

# A further comment on *The Cranes Are Flying*

Wolfgang Weber  
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*The following comment by Wolfgang Weber of the WSWS was provoked by the review of The Cranes Are Flying (1957), which we are posting today. The comment is addressed to the author of that review.*

Dear Dorota,

Your review of *The Cranes Are Flying* truly struck a chord with me. Just a few days earlier I was speaking with comrade David Walsh about this marvelous film, which I saw—and it was the very first film I ever saw!—some 50 years ago.

Over the course of half a century many of the film's images remained alive in my memory, images such as those of the Soviet soldier Boris and his unit, surrounded by the enemy in a swamp, marching through mud and birch groves desperately trying to find a way out; and, above all, the images of Boris, having been fatally wounded by a sudden, unexpected and single shot, falling into the quagmire with the treetops above him in the sky circling faster and faster, symbolizing the cruel senselessness of his death.

With hundreds of thousands of workers and youth having demonstrated in the streets only a few years earlier—in vain—against the rearmament of Germany, and with the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt just beginning to be reported on the radio—our main source of information at that time—the film left a deep mark on my consciousness and in that regard I was certainly not alone.

Young as I was and only beginning to adopt a somewhat critical view of the society around me, comparing it with the high ideals of human behavior and social order I was absorbing from classical literature, the film also aroused in my mind many critical questions: Why had Germany attacked the USSR where the people, as one could see in the movie, were completely unprepared to be targeted for attack and were innocent victims of massive bombing raids? What was the cause of a war the ruins of which were

still very much to be seen in German cities at the time; a war that had produced the many crippled survivors who were still to be met as beggars on the street, and as teachers at school or at home in my family? And what about the Hitler regime's generals, judges, executioners, university professors, ideologists and political leaders who were still—or again—occupying high positions in West German society, in the army, in political and academic life, as my parents occasionally discussed at home?

And the picture of social life in the Soviet Union presented in *The Cranes Are Flying*, with so many ordinary people like Boris, his father, mother and sister, his girlfriend Veronica—men and women so terribly human and engaging as they deal with their hard daily life and selflessly follow high principles and social ideals—how could this picture be reconciled with the dreadful image of the Soviet Union propagated day in, day out by “our” news media, radio, teachers and politicians in the “Free West,” with the image of a dangerous aggressor country, blighted by hatred and just waiting for the right moment to leap up and attack us?

Only ten years later I would find answers to those questions in Leon Trotsky's analysis of the historical crisis of German and world capitalism as the cause of two imperialist wars, his analysis of Hitler's Nazi dictatorship and military aggression as the capitalist “solution” to that crisis and of Social Democracy and Stalinism as the decisive forces strangling the working class and preventing it from overthrowing capitalism.

Having watched the film again this week, I can appreciate even more what a masterpiece it is. It has always been regarded as outstanding cinematic poetry. Pablo Picasso is known to have remarked after attending a screening in Cannes: “In a hundred years I have not seen such a poetic piece of art!” But the mere making of *The Cranes Are Flying* was also an

astonishing act of artistic and political courage on the part of the scriptwriter, the director and the whole cast. They had all personally passed through the dreadful experience of the world war, as well as the Stalinist purges and mass murder.

Tatyana Samoylova, the actress who played Veronica, had even gone through the terrible siege of Leningrad as a 7-year-old, together with her family. Luckily, she was evacuated via Lake Ladoga and thus escaped death by cold and hunger—like Lena Mukhina (see the review of her diary on the WSWS), but unlike almost 1.5 million inhabitants of that city of the October Revolution.

As you indicate, the filmmakers dispense with the bombastic glorification of Stalin's rule, and with all the lies depicting local Stalinist bureaucrats as patriotic heroes, all of which was obligatory and omnipresent in previous Soviet films about the war. Not only the sarcastic and biting digs of Boris' father against the bureaucratic rituals of egging on ordinary party members to work harder and harder for the "Fatherland," not only his principled stand against one of his own sons when his criminal egoism and corrupt alliance with a leading local party bureaucrat are revealed ... but the whole world outlook of the film was a declaration of war against the rule of the hated Stalinist bureaucracy. In particular, *The Cranes Are Flying* takes a sharp stand against the oppressive and repelling treatment of women by men like Mark, which was still prevalent—40 years after the October Revolution—in the Soviet Union, thanks to the Stalinist cultivation of backward social relations and culture in daily life.

And the film achieves all this without the slightest political lecturing or sermonizing.

The single scene which might be considered, mistakenly, as coming close to that kind of patronizing typical of Stalinist "artists" is Stepan's speech celebrating the end of war, which you quote in closing your review. One has to take into account, however, the catastrophic experiences millions of Soviet people suffered through during the Nazi war and the Stalinist terror—traumas very much alive in Russian families even today. One also has to take into account the deep crisis of the bureaucracy, which came openly to the fore after Stalin's death in 1953 and after the revelations by Khrushchev of Stalin's crimes in 1956 that shook not

only Soviet society, but all the Stalinist parties around the world.

If all this is kept in mind, then Stepan's speech, especially the last two lines—"We have won and we shall live never to destroy, but to build a new life!"—could not but be understood by contemporary Soviet workers and youth as an authentic expression of hatred of war, not against abstract war in general, but against the concrete wars caused by capitalism and fascism. And to be sure, the speech could also only be and was only understood as an undisguised declaration of war against "the old life" under Stalinism—a declaration full of the spirit of optimism and change, which was characteristic of the "Thaw Period" (from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s).

Yet tragically, insofar as all those hopes and illusions in change for the better were invested in figures such as Nikita Khrushchev or entire sections of the ruling Stalinist bureaucracy, they were soon shattered. In the end, the hopes of that generation were crushed in the destruction of the Soviet Union carried out by the very same Stalinist bureaucracy under Gorbachev and Yeltsin—with all its catastrophic social and political consequences, culminating today in the imperialist powers of the US, Europe and again Germany threatening the Russian people and the whole world with a new imperialist war.

I share with you the hope that *The Cranes Are Flying* will once again come to the attention of young people around the world!

Warm regards!

Wolfgang Weber



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