly did. In the film itself, the voiceover's final comment repeats the motto of Maliukov's film: "The death match *did* take place [*match smerti vsë-taki sostoialsia*], and in it victory was ours."<sup>41</sup>

It is important to see that the conspiratorial account of *Executed for Victory?* relies on a metonymic structure of signification. Conspiracy theorists tend to obsess over details, and speculate about the connections of seemingly arbitrary events to comprehensive designs. *Executed for Victory?* indeed takes great pains to reveal small events as *pieces* or *effects* of an all-encompassing plot: every activity by the players—work in the bread factory, service as bodyguard for Kiev's mayor, the playing of football—is exposed as a meticulously planned piece of the overarching espionage puzzle that the documentary gradually reveals to the viewer. Even more strongly, the documentary exhibits the characteristic tendency of conspiracy theories to transform, as Susan Harding and Kathleen Stewart submit, "metaphors into metonymies."<sup>42</sup> Note that in its original Soviet versions, the death match tale had a strongly symbolic or metaphorical significance. The triumph in the football game here *figuratively* represented the self-sacrificing victory of the Soviet army over the Germans. This metaphor of "football as war" is indeed emphasized throughout *The Third Half*: in the film the game takes place on June 22, 1942 (instead of August 9, the actual date of the match), and the members of the Gestapo repeatedly stress the symbolic importance of this date, marking one year to the day from the beginning of Operation Barbarossa: "Today it is the anniversary of the war. This game has a symbolic meaning."

The documentary, by contrast, transforms the metaphoric tale into a metonymic piece of a ramified conspiratorial constellation. The voiceover in

41. This material on Rossiia 1 is available online at [https://russia.tv/brand/show/brand\\_id/41965/](https://russia.tv/brand/show/brand_id/41965/) (last accessed May 3, 2018).

42. Susan Harding and Kathleen Stewart, "Anxieties of Influence: Conspiracy Theory and Therapeutic Culture in Millennial America," in Harry G. West and Todd Sanders, eds., *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order* (Durham, 2003), 280.

*Executed for Victory?* leaves no doubt about this reinterpretation: “The death match was altogether only a part of the game the Soviet team was playing in Kiev in 1942, and [this game] took place not only on the football pitch.”<sup>43</sup> A similar mechanism guides *The Match*, where the focus is also not primarily on the “football as war” metaphor (although it is present), but rather on the intricacies of collaboration, treason, and cover-ups preceding and following the game. The match itself becomes one episode in a chain of events that begins a year earlier and that might extend into the present, as it suggests, that even the contemporary lack of proof for the Nazis’ nefarious plot, as seen above, is the result of their intent to hide it.

In *The Match*, not only the plot, but also the imagery and camera work are involved in this metonymic conspiratorial re-employment. Evocative is the moment when a group photograph is taken of the Start and Flakelf players. The scene converses with those critics of the myth who have pointed to the famous photograph of both teams taken directly after the “death match,” a picture showing smiling faces instead of players facing certain death. In *The Match*, the photo shoot takes place *before* the game, at the very moment when the players discover that they will be executed if they win. This information comes from Ranevich, who has returned from the Gestapo headquarters where he had been held and threatened. He arrives late to the stadium, just in time to join the group photograph. As his news about the Nazi threats spreads by word of mouth among the Kiev players, the camera clicks. At this moment, many faces still express untroubled anticipation of an exciting game of football, while those in the know look pensive or sad. The message here is clear: the historical photograph, often adduced to disprove the players’ martyrdom, cannot unseat the heroic tale. See: (Figures 1 and 2).

The framing of the scene is crucial. We follow Ranevich as he enters the stadium. After he joins the players posing for the photograph, the film camera halts before the group and takes its position beside the photographer, who initially remains off-screen. The German and Kiev players are mingled amongst each other, with some of them squatting in front of the group. The film’s frame replicates the composition of the historical photograph quite accurately, but when the camera slowly begins to retreat, the composition and meaning of the well-known image change. The receding camera moves slightly to the right, revealing the photographer. The deep focus also allows us to see, in one frame with the players, armed German troops in the background, fencing off the football pitch. The historical image is not merely narratively re-contextualized (by its being taken before, instead of after, the match), but also visually reframed. Showing German soldiers and massive Nazi banners in the back, the film here integrates the historical picture—a major piece of evidence *against* the truthfulness of the death match tale—into an image that cements and extends the myth.

