



2018

Sex and the Soviets: Depictions of Rape in Soviet Cinema and Literature

Susannah Morrison

Brigham Young University, susannah.morrison.97@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thetean>

 Part of the [History Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Morrison, Susannah (2018) "Sex and the Soviets: Depictions of Rape in Soviet Cinema and Literature," *The Thetean: A Student Journal for Scholarly Historical Writing*: Vol. 47 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thetean/vol47/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Thetean: A Student Journal for Scholarly Historical Writing by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



Joseph Stalin with daughter Svetlana, 1935. Wikimedia Commons.

Paper

Sex and the Soviets

Depictions of Rape in Soviet Cinema and Literature

Susannah Morrison

IN 1924, SOVIET FREUDIAN PSYCHOLOGIST ARON ZALKIND PUBLISHED the “Twelve Commandments of Revolutionary Sex,” attempting to articulate sexual norms within the bounds of Bolshevik ideology.¹ Monogamy and sexual restraint was expected; the sexual act itself was to be prized as the “culmination of a deep and comprehensive sympathy and attachment,” the “final link in a chain of deep and complex experiences binding the lovers together.” Although Zalkind did not directly address the subject of rape, its taboo is implicit. Obliquely condemning “sexual conquest” and “sexual perversions” as damaging to “revolutionary-proletarian class objectives,” Zalkind situated sex firmly within the context of monogamous and egalitarian marriage. There could be no ideological sanction for sex outside marriage—including and especially non-consensual sex.

Although well-known and influential in its time, the dictates of “Twelve Commandments of Revolutionary Sex” failed to entirely take root. As a crime, rape existed in the Soviet Union largely on similar terms as in the West,

1. Aron Zalkind, *The Twelve Commandments of Revolutionary Sex*, trans. James von Geldern (Moscow: The Sverdlov Communist University Press, 1924).

accounting for roughly 1.7% of all criminal convictions in 1966.² The same year, 85% of all rapes tried by the courts were classified as aggravated rapes, the severity of the crime exacerbated by additional acts of violence, the age of the victim, or the existence of a familial relationship between the rapist and victim.³ Despite the Soviet ideological commitment to gender equality, similar taboos and double-standards to those in the West existed in the regime's official treatment of rape; women who were drunk at the time of the attack, or who had a prior sexual history, were widely considered less sympathetic victims than their sober or virginal counterparts.⁴ However, even as the Stalinist culture of "excessive modesty" censored open public discussion of this widespread problem, rape continued to feature prominently in Soviet film and literary output.⁵ Even so, scholarly examinations of depictions of rape in Soviet culture have traditionally been limited primarily to film studies, neglecting literary analysis altogether. Furthermore, the prevailing school of historiography examines these cinematic portrayals of rape in isolation, outside the framework of the broader Soviet cultural context.⁶

However, when examining instances of rape in Soviet cinema and literature on a comparative and chronological basis, a general pattern emerges. Over time, these portrayals shifted from male-driven narratives which framed rape primarily as an attack on masculinity, to female-driven narratives which treated it as a crime against the victim. For purposes of this study, I have chosen to examine three acclaimed pieces of Soviet culture: Mikhail Sholokov's epic novel *And Quiet Flows the Don*, the 1943 wartime propaganda classic *She Defends the Motherland*, and the 1957 critically acclaimed masterpiece *The Cranes Are Flying*. Each of these works were, in their own time, hailed as hallmarks of Soviet cultural achievement—and, therefore, provide a distinctive and insightful glimpse into Soviet perspectives on rape, as manifested in the output of the centralized and intensely scrutinized cultural establishment. Early portrayals of rape, such as in

2. A.A. Gertsenzon, *Ugolovnoye pravi i sotsiologiya* (Moscow: 1970), 17, in Valery Chalidze, *Criminal Russia: Crime in the Soviet Union*, trans. P.S. Falla (New York: Random House, 1977), 133.

3. Chalidze, *Criminal Russia*, 138.

4. Chalidze, *Criminal Russia*, 134–136.

5. Mikhail Stern and August Stern, *Sex in the Soviet Union* (London: W.H. Allen, 1981), 68.

6. Denise J. Youngblood, *Russian War Films: On the Cinema Front, 1914–2005* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2007); Birgit Beumers, ed., *A Companion to Russian Cinema* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2016).

And Quiet Flows the Don, treated the act as a natural behaviour of non-socialist masculinity. The ideological angle of rape was further advanced in the context of the Great Patriotic War, when *She Defends the Motherland* used one woman's rape as the symbolic violation of the nation. By contrast, however, in the post-World War II period, *The Cranes Are Flying* represented a significant shift in culture, offering a more nuanced, humanized, and sympathetic perspective on rape, particularly in comparison to earlier cultural products.

