

# *I.S.S.*: War in space without—for a change—anti-Russian xenophobia

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February 24 marked the second anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a conflict that has taken the lives of more than 500,000 Russian and Ukrainian military personnel and civilians. Even before the invasion, Russians, particularly engaged in the arts, have become targets of truly repulsive xenophobic reprisals in Europe and America.

It is hard to find any official institution or news outlet that has a kind word to say about Russians, even after the terrorist attack in Moscow in March that killed 160. In fact, the rule of thumb—and this includes artistic media as well—is to depict Russians as blind supporters of Vladimir Putin and his invasion of Ukraine, generally without any redeeming human characteristics at all.

But there are exceptions, so far only minor or quasi-exceptions, films or other works in which Russians are portrayed as human beings. One of those is the film *I.S.S.* [International Space Station], which premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival in June 2023. Directed by American Gabriela Cowperthwaite (*Blackfish*, 2013) and scripted by Nick Shafir, *I.S.S.* defies tropes so plentiful in Cold War (and contemporary) fiction and film.

The actual International Space Station emerged out of the “space race,” which saw milestones like the first manned orbit of Earth in 1961 by Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin and the US Apollo moon landings from 1969 to 1972. The project, designed to conduct, according to NASA, “research in human physiology, radiation, materials science, engineering, biology, fluid physics, and technology,” was conceived by an international group of scientists and engineers as early as 1983.

After 1993, that is, following the dissolution of the USSR, Russian scientists were invited to participate. Serving as a symbol of international cooperation in space exploration, it remains a joint research station with the space agencies NASA (United States), Roscosmos (Russia), JAXA (Japan), ESA (Europe) and CSA (Canada) participating.

The first modules of the International Space Station, established in low Earth orbit, were launched between 1995 and 1998.

The collaboration between US and Russian scientists, despite political tensions on Earth, has endured, demonstrating the power of international cooperation in advancing human knowledge and exploration, with all the inherent limitations stemming from the subordination of science and other endeavors to the drive for profit.

To begin with, the film’s casting challenges the prevailing anti-Russian sentiment by prominently featuring two Russian actors, Costa Ronin (*The Americans*), who portrays Nicholai Pulov, and Masha Mashkova (*Closed Spaces*), who plays Weronika “Nika” Vetrov. The cast also includes three Americans—Ariana DeBose (*West Side Story*) as Science Officer Kira Foster, Chris Messina (*The Mindy Project*) as Commander Gordon Barrett and John Gallagher Jr. (*10 Cloverfield Lane*) as Christian Campbell—alongside the Danish Johan Philip “Pilou” Asbæk (*Game of Thrones*), who portrays Alexey Pulov, Nicholai’s brother.

Despite the diversity of the cast, spanning various nationalities, races, ethnicities, genders and sexual orientations, *I.S.S.*, unsurprisingly, places particular emphasis on the dynamic between the Russians and Americans.

The crew has dinner together. Music is playing, fostering a lively atmosphere of conversation and laughter. Nika speaks with Kira, underscoring that “the important thing is that we stick together.” Then there is this admonition from Nicholai: “We don’t talk politics around here. Here, we’re one.” Christian adds, “We don’t talk about any of it. We stay away from Syria, Israel ... and we sure as hell don’t talk about what’s going on down there right now.”

Whatever this means exactly, presumably the Ukraine war, it provides a convenient excuse for the filmmakers to forbid their characters from discussing politics. Anything that might have possibly influenced or shaped the lives of the Russians and Americans or their mutual relationships, ranging from the fall of the Berlin Wall and the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union to the subsequent wars of American conquest in Iraq and Afghanistan, much less the wars in Syria and Ukraine, is excluded in advance.

At one point, the crew collectively decides to make their way to the cupola of the space station. There, Kira views Earth for the first time with her fellow crewmembers. Nika tells Kira that the view, “For some people, it’s a spiritual awakening. Like the whole world, like humanity we’re all connected together or something.”

Later, Kira makes her way back to the cupola and notices a flash of light on the surface of Earth, initially thinking it might be a volcano, but more flashes pepper the North American continent. It becomes immediately apparent to her and the rest of the crew they have just witnessed a nuclear war.

Each team of astronauts, Russian and American, is instructed by military command on Earth to take control of the space station. Most of the film after that is comprised of thriller suspense and violence. Some of the Russian crew members are bent on the destruction of the Americans, though the Americans tend to be less vicious. Other Russians and Americans display real compassion.

Throughout *I.S.S.*, there are references to an experiment known as “Node Zero,” which involves research on a medicine crucial for treating radiation sickness. With no explanation provided by the film for the origin of this life-saving medicine—whether it stems from events like the Chernobyl and Fukushima disasters or even chemotherapy—the viewer is left to speculate whether the Russian and American governments see nuclear war as inevitable or whether the development of this medicine is merely a plot contrivance.

After a traumatic turn of events, Kira and Alexey restore life support and communication systems and ignore their respective governments’ directives as they board the Soyuz with the Node Zero research. They shuttle off from the ISS and begin hurtling towards Earth in an uncontrolled descent. When Alexey questions their destination, Kira responds uncertainly, “I don’t know.”

Overall, the filmmakers’ avoidance of xenophobic attacks on Russians in the wake of the deepening crisis in Ukraine and blaring imperialist anti-Russian propaganda is commendable. The intention may well be to show how human beings can cast aside nationality and national prejudices to collaborate on a life-saving project.

Cowperthwaite’s film, unfortunately, also exhibits a sharply pessimistic outlook in regard to humanity’s future. Nuclear war in *I.S.S.*, like just about everything else, develops outside of history and therefore apart from human understanding and any possible action to stop annihilation. Consequently, the film is only able to offer at best an inconsistent exploration of its themes and character motivations, leaving the viewer with serious questions unanswered.

*I.S.S.* is marred by ~~Further~~ <sup>Further</sup> ~~incons~~ <sup>inconsistency</sup> beginning with a congenial atmosphere among the crew members only to end in a bloodbath. This occurs after the viewer is made aware by the characters of the futility and absurdity of borders, only to have them succumb to nationalist and disastrous directives and orders.

A more realistic film about the I.S.S. even in the thriller genre, would have found rich material in the recent development of the militarization of space in various nationalist, capitalist interests.

In 2022, the director of Roscosmos, General Yury Borisov, a former military strategist, informed Russian president Vladimir Putin that “the decision to leave the [International Space Station] after 2024 has been made.”

This decision to pull out of the I.S.S. was no doubt motivated by the US-NATO-provoked Russian invasion of Ukraine. A new space station, named Russian Orbital Space Station, operated entirely by Roscosmos, has a planned launch in 2027.

In December 2019, then President Donald Trump announced his intention to create a “Space Force,” a sixth branch of the US military, to serve American imperialist interests. Not long after, Trump signed an executive order declaring US private property rights in space.

Earlier in 2019, French president Emmanuel Macron revealed plans for a French space command. The unfolding war-political crisis on Earth is currently also developing in space.

But that crisis emerges concretely, and the complexities of scientists in space (or anywhere else) supporting or opposing the interests of their government in drama depends on a more serious historical assessment of these developments by artists. Provided with the opportunity to touch upon one or more of these major developments, the filmmakers chose not to or were unable to do so.



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