The most dramatic effect of the gradually enlarging image, however, is its exposure of a colossal portrait of Hitler adorning the stadium’s entrance. As the camera backs up and takes a wider view, Hitler’s stern face ends up

43. *Rossia 1*, available online at [https://russia.tv/brand/show/brand\\_id/41965/](https://russia.tv/brand/show/brand_id/41965/) (last accessed May 3, 2018).



Figure 1. Source: <https://www.footboom.com/ukrainian/news/1494054789-v-kiyev-pochtili-pamjat-uchastnikov-matcha-smerti-foto.html>. The author of this famous photograph is unknown, although some sources credit the referee of the match as the photographer. After the war a copy of the photo was kept in the archive of the journalist Igor' Kononchuk.



Figure 2. A still from *The Match* (dir. Andrei Maliukov, film studio: Rekun Cinema, 2012).



right above the posing players, looking straight into the camera. It is hard not to see in this composition a suggestion of menacing conspiratorial omniscience: Hitler almost literally oversees, from behind the players' backs, the fatal match. The image visually exhibits the basic conspiratorial assumption of agency and intentionality, the idea that events, even the smallest ones, are masterminded by an individual, personal force. Byford, relying on Karl Popper, argues that "[t]he conspiracy theorist treats collective, symbolic entities as having 'a kind of group-personality' and regards them as 'conspiring agents, just as if they were individual men.'"<sup>44</sup> The filmmakers would probably not go so far as to claim that Hitler was personally involved in the events portrayed, but they cannot resist, it seems, the conspiratorial desire to give a face to those anonymous forces allegedly plotting against "our community."

Speculating about what falls outside the frame, *The Match* embeds archival material into a narratively and visually more comprehensive account of the events: the film insists that what we know and "see" of history is only partial. It is a fragment, moreover, that has been "framed" in such a way as to reduce the amount of suspicion it might be subjected to by future generations. The real, yet hidden, historical machinations of power, by contrast, work outside these frames, and it is only, *The Match* implies, by shedding light on these wider contexts of manipulation and foul play that one can grasp the full significance of past events. The gradually-enlarging film frame in *The Match*, then, visually exemplifies what conspiracy narratives essentially do: they attribute responsibility and agency to personified forces, and they depict received knowledge as metonymic pieces of a speculative "bigger picture," while an obsessive drive to connect facilitates an integration of seemingly unrelated minutiae into (allegedly) hidden designs. Even if *The Match* does not present a classic conspiracy theory, the existing body of scholarly work on conspiracy theories helps us to see how the historical revisionism of this film, as well as that of *Executed for Victory?*, is governed by the explanatory logic, the narrative structures, and the visual poetics of the conspiratorial outlook.

The makers of *The Match* have been quick to stress that they did not strive for historical accuracy or political engagement and have instead emphasized the film's fictional qualities and entertainment status. Maliukov told Kirill Reshetnikov in an interview for *Vzgliad* that "we are not making a documentary or a popular scientific film . . . I had a different task—I shot a film about love and football. The political side of it did not interest me at all." It is precisely this purported adherence to the seemingly innocent domain of popular culture—with its preference for historical drama, sport, romance, and "stellar" actors—that provides leeway for re-interpretations of twentieth-century history that are brimming with political implications.<sup>45</sup> While *Executed for Victory?* still supported its assertions with the accounts of historians and eyewitnesses, *The Match*, which as a dramatization need not prove its claims,

44. Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, 72.

