

Chapaev

VASILYEV BROTHERS

1934

Chapaev is perhaps the most famous cinematic work of the Socialist Realist movement, but how does one define this movement? In a nutshell, Soviet directors were provided with specific themes and storylines that furthered the spirit of socialism and Soviet heroism. The proletariat should be glorified for its productivity, capitalists portrayed as greedy money-grabbers, and the individual must subordinate him or herself to the collective. Unsurprisingly, then, Chapaev is said to have been one of Stalin's favourite films (he reportedly watched it over 30 times).

Directed by the Vasilyev brothers, Chapaev is loosely based on the novel of the same name by Dmitri Furmanov about the life of his comrade, Vasily Ivanovich Chapaev. The action takes place on the Eastern Front over the course of six months during the Civil War. It follows the eponymous hero's time in the Red Army, who with the assistance of his politically consciousness commissar, (the aforementioned Furmanov), rallies his troops against the White Army.

The character of Chapaev (Boris Babochkin) is an archetype of soviet heroism: at heart, he's a simpleminded country bumpkin, having only just learnt how to read and write. Yet his loose grasp on the subtleties of political theory are vastly outweighed by his wit, charisma and courage. He may use potatoes to demonstrate military tactics, but his loyalty is second to none: "Come to me midnight or later," he assures his troops, "and if I'm drinking tea- drink with me. If I'm eating- eat with me. That's the kind of commander I am!"

Furmanov, before writing his novel, spoke of the difference between a brave man and a hero, describing the latter concept in the Soviet context as something that "emerges from a deep conviction of the righteousness of their cause...they have consciously entered into the struggle."

Thus Chapaev's spontaneity and exemplary military leadership makes him brave, but it is his coming to consciousness over the course of the film, his ideological growth, that makes him a true

Soviet hero. Underpinning this ideological conception is a tradition dating back to the 1860s, a continuation of categories from the works of writers like Chernyshevsky (whose novel *What is to Be Done?* was famously Lenin's favourite). Unlike Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov or Turgenev's Rudin, for whom the conflict between words and deeds was torturous, Chapaev represents a way of harnessing these conflicting categories in a way that leaves heroism open to all citizens. And for this conception to be adequately depicted, art can't just be for art's sake, but should deal directly with the real problems faced by all.

And so the film, with its expansiveness and introduction of new Soviet vocabulary, successfully communicated this conception to the masses. The governing philosophy freed its viewers from having to delve into abstract ideas; instead the film simply reiterates that all existing reality is the result of firm, passionate and decisive party leadership during the Civil War. With the help of his two young aides, Petka and Anka the machine-gunner, Chapaev's commando are an unstoppable force. And these characters have had such a far-reaching impact precisely because they are drawn from real life.

Watched by over 30 million people at the time, Chapaev is one of the most popular Soviet films ever made, and stands firmly alongside the likes of Dovzhenko's *Arsenal* (1929) and Askoldov's *The Commissar* (1967) as one of the most enduring depictions of Soviet brotherhood and sacrifice. In fact, Chapaev looms so large in the Soviet imagination that playing Chapaev and Reds versus Whites was their childhood version of Cowboys and Indians. It even still provides the subject for many a Russian joke. A good example is one in which Chapayev, Petka, and Anka, hiding from the Whites, are crawling across a field: Anka first, then Petka, and lastly Chapaev. Petka remarks, "Anka, you lied about your proletarian ancestry! Your mother must have been a ballerina – your legs are so fine!" Chapaev responds, "And your father, Petka, must have been a ploughman – the furrow you're leaving behind you is so deep!"