***And Quiet Flows the Don:* Pre-World War II Perspectives**

Mikhail Aleksandrovich Sholokov's *And Quiet Flows the Don* is widely considered a literary masterpiece, both within the Soviet Union and abroad. Published in installments throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the novel was awarded the Stalin Prize in 1941, the country's highest state honor to recognize works which significantly advanced the Soviet Union or the cause of socialism. Following the work's translation into English in 1934, Sholokov himself won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1965. Despite the novel's popularity outside the Soviet Union, the level of official praise and sanction given to the novel from the highest echelons of the Soviet establishment indicate that it may be regarded a generally representative cultural product.

First published in the conservative magazine *Oktyabr*, the novel explores the lives of Cossacks on the Don during World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the Russian Civil War. The main character, Grigori Melekhov, is a Cossack embroiled in a tragic love affair with Aksinia Astakhova, the wife of a family friend. Grigori and Aksinia's romance—and its painful consequences—dominates the plot of the novel, interwoven with the broader narrative of Russia in upheaval. As a universal shorthand signifying absolute moral corruption and societal chaos, rape is an ever-present threat throughout the novel.

One of Sholokov's main ideological goals was the discrediting of the Don Cossacks, who had fought heavily in the counterrevolutionary White Army during the Civil War. This agenda is demonstrated early on in the novel, even before war and revolution strike. As a seventeen-year-old girl, while working alone and unprotected in her family's fields, Aksinia is raped by her father. This violent encounter is punished by rough vigilante justice. After Aksinia "sob[s] out the whole story" to her mother, her mother and brother "frenziedly" beat

the rapist father to death.⁷ Although Aksinia continues to figure prominently in the novel's plot, her teenage rape is never mentioned again. Instead, the event serves a primarily ideological purpose within the narrative. Introducing one of his major characters against a backdrop of incestuous rape and bloody revenge-killing, Sholokov effectively highlights the moral depravity and civilizational backwardness of the pre-revolutionary Cossacks. Aksinia is acknowledged as a victim, but her victimization is quickly forgotten within the text itself. Furthermore, Sholokov seems to suggest that there is hardly anything deeper in Aksinia's suffering to explore; rather, the narrative frames rape as a detestable but fundamentally natural function of non-socialist masculinity.

Rape is again used as a storytelling device later on in the novel, when Aksinia's lover, Grigori, is on campaign with a Cossack regiment on the Austro-Hungarian front of the First World War. The soldiers are billeted on a country estate, on which lives the "pretty young housemaid . . . Franya."⁸ Franya immediately becomes an object of interest for the men, and, according to Grigori's flawed narrative perspective, appears rather to enjoy "bath[ing] in the streams of lasciviousness that came from three hundred pairs of eyes."⁹ Unlike Aksinia, whose innocence is clearly and sympathetically portrayed, Franya's brazen flirtatiousness is treated as the primary catalyst for her brutal gang-rape by a group of Cossack officers and soldiers. Grigori, the morally upright hero of the novel, attempts to rescue Franya, but is beaten, tied up, and threatened into submission and silence. In the aftermath of the attack, Grigori's failure to rescue the victim triggers feelings of deep shame and emasculation.

Although the novel is narrated by an omniscient third person and frequently changes perspectives between characters, this particular incident is told with the focus entirely on Grigori. Unlike Aksinia's earlier rape, which occupied only a single vague paragraph, this sequence is highly graphic and drawn-out—focusing not on the victim, but on Grigori's feelings of humiliation as a helpless bystander. Franya is all but incidental to her own violation; her considerable trauma functions only as a plot device through which to narratively probe Grigori's pained psyche.

7. Mikhail Sholokov, *And Quiet Flows the Don*, trans. Stephen Garry (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1934), 63–64.

8. Sholokov, *And Quiet Flows the Don*, 407.

9. Sholokov, *And Quiet Flows the Don*, 407.

The injury to Grigori's masculinity is twofold: first, in his inability to protect a civilian woman, and second, in having been physically overpowered by his fellow soldiers.¹⁰ Indeed, it is this humiliation before his peers which appears to make the greatest impact on Grigori. Following the rape scene, Grigori is reprimanded by a troop commander for a missing button on his great-coat, which had been torn off in the altercation with the other soldiers. Grigori "glance[s] down at the little round hole left by the missing button . . . [and] for the first time in years, he [feels] like crying."¹¹ In this moment, his victimization is absolute; disrespected by his colleagues, scolded by his commander, cowed into silence, and unable to live with himself in the wake of his forced moral compromise, he is fundamentally powerless and dehumanized, alienated from all expressions of traditional masculinity.

