

Seventeen Moments of Spring, a Soviet James Bond Series? Official Discourse, Folklore, and Cold War Culture in Late Socialism

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Abstract

The Soviet television mini-series *Seventeen Moments of Spring* is one of the most important products of popular culture in the USSR. In the Cold War context, viewers considered the series' main character Stirlitz as an alternative to the western hero James Bond. Although the mini-series was produced in the 1970s, it communicates values that are close to Stalin-era patterns. While ordinary Soviet citizens criticized the numerous weaknesses about Stirlitz, they never questioned the underlying communist ideology in the numerous anecdotes.

Keywords: television mini-series, Soviet Cold War culture, values, anecdotes.

The Soviet television mini-series *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (*Semnadtsat' mgnovenii vesny*, 1973) is remarkable in several ways. First of all, it represents one of the most important products of official popular culture in the Soviet Union.¹ On one hand, it was instigated through institutions of the Party state and thus was part of the Soviet hegemonic discourse. On the other, it was a product of popular culture through its format, which was intended to affect the masses.² The series' extraordinary popularity is also remarkable. Within a very short time, *Seventeen Moments'* reception took on a cult character and it must be seen as one of the most successful productions in the history of Soviet television. This cult status is demonstrated, for example, in the cycle of anecdotes that developed from it, which is one of the largest from the Soviet era. Finally, the series represents a significant caesura in Soviet cultural history. As Stephen Lovell

has convincingly demonstrated, *Seventeen Moments* marks the end of the Thaw and the beginning of 1970s culture because the new genre of the miniseries was "the major mass cultural innovation, and the quintessential cultural form, of the 1970s".³ He argues that it stood for the emergence of a mass culture whose chief medium was the television and that could be experienced by the public simultaneously in real time. Furthermore, it represented a national culture that no longer included any kind of internationalist intentions.⁴

The aim of this article is to shed light on two questions: Why can *Seventeen Moments* be seen as a part of official popular culture and which values did it propagate? And how was this proposal negotiated in the popular culture "from below", in the anecdotes told by average Soviet citizens in their everyday life?

It is already known that the series was filmed on order of the KGB with the goal of improving its image by depicting its contribution to victory in World War II.⁵ The idea of producing

1 Elena Prokhorova, "The Post-Utopian Body Politic: Masculinity and the Crisis of National Identity in Brezhnev-Era TV Miniseries," *Gender and National Identity in Twentieth Century Russian Culture*, ed. Helena Goscilo and Andrea Lanoux, DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006, pp. 131-150, here p. 135.

2 In terms of the Second World War theme, this format remained an exception, probably due to concerns that the accompanying trivialization could not do justice to the topic. Birgit Beumers, "The Serialization of the War," *Kinokultura* 12, 2006, <http://www.kinokultura.com/2006/12-beumers.shtml>, accessed 23 September 2012.

3 Stephen Lovell, "In Search of an Ending: Seventeen Moments and the Seventies," *The Socialist Sixties: Crossing Borders in the Second World*, ed. Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane Koenker, Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2013, p. 307.

4 Lovell, *In Search*, pp. 305, 307, 317.

5 Mark Lipovetskii, "Iskusstvo alibi: Semnadtsat' mgnovenii vesny v svete nashego opyta," *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 3, 2007, <http://magazines>.

a series on the topic came from Andropov himself, who was head of the secret services at the time. He commissioned his deputy Tsvigun to advise and oversee work on it. The Central Committee also supported the series and provided an adviser.⁶ A novel by the author Julian Semenov, who enjoyed close ties to the KGB, provided a model for the twelve-part series.⁷ During filming, director Tatiana Lioznova undertook extensive changes to the original and showed a good feel for what the public would like.⁸

