

Twenty Days Without War

ALEKSEI GERMAN

1977

In many ways Aleksei German's *Twenty Days without War* (1977) is a piece of cinematic discourse. Throughout his career, the director was drawn to serious and often morally ambiguous topics. This 1977 contribution from the Russian great, who has often been compared to Tarkovsky in stature and importance, is no different. *Twenty Days without War* (1977), German stated, is an explicit challenge to Yuri Ozerov's film *Liberation* (1970), and the capacity cinema carries for dishonesty.

The film begins in action. As is typical of German, the tale is told to us by a narrator, in this case front-line journalist. Vasily Lopatin. Lopatin tells us he was wounded twice, but what really sticks in his memory is 'the fog that spread over the sea', before their return to the mainland. We are also told that his comrade has died, moments before a bomb strikes.

German has a particularly interesting visual language. However this is often less expounded upon in critical theory, the depth and message of his films often taking prevalence, with visuals discussed as subordinate to that. But his effectiveness in managing to display the post-apocalyptic black and white world in this film as visually striking and powerful in a way that does not diminish its horror should be noted. Planes darken the white of the sky, hanging low filling the screen. Their disappearance is brutal and sudden. As viewers we hardly see the cause of death leave, but we hear it humming low in the distance. The effect is self aware, and situates itself somewhere between a realist documentary approach and deliberate abstraction. There are only three episodes of war in the film: the opening, a flashback in the middle of the plot and the ending, which features Lopatin's inevitable return to battle. Their sparing use gives them more impact, as their placement at key points in the narrative poetically responds to Lopatin's return to the civilian world, giving these segments the stature of truth.

At the time of production, German's previous film, *Trial on the Road* (1971) was still shelved, and his sophomore film nearly met the same fate for expounding upon similar themes. German is nothing if not relentless! If moral ambiguity in the face of human desperation, was the major thesis of *Trial on the Road* (1971); war's randomness and and disregard for the individual is the major theme of *Twenty Days without War* (1977). The so called 'luck'

of the draw is made evident from the beginning, you never know when or who may get hit by a bullet or a stray piece of shrapnel. A man with a wife is dead, youngsters die and Lopatin lives. 'Why does this all come back to me now?' Captain Lopatin muses, 'Maybe because a year has passed and he isn't here? Maybe because I am now taking his things to his wife in Tashkent?' 'Why is it this way round and not the other way round?'

This pointed reminder of cruel chance, runs as a counter to the narratives of war, which are filled with tales of heroics and ideology. As with *Trial on the Road* (1971), German asks us many questions that cut through social narratives: should individual lives ever be sacrificed, and can someone ever truly be a 'hero' in such a warped metric of ideology, randomness and sacrifice? This is central to the film within a film narrative. As Lopatin witnesses Tashkent Studios produce a film based on his writings, he is struck by the fundamental difference between his lived traumatic experience and the message of the Soviet authorities. The film consultant hired has had no experience of war. Because of his age and his health, he has remained behind the lines and never seen the horrors of the front. In spite of this, he argues with Lopatin. This raises another strange question, how does the propaganda around war affect civilians and alienate the very individuals who are simultaneously canonised and sent to the slaughter? How can you convince a public to make human sacrifice palatable, and what discordance between reality and thought do the ones on the front line face when they return home?

But horror is not left at the front, Tashkent was the home of many Russian evacuees during the war. German, as a child, was one of these young evacuees himself. The scenes, as early on as the trains, are of poverty, overcrowding and desperation. A mother and son ask Lopatin what the return of a watch means, Lopatin knows it likely means death, but lies in an act of mercy. There is a major irony in the film's title, the twenty days of leave, or the twenty days without war undertaken by Lopatin are still filled with war. Battle may remain on the front, but war has permeated everything. For all the intelligent and philosophical questions German asks with this film, the most pertinent one is, 'At what cost?'