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CONFLICTED LOYALTIES: REDEFINING PATRIOTISM IN RUSSIAN WAR CINEMA

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ABSTRACT:

THIS PAPER EXPLORES THE PORTRAYAL OF PATRIOTISM IN TWO WAR DRAMAS, "GU-GA" (1989) AND "SHTRAFBAT" (2004), BOTH OF WHICH EXAMINE THE EXPERIENCES OF SOLDIERS IN PENAL BATTALIONS DURING WORLD WAR II. SET AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF THE SOVIET UNION'S REPRESSIVE WARTIME DISCIPLINE AND THE LASTING CULTURAL IMPACT OF THE "GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR," THESE FILMS DEPICT THE COMPLEX AND OFTEN CONTRADICTIONARY NATURE OF PATRIOTISM. IN "GU-GA," PATRIOTISM IS NOT GLORIFIED, BUT PRESENTED AS A COERCED SENTIMENT ROOTED IN PERSONAL SURVIVAL AND REDEMPTION RATHER THAN BLIND ALLEGIANCE TO THE STATE. IN CONTRAST, "SHTRAFBAT" OFFERS A MORE NUANCED EXPLORATION OF STATE-IMPOSED PATRIOTISM, PORTRAYING THE SOLDIERS' INTERNAL STRUGGLES BETWEEN LOYALTY TO THE SOVIET SYSTEM AND THEIR HOMETLAND. BOTH FILMS CONTRIBUTE TO THE POST-SOVIET REASSESSMENT OF SOVIET WAR MYTHS, FOCUSING ON HOW HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS AND PERSONAL MORALITY OFTEN TRANSCEND THE IDEALS OF THE STATE. TOGETHER, THEY REFLECT THE SHIFTING CULTURAL MEMORY OF THE WAR AND THE EVOLVING NARRATIVE OF PATRIOTISM IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN CINEMA.

KEY WORDS: THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR, RUSSIAN CINEMA, PENAL BATTALIONS, CONFLICTED PATRIOTISM, OFFICIAL VS. INDIVIDUAL PATRIOTISM

INTRODUCTORY NOTES

The "Great Patriotic War" (*Velikaia Otechestvennaia Voina* or *VOV*) has been a pivotal cultural narrative in Russian society, serving multiple crucial functions. It generates a powerful national mythology that provides a foundational narrative of collective heroism and symbolizes Soviet/Russian resilience and triumph. Politically, the war narrative legitimizes the post-Soviet Russian state identity, reinforces historical continuity, and serves as a key propaganda instrument [1]. Culturally, it remains a dynamic memory, continually reinterpreted through literature and film, oscillating between heroic and critical representations and adapting to changing political contexts.

The war narrative transcends historical documentation, functioning as a crucial mechanism for constructing and maintaining national identity, military pride, and collective memory. It remains central to Russian national self-perception, used to mobilize public

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sentiment and strategically invoked in current geopolitical narratives, including the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. This enduring significance demonstrates how World War II continues to be more than a historical event—it is a living, evolving symbol of national strength and collective experience.

Nevertheless, many historical facts about World War II were less known in the Soviet Union due to propaganda and its mythologizing machine. One hidden fact was Stalin's Order No. 227, issued on July 28, 1942, and known as "Not one step back!" (*Ni shagu nazad!*), a direct response to Soviet soldiers' panic in the face of German military advances. The order introduced severe disciplinary measures, including imprisonment and execution for unauthorized retreats, cowardice, and desertion. Penal battalions (*shtrafbats*) were created following the German model, comprising disgraced officers who could potentially redeem themselves even after suspicious survival from encirclements and imprisonment. These units, overseen by NKVD officers (*osobisty*), were established alongside blocking units (*zagradotriady*) tasked with preventing retreats by force. The penal units' guiding principle was to redeem themselves through ultimate sacrifice for the Motherland, "to the last drop of blood."