russ.ru/nz/2007/3/li16.html, accessed December 20, 2012. In the context of Soviet film history, it was not unusual that the secret service advised *Seventeen Moments*. Many successful television series were curated by the KGB with the goal of spreading a positive image of the service. Other famous examples of this PR strategy, which can be characterized as a “KGB popular culture”, were *Neulovimye mstiteli* (*The Elusive Avengers*, 1966), *Adiutant ego prevoskhoditel'stva* (*The Adjutant Of His Excellency*, 1970) and *TASS upolnomochen zaiavit'* (*TASS Is Authorized To Declare*, 1984, also starring Viacheslav Tikhonov, the main actor of *Seventeen Moments*). On two of these productions, see Elena Prokhorova, *Fragmented mythologies: Soviet TV-Series of the 1970s*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 2003, pp. 64-80. Additionally, the Ministry of the Interior initiated or promoted films made to improve the image of the Militsiia, the Soviet police. The most famous examples of this are the television series *Sledstvie vedut znatoki* (*Investigation Held By Experts*, 1971) and *Mesto vstrechi izmenit' nel'zia* (*Can the Meeting Place Be Changed?*, 1979, with the popular singer / actor Vladimir Vysotskii as protagonist; the idea for the production may have come from him). On this, see Serguei Alex. Oushakine, “Crimes of Substitution: Detection in Late Soviet Society,” *Public Culture* 3, 2003, pp. 426-451 and Elena Prokhorova, “Can the Meeting Place Be Changed? Crime and Identity Discourse in Russian Television Series of the 1990s,” *Slavic Review* 3, 2003, pp. 512-24, here 515-6. See also Aleksei Leonidovich Murav'ev, “Za tech, kto 'v pole': Geroi nezrimogo fronta na ekrane i v zhizni”, *Trudy istoricheskogo fakul'teta Sankt-Peterburgskogo universiteta* 21, 2015, pp. 316-338.

⁶ Prokhorova, *The Post-Utopian*, p. 147, n. 11.

⁷ Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, “The Blockbuster Miniseries on Soviet TV: Isaev-Shtirlitz, the Ambiguous Hero of Seventeen Moments in Spring,” *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 29, 2002, pp. 257-276, here 259.

⁸ Marina Adamovich, “Ne dumai o „Mgnoveniakh“ svysoka...”, *Iskusstvo kino* 3, 2002, pp. 74-85, here p. 76.

The plot of the film focuses on seventeen chosen “moments” and is set between February 2 and March 24, 1945.⁹ Thus, it is placed just few months before Germany’s capitulation and the collapse of the National Socialist system. The main character is the Soviet spy Maksim Isaev, who is working under the name Max von Stirlitz as an SS regiment leader in the Reich Main Security Office. He receives orders from Moscow to investigate rumors that the western Allies are negotiating a separate peace treaty with high-ranking Nazis. If the rumors are true, then he must undermine the negotiations. Stirlitz maintains contact with Moscow with the help of a Soviet couple in Berlin using the names Erwin and Käthe Kien, who operate a radio room. When Erwin dies during a bombardment and Käthe is brought to the hospital to give birth, Stirlitz is cut off from his contact to the Soviet Union. With the help of two German anti-fascists (the pacifist Pastor Schlag and the scholar Professor Pleischner) he tries to re-establish contact from the Swiss city of Berne and find out more about the possible negotiation between the western Allies and the Nazis. Although Pleischner fails at his mission and commits suicide, Schlag succeeds in eliciting the protagonists and key points of negotiation. Stirlitz then exploits the rivalries among the Nazi elite to bring about the failure of the western Allies’ plans. Toward the end of the series Stirlitz is in acute, life-threatening danger because the head of the Gestapo, Müller, suspects him of being a traitor and tries in various ways to uncover him. When Stirlitz’s fingerprints are found on Käthe’s suitcase, he is arrested by Müller but extracts himself from the whole affair with an explanation for how the fingerprints got there. It is unclear whether Stirlitz is arrested

⁹ Nepomnyashchy, *The Blockbuster*, p. 259.

and killed after his return from Switzerland because of *new* suspicions. It is certain, however, that he rejected offers from the USSR to return and voluntarily stays in Germany.

Despite its mass appeal, the series has been surprisingly little researched to date. Though several studies are available, most deal with single aspects such as its cult status or the construction of masculine and national identity in *Seventeen Moments*.¹⁰ Until now, the broadest thematic studies address the question of which upheavals the series represents from 1970s Soviet cultural history, and when exactly the end of the Thaw was.¹¹ The present text brings these hitherto disparate pieces together and delves further into aspects that have received less attention. First I analyze the constructions of identity and values that are represented in the film. Then I illuminate the series' transnational references in a Cold War context through comparison to the James Bond films. Finally, I examine the reasons for the series' popularity and question what the anecdotes about *Seventeen Moments* indicate about its reception.

National Identity, Masculinity, and Heroicism as Central Values

As Elena Prokhorova has emphasized, the primarily masculine Soviet identity fell into crisis after Stalin's death because the father figure of the "Great Family"¹² was torn from its pedestal during the Thaw.

