

# No Path Through Fire

GLEB PANFILOV

1967

1967 was something of an *annus horribilis* for Soviet film, a definitive turning point away from the relative licentiousness of Khrushchev's Thaw and towards late socialist Stagnation. Three greats of Soviet cinema completed their debut solo features in that year (all of which are now available on Klassiki): Kira Muratova, with *Brief Encounters*, Aleksandr Askoldov, with *Commissar*, and Panfilov. Only *No Path Through Fire* made it past the censors unscathed. Muratova would at least get another film made (1971's *The Long Farewell*) before being cast out of the studio system; for his efforts, Askoldov – whose film treads much of the same ground as Panfilov's – was immediately expelled from the Party. He never directed a feature again.

A decade on from the first flourishes of the Thaw in film, when classics like *The Cranes Are Flying* and *Ballad of a Soldier* had reaffirmed faith in Soviet ideals, doubt was seeping into the culture. Was there a salvageable legacy in the revolution, half a century on? Could the desires of the individual ever be reconciled with the demands of the state? In the context of this debate, the turn back to the Civil War makes sense. The conflict, which raged for five years after the Bolshevik revolution, between the hastily assembled Red Army and the forces of international reaction, represented the "creation myth" of the Soviet state, the crucible in which it had been formed; it was therefore a fitting setting for filmmakers exploring the potential of revolutionary idealism. There was a catch, though, as scholar Elena Monastireva-Ansdell notes: "When Thaw filmmakers moved from the initially idealistic to a more critical exploration of Soviet structuring mythologies, they threatened the very state apparatus that these myths were called to legitimise."

Panfilov was also going through his own artistic crucible. He had initially trained as a chemist before moving through the various courses of the Moscow Film School. There, he studied in the famous directing workshop of Mikhail Romm – alma mater also to Andrei Tarkovsky, Andrei Konchalovsky, and Larisa Shepitko. Romm's classes, where he encouraged experimentation, have been described as the cradle of Soviet auteurism. *No Path Through Fire* was, remarkably, Panfilov's diploma film, and set the terms for much of his career. It was the first of his three classic Lenfilm titles. It established his brand of reflective, psychologically nuanced dramas,

preoccupied with creativity and the power of the written and spoken word. And it was where he met his future wife Inna Churikova, who has appeared in all but one of his films. "I wanted someone a little bit strange-looking, with big eyes like Inna has," Panfilov once said of their meeting. "I saw her on TV, but I couldn't figure out her name because I missed the credits. I spent three months trying to track her down. Then I found her."

As the ingenue military nurse Tanya Tyotkina, Churikova more than holds her own at the centre of a cast that includes some heavyweight talent, notably Tarkovsky regular Anatoly Solonitsyn as the disillusioned commissar Yevstryukov, and Maya Bulgakova, a collaborator of both Shepitko and Alexei German, as the desperate Maria. Tanya and her comrades work aboard a hospital train, caring for the wounded from the nearby front. Sensitive and skittish, she goes through the growing pains of first love with the brattish soldier Alyosha, before discovering a talent for painting. Her naive, expressionistic artworks are dropped into the film like chapter headings. Meanwhile, the older men around her debate the philosophical tenets of the revolution they are supposedly fighting for, Yevstryukov's diffidence playing off against the blunt resentment of the officer Fokich. The pair's responses to Tanya's declaration that she has fallen in love set out the dichotomy that underpins Panfilov's narrative. "Marxism is what you need, Tanya. Marxism, Marxism, Marxism!" scorns Fokich; "What's wrong with it?" Yevstryukov reasons in reply, "love is a fact, and a materialist one at that."

These debates can seem a little on the nose, evidence of the director's as-yet unmatured penchant for philosophising, but Panfilov also allows Fokich and Yevstryukov to demonstrate the complexity of their relationship to communism. This degree of ambiguity regarding the revolutionary cause is certainly striking; a similar reticence did for Askoldov in the same year, and we might ask why his take on the Civil War was rejected and Panfilov's permitted. Askoldov's centering of the Jewish experience of the war, and his positioning of humanism as a religious rather than a political principle, likely did him no favours. Panfilov, on the other hand, turns back to broader, less pointed themes – the pangs of love, the power of art – that provide him with the canvas on which to sketch out his first cinematic masterpiece.