45. In this respect, *The Match* subscribes to the contemporary genre of what Tatiana Smorodinskaya calls "patriotic 'light' war movies." Tatiana Smorodinskaya, "The Fathers' War through the Sons' Lens," in Helena Goscilo and Yana Hashamova, eds., *Cinepatermy: Fathers and Sons in Soviet and Post-Soviet Film* (Bloomington, 2010), 108.

can freely imply that all the players were killed and that the Nazis carefully covered their tracks. While insisting on *The Match*'s entertainment value, the filmmakers simultaneously and meticulously reframe historical events and converse polemically, yet implicitly, with archival material and other accounts critical of the death match story.<sup>46</sup>

### Stories from the “Invisible Front”

The conspiratorial re-plotment of episodes and myths from World War II is by no means limited to the two films discussed above. Other recent cinema and television productions also insist on hidden dimensions of agency and present well-known war stories as ciphers implicated in larger, secret narratives. Many of these films and series rely, to varying extents and with different effects, on a Soviet tradition of spy thrillers set during the war, from which they take the idea that the history of open warfare is secondary to a more consequential, yet hidden history of wartime intrigue.<sup>47</sup> The genre's reverberations are evident in Kitaitsev's documentary *Executed for Victory?*, which reinvents the players as spies who risk their lives behind enemy lines. But *The Match*, too, while not a spy thriller, shares with the genre an emphasis on the secret contexts of events from World War II, and a fascination with the intrigue as the principle explanation for historical events. To understand how contemporary productions re-employ the spy thriller's tropes and assumptions, we must discuss several other recent Russian re-imaginings of war history, as well as their Soviet predecessors.

The Russian popularity of the spy adventure, of course, owes much to the monumental twelve-part television series *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (*Semnadtsat' mgnovenii vesny*, 1973), directed by Tat'iana Lioznova and based on Iulian Semenov's spy novel of the same title. *Seventeen Moments* was, according to Steven Lovell, “the biggest cult phenomenon in the history of Soviet (and indeed Russian) television.”<sup>48</sup> As is well known, the series, set during the last months of World War II, chronicles the adventures of a mole, the Soviet spy Maksim Isaev, who has infiltrated the Nazi establishment as SS-Standartenführer Otto von Stierlitz. His bosses in the GRU have tasked him to examine and sabotage the secret plans for a peace treaty between the United States and Germany that would, if realized, treacherously cold-shoulder the Soviet Union.

46. As often in conspiratorial approaches, *The Match* displays an inconsistent commitment to the fictional and documentary mode. Mark Fenster points out that “[n]umerous conspiracy-based novels, feature films, and television series include in their fiction thrillers real people, places, and events, while putatively nonfiction work of actual conspiracy theorists typically conjures up unproven, often quite fanciful narratives to explain real historical developments.” Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, 119–20.

47. See for instance the miniseries *The Shield and the Sword* by Vladimir Basov (*Shchit i mech*, 1968), but also films from the Stalin era like *Secret Agent* by Boris Barnet (*Podvig razvedchika*, 1947).

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

*Seventeen Moments* was more concerned with the (beginning of) the Cold War than the final months of World War II.<sup>49</sup> It interpreted contemporary Cold War realities as having resulted from the secret rapprochement, already put in place before the war's end, between German fascism and American imperialism. The series thus imaginatively amplified the impact of events from World War II, and embedded them into a bigger, yet allegedly hidden, picture of twentieth-century history, that included Soviet-American antagonism.

The main point of convergence among *Executed for Victory?*, *The Match*, and the narratives presented in *Seventeen Moments*, as well as other Soviet spy thrillers, is their insistence that the outcome, impact, or effects of World War II are a result of actions taken in an obscured realm of manipulations and conspiracies that continue to resonate in the present. In *The Match* the incongruent details of the death match tale made sense only in light of a German intrigue that muddled historical enquiry up through today, and Kitaitsev's documentary, by linking the death match story to the Battle of Stalingrad, attributed even larger implications to the story it uncovered.

The new millennium has seen a booming interest in war-time spy thrillers, many of which take inspiration from *Seventeen Moments of Spring* or the renowned police procedural *The Meeting Place Cannot Be Changed* (*Mesto vstrechi izmenit' nel'zia*) directed by Stanislav Govorukhin and released in 1979. Like the reformattings of the death match story, these recent films and series reinvent the contexts of historical events and present well-known histories as the pivots of larger tales of intrigue and collusion still waiting to be told.