The portrayals of rape in *And Quiet Flows the Don* are ideologically motivated and masculine-centric. However, when placed in the original context in which Sholokov was writing and publishing, an overarching purpose begins to crystallize, beyond the generally clumsy and insensitive manner in which the rapes are portrayed in the text. Aksinia and Franya's rapes demonstrate the high degree of sexual danger under which women commonly lived in pre-revolutionary Russia. Aksinia, as a rural woman subject to her father's tyrannical control, and Franya, as a working woman assaulted by future White Army class enemies, were both placed at risk as a result of traditional male authority. The corrupt tsarist system failed to protect either woman—but the female emancipation promised by the revolution, embodied in early feminist Bolsheviks like Aleksandra Kollontai and Nadezhda Krupskaya, might have spared both Aksinia and Franya. Although it is not Sholokov's primary narrative focus, the message is still implicitly communicated: such acts of barbarism, permissible and even inevitable under the tsarist system, are unthinkable in the socialist state, rendering these incidents objects of morbid curiosity to the Soviet reading public.

10. Karen Petrone, *The Great War in Russian Memory* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), 154.

11. Sholokov, *And Quiet Flows the Don*, 412.

She Defends the Motherland: Rape in the Context of the Great Patriotic War

The advent of World War II—or the Great Patriotic War, as it was termed in the Soviet Union—indelibly changed the face of Soviet culture and, in particular, cinema. With invading German forces directly threatening the cultural capitals of Moscow and Leningrad, the Soviet film industry decamped to Alma-ata, Kazakhstan in the autumn of 1941. From this remote location of self-imposed internal exile, Soviet filmmakers threw themselves into the production of full-length propaganda war films. One of the most influential and beloved of these was *She Defends the Motherland*, released in 1943 and awarded the Stalin Prize in 1946.¹²

This particular film features a strongly-implied off-screen rape as one of its climactic moments, a rare portrayal in 1940s Soviet cinema. From the 1930s onwards, Stalinist censorship had produced a regressive and patriarchal media culture, rendering the subject of wartime civilian rape essentially taboo—even as the Soviet Union's Western allies released propaganda which prominently featured rape as a shorthand for Nazi depravity.¹³ However, due to the fact that the central rape takes place off-screen, *She Defends the Motherland* escaped censorship. As in *And Quiet Flows the Don*, rape functions primarily as a plot device within the story. However, while Sholokov's novel was far removed from the war it portrayed, *She Defends the Motherland* was the product of a real, present, and ongoing war—and so rape occupies a far more emotionally charged role within the narrative, acting as a violent catalyst for the transformation of an upstanding Soviet farm-wife to a frenzied avenging angel. Even so, however, *She Defends the Motherland* essentially follows and only moderately adapts the precedent established by *And Quiet Flows the Don*. Within the narrative, rape's significance for the victim is overshadowed by the crime's significance to those around the victim. In Sholokov's universe, this meant the male bystanders to

12. *She Defends the Motherland*, directed by Friedrich Ermler (Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan: Tsentralnaya Obedinennaya Kinostudiya Khudozhestvennikh Filmov, 1943); Stephen M. Norris, "Defending the Motherland: The Soviet and Russian War Film," in *A Companion to Russian Cinema*, 415–417.

13. Helena Goscilo, "Slotting War Narratives into Cultures Ready-Made," in *Fighting Words and Images: Representing War Across the Disciplines*, ed. Adam Muller, Elena V. Barbaran, and Stephan Jaeger (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 144.

the crime; in the wartime fervor of *She Defends the Motherland*, this meant the Soviet nation as a whole.

The main character of the film is Praskovia Lukianova, known initially by her nickname, Pasha, and later by her *nom de guerre*, Comrade P. At the beginning, Pasha is a blissfully happy young wife and mother, renowned as a tractor driver on her collective farm. However, her profession, her community, and her family are all shattered by the German invasion forces, who destroy her tractor and the other machinery of the collective farm, kill her husband, and, in a particularly gruesome scene, shoot her toddler son and proceed to run over his lifeless body with a tank. In the midst of this vision of horror, Pasha herself is dragged into the forest by a German soldier and raped. Although this particular act of violence takes place off-screen, there can be little doubt about what occurs. The next scene finds Pasha wandering alone through the devastated countryside. The camera follows Pasha from a distance initially, as she takes her first unsteady steps through a now-alien and barren landscape. As she approaches, the viewer sees that her clothes are ripped and tattered, and that her expression is now strangely blank and empty. Her transformation is absolute; she has metamorphosed, seemingly overnight, from a pretty young woman to the fearsome, hardened figure at the centre of the iconic “Motherland Mother” propaganda poster.¹⁴ Fueled by rage over her rape and the murder of her young son, Pasha is, from this moment onwards, reborn as Comrade P., the ruthless leader of a band of partisans, mercilessly exacting revenge on the occupying German army.

