

Two films at the Montreal World Film Festival

Komrades, directed by Steve Kokker, and Babi Yar, directed by Jeff Kanew

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1 November 2003

Komrades, directed by Steve Kokker, and Babi Yar, directed by Jeff Kanew, presented at the Montreal World Film Festival, August 27-September 7

Canadian director Steve Kokker set out to produce his documentary *Komrades* to examine the attitudes to comradeship, male bonding and male fraternity among young naval officer-cadets and Army recruits within the Russian armed forces. He is at once the narrator, director and cameraman of this home-made production.

This one-person hour-long production provides some glimpses of present attitudes among the elite cadets in the naval academy in St. Petersburg. There are numerous scenes of naval cadets getting drunk in a drab courtyard near the Academy and of elite commando troops getting drunk during some Army Day at a public park in the summer. There are interviews with two drunk cadets at someone's home where the sailors profess their undying love for one another. There is a prolonged interview with a future officer as he lies naked on a bed.

Other interviews in *Komrades* try to examine issues of patriotism and loyalty among the future officers. However, there is little attempt to place these individuals in the context of the social and political organization of the present-day Russian army, the future careers of these naval specialists within the Russian Navy, or the future of this Navy itself, or to examine the big question of what is going to happen to the once mighty Soviet armed forces. What are the personal goals of these young men? Kokker seems satisfied with the rehearsed and formulaic reply of one young man—that he and his comrades serve to defend the Russian federation.

Kokker includes clips from old Soviet movies about the life of the regular soldier, the heroic experiences and spirit of sacrifice of millions of Russian soldiers during World War II, and the power and sense of purpose in the Soviet Navy of the 1970s and 1980s. These clips suggest that Kokker shares to some extent this idealized and sanitized view of the latter-day Stalinist “Red” Army. However, today's Russian armed forces represent only a grotesque shadow of the old Soviet army.

We cannot tell from the film what these young officers think of the present state of their Navy. There is one conversation with a sober (thank God!) young submarine trainee about his future career, during which he tells us that his father was a submarine officer in the Soviet Navy. But any intelligent follow-up questions are omitted in favor of documentary footage of a Soviet submarine in the “good old days.” Three years ago, the tragic sinking during training exercises of the

advanced Russian nuclear attack submarine Kursk showed the miserable state of the Russian elite units. Last month's fatal sinking of a retired submarine as it was being towed to a scrap yard showed that even routine and technically relatively simple tasks are becoming impossible in the new Russian Navy and in the rapidly decomposing Russia, as it slides toward technical backwardness and obsolescence.

The only penetrating series of questions are about hazing. The Russian phenomenon of *dedovschina*, the domination and abuse of the young recruits by the older ones, is well known. One soldier tells us of the ordeal of degradation and humiliation, which is the lot of the regular draftee. He mentions that some abusers are driven by sadism, that some victims are beaten to death or driven to suicide. However, the film's director seems more interested in the nude male body and scenes of physical closeness of these young men in their cramped barracks. He does not tell us much that is new about individual and group mentality within the barracks.

Kokker, whose work suggests strong interest in homosexuality (the film itself was presented among other works on homosexual subjects), does not bring us any special insights into either gay or straight sex in the military. An amusing and revealing exception is one young officer's explanation for early marriages among graduating officers. Life in remote garrisons is so dull that senior officers get drunk every night and insist that unmarried junior officers drink along with them. You either get married, he explains, and blame your wife for preventing you from drinking, or you get cirrhosis of the liver.

All in all, *Komrades* is an unintelligent movie, which, despite the uninformed intentions of its director, does tell us something about the tragic conditions of life in the Russian military.

Babi Yar, directed by Jeff Kanew, has a very odd feel to it, more like a patchwork than an integral picture. This is perhaps understandable, considering the peculiarities of its production. The film was made with German money and with a view to primarily German distribution; the story takes place in Kiev in September 1941, soon after the Nazis occupied the capital of Soviet Ukraine; most of the actors are Russian and Russian was the working language on the set; the film was shot in Minsk, Belarus and its environs; the author and the director are both American; some of the central actors are German, and one “big name” is an Italian; the movie is dubbed in German, although a Russian-language version also exists.

The story deals with the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union begun on June 22, 1941, and the resulting annihilation of the millions of Soviet

Jews living in the western regions of the former czarist empire, the so-called “Pale of Settlement,” to which the Romanov czars had restricted their Jewish subjects. Because of the massive purges of the leadership of the Red Army by Stalin in 1936-1938, as well as the bureaucracy’s 1939-1941 policy of appeasement of Hitler, the Soviet armed forces suffered a series of massive defeats in the first months of the war and had to retreat all along the huge front from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

The story begins in August 1941, as the Red Army faces encirclement and must abandon Kiev. Two families, one Jewish and one Ukrainian, have been life-long neighbors and friends, but now the Germans are coming and the privations of war are putting many pressures on this friendship.