The most popular and critically acclaimed work has been Sergei Ursuliak's fourteen-part television series *Liquidation* (*Likvidatsiia*, 2007). Set in a nostalgically-depicted Odessa of 1946, this retro-style detective intrigue reproduces the feel of a Soviet-era spy movie or a police procedural. Partly based on historical facts, it documents the efforts of Odessa's criminal investigation department to control the rampant gangs who murder, steal, and smuggle quite freely amid the chaos of the war's aftermath. The Odessa Military District is headed by Marshal Georgii Zhukov, sent to Odessa after his fall from favor with Stalin in spring 1946. The series' hero, however, is the streetwise local inspector David Gotsman. Thanks to him, it is revealed that Odessa's criminal underground is run by an Abwehr-trained anti-Soviet intelligence agent, who has now concealed himself among Odessa's police inspectors.

49. While the series obviously fitted the cold-war context (and conveyed a somewhat anachronistic, pre-détente view of Soviet-American relations), it also contained subversive undertones. Stierlitz's contemplative nature and his refined professional instinct for what could and could not be said under the Nazi regime, for instance, reminded many viewers of the plight of the intellectual within Soviet authoritarian society. For other viewers, the series provided a tantalizing window on the otherwise curtained-off "bourgeois" luxuries of the west. They were gripped by the easygoing atmosphere of a German pub, the conveniences of Stierlitz's cozy house in Babelsberg, his classy Mercedes, details all meticulously registered in long takes, see Mark Lipovetskii, "Iskusstvo alibi: 'Semnadsat' mgnovenii vesny' v svete nashego opyta," *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 3, no. 53 (2007), at <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2007/3/li16.html> (last accessed March 20, 2018); Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, "The Blockbuster Miniseries on Soviet TV: Isaev-Shtirlits, The Ambiguous Hero of 'Seventeen Moments in Spring,'" *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, 29, no. 3 (2002): 257–76; and Lovell, "In Search," 303–22.

The aims of Gotsman's antagonist, and of the gangs he controls, remain utterly obscure.<sup>50</sup> It is clear, however, that the series partakes of the conspiratorial revisionism discussed above: it reembeds war episodes in a story of intrigues, false identities, and secret ties, the significance of which allegedly stretches beyond the war itself. What appears to be post-war chaos is thus revealed as the result of active subversion, planned during the war and smoldering under the surface of peace. The contrast between actual warfare and a secret, elusive battle with the enemy is underlined through the doubling of protagonists in Zhukov and Gotsman. While the former embodies the military discipline and linearity that are necessary for the open confrontation with the enemy, the latter is a man of wit and imagination—those qualities essential to fight the insidious conspiratorial maneuvering of the Soviet empire's adversaries on a "hidden front."<sup>51</sup>

Other recent espionage series—for instance *The Saboteur* (*Diversant* 1 & 2, 2004, 2007), *Black Cats* (*Chernye koshki*, 2013), and the multi-season series *Smersh* (2007–2013)—also insist that the course of the war, as well as post-war realities, were determined on an all-important invisible front. No other recent production, however, employs this notion as exuberantly as Aleksei Andrianov's utterly self-conscious debut film *Spy* (*Shpion*, 2012), a screen adaptation of Boris Akunin's *A Spy Novel* (*Shpionskii roman*, 2005). Set in Moscow just before the German invasion of the Soviet Union, *Spy* makes no claim to accuracy or even truthfulness, and generically the film subtly adopts an odd mixture of science fiction and alternate history. NKVD agents use remote-controlled street cameras; the Abwehr leadership communicates with Hitler via Skype-like technologies; and in this fantasy world, Stalin's 1936 plans for the transformation of Moscow have gloriously been realized. The city has been completely reshaped in a monumentalist style that defies the wildest futurism of Stalinist art and design.

*Spy* implicitly asks how Stalin could have been taken by surprise when the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941. German troops had been amassing at the Soviet Union's borders, and Stalin could hardly have trusted the Nazis' promises of peace made years earlier. Subscribing to the conspiratorial fixation on agency and secrecy, the film postulates that Stalin has been carefully misled by generals from the Abwehr. At its outset we see these men deliberating in the luxurious and sinister setting of a castle in the Alps. They agree to launch an intricate campaign of disinformation involving a group of German and Ukrainian spies, aimed at assuring Stalin that war with the Third

50. Do these criminals fanatically continue their sabotage activities even after the Abwehr has ceased to exist? Or, as one critic wondered on his blog, are their anti-Soviet activities also motivated by a separatist political agenda? See Mikhail Magid, "Retsenziia na fil'm 'Likvidatsiia': Odesskie povstantsy v abrikosovykh dzhungliakh," review of *Liquidation* (*Likvidatsiia*), directed by Sergei Ursuliak, *Live journal*, December 31, 2007 at <https://shraibman.livejournal.com/10126.html?thread=80782> (no longer available).

