

Dear Comrades: Russian film about the 1962 Novocherkassk massacre

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Directed by Andrey Konchalovsky; written by Konchalovsky and Elena Kiseleva

Dear Comrades, the Russian entry for Best International Feature Film at this year's Academy Awards, addresses one of the most significant and least understood episodes in the history of the Soviet Union: the massacre of dozens of workers in Novocherkassk on June 2, 1962, on the orders of Nikita Khrushchev, the general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU).

Twenty-six people are believed to have been killed in the incident (other estimates go far higher), but the real number was never established and perhaps never will be. Seven young workers were accused of "banditry" and executed, while dozens more were sent to labor camps for many years. Most were not rehabilitated until the dissolution of the USSR.

The new film directed by Andrey Konchalovsky, one of Russia's best-known filmmakers, has generated significant coverage of the event in Russia, including interviews with historians, and has been received favorably by the international media.

Dear Comrades, set in June 1962, focuses on Lyudmila (Lyuda, played by Yulia Vysotskaya), a loyal Communist Party apparatchik and convinced Stalinist. Over the course of the film, she develops from a devout believer in the party and Stalin into someone who questions the "humanity" of the Soviet system. In the film's opening, we see Lyuda, a city council member, receiving extra portions of meat in a grocery store under conditions where most residents have to wait all night to get potatoes, and often don't obtain meat at all. Lyuda blames Khrushchev, above all. Under Stalin, she repeatedly says, food prices were never raised, only lowered.

At a June 1 meeting of the city council, she confidently proclaims that the workers she is responsible for are "under control." In this meeting, as throughout the film, Lyuda refers to the workers as "hooligans" and "criminals." Then, however, the news arrives that workers at the Locomotive Plant and the Electric Plant have gone on strike to protest the rise in food prices.

A demonstration by the workers, carrying banners with the portrait of Lenin and the slogan "Workers of the World Unite," proceeds toward and surrounds the city administration building. The protesters jeer the head of the city council. The council members, shocked, infuriated and scared, manage to flee the building through the back door. The scenes of the council consulting during the demonstration and then taking flight are among the strongest in the movie.

The social and political tension gripping the city finds expression in Lyudmila's own household. Her daughter Svetka (Yuliya Burova), a student, works at the affected plant. In opposition to her mother, Svetka defends Khrushchev's secret speech at the 20th Communist Party congress in February 1956, in which the latter acknowledged some of Stalin's worst crimes. She expresses the determination to join a protest by workers scheduled for the following day.

On June 2, the city council meets with Communist Party Central

Committee members who have flown in from Moscow. Among them is Anastas Mikoyan (Goga Pipinashvili), one of the few Old Bolsheviks who survived the Great Terror of the 1930s. By 1962, he is the "No. 2" figure in the Soviet Union, after Khrushchev. In a discussion about how to respond to the protests, Lyuda distinguishes herself by suggesting that everyone participating in the demonstration needs to be rounded up and the "instigators" found and executed. Mikoyan is impressed and asks her to submit her proposal in writing.

The Central Committee wants to send armed troops to the city, but a Red Army representative opposes sending in soldiers with live ammunition. In the end, he has to yield to the pressure of the party leadership. The city is placed under de facto martial law and, on the orders of Mikoyan and company, entirely cut off from the outside world.

At a demonstration of thousands of workers that same day, the massacre occurs. These scenes in *Dear Comrades* are effective and highly disturbing. The filmmakers have KGB snipers firing the deadly rounds at the protesters. This version of events, while plausible, has not been conclusively established, and most historians assume that both the military and the KGB were involved. Lyuda herself escapes only narrowly and witnesses someone she knows shot dead.

After the massacre, Lyuda cannot find her daughter anywhere. Throwing political caution to the wind and driven by elementary maternal instinct, she searches desperately for Svetka, fearing that she is among the murdered. The same Lyuda who had called for all "instigators" of unrest to be "shot" just a few days ago becomes increasingly disturbed by the "inhumanity" with which the massacre is covered up.

Her disillusionment is only deepened by comments from her religious and bitterly anti-communist father (Sergei Erlich). He tells her that everything happening was presaged by the "Red terror" during the Civil War and the requisition of grain from the peasants. Konchalovsky portrays this grim and bitter man as something of an oracle whose supposed political wisdom is gradually revealed by the reality of the massacre and ensuing cover-up.

Eventually, a KGB agent, Viktor (Andrey Gusev), heavily involved in the massacre, reveals an elemental human decency and helps Lyudmila find out what has happened to her daughter.