As in *And Quiet Flows the Don*, rape is used as a shorthand to demonstrate the absolute depravity of an enemy—though *She Defends the Motherland* invokes a foreign military enemy, as opposed to an internal class enemy like the Cossacks. Although the two cultural products share some superficial differences in their handlings of rape, the portrayal of Pasha’s violation in *She Defends the Motherland* generally follows the pattern established in *And Quiet Flows the Don*. Sholokov’s novel was dominated by a male perspective; the impact of the rape upon the actual victims was never explored. These non-consensual encounters were more significant as ideological demonstrations, or for their insight into a man’s psyche, than for what they meant for the actual women. By contrast, in *She Defends the Motherland*, the focus ostensibly rests on Pasha. The rape itself is

14. Konstantin Rudnitsky, “O Vere Maretskoi,” *IK*, no. 1 (January 1979), 119, quoted in Youngblood, *Russian War Films*, 61.

treated as an act of pure evil, and Pasha's vengeful reaction is treated with grim approval. On the surface, this endorsement of feminine violence might seem to be a betrayal of the Stalinist ideal of traditional femininity, which was generally prevalent in the vast majority of Soviet wartime propaganda.¹⁵ However, the rape, set in the fraught context of the war, is what sets Pasha apart. Her personal violation is symbolic of the national violation of Nazi invasion; her rage is an example of the ideologically ideal reaction of the Soviet people of a whole. Through her suffering at the hands of the Germans, she has become a warrior in her own right; her brutalization has earned her the right to be brutal.

But even so, *She Defends the Motherland* fails to give Pasha—and, by extension, the millions of wartime civilian rape victims she represents—a platform on which to meaningfully express her trauma. The rape is never discussed or even mentioned again; it simply exists, the untold origin story of a hero of the Soviet Union. Except for the ways in which it galvanizes her to anti-Nazi resistance, her pain is inconsequential; her rape, then, serves as almost as much of a plot device as in *And Quiet Flows the Don*. This fundamental disinterest in personal experience is typical of the Stalinist cultural establishment—but in this regard, *She Defends the Motherland* falls short of its tremendous opportunity to authentically explore the emotional reality of life under wartime.

***The Cranes Are Flying:* Rape in Retrospection**

In 1957, in the midst of the cultural thaw associated with the early Khrushchev era, the film *The Cranes Are Flying* offered a more nuanced interpretation of rape retrospectively set against the backdrop of the Great Patriotic War.¹⁶ The story centres on three main characters: Veronika, an innocent young woman in love with her fiancé; Boris, Veronika's fiance who volunteers for frontline duty; and Mark, Boris' cowardly cousin who is also in love with Veronika. With Boris away in the army, and her own family killed in an aerial bombing campaign, Veronika moves in with Boris' family—only for Mark to force himself on her in the midst of an air-raid. As in *She Defends the Motherland*, the film does

15. Helena Goscilo, "Graphic Womanhood Under Fire," in *Embracing Arms: Cultural Representations of Slavic and Balkan Women in War*, ed. Yana Hashamova and Helena Goscilo (Budapest, Hungary: Central European University Press, 2012), 160–161.

16. *The Cranes Are Flying*, directed by Mikhail Kalatozov (Moscow: Mosfilm, 1957).

not graphically depict the central rape; rather, it includes an extended scene of Veronika violently but ineffectually struggling to fight Mark off, before she faints and is carried away. The film presents little question of Veronika's culpability for Mark's actions; rather, at least as far as the rape itself is concerned, she is unambiguously represented as a victim.

However, Veronika's reaction to her rape takes a notably different form than Pasha's. While Pasha responded by violently reclaiming her body as a tool of destruction and revenge, Veronika simply shrinks in on herself, losing interest in life and passively drifting along. For example, in the aftermath of the incident, she marries Mark—not because she loves him, nor out of a misplaced sense of guilt or duty, but simply because she can no longer visualize a happy future with her beloved Boris.¹⁷ Veronika's bitterness and shame reach a climax when she decides to commit suicide by jumping before a moving train—but before she can do so, she rescues and ends up adopting a young war orphan. This is the turning point for Veronika; becoming a surrogate mother is what saves her. She gathers the strength to leave Mark and, although she is devastated by news of her first love's death on the front, the film ultimately ends on a hopeful note.