Since the full text of Order No. 227 remained unpublished until 1988 during Gorbachev's *glasnost* campaign (as it contradicted the carefully crafted narrative of Soviet heroism), few writings about penal battalions were available.² The first films about penal battalions were launched in the *glasnost* era, reflecting the great social, cultural and political changes in the Soviet Union. Our focus is on one of the three films produced in 1989 – *Gu-ga* (directed by V. Novak, 1989) – given its genre of war drama³ and strong revisionist tone. The post-Soviet period explored the previously taboo theme in several films⁴ but our paper investigates the cult war drama TV series *Penal Battalion/ Shtrafbat* (directed by N. Dostal', 2004). These two *shtrafbat* depictions are film adaptations and reflect the specificity of the cultural background preoccupied with reassessing the Soviet heritage and de-heroicise the main Soviet myths concerned with the cult of *VOV*. Moreover, *Gu-Ga* and *Shtrafbat* represent a shift in the patriotic depiction of war dramas, reflecting preoccupations with veracity and revisionism rather than commemoration or reiteration of the Soviet war myths [2].

GU-GA – EROSION OF TRADITIONAL SOVIET PATRIOTIC NARRATIVE

Launched in a relatively loosened censorship era of the late 1989s, the film *Gu-ga* explores previously taboo topics: war trauma and societal trauma of the Stalinist era, the human cost of war, the conflicts within a military unit and femininity and eroticism in wartime. A significant and controversial contribution to the late Soviet historical revisionism, Villen Novak's film approaches the topic of patriotic sentiment, presenting the two types of patriotism: the state-imposed or official patriotism vs. the personal or individual one. While the first one remains at the declarative level of slogans demanding blind loyalty to the state, the latter stems from the soldiers' complex relationships to duty, survival, and redemption.

Patriotism is explored indirectly since the focus is on the personal and emotional experiences of the characters involved in Vladimir Pravorotov's penal battalion. This is not the average Soviet glorification of patriotism as seen in S. Gerasimov's *The Young Guard* (1948) or A. Stolper's *A Tale of a True Man* (1948) of the Stalinist period. *Gu-ga* depicts the main

² V. Karpov's *Vziat' zhivym!* (1974) and Moris Simashko's story *Gu-ga* (1982).

³ *The Name/ Imya* (B. Rytsarev, 1989) is a tragicomedy with satirical notes, while *One Hundred Soldiers and Two Girls/ Sto soldat i dve devushki* (S. Mikaelyan, 1989) treats the topic only marginally.

⁴ See the television film *Victory Day/ Den pobedy* (F. Petrukhin, 2006), A. Atanesian's version focused on orphan teenagers *Bastards/ Svolochi* (2006) and N. Mikhalkov's *Burnt by the Sun 2 (Exodus/ Predstoyanie, The Citadel/ Tsitadel', 2010)*.

characters' complex relationship to the state and duty. Neither of them, not even the negative characters – Sergeant Kravets and the officer of the blocking unit – are driven by patriotic zeal. They both seem animated by contempt and hatred toward the penal unit soldiers (*shtrafniki*) and humanity in general.

While undisciplined soldiers end up in a penal unit, the criminal prisoners get involved in the war, thinking of a quicker way to redeem their guilt. As depicted in *Gu-ga*, for neither category is the involvement an act of national pride, as both despise the state and its forms of authority. This is a forced duty, yet another form of constraint in the Stalinist system. For soldiers in a penal battalion, patriotism is often a compulsion rather than a true, heartfelt sentiment. Many of them are there because they have been sentenced to fight on the front lines, and their primary motivation is survival, not national glory.

Even the commander Pravorotov displays a negligent attitude toward the military rules in the instruction camp of his penal unit, drinking alcohol openly on duty and proposing to subordinates. Paradoxically, this contributes to soldiers' respect for this military commander, as it is the consequence of losing his family in a bombing (as the viewer finds out later). Also, discipline in the penal unit is ensured by appointing two people responsible for the two categories: stray soldiers and prisoners. Moreover, the further addition to the penal unit – Dan`kovets – becomes the trusted elder due to his third experience in a *shtrafbat*. Considering Dan`kovets' experience and military, psychological resourcefulness displayed in the film, this also suggests the unpredictability and absurdity of the disciplinary Stalinist system.