10 Nepomnyashchy, *The Blockbuster*; Prokhorova, *The Post-Utopian*; Rodolphe Baudin, "Le Phénomène de la Série Culte en Contexte Soviétique et Post-Soviétique: L'exemple de Semnadcat' mgnovenij vesny," *Cahiers du monde russe* 1, 2001, pp. 49-70; Lipovetskii, *Iskusstvo alibi*.

11 Prokhorova, *Fragmented mythologies*, pp. 81-113; Lovell, *In Search*.

12 Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000, pp. 114-135.

Restabilizing this identity was a major goal of *Seventeen Moments*.¹³ To this end, the series communicates an understanding of patriotism and masculinity that is heavily oriented toward Stalin-era patterns and stands in contrast to the cultural production of the Thaw; both of these features are typical of Brezhnev-era films.¹⁴

Ideal Soviet patriotism is conveyed in Stirlitz's undercover work. For his merit he receives the title "Hero of the Soviet Union". It is no coincidence that the series plays in the time of the "Great Patriotic War" because in the Brezhnev era, Marxist-Leninist ideology had lost much of its legitimacy – not least due to the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968 – and official history and culture thus promoted memory of World War II as the single most important source of a common identity.¹⁵ This strategy permitted the construction of a Soviet identity in which ideology played almost no role. The most decisive aspect of this identity – just like in official Soviet discourse during the war – was the defense of the motherland against National Socialism.¹⁶ This politics of history culminated with the 1965 declaration of May 9, Victory Day, as a holiday. Additionally, a multitude of publications and films on World War II appeared. Beginning in the 1970s more films were made showing an unusual and less monumental image of the war, to attract a younger audience. *Seventeen Moments* also served this goal:¹⁷ while the Red Army attacks

13 Prokhorova, *The Post-Utopian*, p. 134.

14 Tony Shaw, Denise Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds*, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2010, p. 159.

15 Lev Gudkov, "Die Fesseln des Sieges: Russlands Identität aus der Erinnerung an den Krieg," *Kluffen der Erinnerung: Rußland und Deutschland 60 Jahre nach dem Krieg*, special issue, *Osteuropa* 4-6, 2005, pp. 56-73, here 64.

16 Prokhorova, *The Post-Utopian*, p. 133.

17 Denise J. Youngblood, *Russian War Films: On the*

the enemy from the outside, Stirlitz fights against Germany by undermining it from within. He must look, talk, and act like a Nazi in order to fulfil his mission, yet he proves a Soviet patriot because on the inside he remains true to his orders and Soviet values. Stirlitz even celebrates Soviet holidays, though in a very conspiratorial manner – namely in his fantasy alone.¹⁸ The only visible signs are that he raises a glass and makes himself a humble festive meal by baking potatoes in the living room fireplace.

Stirlitz is stylized not only as a Soviet patriot, but also as a superb representative of hegemonic masculinity.¹⁹ Some of his most important traits are ones that are traditionally coded masculine. First, Stirlitz is thoroughly rational, in contrast to the emotional film hero of the Thaw.²⁰ Each of his actions is thought through entirely, and the viewer often sees him deep in reflection. At the beginning of the series he reviews all the high-ranking dignitaries of the Nazi state, questioning whether they could be interested in a separate peace agreement with the western Allies. Then he researches which people are expediting negotiations and applies diverse strategies in order to hinder their endeavors. During his brief arrest in the basement of the Gestapo headquarters Stirlitz once again proves to be a thinker, keeping a cool head as he goes through all the ways of deflecting suspicion that he may be a Soviet spy.

Moreover, Stirlitz exudes a physical power that corresponds to his inner moral strength. His body language shows authority and

confidence. He never moves hectically or without coordination; rather, his movements always appear well considered and single-minded. The filmic and photographic depiction of Stalin and Stalin-era heroes may continue to have an effect here.²¹ Furthermore, Stirlitz is always self-possessed. He controls his facial expressions so that nobody can read his thoughts or emotions.

Beyond all of this, Stirlitz also acts as a protector for people who are threatened by Nazis and thus conforms to the typical male role in war²²: he defends his own (above all, women) against the enemy. In particular, he saves Käthe, who is arrested by the Gestapo and put under house arrest, and enables her to flee. Later he brings her and her baby to safety abroad. Indirectly, his hindrance of a separate peace treaty protects his own wife and all other citizens of the USSR.