51. The series reminded many viewers of *The Meeting Place Cannot Be Changed*, but *Seventeen Moments of Spring*, too, was a recurring point of reference. After the release of *Liquidation* the comedy show of Channel 1, *The Big Difference* (*Bol'shaia raznitsa*) broadcast a parody of the series. It was entitled *Capitulation* (*Kapituliatsiia*) and in it a delicate Stierlitz was endowed with the bravura and melodious Odessa-region accent of Gotsman.

Reich is not imminent. Pivotal is the film's later conversation between Stalin and a German spy who goes by the code-name Wasser, and who presents himself as Hitler's direct envoy. Stalin and Wasser confer on a richly-decorated marble balcony of the fantastic Palace of the Soviets, which is presented to the viewer in breathtaking aerial shots. Against the backdrop of a sublime urban panorama, Wasser passes on the promise, allegedly coming from the Führer himself, that there will be no German attack on the Soviet Union before January 1943.

Supervised by his seasoned NKVD mentor (Fedor Bondarchuk), the film's hero, the Dynamo boxing champion-cum-intelligence agent Egor Dorin (Danila Kozlovskii), gradually unravels the Nazi intrigue. His revelations, however, come too late, and are met with disbelief by NKVD chief Lavrentii Beria, who in the film obsequiously adheres to Stalin's misguided ideas about the Nazi-Soviet relationship. The NKVD's methods are utterly cynical.<sup>52</sup> They contrast sharply with the sincerity of Dorin's lover Nadia (Anna Chipovskaia), a devoutly religious girl whom Dorin meets at the film's beginning, after saving her from the pushy overtures of young men on Moscow's streets. In the 1930s, Nadia's mother had fallen victim to the NKVD-orchestrated Great Terror, and when Nadia later learns about Dorin's work for the secret police the two break up. Their reconciliation takes place only in the epilogue, after Dorin has been sent on other intelligence missions.

*Spy* makes a travesty out of conspiracy theory's potential to encrypt "pieces of history" (especially those that have not been satisfactorily explained) into an overarching story of intrigues; into a narrative that tantalizes the viewer's imagination even when what is presented is far-fetched or openly absurd.<sup>53</sup> In doing so, the film lays bare some key features of the conspiratorial revision of history and points up the excitement it inspires. *Spy*, for instance, exalts the thrilling narrative acceleration that in the conspiracy narrative ensues from the frantic knitting together of the disparate and elusive hints of a hidden scheme.<sup>54</sup> Interrogating spies, decoding secret messages, pursuing the enemy in taxis or trolleybuses or on foot across Moscow: all these activities support the film's rushing pace, which itself parallels Dorin's increasing cognitive hold on the Abwehr plot.

52. NKVD agents, for instance, stage a trolleybus accident that kills dozens of citizens merely to make the Germans believe that one of their spies died in the calamity and not at their hands.

53. Notwithstanding the conspicuous absurdism of the film's idealized Moscow, and its overblown story of grand, ramified conspiracies, viewers were indeed fascinated by its alternative reading of history. One of them described the film's intrigue as "Stierlitz the other way around," and valued the fact that its story at least provided an explanation, albeit "mystical and conspiratorial," for Stalin's hitherto unexplained ignorance of Nazi plans. Ruthaizer, "Shtirlits naoborot," review of *The Spy [Shpion]*, directed by Aleksei Andrianov, *KinoPoisk*, May 7, 2012, <https://kinopoisk.ru/review/1518368/> (last accessed March 20, 2018; no longer available).

54. Fenster proposes the term "velocity" for the rapid movement implied in many conspiracy narratives. Velocity refers to the "protagonist's physical and cognitive movement through historical space. . . . The protagonist . . . must continually move in order to collect necessary information or rely on numerous scattered sources about the conspiracy and its effects." Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories*, 134.