The protagonist's love affair with Tamara, the married teacher, provides a contrasting image of the chaotic battlefield. Their sexualized love story serves as a form of emotional escape from the brutality of war, rendered on screen by flashbacks every time Borya Tiraspolsky faces imminent extreme danger. Punished by Sergeant Kravets to clean the toilets, certain of the Sergeant's intentions to kill him when the moment appears or in the nauseating miasma of the swamps during the night surveillance, the camera stops on Borya's face. This is the slipping moment to the recent lustful and rebellious past, constructing the reason for Tiraspolsky's *shtrafnik* status – hijacking the instruction plane to visit Tamara in the nearby town. These moments of escaping war's harsh and cruel reality suggest that personal connections and survival matter more than abstract notions of patriotism or national duty. The romantic subplot is a form of resistance against the dehumanizing and depersonalizing forces of war, demanding oppressively blind obedience as the only accepted form of patriotism.

While patriotism is not overtly celebrated, the film does explore the idea of redemption through personal sacrifice and bravery. Tiraspolsky's possible redemption (as he fights for his survival) could be interpreted as a kind of patriotic act, though it is deeply personal and individual rather than driven by nationalistic fervour. This type of conflicted patriotism emerges through multifaceted character experiences. Borya's character arc does not follow the typical Socialist Realism character development, as pointed out by Katerina Clark: from spontaneity to consciousness [3]. However, the rough war experience in a penal battalion matures the protagonist; apparently, his transformation from an undisciplined, lustful soldier to a platoon responsible and in command during the battle (due to Pravorotov's wound and Dan`kovets' death) may be regarded as a potential argument. Nevertheless, the last scene of the film is the key to restating Borya's spontaneity and disobedience toward the coercive and unjust military system. At the end of the battle, the few survivors who have already redeemed their guilt through blood are asked to hand over their weapons to the blocking unit. The close-up of the blocking unit's officer and Tiraspolsky reveals the clash between the individual and the system. This is the trigger to Borya's rebellious reaction: emptying the gun in the air, an act replicated by other survivors.

Soldiers' patriotism and humanity are tested by systemic punishment and suspicion. For example, when transporting a wounded soldier to the blocking unit camp in the woods, Dan`kovets and Tiraspol'sky are met with warning bullets. After a brief discussion, the blocking unit agreed to take over the wounded without letting the other soldiers get closer to the camp. Also, the blocking unit used fire to "encourage" the penal battalion to pursue their nearly impossible mission without any break. Even oscillating soldiers between institutional loyalty and personal survival would incline toward the latter after such traumatic experiences. In Novak's directorial view, patriotism manifests as endurance against the brutal military disciplinary system mirroring the Stalinist violent state. This state measures individual worth through immediate unquestionable availability to serve as cannon fodder. Within this military disciplinary system, (avoidable) collective military sacrifice is the only valued way of redeeming past transgressions.

***SHTRAFBAT* – NUANCED PATRIOTIC PERSPECTIVE**

Nikolay Dostal's TV series *Penal Battalion* has become the benchmark of Russian historical drama about World War II concerning veracity and demystification. Unquestioned loyalty toward the Soviet state and military system during the war is heavily demythologized. The TV series explores individual moral choices within the collective struggle of a totalitarian regime. It shows soldiers' patriotism more explicitly than in *Gu-ga*, from a critical view - it is complex and sometimes conflicted. One of the symptomatic examples is a political prisoner who decided to join a penal battalion not to redeem his guilt (as the official invitation stated) but to protect his homeland. After sharing the tragic death of his family as the result of forced collectivization and his imprisonment due to setting his house on fire on the pretext of "arson of a collective farm property," he sighed, concluding: "Homeland is calling. It is my homeland, after all." From this view, personal survival is linked to national survival. Furthermore, *Shtrafbat* depicts patriotism as emerging from shared suffering rather than official ideology, deepening the difference between state-imposed and desirable patriotism and individually shaped one. It falls into the category of post-Soviet war films promoting a "rather amorphous or highly subjective expression of patriotism" [4].

