

Prazdnik (Holiday): Film about social inequality in Russia attracts mass audience

Clara Weiss
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Written and directed by Alexey Krasovsky

Prazdnik (Holiday), a film from Russian director Alexey Krasovsky, which directly addresses social inequality in both the former Soviet Union and in contemporary Russia, has so far been viewed by over 1.5 million people on YouTube. The filmmakers were forced to upload the film on January 2 after a major state-sponsored campaign against the movie prevented it from being shown in the theaters.

The film is set during the Nazi siege of Leningrad during the Second World War in the winter of 1941-42. The siege—at 999 days, the longest of any city in modern history—led to a terrible famine that claimed the lives of over 1 million people. The suffering during the blockade continues to form a significant component of popular historical consciousness in Russia.

In stark contrast, *Prazdnik* centers on the Voskresensky family, who enjoy lots of privileges and virtually unlimited access to food. The head of the household, Georgy (Yan Tsapnik), works for the ruling party in a laboratory, where he supposedly is developing a secret weapon for the fight against the German military. The Voskresenskys' food supply is taken care of by Stalin himself. They live on the outskirts of the besieged city, have access to fur coats and chicken dinners, while the vast majority of the population hardly gets hold of one piece of bread a day.

The family's celebration on New Year's Eve—the principal holiday in Russia—is disrupted when the son, Denis (Pavel Tabakov), brings home an impoverished girl, Masha (Asya Chistyakova), who has just lost both her parents and has not eaten bread in days, to spend the holiday with his family. The wife and mother, Margarita (Alyona Babenko), seriously upset by Masha's presence, is desperate to hide as much of the family's food and clothing as possible.

The satirical depiction of the parents, and especially of the mother, is scathing: they are shown to be hypocrites, cynics and cowards; they are obsessed with their own well-being and comfort, and entirely removed from the concerns and lives of the people. Fearing discovery and revenge by the latter, at the same time they feel fully entitled to their privileges.

The social tension in the movie builds up for almost an hour, until it bursts into the open at the dinner table.

Masha asks Margarita, "So you're getting food directly from comrade Stalin?" "Yes, Mashenka ... Were we supposed to renounce it or what? To starve like everyone else?" "But you could share what you have in abundance with other people"

[Margarita laughs hysterically] "Share it? How? What would we give away, what would we keep for ourselves? Fine, I will give something to some children, but then tomorrow they will bring their parents, and the day after tomorrow the entire city will be here. ... And do you know why we have so much? Because the state values us, it is taking care of us. And why would *you* be loved? What have *you* given to this world? ... Yes, I'm very sorry for you, for your parents, for all the unhappy people in the world, but, unfortunately, there is not enough bread for all of them." Masha responds, tiredly, "It would be enough, if it was divided equally."

Prazdnik is only a little over an hour long, but it makes a lasting impression on the viewer. It is a poignant indictment of the massive social divide both in the Soviet Union and in contemporary Russia, and has been universally understood as such.

In terms of wealth distribution, Russia is the most unequal of the major economies in the world, with the top 1 percent of the population owning a third of the total wealth and the bottom 50 percent possessing less than 5 percent. About 20 million people, out of a population of 140 million, live in extreme poverty, eking out an existence on less than \$175 a month. Meanwhile, the country's super-rich protect their enormous mansions in Moscow's wealthy suburbs and elsewhere from the sight of the population with high walls.

It is not surprising, therefore, that *Prazdnik* has elicited a quasi-hysterical reaction from the Russian government and the media. A systematic campaign to prevent the film's release was launched last fall. A leading official from the United Russia party threatened to have the film banned, and the media tried to discredit the film as an alleged insult to the victims of the siege of Leningrad.

The director and the producer have also been subject to two criminal investigations by the police, one for "terrorism and extremism" (that case was eventually dropped), and another that seeks to prove that the film was shot with money from illegal sources (as of January 22, this investigation was ongoing.) The filmmakers eventually saw no alternative to making the movie publicly available on YouTube.

The response by viewers has been overwhelmingly positive.

One commented that "this film is an allegory about the current regime, under which state officials ... are in competition with one another over their yachts, cars, and villas, go crazy for luxury, while the population is tightening its belt, has to save even on

basic necessities, including food and clothes, works without rest until death to somehow be able to feed itself, and listens to fairy tales about the importance of public spending on more rackets to defend us from all enemies.”

Another viewer noted, “This film is very contemporaneous. The entire current elite consists from top to bottom of former party officials and Komsomol-members.”

In interviews, the director and author of the screenplay, Aleksei Krasovsky, indicated that this is precisely the message he intended to convey.