Illegally, they visit a cemetery on the outskirts of the city where, as they are told, many of those who had been killed have been buried in secret. A worker, forced to bury some of the corpses the previous night, tells them he is sure Svetka's corpse was thrown on top of another body in a grave. Further surprises lie in store.

While Lyuda is a fictional character, the reconstruction of the June 1962 events in *Dear Comrades* is largely accurate. For decades, the massacre was treated as a state secret in the Soviet Union. The first accounts of it did not appear in the Soviet press until 1988. In 1992–1994, a presidential commission conducted an investigation into the massacre based on newly accessible archives. The movie's historical advisor was Yuri Bagraev, a former high-ranking member of the military prosecution in the USSR and

post-Soviet Russia, and a member of that commission.

Konchalovsky's film offers a view of the crisis of Stalinism in the USSR, but he does so from the standpoint of the Stalinist bureaucracy itself. Viewers are called upon to sympathize with Lyuda, who defends the Stalinist terror of the 1930s and only becomes concerned with the "human costs" of the Soviet system when her own family becomes involved; and with Viktor, who first participates in a massacre and then talks about acting *po-chelovecheski* (in a humane manner or like a decent human being). There is a healthy amount of political and intellectual blindness and complacency in these portraits.

By contrast, the striking workers are portrayed in the manner in which the bureaucrats view them—as drunkards, hooligans and criminals. Lyuda's overt contempt for them is never countered. In fact, even Lyuda's daughter, the only one who directly contradicts her, at one point dismissively notes that nothing but heavy drinking can be expected from workers. Historically, this has no basis. While there were criminal elements in the crowd, the historian Vladimir Kozlov argues they were insignificant in the context of a protest by tens of thousands of industrial workers.

However, for Konchalovsky, it seems, any change for the better will come from elements such as the arch-Stalinist Lyuda and the KGB man Viktor.

More fundamentally, the focus on Lyuda and Viktor distracts from and skews the sentiments that prevailed among the Soviet masses at the time and that drove events such as the Novochoerkassk walkout: the widespread desire for a return to the goals and aspirations of the October Revolution in opposition to the parasitic, tyrannical bureaucracy.

The Novochoerkassk massacre has to be understood within a broader political and social context. In 1956, with his speech about Stalin's criminality, Khrushchev initiated the so-called Thaw in which more political and artistic freedoms were granted. The revelations, reflecting the profound crisis of the bureaucracy, galvanized millions of workers, youth and intellectuals not just in the USSR but internationally.

Among broad sections of the Soviet working class, youth and intelligentsia, there was genuine anger about social inequality and what many perceived as the betrayal of the 1917 revolution. Moreover, the social weight of the working class in Soviet society had been significantly strengthened: after a wave of industrialization in the 1950s, the urban population now for the first time outnumbered that in the countryside. Many workers were young. They had expectations of rising living standards and far-reaching political changes, and they were willing to fight for them.

In the 1961–1962 period, Khrushchev rolled back social concessions made earlier, while implementing certain pro-market measures. A currency reform was introduced and food prices and work norms were raised, thus lowering workers' income. According to the historian Kozlov, "These developments, combined with growing problems of social justice and mass egalitarian criticism of new 'Soviet barons' and 'dacha capitalism,' raised popular unrest."

The Novochoerkassk uprising was one of a series of urban uprisings and strikes that rocked the Soviet Union in 1961–1964 and threatened the rule of the bureaucracy. When the strikes and demonstrations occurred in Novochoerkassk in June 1962, Kozlov noted, "calls for uprisings and strikes...reports of anti-government leaflets and statements, as well as insults addressed to Khrushchev personally, were coming in from everywhere."

How close the Novochoerkassk protest came to being a full-blown insurrection is indicated by a member of the bureaucracy, Iu. Rukhman, who later recounted: "I was standing there looking out of a window of the city department as the procession was streaming past. The mood was somber. Workers, our workers, were carrying portraits of Lenin and banners and we were on the other side of the barricade. At this moment,

there was essentially no authority in the city." The political character of the Novochoerkassk events is downplayed and obscured in *Dear Comrades*.

Nor was Novochoerkassk an isolated episode on the international level. In 1953, an uprising by workers in Stalinist East Germany was crushed by Soviet tanks. Three years later, a mass strike movement in Poland occurred almost simultaneously with a revolt by Hungarian workers against Stalinist rule, also violently suppressed.

In 1964, Khrushchev was replaced by Leonid Brezhnev through a political coup in the Politburo—not least of all because the former was considered incapable of dealing with the mass discontent in the working class. In 1968, amidst a global upsurge of working-class struggles, workers in Czechoslovakia moved to challenge the bureaucracy, a movement again crushed bloodily through a military intervention by the Moscow bureaucracy.