The film portrays how the soldiers' sense of duty to their homeland is shaped by their status as criminals or expendable soldiers used mercilessly by a system as cannon fodder. State-imposed patriotism is also forcing the penal battalions into unquestioned obedience and blind sacrifice under the slogan of "redemption through blood." This patriotic sentiment demanded of soldiers is flawed, creating a moral conflict for many characters asked to die for a system that has already abandoned or punished them unjustly (as in the afore-mentioned example).

Blind patriotism demanded by the authorities is a form of manipulation: under the pretext of a noble cause, penal battalions are used as disposable pawns. This manipulation of patriotism often leads to internal struggles among the soldiers as they try to reconcile their own feelings of abandonment and worthlessness with the demands placed upon them. This is especially true of criminal prisoners who express their discontent with impossible missions, unlike political prisoners (most of them had fought in World War I and/or the Civil War). The latter category is more inclined to take military missions as a duty to their motherland than a vicious treatment of a violent state. In both cases, the soldiers' treatment of the special military unit responsible for penal battalion command reveals a gap between the official narrative of patriotism and the fierce, cynical reality of war. The declarative patriotism demanded by the Soviet authorities is not reflected in their command of penal battalions. As one German officer comments on the unnecessary sacrifice of a Soviet battalion: "Even if my country had so many soldiers, it would not treat them like expendables." Therefore, this type of official patriotism is largely coercive.

Dostal's war drama depicts soldiers' loyalty emerging from horizontal relationships, not vertical state structures. Despite their internal conflicts, *shtrafniki* developed a sense of unity and cohesion when facing the epitome of the military disciplinary system – Major Kharchenko. All soldiers (except the traitor informer) question Kharchenko's retribution arrest of their command, Vasily Tverdokhlebov, examining critically official narratives. In this case, they maintain commitment not only to survival, but also to their first command. When asked about how the battalion received him, the new command commented that the soldiers had Tverdokhlebov in high respect, alluding that he had a considerable standard to meet.

Patriotism in *Shtrafbat* is more psychologically fragmented than in *Gu-ga*. Dostal goes beyond portraying a soldier's depersonalized and dehumanized state; it captures the difficulty of reconciling conflicting desires or ideals. Tverdokhlebov's first arrest by the special disciplinary unit after escaping from German imprisonment marks the first disconnection from idealized patriotism. It serves as a turning point in the protagonist's beliefs in a just and protective state, shaping his personalized patriotism. Vasily's second arrest under the suspicion of straying from the party's line when dealing with war prisoners (especially former Soviet soldiers, as in Sazonov's case) amplifies his sense of disconnection from himself in service of a blatantly violent state and the state itself. The traumatic experience of being treated as a traitor twice despite fighting for his motherland reinforces Tverdokhlebov's complex issue of patriotism.

Former Red Army captain Sazonov's case is yet another example of psychologically fragmented patriotism. As war prisoners, a group of loyal Red Army higher-ranked officers, Tverdokhlebov and Sazonov among them, refuse to eat. When offered the opportunity to fight against the Bolsheviks alongside Andrey Vlasov,⁵ Sazonov and another one accepted. Sazonov's argument is subtle yet clear: "I'll fight for my country against Bolsheviks, not for Germany." Disillusioned with the Stalinist regime, these two officers chose to betray the state, not their motherland, even if their first mission was to execute those who refused Vlasov's offer. In this case, the vertical loyalty gained prominence over the horizontal relationships. When Tverdokhlebov captured Sazonov, the first gave the latter the chance to commit suicide instead of executing him. By doing so, Tverdokhlebov combined his loyalty to horizontal relationships and the motherland but broke his allegiance to the state in general and military law in particular.

Shtrafbat approaches the redemption theme from two perspectives: the state and the individual. The official call for arms starts with the statement, "Motherland is in danger," appealing to the criminals' availability to defend their country. This appeal to patriotic feeling is linked to individual benefit – redeeming through blood their guilt. In the criminals' case, this redemption is not linked to their duty to the state but to their homeland loyalty. Moreover, redemption stems from mutual solidarity rather than abstract national ideology.