Stirlitz also follows the traditional male role in that he finds self-fulfillment almost only in his work. In this respect he is lacking in the private and sexual side of masculinity. As scholarship has emphasized, this is a remnant of the hero model of the Stalin era. There, the father role in the family is kept for Stalin or the Party, while the man is to find fulfilment in the public realm.²³ Stirlitz has a wife, but he abnegates her love in favor of his mission and has spent twenty years in Germany without her. His relinquishment of private happiness distinguishes him from most of the heroes in films of the Thaw.

The masculinity glorified by the series is

21 See, for example, the character of the commander in *Meeting on the Elbe*. Isabelle de Keghel, "Meeting on the Elbe (Vstrecha na El'be) – a Visual Representation of the Incipient Cold War from a Soviet Perspective," *The Cold War in Film*, special issue, *Cold War History* 4, 2009, pp. 455-467, here p. 456.

22 Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, London: Sage, 1997, pp. 93-96, 107-110.

23 Prokhorova, *The Post-Utopian*, p. 132.

Cinema Front, 1914-2005, Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2007, pp. 143-4, 159-165, 170-3, 184-5.

18 Nepomnyashchy, *The Blockbuster*, p. 261.

19 Robert (Raewyn) Connell, *Masculinities*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

20 Lipovetskii, *Iskusstvo*, p. 3. Connell, *Masculinities*, pp. 164-5.

further strengthened by its dominance over any feminine presence. The main characters of *Seventeen Moments* are male. Lioznova added female characters to the novel in order to make Stirlitz appear more human; however, these women all play supporting roles. Furthermore, they speak little or, as in the case of Stirlitz's wife, abide in silence.²⁴

The Cold War Context: Stirlitz and Bond

Stirlitz is frequently called the Russian James Bond.²⁵ However, the director of *Seventeen Moments*, Lioznova, claimed to have conceived of him as an alternative to the British-American spy.²⁶ Because of these conflicting views, a comparison of the two characters is illuminating.²⁷

At first sight, the Bond films and *Seventeen Moments* are rather different formally and thematically. For one thing, they were made in the differing formats of cinema feature and television series. For another, the Bond films all play in the post-war period, but *Seventeen Moments* during World War II. Nevertheless, a comparison is appropriate because both productions can be read as contributions to the cultural Cold War²⁸ in that each side attempted to outdo the other with demonstrations of moral superiority. They also competed in seeing which side could achieve greater social cohesion and mobilization. The mass media was a weapon in this competition and was able, thanks to its wide distribution, to reach

both national and international publics.²⁹ Accordingly, the Bond films and *Seventeen Moments* represent the competing value systems and images of the enemy in the east and west.³⁰ The Bond films, however, were intended for a global audience, including viewers who lived in either system, while *Seventeen Moments* was made exclusively for the "home front", that is, for the public of the Soviet Union or another state socialist country.³¹

Because both productions worked within the same frame of reference of a cultural contest between the east and west,³² it is not surprising that the two heroes bear similarities. Both Bond and Stirlitz fight for the interests of their countries against a criminal power, that is, they represent good against evil. They have in common that they are subject to great threats, and they master and survive the most dangerous episodes. As Umberto Eco has shown, even the plot structure is similar and in both cases it recalls the build-up of a fairy tale.³³ Broadly speaking, *Seventeen*

29 Caute, *The Dancer*, pp. 3-5, 15; Thomas Lindenberger, "Einleitung", *Massenmedien im Kalten Krieg: Akteure, Bilder, Resonanzen*, ed. Thomas Lindenberger, Köln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau, 2006, pp. 9-23, here p. 12.

30 Shaw, Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War*, pp. 65-6, 97-8. For a definition of Cold War Culture see Marsha Siefert, "East European Cold War Culture(s): Alterities, Commonalities, and Film Industries," *Cold War Cultures: Perspectives on Eastern and Western European Societies*, ed. Annette Vowinckel, Marcus M. Payk and Thomas Lindenberger, New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012, pp. 23-49, here p. 25.

31 The first Bond film was already shown in Moscow in 1970, but only for high-level functionaries. Lars-Olav Beier, "Ein Mann wie eine Black Box," *Der Spiegel* 40, 2012, pp. 124-132, here p. 131. In contrast, Soviet films with "Cold war genres" like espionage were commercially exported only to the Socialist countries. Siefert, *East European Cold War Culture(s)*, pp. 36-7.