Veronika is a singular character within Soviet cinema. As a rape victim, she utterly defies the conventions of categorization established by epic works of literature like *And Quiet Flows the Don*, or by wartime films like *She Defends the Motherland*. Unlike Aksinia and Franya, Veronika's rape is not treated something fated to happen to her as an inherently vulnerable woman living in a non-socialist country. Her rapist is not a foreign fascist, nor a brutish class enemy, but a fellow Soviet, notable more for his banality and weakness than for his embodiment of absolute evil.¹⁸ Unlike Pasha, Veronika's body is not implicitly depicted as a symbol for the nation itself; her violation is not a metaphor for the humiliation of invasion. While the rape does not rob Veronika of her intrinsic value as a person, it also does not make her better or stronger in any way; rather, it breaks her spirit and her will to live. Although Veronika's human frailties disqualify her for classification as an archetypal Soviet film heroine, she is, regardless, depicted with absolute sympathy and compassion.

The treatment of rape in *The Cranes Are Flying* represents a significant shift in the attitudes of the cultural establishment, typical of the Khrushchev Thaw.

17. Denise J. Youngblood, "A War Remembered: Soviet Films of the Great Patriotic War," *American Historical Review* 106, no. 3 (June 2001), 846.

18. Josephine Wohl, *The Cranes are Flying: A Film Companion* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 28–29.

Rape is portrayed on an unflinchingly human scale; there is no abstraction of Mark's actions into something symbolically significant, and there is no escaping the depth of Veronika's pain and despair over what she has suffered. The act is framed, not as an attack on the nation, or an act of renegade masculinity, but as a profoundly damaging wound against the victim. This individualization of suffering is highly representative of the prevailing cultural trends under Khrushchev.

Conclusion

Portrayals of rape in any society are difficult to analyze and deconstruct, by virtue of their inherently sensitive character. In the Soviet case, cultural depictions of rape gradually became more nuanced and complex over time between the 1920s and 1950s, reflecting a growing space for the individual within Soviet society and an increasing level of interest in the feminine experience. Early rape narratives, such as those found in *And Quiet Flows the Don*, were shaped by the overwhelming ideological imperative of the immediately post-Civil War era, and used rape as a plot device to villainize the Bolsheviks' class enemies. These portrayals of rape were told from a masculine perspective and were, therefore, limited to the experience of the male bystander; female victims were all but incidental to their own violation. During the Great Patriotic War, Soviet cinema used rape as a metaphor for more extended German atrocities against the Soviet people at large. Female victims like Pasha reacted to rape in ideologically consistent and profitable ways, using their brutalization as the catalyst for their transformation into valiant defenders of the motherland. However, in the post-war era, as the Khrushchev reforms helped to elevate the status of the individual in Soviet culture and society, the cultural establishment began to treat rape as an emotional, rather than symbolic, devastation; within Soviet cinema, female characters like Veronika were given the space to respond to their rapes in contradictory, ideologically unhelpful, and thoroughly human ways. Despite this generally progressive trajectory, Soviet portrayals of rape through the Khrushchev era remained intrinsically flawed, indelibly influenced by casual sexism and traditional gender roles.

It is crucial to note that, even by the late 1950s, rape was still heavily stigmatized within Soviet culture, primarily only portrayed in the context of war-time. Although *The Cranes Are Flying* initiated the beginnings of a broader shift, the cultural establishment still treated rape as something unthinkable evil

and, therefore, something which fell outside the realm of normal, day-to-day socialist experience. In so doing, these cultural depictions actually marginalized the lived experience of ordinary Soviet women, who suffered rape at roughly the same rates and under the same circumstances as their counterparts in the West.¹⁹ However, it would take into the Brezhnev era for portrayals of rape, such as in the 1980 classic *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears*, to begin to more authentically and honestly reflect the Soviet female experience.

Susannah Morrison is a senior studying history, with an emphasis in British history and a lifelong fascination with all things Soviet. A German-Canadian, she plans to defect to Moscow after graduation to learn Russian, before pursuing graduate study in Berlin. She would like to here to acknowledge the innumerable female role models, the unquenchable feminist rage, and the unlimited quantities of '80s music which played so indelible a role in producing this paper.

19. Chalidze, *Criminal Russia*, 133; see also *USSR Crime Statistics and Summaries: 1989 and 1990*, trans. Joseph Serio. (Chicago: Office of International Criminal Justice, 1992).