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Apocalyptic Visions of the Great Patriotic War:

Elem Klimov's *Come and See*

By **Denise J. Youngblood**

It's a sunny day. Children romp on a beach, while others dig in the sand. A carefree scene, except that the play is not innocent, and the children are wise beyond their years. "Dig harder! Can't join the partisans without a gun!" growls one grimy urchin. They are robbing shallow graves, looking for guns. A village elder protests their desecration, but they mock him. No respect for elders in this gang. A few days later, one of the youngsters, a 14-year-old boy named Flyor, stumbles past a crowd of keening peasant women to find the same old man, near death, a charred mass of bloody flesh. "I was set on fire," he gasps. "I warned you not to dig. I begged them to kill me. They laughed. I said not to dig." It is Belorussia, 1943. The German army is in retreat.



One of the many harrowing images from *Come and See* (dir. Elem Klimov, 1986). Photo courtesy Kino International.

From these two scenes alone, it's obvious that this is no run-of-the-mill Soviet war film. Critics and audiences responded with one mind, a rarity in the contentious world of Soviet cinema. *Come and See* was named best film at the Moscow Film Festival in 1985. It came in sixth at the box office and was named best film of 1986 in the *Soviet Screen* viewers' survey. It's among the most powerful anti-war films in global cinema and is an equal to great Vietnam War films like *Apocalypse Now*. Finding resonances between *Come and See* and contemporaneous Western films like *Apocalypse Now* might be tempting, but it is worth remembering that Soviet filmmakers labored in relative isolation, little influenced by Western trends. This was due to censorship and film importation practices that strictly curtailed the distribution of provocative films, especially war films.

Rather than artificially situate *Come and See* into the Western tradition of dystopian war films, I'd like to consider what it tells us about the cinematic counterculture in Soviet society. Most importantly, *Come and See* demonstrates the depths of dissent *before glasnost* in the hoariest of all Soviet film genres, the war film. But it did not emerge from a vacuum; in fact it's the apogee of a three-decades-long Soviet tradition of subversive films about World War II. Because of the centrality of the Brezhnevian World War II cult as a buttress to late Soviet power, mythologization of the war became a massive state enterprise, in which movies played a key role. Therefore, films like *Come and See* were not only cinematically significant, they actively undermined the state's *raison d'être* by challenging the tropes of the classic commemorative war film.

To understand how films came to play such a role in Soviet society at this juncture, it will be useful to sketch in the historical background. The USSR's control over the film industry changed slowly but dramatically after Stalin's death. Khrushchev's relaxation of cultural censorship known as the Thaw meant that for the first time in more than two decades, Soviet directors could bring a human face to socialist cinema. The Thaw was, however, short-lived; the cultural climate was cooling rapidly even before Khrushchev's ouster in 1964. Brezhnev's reign was, of course, known as the "stagnation," but recent research, including my own, has shown that cinema culture was remarkably varied, even though the threat of censorship or even banning was once again a Damocles sword for directors and scenarists. The cinematic emphasis of the era was to produce entertainment films that could compete with foreign films; the result was that art film directors, relegated to the backwaters of the cinematic enterprise, could often make daring films (in the Soviet context) and even get them released.

The outspoken director Elem Klimov (who became head of the Union of Cinematographers in 1986) and the equally provocative scriptwriter Ales Adamovich (who eventually entered politics) were two of the best examples of subversive filmmakers. They had sought to film Adamovich's story about the destruction of the village of Khatyn for years, not succeeding until the years of post-Brezhnev decline, when censorship loosened to a degree. The only artistically celebrated Soviet film commemorating the 40th anniversary of Victory Day, *Come and See* seeks to bridge the traditional chasm between the grandiose and intimate views of the war. *Come and See* has epic scale—the genocide in Belorussia—but it is seen through the eyes of one individual, the adolescent Flyor. The picture drew on some of the established tropes of the Soviet war film—its epic dimensions, for example—but subverted them ruthlessly. The great

victory that *Come and See* ostensibly intends to remember is completely absent from the picture as are any intimations of the glory and heroism that were the hallmarks of the mainstream Soviet war epic.