In *Spy*, not only the conspiracy theory's narrative speed, but also its alternative mode of explanation is employed *and* distorted. Suggesting that the initial success of Operation Barbarossa was a result of Nazi cunning rather than Stalin's short-sightedness or the army and NKVD purges in the 1930s, *Spy* offers an interpretation of the war's history that makes secret manipulations its motive force. In doing so, it takes to an extreme a tendency present in the films and series discussed above. *Liquidation*, Kitaitsev's documentary, and, earlier, *Seventeen Moments of Spring*, all took for granted the primacy of an invisible front and hypothesized that secret alliances, disinformation campaigns, and cover-ups were more fundamental to the course of twentieth-century history than the overt trials of strength and strategy on the battlefields themselves. In these stories, revelations of dates of attack, the unmasking of spies, and generally the uncovering of "secret wars" (often waged under the cover of apparent peace) become important victories in (Soviet) Russia's historical struggles with its enemies.

While the tone of these various films and series is different in each case, they all share a particular "style" of historical explanation. Their revisionism relies on what Luc Boltanski calls a "doubling of reality," by which real power and influence are speculatively relegated to a realm of secrecy. Their suspicion-filled reformattings of history, moreover, pivot on what Peter Knight describes as the obsession in conspiracy theories with "hidden connections," and on what Popper and Byford characterize as the conspiratorial assumption of agency and intentionality: the idea that events, even those that appear to be contingent, are masterminded by deliberate, personal forces.<sup>55</sup> Finally, both the narrative structure and the visual language of these productions are infused with a logic that we may call, following the work of Mark Fenster and Susan Harding and Kathleen Stewart, metonymic: well-known historical events are recast as mere pieces or effects of larger machinations that have hitherto remained outside the "frames" of accepted historiography. Drawing connections between far-flung events and hinting at nefarious manipulation, these narratives *expand* established interpretations, speculating precisely on what lies beyond these frames.

This expansive, integrative thrust of the stories caters to a wider current interest in Russian narratives of historical continuity. Serguei Oushakine, for instance, has written about a general interest in "historical connectivity" in current Russian engagements with Soviet history in the media.<sup>56</sup> Kevin Platt observes that contemporary Russian politics and cultural life are increasingly bent upon emphasizing the continuities rather than the disjunctures with the Soviet past.<sup>57</sup> In this context the conspiratorial insistence on secret

55. Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*, 204.

56. Serguei Alex Oushakine, "Remembering in Public: On the Affective Management of History," *Ab Imperio*, no. 1 (2013): 275.

57. Kevin M.F. Platt, "The Post-Soviet is Over: On Reading the Ruins," *Republics of Letters: A Journal for the Study of Knowledge, Politics, and the Arts* 1, no. 1 (May 2009) at <http://arcade.stanford.edu/rofl/post-soviet-over-reading-ruins> (last accessed May 3, 2018); Kevin M.F. Platt, "Russian Empire of Pop: Post-Socialist Nostalgia and Soviet Retro at the 'New Wave' Competition," *The Russian Review* 72, no. 3 (July 2013): 447–69.

connections and hidden designs infuses historical explanations with a welcome sense of coherence.

The reinterpretations of the death match myth, for instance, cultivated linkages among geographically and temporally disparate events. The intelligence conspiracy proposed by the documentary *Executed for Victory?* connected (secret) events and activities in Moscow, Kiev, and Stalingrad into a cohesive narrative of Soviet heroism and strategic supremacy over Nazism. *The Match*, too, presented viewers with an extensive apprehension of temporality, implying that the Nazis' cover-up had continued to blur contemporary knowledge of what actually happened in Nazi-occupied Kiev. The injustice was ongoing, as the suggestion was put forth that current investigations were still being misguided by past corruptions. *Liquidation* and even *Spy*, too, subscribe to an expansive and connective logic that amplifies the resonances of war history beyond the confines of World War II. *Spy* posits that a battle between intelligence services was in progress already before the Nazi invasion, while *Liquidation* suggests that the war's conclusion did not end the Soviet Union's struggle with its enemies on its western borders.