Despite the cynical treatment of patriotism, *Shtrafbat* also explores moments of selfless sacrifice and heroism. Some of the soldiers, especially the political prisoners, do display a form of patriotism, though it is born from personal redemption or camaraderie rather than ideological loyalty. These moments, where soldiers put their lives on the line for each other, suggest that patriotism, in its truest form, can still exist even in the most degrading circumstances. The soldiers' efforts to survive and protect each other can be interpreted as a desire to maintain

⁵ Andrey Vlasov was a Soviet general during World War II who, after being captured by the Nazis in 1942, became a collaborator. He formed the Russian Liberation Army (ROA), composed of Soviet POWs, aiming to fight against the Soviet regime. Vlasov's motivations remain debated, but his collaboration with Nazi Germany marked him as a traitor in the eyes of many. After the war, he was captured by the Soviets, tried for treason, and executed in 1946. His actions and legacy are still a subject of controversy in Russian history.

some sense of dignity and purpose, even if that purpose has little to do with the official cause of the war.

COMPARATIVE VIEWPOINTS

Both films use penal battalions as a lens to examine patriotism during World War II. Still, *Shtrafbat* represents a more psychologically introspective approach compared to the more straightforward heroic narrative of *Gu-ga*. These films reflect distinct responses to the socio-political climate of their respective times. Not only are they shaped by the broader shift in Russian historical memory and cultural discourse, but they also shape historical memory by introducing war trauma and Stalinist societal trauma into the cultural discussion [5]. Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* period allowed critical reassessments of the glorified portrayal of World War II and demystifying attitudes. Unlike previous Soviet war films,⁶ Novak's film focuses on soldiers' struggles driven by survival rather than blind loyalty to the state. It thus challenges the state's official patriotic narrative by presenting a demystified, humanized and fragmented view of patriotism. The conflict within the victorious Red Army (blocking units and penal battalions, Sergeant Kravets and soldier Tiraspol'sky) reveals demythologized patterns of previously standard Socialist Realism motives, such as the myth of the great family [6]. It also moves the focus from abstract party ideals to personal sacrifice and relationships.

In contrast, the TV series directed by Dostal' mirrors a period of greater artistic freedom, engaging explicitly in the issue of state-manipulated patriotism. It is part of a larger post-Soviet reassessment trend of Stalinism, the Great Patriotic War cult and its mythologized history. The film criticizes the Soviet regime's coercive use of patriotism, depicting soldiers of penal battalions forced into (sometimes unnecessary) sacrifice under the guise of "redemption through blood." *Shtrafbat* explores patriotism on the verge of moral conflict and personal struggle, highlighting the collision of official narratives and personal histories.

Both films represent significant stages in the evolution of Russian historical memory of World War II, detaching from state-imposed heroism and loyalty to a subtle, individualized rendering of the motherland loyalty. While *Gu-ga* reflects the late Soviet tendency toward confronting less known and uncomfortable historical facets, *Shtrafbat* exemplifies a post-Soviet stance on the risks of manipulating patriotism for political gain. Together, these films convey the Russian cinema shifts from Soviet mythologizing canon to its myths' critique, thus highlighting personal fragmented and conflicted patriotism.

VISUAL AND CINEMATIC REVIEW

Both films convey complex themes through specific film techniques: visual composition and editing transmit the protagonists' psychological fragmentation; the war's dehumanizing effects and the distorted nature of patriotism. The directors' visual choices highlight the harsh conditions and the soldiers' psychological turmoil. The cinematography mainly consists of gritty, realistic depictions of war: pan shots of battlefields, the mix of mud, blood and human parts, zooming in on the soldiers' wounds (no ellipsis as in previous Soviet war films). These emphasize the brutality of war and the characters' internal struggles.

⁶ See M. Chiaureli's *The Fall of Berlin* (*Padeniye Berlina*, 1950) as a notable manifestation of Stalin's cult of personality and a significant example of Socialist Realism. Among the films of the Soviet heroic war canon see also M. Chiaureli's *The Vow* (*Klyatva*, 1946), I. Savchenko's *The Third Blow* (*Tretiy udar*, 1948), V. Petrov's *The Battle of Stalingrad* (*Stalingradskaya bitva*, 1949).