Like a number of other Soviet war films, *Come and See* involves a journey, but a journey through hell, rather than one along the path to discovery. There is no real plot. The boy Flyor joins the partisans, but finds his way home again after being abandoned by them. He discovers that the Germans have executed his family; then, nearly catatonic, he sets out with some survivors to find food. After his comrades are killed by German strafing, Flyor finds his way to a German-occupied village. The villagers are rounded up to be "deported," and a brutal massacre ensues. Flyor survives once again. The partisans arrive, round up a few German prisoners and execute them. Flyor rejoins the partisans. As they disappear into the dark forest, a sobering title informs us, "628 Belorussian villages were destroyed, along with all their inhabitants." The film's closing shot is of the partisans, backs to the camera, shoulders slumped, gait weary. Mozart's "Requiem" soars. Victory is not even close, and what kind of victory will it be?

From beginning to end, *Come and See* subverts the tropes of the socialist realist war film. The children of the opening scene are not rosy-cheeked cherubs; they are children of war. Flyor's mother is not noble and self-sacrificing like the mothers in Soviet wartime films. She becomes hysterical at the thought of his leaving home to join the partisans. She weeps, screams, clutches at him: "Then kill yourself now! And the other children too! I won't let you go! I won't!" The partisans, unlike the stalwart and upright heroes of socialist realist movies, are not only completely unmoved by the mother's grief, they are crude and disrespectful, more like a press gang than freedom fighters. And at the end of the film, as the partisans interrogate their German captives, they shout for vengeance and douse their prisoners with gasoline. The partisan commander opens fire, killing the prisoners in cold blood.

As for Flyor, he is certainly not a positive hero but a child stumbling blindly through the apocalypse. He has no apparent "cause"; indeed none of the characters talk about defending the motherland and the communist party. His function in the film is as witness. Nowhere in the film is this more obvious than in the massacre scene when three Germans pose Flyor for a photograph, gun at his temple, his face a mask of terror.

The annihilation of the village, which is the climax of Flyor's tortuous journey, also defies the practice of the typical Soviet war film. The episode is visually and aurally surrealistic, punctuated with scenes of graphic violence. Covering on the ground, Flyor watches what may well be the most brilliantly choreographed massacre in film history. Shot through long takes and pans, the entire village goes up in flames. Those who initially escape are beaten, raped, humiliated, killed, their corpses desecrated. As terrible as are the visual images of the carnage, even more remarkable is the racket: screaming, barking, laughing, shouting, motor noise, music, machine gunshots, and the whistling of flamethrowers. When it is all over, the silence is deafening. The Germans merrily pile into their vehicles and continue their westward retreat.

If we compare *Come and See* to the standard, tendentious Soviet war film, like Yury Ozerov's *The Battle for Moscow* (1985), a vainglorious seven-hour epic, there's no comparison. But Klimov and Adamovich were in fact working within a rich cinematic tradition that began in Khrushchev's Thaw and, contrary to popular belief, continued through Brezhnev's "era of stagnation." After all, the famous war films of the Thaw—like Grigory Chukhrai's *The Ballad of a Soldier* (1959)—had sought to bring a public sated on gargantuan Stalinist epics, a human wartime experience.

Resistance to the rapidly developing World War II cult continued, in part as a backlash to Yury Ozerov's retrograde eight-hour *Liberation* (1968–71), a film much influenced by late Stalinist epics. On a few occasions the subversive films were banned—like Aleksei German's *The Trial on the Road* (1971). Mostly they were released, some to widespread popular and critical acclaim (Stanislav Rostotsky's *And the Dawns Are Quiet Here*, 1972), others to limited distribution (Larissa Shepitko's *The Ascent*, 1976). Tragic endings were the norm. War was death and destruction; superhuman feats of glory were nowhere to be found.

And then there was *Come and See*, more subversive to the cult of the Great Patriotic War than any of its predecessors. Its images of the apocalypse are indelible. By stripping the war of its cant and varnish, Klimov lay bare the universal dehumanization of the "Good War."

As celebrated as the film was at home, it seemed for years to stand alone. Interest in the Great Patriotic War plummeted during the dismal 1990s, when the Russian film industry almost went out of business. There has, however, been a recent revival, and the 60th-anniversary films in the mid-2000s bear strong traces of *Come and See's* influence. The demythologization of the war continues. Even in this time of cultural conservatism in Russia, some filmmakers and moviegoers have yet to lose an appetite for movies that challenge received wisdom.

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