Prazdnik is an important film, and the response to it expresses significant shifts in Russian political and social life. Together with Boris Khlebnikov’s remarkable *Arrhythmia* (2017), which addressed the severe crisis in the Russian health care system, the work indicates that serious artists in Russia are increasingly concerned by the social crisis and the lives of working people.

However, the very seriousness of the movie and the healthy impulse of the filmmakers call for a critical analysis of its underlying conceptions. Through its implicit comparison of Leningrad in World War II to contemporary conditions, *Prazdnik* echoes the message of many popular jokes and sayings in Russia to the effect that whoever rules, nothing changes for ordinary people, who always remain oppressed and impoverished.

In an interview, Krasovsky explained, “I wanted to talk about how this segregation developed between the rich—often the unjustly and undeservedly rich—and everyone else. When did it begin?” Rich people ignoring the suffering of others, he continued, “existed, exists and, I fear, will always exist.”

This very pessimistic view is an expression of substantial confusion about the October Revolution and the Soviet Union. It is true there is a definite relationship between the parasitic oligarchy of today and the Soviet bureaucracy. However, a formal comparison between the two phenomena ignores the fundamental differences between the social and historical origins of the Soviet Union and those of the Russian Federation.

The Soviet Union was the product of the greatest and most progressive revolution in human history, the October Revolution in 1917 led by the Bolsheviks. Founded on the program of internationalism and social equality, the USSR represented an enormous conquest for the working class internationally. However, the isolation of the Russian Revolution, along with the backwardness and poverty of the country, soon created conditions under which a bureaucracy, with Stalin as its central representative, emerged. This social layer enjoyed enormous privileges vis-a-vis the working class. By 1923-24, the nascent bureaucracy began to advocate a nationalist program of “socialism in one country” in direct opposition to the program of world socialist revolution that had formed the basis of the seizure of power by the working class.

The counterrevolutionary bureaucracy’s hostility toward the October Revolution was most horrifically expressed in the terror of the 1930s during which Stalin killed virtually the entire generation of revolutionary Marxists that had carried out the revolution, including 30,000 Trotskyists and, in 1940, Leon Trotsky himself.

Yet despite the enormous crimes of Stalinism, millions of workers and peasants still felt great loyalty to the October

Revolution and the Soviet state. This is why masses of people were prepared to endure such horrendous deprivation during the Second World War, including the siege of Leningrad, and still fought to defend the USSR at extraordinary cost against the Nazi onslaught. (Estimates of the total number of Soviet victims of the war range from 27 million to 40 million.)

The relationship between the Soviet bureaucracy and the current oligarchy cannot be viewed outside the context of the Stalinist betrayal of the October Revolution. As Leon Trotsky analyzed in his *The Revolution Betrayed*, the bureaucracy was not a ruling class, but a parasitic caste. The bureaucracy had usurped political power in the Soviet state from the working class, but unlike a class, the bureaucracy did not play an independent role in the process of production. It possessed, as Trotsky noted in 1939, “all the vices of the old ruling classes but lacks their historical mission.”

As a parasitic caste fearing the working class more than anything else, the bureaucracy was forced to engage in unending lies about the October Revolution, and desperately sought to hide the extent of its privileges. Its transformation into a ruling class eventually required the destruction of the Soviet Union itself in 1991 and the restoration of capitalism.

The creation of the Russian Federation and the emergence of the oligarchy were the final product of this process. Though social inequality no doubt existed in the Soviet Union, many studies have shown that it has reached levels without historical precedent in Russia following capitalist restoration.

The oligarchy emerged out of the Stalinist bureaucracy, but stands, at the same time, in the tradition of the hated bourgeoisie that was overthrown by the working class and rural masses in 1917. This also explains the peculiar ideology of the Russian oligarchy, which combines a glorification of the crimes of Stalinism with veneration for the Tsarist regime. It is a historically foul and doomed ruling class, steeped in blood and crime, and presiding over what is a brutally capitalist society.

The formal equation of the Soviet Union with capitalist societies, usually through the conception of the Soviet Union as “state capitalist,” has historically often provided the basis for right-wing, anti-communist conceptions. It is the hope of this reviewer that the filmmakers will not follow such a path.

Their passionate indictment of social inequality is a welcome development in cultural and artistic life, in Russia and beyond. But a real struggle against social inequality, as well as a more profound treatment of it in artistic works, will ultimately require a turn toward a serious study of the history of the October Revolution and the struggle of the Trotskyist movement against Stalinism.

The film is available on YouTube with English and Italian subtitles.



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