These working-class uprisings vindicated the perspective and analysis of Leon Trotsky, the co-leader of the October revolution and leader of the Left Opposition against Stalinism. In *The Revolution Betrayed* (1936), Trotsky analyzed how the bureaucracy, which had arisen under conditions of the international isolation of the 1917 October revolution and Russian backwardness and poverty, acted as a counterrevolutionary force within the degenerated workers' state. The bureaucracy, which enjoyed vast social privileges, found itself in constant conflict with the socialist legacy of the October revolution and the working class. Its nationalist program of "socialism in one country" was both counterrevolutionary and historically unviable. Eventually, Trotsky warned, the bureaucracy had either to be overthrown in a political revolution by the Soviet working class, acting in alliance with workers internationally, or it would move to restore capitalism and destroy the Soviet Union.

In an interview on Russian television, Konchalovsky indicated that, as far as he was concerned, the great tragedy in 1962 was that there were those who still believed in Stalin. In reality, the great tragedy of Novochoerkassk and similar uprisings was—along with their bloody suppression—the stark contrast between the socialist aspirations of the workers and their lack of a political leadership and perspective.

A worker from Novochoerkassk gave expression to this when he later noted that "in one of the old Novochoerkassk preliminary investigation cells, the following inscription had been scrawled on the wall: 'Here sat working men. They suffered for the workers' cause.' That's how it was. Those who were imprisoned believed that they had been struggling for justice, but where could they have learned how to wage a correct political struggle?"

Responsibility for the absence of socialist leadership rests with Stalinism. Stalin's political genocide of revolutionaries and socialists in the 1930s, including almost the entire cadre of the Bolshevik Party of 1917, thousands of Trotskyists in the USSR and Leon Trotsky himself in 1940, had decapitated the working class, cutting it off from a political understanding of its own history.

Konchalovsky's decision to focus on some of the most degraded elements of this bureaucracy flows from his own social and political orientation. Konchalovsky was born in 1937 to a privileged family in the USSR, which was extremely close to leading party circles. His father, Sergei Mikhalkov, authored both the Soviet anthem and the anthem of the Russian Federation and was, for decades, a member of influential state and party bodies. Today, Konchalovsky, like his younger brother Nikita Mikhalkov (also a director), maintains close ties to the Putin regime, which emerged out of the Stalinist destruction of the USSR. (Konchalovsky adopted his grandfather's surname.) The main producer of the film is Alisher Usmanov, a former Stalinist bureaucrat who has become one of the richest oligarchs in Russia, with a net worth of \$11.68 billion. The film has also received heavy backing from state television.

Konchalovsky, who no doubt has considerable gifts and skills as a

director, is a representative of a social type that, unfortunately, is not uncommon in Russia: the court artist who places his or her work and talent at the disposal not of the people but of the state, and who, for the sake of making a career, sacrifices historical and artistic truth. (Vadim Rogovin, in his account of the Great Terror, analyzed the emergence of this layer under Stalin.)

Throughout the post-war period, the impact of Stalinism was abetted by the role of revisionist tendencies like Pabloism which promoted the illusion that the Stalinist bureaucracy was a progressive social force which could be “reformed” at the very point when it was challenged constantly by revolts in the working class. Falsely claiming the banner of the Fourth International, which had been founded by Trotsky in 1938 and was only defended and continued by the International Committee, the Pabloites subordinated the working class to the bureaucracy in the Stalinist-ruled countries and to bourgeois forces internationally. It was only because of this prolonged and bloody undermining of socialist consciousness in the working class that the perpetually crisis-ridden Soviet bureaucracy could maintain its rule and ultimately destroy the USSR and restore capitalism

The combination of an apologetic account of Stalinism with anti-Communism that Konchalovsky ultimately offers in *Dear Comrades* is not only an accurate expression of his own political and ideological evolution. It also reflects the dominant ideological trend of the Putin regime in Russia, which has combined a promotion of Tsarism and anti-Communism, including in its most vile, anti-Semitic forms, with a glorification of Stalin. In short, a whitewash and promotion of all the forces of counter-revolution in Russian history.

The broad and serious response to Konchalovsky’s movie is an indication of the enormous relevance of these historical questions for the development of political consciousness of workers today. But it also makes clear that both the historical and artistic fields must not be left to those who use the crimes of Stalinism to promote anti-communism and, in this case, perversely, to legitimize the Stalinist bureaucracy itself. A serious reckoning with the socialist alternative to Stalinism offered by Trotsky, the Left Opposition and the Fourth International is overdue, in Russia and internationally.



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