32 Caute, *The Dancer*, p. 1.

33 Adamovich, *Ne dumai*, pp. 78-9. James Chapman, *Licence to Thrill – a Cultural History of the James Bond Films*, New York, London: Tauris, 2007, pp. 25-6; Marc Föcking, "James Bond – Superuomo

24 Lipovetskii, *Iskusstvo*, p. 8; Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 74.

25 Prokhorova, *Fragmented Mythologies*, p. 82.

26 Adamovich, *Ne dumai*, p. 74.

27 Before the first broadcast of *Seventeen Moments*, there were eight Bond films. The present comparison is based on these eight films.

28 David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy During the Cold War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 1-16.

Moments corresponds to this schema, but with the significant divergence that there is no counterpart to the Bond girl.³⁴ Bond and Stirlitz are also similar in that they do not undergo any psychological development.³⁵

Both of these cultural products reproduce the era's images of the enemy, though to different degrees. Although the first Bond film was released in 1962, the year of the Cuban missile crisis, Bond's early main enemies were not attached to a socialist state; they represented international criminal organizations. Over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, however, the Cold War's opposing systems unmistakably form the broad context of the plot. Bond's criminal opponents often try to play the superpowers off against one another or cooperate with (ex-)Soviet protagonists, who are in turn depicted as brutal and inhuman or deviant from gender norms.³⁶ Similarly, the plot and sometimes even the terminology of *Seventeen Moments* are marked by the culture of the Cold War, although the series is set in World War II, because it had the duty of reminding the Soviet public during a *détente* in the Cold War that the west is unreliable and untrustworthy. Thus, although the Allies and the USSR cooperate with each other, there are already signs that this pact will soon turn

into a conflict between opposing systems: the western Allies are negotiating with a higher-up in the SS to bargain a separate peace treaty to the detriment of the USSR. Because of the Allies' anti-communist stance, a new war against the USSR even seems possible.³⁷ Their negative portrayal corresponds to the official Soviet reading of fascism as an extreme development of capitalism.³⁸

In sum, the differences between the two heroes outweigh their similarities, which I propose is a result of the contrasting value systems of the east and west during the Cold War.

Stirlitz is presented as an attractive man but no lady-killer, unlike Bond.³⁹ Viewing women as objects of desire was not fitting to the Soviet ideal of gender equality and women's emancipation. In his work, Stirlitz almost always finds himself in the company of men and he rarely encounters women. Unlike Bond, Stirlitz is married and clearly has a deep commitment to his wife. That their love is still very strong becomes clear in the legendary scene in the cafe "Elefant" where they see each other again after many years, though only for a few minutes and from a distance. The wife looks at Stirlitz lovingly while his eyes express more grief, longing, and restraint. Stirlitz never has any affairs in the series; he does not even flirt. The women with whom he has contact are characterized asexually (such as the elderly Frau Saurich) or are—like Käthe—mothers for whom the child takes center stage. The only woman who flirts with him is the SS member Barbara, but he does not respond to her advances for moral and ideological

di massa? Umberto Eco's Fleming-Lektüre und ihre post-moderne (Selbst-)Revision," *James Bond – Anatomie eines Mythos*, ed. Marc Föcking, Astrid Böger, Heidelberg: Winter, 2012, pp. 79-106.

34 I disagree with Adamovich's assertion that the Bond girl is substituted in *Seventeen Moments* by the combination of multiple female characters (see Adamovich, *Ne dumai*, pp. 71-2), because these female characters are all missing the sexual aspect that the Bond girl has.

35 Nepomnyashchy, *The Blockbuster*, p. 268.

36 Chapman, *Licence*, pp. 26-7. Cord Krüger, "Mr. Bond, I expect you to die! 007s Widersacher und die Transnationalisierung des Bösen," *Mythos 007: Die James-Bond-Filme im Fokus der Popkultur*, ed. Andreas Rauscher, Bernd Zywiets, Georg Mannsperger, Cord Krüger, Mainz: Bender, 2007, pp. 122-149.

37 Baudin, *Le Phénomène*, p. 59. Lipovetskii, *Iskusstvo*, p. 7.

38 See Prokhorova, *The Post-Utopian*, p. 138.

39 The oversexualization of Bond, like the stylization of Stirlitz as an ascetic, can be read as a reaction to a crisis of national identity. See Adamovich, *Ne dumai*, p. 80; Prokhorova, *The Post-Utopian*, p. 138.

reasons.⁴⁰

Bond's hedonistic side distracts him over and over, even though his duties have higher priority; Stirlitz, by contrast, lives entirely for his professional work. Stirlitz's hedonism is limited to culinary pleasures and smoking. Beyond that, he cherishes good clothing, the amenities of home, and his car. His physicality is staged with utmost reserve and accentuated only through well-tailored clothing. Unlike Bond, Stirlitz is never shown naked.