The Jewish Lerner family is dominated by the grandfather, who relies on his experiences of life in Berlin during World War I and refuses to believe Soviet propaganda about German atrocities against the Jews. His son, a Soviet soldier, was seriously wounded in an earlier battle and cannot be evacuated with the other wounded. He urges the family to go without him, but his Russian wife won’t hear of it. Then, as the Germans are closing in on the city, three Jewish youths, escapees from an earlier German atrocity in the western Ukrainian city of Lvov, arrive bearing tales of wholesale slaughter and urging the family to find any means of leaving Kiev.

The Ukrainian Onufrienko family is torn apart by its own conflicting priorities. The father wants to stay friends with the Lerner, resist the Germans and remain human. The mother’s anti-Semitism comes out; she is envious of the Lerner’s house and wants to take it over when they leave. Thus, she is ready to take advantage of the German invasion and actually greets the troops with traditional bread and salt. Her son is only beginning to make conscious moral decisions in his life—he falls in love with one of the Jewish refugees from Lvov; he wants to save the Lerner.

As the Soviet army pulls out, the Nazi high command makes a decision to organize a “final solution” to the “problem” of tens of thousands of Jews living in Kiev. They plan to rely on the help of Ukrainian anti-Semitic nationalists and organize an orderly and efficient massacre, unlike in Lvov or other places, where too much effort had been expended and presumably too much “noise” and “disorder” occurred.

We see the German colonel Blobel chosen to direct the massacre. He suffers from cirrhosis of the liver and knows that the constant drinking he must do to calm his nerves will kill him eventually, but “German Victory and the Fuhrer demand it.” He organizes the killing field, a narrow ravine about three kilometers from the city, meets with the elders of the Jewish community to convince them that the Jews are about to be transported west to work in orderly arranged communities. He arranges for transport, instructs the Ukrainian police to hurry the Jews to the execution spot, get them undressed and ready, and instructs the machine gun crews who will do the actual killing.

The Lerner are finally frightened enough to try to escape, but what with the small children and the wounded son, they need a horse and a cart to carry them. By various means, with the help of the younger Onufrienko, they find a horse and leave in the middle of the night, just as the Germans begin to round up the Jewish population of Kiev. In the morning, Mrs. Onufrienko discovers the Lerner gone and wants to ingratiate herself with Germans in order to get the house and the furnishings left by the fleeing family. She reports that the Lerner family is attempting to flee.

I will not tell the whole story, except to say that the director shows

us the scenes of the round-up of the Jews in Kiev, the adventure of the Lerner family fleeing and the German pursuit, and the final denouement of the massacre scenes at the ravine. We know what happened that day: the Nazis shot more than 30,000 Kiev Jews and dumped their bodies in Babi Yar. Blobel’s deception of the population proved successful enough for his *Einsatzkommando* to be able to continue the mass murder for another two days.

The account of Mrs. Onufrienko’s false denunciation of the Lerner as partisans and her subsequent punishment at the hands of the Germans is quite absurd. No doubt, the millions of Nazi victims included “sinners” and criminals of various stripes. But the director’s presentation of the Nazis’ killing of the evil Onufrienko as an act of divine retribution is a weak attempt to offer his viewers some sort of “moral relief.”

Another example of this quick and easy release of the audience’s pent-up feelings is the story of the infatuation of the young Onufrienko for a beautiful Jewish girl, one of the survivors from Lvov. We are told that even in these evil times Love can still triumph. Their escape, against all odds, floating down the river on a boat, brings further relief from this general picture of killings and massacres.

The movie does not tell us many important things. Why did Soviet Jews not flee in time? Why did some Ukrainians actually welcome the Germans? Why did some Ukrainians, Latvians, Lithuanians, and others acquiesce and sometimes help the fascists exterminate their Jewish neighbors?

The Stalin-Hitler Pact of 1939-1941 resulted in the Soviet press suspending its previous anti-fascist coverage of events in German-occupied Europe and in a general whitewash of the Nazi crimes. Soviet Jews to a large extent did not realize the murderous program of the Nazis. The previous anti-Marxist politics of the Stalinist regime—forced collectivization; the hunger genocide of 1932 aimed at the Ukrainian peasantry; the extermination of the Communist International and entire Communist parties in eastern Europe, including the west Ukrainian and Polish CPs; the murderous persecution of any political activists in the areas Stalin took over in 1939-1940—all these actions aroused anger and resistance against the Soviet regime within the populations of these regions. The Nazis were able to make use of this anger in the initial stages of the war.

In a profound sense, the “socialism in one country” nationalist vision of Stalinism undermined the early internationalist impulse of the Soviet population, helped revive nationalism and race hatreds within the country, and eventually destroyed the socialist beginnings in the Soviet Union.

More than 60 years have passed since the horrific events represented in this film. There have been many reports and presentations to inform us and help us understand: news reports, books, poems, documentary and fictionalized films, historical studies, memoirs and so forth. It is simply not enough at this late stage to present another simplistic account of the atrocity and its tragic effect on some individuals and families. The best that can be said about this film is that it is fairly honest, albeit simple-minded.



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