In *Gu-ga*, close-ups of Borya Tiraspolsky's face in the utmost moments of danger and violence are ways to introduce flashbacks to his love affair with Tamara. These evasions in the recent past replaced his inner turmoil expressed by longer shots of Borya's facial expressions of fear, anxiety and rage. The bleak, muted colour palette of the daily war reality contrasts with the bright, colourful scenes of the protagonist's instruction period in a Soviet Asian republic. The war's dehumanizing environment of the putrid swamp differs from the orchard or vineyard scenes with Tamara. The soldiers' framing against barren, affected by war ruins, expresses their isolation and helplessness, deepening the distance between the state's absurd patriotic demands and daily survival struggle.

There is a similar focus on harsh war realities in *Shtrafbat*, employing colour grading to produce the effect of older coloured Soviet films. This has a double effect on the viewer: it creates a sense of temporal distance between the viewer and the fictional events set during the war while also imparting a documentary-like quality that enhances the feeling of authenticity [7]. The director uses wide shots of the soldiers in the wilderness to emphasize their vulnerability and close-ups of their faces to focus on their inner battles. For example, the camera closely follows Tverdokhlebov's facial expression after announcing that he would return to his penal battalion as a soldier following Sazonov's case investigation. A glimmer of hope appears on his face, but soon after leaving the room, he bursts into bitter tears, expressing a mix of joy, despair and unwillingness to live. The close-up of his face transmits to the viewer a sense of immediacy. The scene of Tverdokhlebov's return to the battalion and intimate conversation with Glymov also features a close-up of the two in the same frame before falling asleep. The two do not have visual contact; they stare into the night and discuss Vasily's recent arrest with indistinct facial changes. When asked by Glymov about the arrest, Tverdokhlebov admits that the "guys did their best" and "he broke." Glymov says in an even voice, without looking at Vasily: "I don't believe it." These intimate scenes are combined with long descriptive shots of the penal battalion before the battles, conveying the soldiers' weariness, while handheld camera shots contribute to a sense of closeness and imminence. These techniques bring the viewer closer to the soldiers' psychological chaos.

The editing style of *Gu-ga* is deliberately slow, reflecting the disorienting experience of *shtrafniki*. Tiraspolsky's slipping into the pre-war love affair with Tamara fragments the fabula and mirrors his disconnection from the war's brutal reality. The nonlinear editing shows the characters' psychological fragmentation and disillusionment, driven by survival rather than any sense of patriotic duty. These moments of evasion offer Borya a fleeting relief and strength to cope with the horrid war.

The 2004 TV series installs a fast-paced, almost visceral editing during the battle scenes, rendering the chaotic and brutal nature of soldiers' lives. The quick cuts and fragmented pacing create a sense of urgency and danger, stressing the soldiers' constant fear of death and the dehumanizing nature of their mission. However, the film also includes quieter, more reflective moments that slow down the narrative, allowing the characters' internal conflicts to emerge (see Glymov's meeting with Katerina, his former lover, or the love affair between soldier Savelyi and nurse Sveta). These love stories pause in the action and are often paired with close-ups and introspective dialogue, allowing the audience to connect with the soldiers' personal struggles (see also Tzukerman's conflict with Captain Bredunov). The shifts between fast-paced battle sequences and slow, reflective moments emphasize the psychological toll of war and the soldiers' attempts to reconcile their personal and ideological battles.

In *Gu-ga*, visual and auditory techniques, such as bleak cinematography, minimalist sound design, and fragmented narrative structure express the character's alienation from the state and its disciplinary means. This world of personal survival outweighs abstract ideals of

national glory or state-imposed patriotism. The camera focuses on gestures like killing the enemy and intimate moments between the soldiers. For instance, Dan`kovets killed a German soldier with a knife, cleaned it in the nearby earth during the night and the next day cut the ham with it. Tiraspol'sky is following Dan`kovets' movements as he shares the slices of ham with the other three soldiers and one is starting to eat; the camera executes a pan shot and then changes the angle from Borya's back toward the others, Dan`kovets is in the centre. Finally, Borya can utter, bewildered, that his comrade killed the German with the same knife. While the camera follows the soldier who has started eating the ham, having an organic reaction in the nearby corner, vomiting on another soldier, Dan`kovets exclaims: "They've become used to the swamp but not to the war!" This lack of heroic gestures and focus on everyday life in the trenches challenges the glorification of Soviet patriotism, instilling a new type of authentic personal and fragmented patriotism developed and carried away to the last breath.