Stirlitz, in contrast to Bond, does not have access to any gadgets, which makes his successes appear all the more heroic. He uses only a rather upscale car and a common pistol. Even so, he hardly needs them because physical violence plays a marginal role in the series: he almost never commits acts of violence and is not subject to any either. He uses his pistol only the one time when he shoots his own agent, the informer Klaus. The other violent action takes place when Stirlitz knocks unconscious the SS man Holtoff, who provoked him. All other duels play out on the level of intellect, most importantly the conflict with his main opponent Müller. Even when he questions Stirlitz in the Gestapo basement, Müller does not resort to violence. In contrast to Bond, there is no "action" for Stirlitz. While the Bond films must always have a car chase and hand-to-hand combat in which Bond makes split-second decisions, the major feature of *Seventeen Moments* is the opposite: its immense slowness and emphasis on dialogue. At the very moment when the Gestapo seeks him, Stirlitz succumbs to immobility and naps in the car on the side of the road, oblivious to danger and thus probably escaping it.⁴¹ In contrast to

Bond, Stirlitz is above all a thinker who takes much time for reflection. This glorification of thinking in *Seventeen Moments* could be related to the logocentric character of Soviet culture in which intellectual achievement was a major criterion for success and respect.⁴²

Reasons for the Series' Popularity

The series became enormously popular immediately after its first broadcast. This is all the more remarkable when one considers its serious weaknesses: the documentary sequences are not convincingly tied to the narrative and the plot does not always seem logical. Also, the character of Stirlitz himself is not coherent. It remains an open question how he could avoid participating in the crimes of the National Socialist regime while establishing a career in the SS. Furthermore, the series contains obvious anachronisms: the interiors and civilian clothing come from fashions of the 1960s, not the 1930s, and the Edith Piaf songs that Stirlitz and Pleischner hear on their trip to Switzerland were recorded after the war.⁴³

It is impossible to quantify how popular *Seventeen Moments* was, but it was a blockbuster for certain. Contemporaries have reported that when it aired the streets were empty, criminal activity dropped, and the energy demands of so many televisions brought power stations to their limits.⁴⁴ The series was in such demand that it was rebroadcast up to four times every year. Another indication of its success is the immense popularity of the actor Tikhonov, who for the rest of his life was associated with

40 Baudin, *Le Phénomène*, pp. 56-7; Prokhorova, *The Post-Utopian*, p. 138; Lipovetskii, *Iskusstvo*, p. 8.

41 Prokhorova, *Fragmented Mythologies*, pp. 87-8. Baudin, *Le Phénomène*, p. 54.

42 Adamovich, *Ne dumai*, p. 80; Prokhorova, *The Post-Utopian*, p. 138; Prokhorova, *Fragmented Mythologies*, p. 95; Baudin, *Le Phénomène*, p. 56.

43 Baudin, *Le Phénomène*, pp. 60, 64. Lipovetskii, *Iskusstvo*, pp. 2-3.

44 Prokhorova, *Fragmented Mythologies*, p. 82.

his role as Stirlitz.⁴⁵

What factors contributed to the legendary success of *Seventeen Moments*—success that came entirely unexpectedly for its makers, and for the director Lioznova in particular?⁴⁶ I will review a few of the hypotheses developed in earlier research.

The ambivalence of *Seventeen Moments'* characters caused a sensation. The film differs from earlier dramatizations of World War II in that it showed Germans as highly intelligent enemies and complex characters. Müller especially—the head of the Gestapo—was hardly different from an ordinary police chief. The leading Nazi characters became even more complex by virtue of being played by actors whose roles in earlier, prominent Thaw films embodied sincerity and authority.⁴⁷ Stirlitz is multi-faceted and contradictory in his own fascinating way: although he looks like a representative of the lawless Nazi state, he is actually fighting for the “right”, Soviet side. For this reason, Lipovetskii has correctly called him the “powerful archetype” of the “*nash/nenash*” dichotomy, connecting the elements of “us” and “them.”⁴⁸ This unusually positive filmic representation of leading members of the SS had the unintended consequence that in the 1970s and 1980s numerous secret “fascist organizations” were founded in the USSR, with their members clearly more fascinated by the image of the Nazi than by National Socialist ideology. The KGB considered them

to be relatively harmless.⁴⁹ In the early 1980s two youth groups in the Ukrainian city of Dnepropetrovsk were labelled “fascist” by the KGB in the course of an anti-rock campaign. The reason was that after their arrest they testified that they felt inspired by the “images of the ‘clean, intelligent, and civilized’ Nazi officers” in the series and therefore tried to imitate their clothing and behaviour.⁵⁰