The conspiratorial reconfiguration of context in these productions also facilitated what the sociologist Boris Dubin has described as a "reconciliation with the Soviet" in the Russian culture of the new millennium.<sup>58</sup> According to Dubin and many others, the swell of positive reevaluations of Soviet history in the country's political and cultural life in the new century hinges largely on celebrations of the Soviet victory over Nazism, which appears to be one of the few uncontested historical sources of national pride.<sup>59</sup> In the cases studied above, the conspiratorial reframing of episodes from World War II indeed facilitated a realignment with myths from the (late) Soviet period. Notwithstanding Maliukov's emphasis on *The Match*'s entertainment value, the thrust of his film was precisely to rehabilitate a discredited myth from the Brezhnev era and to mobilize an extended version of the story for Russia's "memory war" with Ukraine. Giving new, wider contexts to an improbable tale, it suggested that the heroic Soviet version of the events was not a false propaganda story, but rather just an *incomplete* account. Kitaitsev's documentary went even further in its metonymic re-plotment of the story, but here, too, the defense of the Soviet myth consisted precisely in an attempt to expand it and to present the viewer with a bigger historical picture that was even more spectacular than the original account. This "reconciliation with the Soviet," however, also showed itself in the rediscovery of a Soviet tradition of spy narratives (be it the Stagnation-era format of *Seventeen Moments*, or its more fast-paced, heroic variants from the Stalinist period), and especially

58. Boris Dubin, "Staroe i novoe v trekh teleekranizatsiakh 2005 goda," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* no. 78 (2006): 273–77.

59. Dubin "Staroe"; Boris Dubin, "Pamiat', voina, pamiat' o voine: Konstruirovanie proshlogo v sotsial'noi praktike poslednikh desiatiletii," *Otechestvennye zapiski* 43, no.: 4 (2008): 6–21; Boris Dubin, "Vtoraia mirovaia voina i Kholokost v rossiiskom obshchestvennom soznanii" (paper presented at the conference *Pamiat' o Kholokoste v sovremennoj Evrope*, Moscow, September 25–26, 2013) at <http://urokiistorii.ru/article/51913> (last accessed March 20, 2018).

their notion of an “invisible front” as the realm where the course of the war, and its enduring reverberations, were decided.

As seen above, Andrianov’s *Spy* cleverly acts out and exposes this thrust to place Soviet history in a new light, but it also brings to its limit the moral compliance with controversial histories often entailed in recent Russian cinema. *Spy* exculpates Stalin by emphasizing the inexorable manipulations of the enemy, and it stages, in the epilogue, a trite appeasement between “the organs” and their victims, represented by Dorin and Nadia. We see the two lovers at the edge of a misty lake, while the morning sun pierces through the trees. This pastoral environment is devoid of the markers of politics, and Dorin’s natural charisma and heroic deeds seem to have entirely effaced the lovers’ political and ideological conflicts. *Spy* also offers a full-blown, yet parodic, rehabilitation of the Soviet-era spy genre, with its figure of an athletic Chekist, its fascination with foreign and Soviet agents, and its emphasis on a hidden war.<sup>60</sup> Yet unlike the reformatting of the death match tale, *Spy* undoes its own orientation by showing that a moral and aesthetic reconciliation with the Soviet past can be realized only through an utterly far-fetched reframing of historical episodes. Narratively inventing new contexts for historical events, and visually inserting Stalin and other historical figures in a stupefying panorama of an imaginatively reconceived Moscow, the film self-consciously embraces, both in its story and its style, the “leap into fantasy” that according to Richard Hofstadter tends to accompany “paranoid” interpretations of history.<sup>61</sup>

60. Anna Latynina has shown that the novel by Akunin on which the film is based already employed the clichéd conventions and narrative pivots of cheap spy novels from the 1950s to the 1970s. Moreover, the simple and naïve illustrations that accompany the story in Akunin’s novel, too, are part of the stylized imitation of these trashy novels and are, according to Latynina, meant to inspire an (ironically tinted) nostalgia in its readers. Alla Latynina, “Entomologija roda Fandorinykh,” *Novyi mir* no. 8 (2005) at [http://magazines.russ.ru/novy\\_i\\_mi/2005/8/lat11.html](http://magazines.russ.ru/novy_i_mi/2005/8/lat11.html) (last accessed March 20, 2018).

61. Hofstadter, “Paranoid Style,” 11.