

Beanpole (Dyl̑da): Disturbing scenes of postwar Soviet life

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The second film by 27-year-old Russian director Kantemir Balagov, *Beanpole (Dyl̑da)*, gained praise at the recent Cannes Film Festival where it won the FIPRESCI (International Federation of Film Critics) prize.

The film treats the damaged lives of two young women who have returned to Leningrad (today St. Petersburg) from the front in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. The conflict claimed the lives of over 27 million Soviet citizens, including over 1 million in the siege of Leningrad alone.

“Dyl̑da” in Russian describes a tall and somewhat awkward person and refers to the film’s protagonist, the young nurse Iya (Viktoria Miroshnichenko), who works in a Leningrad hospital treating wounded Red Army soldiers. She is also looking after a young boy, who seems to be her son. The film opens with a scene in which Iya experiences something of a fit or seizure and loses consciousness and the ability to hear what is going on around her.

Within the first 20 minutes of the film, Iya, in a highly disturbing scene, strangles a little boy, Pashka (Timofey Glazkov), during another fit, while the two are playing. Soon afterward, Iya’s friend Masha (Vasilisa Perelygina) returns to the city from the front. It turns out she was the boy’s mother and had asked Iya to look after him. When Iya tells Masha that her son is no longer alive (without acknowledging she has killed him), she says, “I’m guilty in front of you.”

The rest of *Beanpole* focuses on the relationship between Masha and Iya, which develops in an increasingly abusive and troubling manner. Masha, having undergone multiple abortions (we later learn that she worked as a prostitute for Red Army soldiers at the front), is unable to bear another child. She forces Iya to “pay” her debt by giving birth herself, an effort that proves futile.

Masha also develops a relationship with the son of high-

ranking Communist Party bureaucrats. Though she initially pursues this relationship for the purpose of obtaining proper food supplies for herself and Iya, she eventually also hopes to find some emotional refuge by marrying him. Toward the end, after a physically violent confrontation with Iya, the two lie in each others’ arms and Masha tells Iya: “We will have the child, and it will heal our wounds.”

There is little question about the sincerity or artistic talent of *Beanpole*’s director Kantemir Balagov and the entire very young cast and crew involved in the making of the film. The performances by the actors and actresses are impressive, especially considering that several have never appeared before a camera before. The camerawork and the film’s palette (its restriction to deep red and brown and some green tones) do much to recreate the atmosphere of the immediate postwar period. The director’s evident and sincere concern to show the long-lasting psychological and physical effects of the war on those who survived comes through to some extent.

However, *Beanpole* has substantial weaknesses, bound up above all with the lack of any coherent understanding and conception on Balagov’s part, not only of the postwar period, but of the nature and history of the Soviet Union more generally.

The film does hint at some of Soviet society’s deep-going problems—hunger, the unequal food distribution and the general social inequality separating the bureaucracy from the rest of the population. The parents of Masha’s lover lead the lives of virtual aristocrats, in a palatial mansion outside Leningrad. However, for all of this and the considerable effort that went into reproducing the atmosphere of that time on a visual level, Balagov’s work remains strangely ahistorical and abstract.

Beanpole’s primary theme seems to be that war as such has horrific, perhaps even irremediable consequences. The war of the Soviet Union against the Nazi invaders,

however, was not just *any* war, and the mass trauma it produced in the Soviet population, a trauma that endures until the present day, cannot be simply attributed to the crimes and horrors of the Nazi occupation and the experience of war “as such,” no matter how terrible all that was.

Genuinely coming to terms with the state of postwar Soviet life also requires an understanding of the role played by Stalinist political oppression of the working class and its historic betrayals—both in the Soviet Union and abroad—and the resulting immense confusion. Despite the bloody repression under Stalin in the 1930s, tens of millions of Red Army soldiers and civilians working for the war effort were dedicated to defending the state that had emerged out of the October Revolution in 1917 against the fascist threat. This heroic effort proceeded at every step of the way against and despite the ruling bureaucracy and many fought in the war believing or hoping that after Hitler, they could do away with Stalin.

Although the prestige of the bureaucracy was to some extent increased by victory in World War II, the reestablishment of a rigid and violently repressive regime after the war, under conditions of enormous material hardship and suffering, produced great anger and disappointment in the Soviet working class and youth. *Beanpole*, unfortunately, does not manage to convey any of those sentiments.

Operating largely outside this historical context, Balagov proves unable to rise above the level of somewhat morbid individual psychology. This contributes not only to depictions of the central figures, and especially Masha, that appear at times unnecessarily cruel and lacking in empathy, it also leaves much of the storyline extremely difficult to follow. It remains unclear, for instance, why Iya, who is generally portrayed as an exceptionally kind and generous person, would kill the little boy, even in a fit, or indeed where these attacks themselves come from.

The problem of sexual relationships and child-bearing was a very real one for millions of working-class and peasant women at the time in the USSR, given the massive demographic crisis that had been produced with the loss of an entire generation of young men in the war—a crisis that prompted the bureaucracy to issue an abortion ban in an effort to increase the birth rate. But *Beanpole* largely reduces this painful situation to the question of the tortured personal relationship between these two women and their specific experiences during the Second World War. Lastly, it is somewhat troubling that the director’s

own attitude toward the war remains unclear.

Balagov belongs to a group of young directors trained in a film school founded by Russian film director Alexander Sokurov as part of the university in Nalchik, the capital of the North Caucasian region of Kabardino-Balkaria, a region that has been left in virtual ruins by the restoration of capitalism in the 1990s. The anti-historical artistic conceptions of Sokurov will have played their role in the development of these young artists and their generally dispirited tone. However, ultimately, much more fundamental problems in the development of the arts and the Russian intelligentsia are involved.

Balagov and other graduates of the Nalchik film school (including Vladimir Bitokov and Kira Kovalenko) grew up in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the year of the first-named director’s birth. Despite the influence of Sokurov and the predominance of various disoriented and anti-Marxist conceptions among intellectuals and artists, they have shown an interest in tackling complex historical and social questions in an honest manner.

Balagov’s first feature film, *Closeness (Tesnota)*, (2017), was a highly original and promising work, dramatizing the life of an impoverished Jewish family in the 1990s in the North Caucasus region, against the background of inter-ethnic tensions, poverty, anti-Semitism, the First Chechen War and the predominance of very traditional conceptions of family relations in post-Soviet Russia.

However, precisely because of the undoubted seriousness and talent of the filmmakers behind *Beanpole*, the new work sheds a stark light on the impossibility of grasping, artistically or intellectually, the reality and experience of life in the Soviet Union outside a broader understanding of the origins and outcome of the October revolution, the rise of Stalinism and the nature of the Soviet state. This reviewer hopes that Balagov and other young intellectuals and artists of his stature and talent will take up a genuine study of these questions.



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