In the same way, *Shtrafbat*'s editing style combines intense combat scenes and reflective moments, rendering soldiers' moral dilemmas. The gruesome image of human bodies on a battlefield is preceded by a chatty atmosphere. This is when tongues loosen up and soldiers express their disrespect to the Soviet authorities that send them to clear death through mined fields or crossing a river to divert the Germans' attention from a different maneuver performed by another battalion. Before the latter, a significant scene composed of different camera angles contributes to another revisionist narrative: a priest fighting voluntarily with the penal battalion is blessing every soldier. The close-up of the blessed soldiers and Father Mikhail renders the intimacy and trust between the two, whereas the tilt reveals the upward faith in vertical power – God - but not vertical state structure. The horizontal relationships contributed thus to finding God and faith at war or settling a new vertical relationship, forming symbolically the shape of the cross. In Father Mikhail's terms, the soldiers are performing a "holy mission," blessing thus their authentic and self-sacrificing patriotism.

CONCLUSION

Both films highlight the tragic nature of patriotism in the context of penal battalions. In *Gu-ga*, patriotism is almost a background theme, where the soldiers' struggles are defined more by their humanity and survival instincts than any sense of national duty. In *Shtrafbat*, patriotism is more explicitly questioned and used as a tool of control, illustrating how the Soviet state exploited the ideal of patriotism to manipulate and sacrifice its soldiers. A central idea from both films is that humanity and personal sacrifice often outweigh the more abstract notions of patriotism. In both works, the soldiers' relationships with each other, their quest for redemption, and their desire for survival ultimately become more important than their allegiance to the state.

In both *Gu-ga* and *Shtrafbat*, patriotism is portrayed as a complex, often contradictory factor. On the one hand, the state-imposed narrative of patriotism demands blind obedience with no regard for human life and the cost of war; on the other, characters display a delicate sense of allegiance to their homeland, disjoined with the state. While in *Gu-ga* patriotism is a background motif, *Shtrafbat* treats the patriotic feeling manipulated by the state to serve as yet another tool of control. As a result, soldiers struggle to reconcile their loyalty to the motherland with their blunt exploitation as expendables. Both directors explore how patriotism can be distorted or become secondary to more human, existential concerns in the face of war's brutal reality.

The characters of *Gu-ga* and *Shtrafbat* show that even under harsh circumstances, moral choices transcend official propaganda. The soldiers' patriotism is a personal version of their love for the motherland, not an abstract concept imposed from above by the state authorities.

Both films deconstruct simplistic patriotic narratives, touching upon previously taboo topics and presenting war trauma and societal trauma of a violent state. Instead, patriotism is revealed on screen as a complex and conflicted human experience where loyalty is constantly negotiated, challenged, and redefined through personal and collective struggle. Novak and Dostal's films reflect the shift in Russian cultural memory: from standardized heroic narratives to individualized ones. As a result, the main protagonists – Tiraspol'sky and Tverdokhlebov – are complex individuals with moral dilemmas and psychologically fragmented patriotism under brutal war circumstances.

Both *Gu-ga* and *Shtrafbat* use visual, sound and editing techniques to effectively convey the complex themes of patriotism, personal struggle, and psychological fragmentation. Through deliberate cinematography and thoughtful editing, the films criticize the Soviet narrative of unquestioning loyalty and sacrifice while offering nuanced portrayals of individual characters grappling with their sense of duty, survival, and redemption. These cinematic elements deepen the emotional impact of the films and reinforce their exploration of the tension between personal and state-imposed patriotism.

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