Seventeen Moments' popularity was increased significantly by some parallels between life under Brezhnev and under Hitler, at least as was shown in the series. In each case we see a political system in the phase of its decline, in which the ruling ideology had suffered the loss of most of its credibility. Each state was marked by a powerful bureaucracy that produced files written in a highly repetitive, stereotypical style.⁵¹ The series even addresses the surveillance of individuals—an experience familiar to Soviet citizens. The film’s protagonists react to phone tapping with typically Soviet phrases such as “this isn’t a conversation for the telephone.”

Furthermore, the pattern by which Stirlitz acts in the National Socialist system strongly resembles the survival strategy used by many Soviets under late Socialism. Stirlitz denies his inner thoughts and emotions in order to demonstrate outwardly his support for the regime as credibly as possible; he hides his true self behind a mask.⁵²

45 After his death and burial, a large photograph of him as Stirlitz was laid upon the fresh gravesite. See “Tikhonov Viacheslav Vasil’evich (1928-2009)”, *Novodevich’e kladbishche*, <http://nd.m-necropol.ru/>, accessed December 12, 2013.

46 Tat’iana Lioznova, “Populiarnost’ byla dlia nas sovershenno neozhidanno!...”, *Krupnyi plan*, <http://www.close-up.ru/articles/detail.php?AID=7859>, accessed 8 December 2012, p. 1.

47 Lipovetskii, *Iskusstvo*, pp. 5-6. Prokhorova, *Fragmented mythologies*, p. 93.

48 Lipovetskii, *Iskusstvo*, p. 4. See also Baudin, *Le Phénomène*, p. 56.

49 There had been underground Nazi groups in the USSR already since the second half of the 1950s. Semen Charnyi, “Natsistskie gruppy v SSSR v 1950-1980 gody,” *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 5, 2004, <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2004/37/ch12-pr.html>, accessed 14 May 2014.

50 Sergei Zhuk, *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City: The West, Identity, and Ideology in Soviet Dnepropetrovsk, 1960-1985*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2010, p. 277.

51 Prokhorova, *Fragmented Mythologies*, pp. 91, 95, 103; Nepomnyashchy, *The Blockbuster*, p. 263; Lipovetskii, *Iskusstvo*, pp. 6-7.

52 Prokhorova, *Fragmented Mythologies*, pp. 104-105;

The third aspect that made the series so attractive was that Stirlitz is characterized as a member of the intelligentsia. This educational class was traditionally associated with high moral standards and a critical distance from the state, and continued to enjoy prestige during the Soviet era. Interestingly, Stirlitz embodies only the intelligentsia's positive aspects: wit, education, concentration, and firm ethical principles. Thus, as an intelligentsia hero, he especially invites the viewers' identification. All negative aspects of the intelligentsia are attributed to Professor Pleischner: unlike Stirlitz, he is unsuited to the practical, difficult things in life; he is overly trusting, inept, and scattered.⁵³

The fascination borne by the series feeds on the way that it shows life in the west as it was imagined in the Soviet Union at the time.⁵⁴ Consumption and lifestyle thus occupy an important place.⁵⁵ Stirlitz lives in a roomy house with considerably more living space at his disposal than the average Soviet citizen had. He wears well-fitting suits, loves good food, Armenian cognac, and cigarettes, and frequents various Berlin cafes. The picture is completed by the flair of worldliness that encircles Stirlitz, since he clearly knows his way around not only Germany, but also other countries that were inaccessible to most Soviet citizens such as France and Switzerland. These aspects of the film accommodate the increasing interest in the west in the Soviet Union during

the Brezhnev era.⁵⁶

In addition, the series' particular aesthetic gives it a distinctly authentic feel. *Seventeen Moments* is comprised largely of feature film scenes, but they are interspersed with Soviet newsreels and other archival footage and are filmed only in black and white. The fade-in of specific dates between sections of feature film and the introduction of leading characters with the help of their staff files amplifies the documentary effect.

