

The wretched state of the Russian military

Soldat, directed by Paul Jenkins

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Soldat, directed by Paul Jenkins, presented at the Montreal World Film Festival, August 22-September 2

Soldat is a documentary made by the British television producer/director Paul Jenkins about the present state of the Russian army. This is not the first film in which Jenkins has treated this subject for British television viewers. Unfortunately, I am ignorant of his previous works. *Soldat* tells the story of a group of young recruits from Moscow, who end up in a motorized infantry brigade in Saratov.

The film begins by showing us the search for and registration of draftees in Moscow. A policeman and a draft board employee scour their district for draft dodgers, who utilize all possible means to avoid military service. A few parents are ready to rid themselves of their thuggish or drug-dependent offspring. As in the old days, they hope that the army will turn their sons “into men.” But most families view the two-year service as a calamity, and only advise their sons to avoid Chechnya, if at all possible.

The inductees passively bear their scalping by the army barber, the coarse uniform, the repetitive training and barrack discipline. We observe as a sergeant repeats the same exercise of dressing and undressing, training the recruits for a rapid formation on the parade ground. After a few weeks of basic training the recruits take an oath to serve the Fatherland and are formally inducted into the armed forces. They are then transferred to common barracks.

From now on, in addition to the general and lawful discipline the young soldiers are subject to ruthless abuse by the so-called “grandfathers” (a term denoting a soldier in his second year of service). The filmmaker somehow got the army’s permission to allow him to do “reality” filming of raw and shocking scenes. On the other hand, he somehow persuaded the soldiers not to

feel ashamed in front of the camera.

We observe shocking scenes of unconstrained bullying and degradation. In the toilets and shower rooms the older soldiers abuse, beat and punch the younger, getting them to perform various personal services, providing them with cigarettes, money, vodka. Although we are only shown such scenes in the toilets, it is clear that abuse and humiliation pursue the younger soldiers everywhere: in the barracks, on the parade grounds, on marches, during military drill and exercises and, finally, in battle.

The director shows us scenes of everyday life in this Saratov garrison. Two soldiers armed with a pick and shovel slowly, like slaves, dig a hole. A junior officer oversees them, smokes and spits to the side, and orders them to continue working. Later we find out that these holes are intended for poles with barbed wire ringing the base. A colonel in command of the base appears, and reproaches a junior officer for leaving some holes in the fence. That officer explains that there isn’t enough barbed wire at the depot, that there isn’t even any colored paper to hide the gaps in the fencing. Pervading everything is an atmosphere of laziness and Potemkin villages.

Our colonel, the brigade commander, complains that new equipment is unavailable, that the tanks, the troop carriers, everything in general is getting older and needs repairs. A general arrives to inspect the base, see a parade and reward some soldiers with prizes: televisions, other electronic goods, money. The general is upset at the bad discipline during parade, the bad uniforms, the irregular marching.

What is the marching for? Why the fences? Why the barbed wire around this Saratov base? Is it perhaps to prevent the soldiers from deserting, to make more difficult the all-pervasive pilfering and theft of

equipment, weapons and uniforms? More to the point: what is this entire army for?

We listen to one soldier complain that because of abuse by the “grandfathers” he could not sleep for a few nights. Then he fell asleep during guard duty and was punished with four days in the stockade. He thought many times about turning his submachine gun at the “grandfather” who abused and punched him.

We are shown a major trained in the old school, who tries to battle the system of “dedovschina” (abuse by the “grandfathers”), searches for those guilty of physical abuse and demands that the younger soldiers point out their tormentors. The soldiers are silent, too cowed to speak up. Finally the major finds an abuser, lines a squad of soldiers up and tries to explain the injustice and illegality of these relationships. These explanations seem so incongruous that the soldiers laugh in his face, one of them is unable to stop and the major orders him to do 30 push-ups as punishment. Abuse has penetrated into the bone and marrow of this demoralized and beaten army. The major finishes by threatening the abuser with calling in his parents. The absurdity of this righteous major is highlighted when we see him get on his bicycle to continue his tour of inspection.

Our soldiers are sent to the south to patrol an area neighboring Chechnya. Guerilla war is continuing here; there are mines under the roads. A truck driver is blown up by a mine and loses an arm and a leg. The brigade commander lectures the officers that they should not be negligent, that the sappers must not be lazy and must continuously search for mines.

Everything is futile. The soldiers dream of returning home and count the days until demobilization. We discover the system of ranking in the barracks: the newly drafted, who are subject to abuse; those who have served six months to a year, and who are no longer subject to abuse by the “grandfathers”; finally, the “grandfathers” who permit themselves to exploit the young. This system is enshrined in custom and tradition; there are rites of passage to seniority and to demobilization.

Those parents who hoped that their son would be turned into a “man” will be disappointed. The military system of violence, injustice, degradation and drunken binges destroys human bodies and the human spirit.



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