Stirlitz Anecdotes

The broad popularity of the television series is probably the main reason why one of the largest bodies of anecdotes from the whole Soviet period is associated with it. Another factor is that *Seventeen Moments* comes from the Brezhnev era, a time when the telling of anecdotes reached its high point.⁵⁷

Drawing on the work of Seth Graham, I consider anecdotes to be orally passed on, ultra-short stories from unknown authors that are usually told in the third person and end with a punch line. Graham emphasizes the subversive potential of the anecdote, which represents a discourse counter to the *official* discourse under conditions of censorship. In contrast to *samizdat*, this counter-discourse was not chiefly produced by the intelligentsia, but by all social strata. Soviet anecdotes can therefore be seen as a form of modern

Baudin, *Le Phénomène*, p. 62. The persuasiveness of this description of Soviet citizens' behavior towards the end of the USSR has been questioned since Alexei Yurchak's study of the last Soviet generation. See Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 17.

⁵³ Lipovetskii, *Iskusstvo*, pp. 3-4.

⁵⁴ See for the "imaginary West": Yurchak, *Everything*, pp. 161-162.

⁵⁵ Prokhorova, *Fragmented mythologies*, p. 103.

⁵⁶ Lovell, *In Search*, p. 316.

⁵⁷ Seth Benedict Graham, *A Cultural Analysis of the Russo-Soviet Anecdote*, PhD thesis Pittsburgh 2003, http://etd.library.pitt.edu/ETD/available/etd-11032003-192424/unrestricted/grahamsethb_etd2003.pdf, accessed 3 December 2012, p. 4. Alexei Yurchak, "The cynical reason of late socialism: power, pretense, and the *anekdot*," *Public culture* 2, 1997, pp. 161-188, here p. 176.; Yurchak, *Everything*, pp. 273-274; Prokhorova, *Fragmented Mythologies*, p. 109.

folklore.⁵⁸

In the following I analyze the Stirlitz anecdotes as a product of popular culture that emerged from below in response to the official popular culture that the series represented. These anecdotes told by average Soviet citizens in their everyday life shed light on what viewers found especially interesting, confusing, or attractive about the series, as well as how it was read and given new meaning by its audience.⁵⁹ For this reason I have limited the analysis to Stirlitz anecdotes that make direct reference to the theme and plot of the film, that is, those that fulfil the criteria of intertextuality.⁶⁰

Many anecdotes make irony of the series' narrative structure, in which an omniscient, omnipresent speaker neutrally comments on or explains the plot in voice-over (read by Efim Kopelian). He creates connections between the fairly heterogeneous film segments and reveals the characters' thoughts, which often stand in contrast to their actions. The narrator functions as the voice of the Party state and thus tries to steer its reception.⁶¹ Typical phrases from the voice-over are frequently made fun of in anecdotes. Thus, the frequent statement "He

[Stirlitz] had never been so close to failure" is repeated *ad absurdum*, always after actions by the spy that would surely have led to his exposure—for example, the revelation of his Soviet identity through the exhibition of clichéd Soviet or revolutionary attributes like carrying a red banner or singing revolutionary songs.⁶²

The anecdotes devoted to the narrator's voice-over simultaneously make straightforward fun of the superhuman abilities that the voice attributes to Stirlitz.

Very frequently they ridicule his distinctive self-discipline, especially his ability to wake up without an alarm clock at exactly the desired time. The narrator mentions this ability when Stirlitz takes a nap in the car while the Gestapo frantically searches for him. In the original, the voice-over assures listeners that Stirlitz will wake up after twenty minutes out of trained habit,⁶³ but the anecdotes often change the context and take a turn for the absurd.⁶⁴ For example, after having visited a bar, Stirlitz stumbles into a puddle but—as the narrator assures us—he will wake up after twenty minutes thanks to this long-trained reflex.⁶⁵ Here, Stirlitz's character oscillates between the indiscipline of the drunkard and the discipline of a man who can control when he will awake, despite excessive alcohol consumption.⁶⁶

Numerous anecdotes question Stirlitz's self-discipline without referencing the narrator. Frequently these stories abrogate the desexualization of the Soviet agent, which was clearly held to be unconvincing. They destroy the image of Stirlitz as an ascetic by ascribing

58 Graham, *A Cultural Analysis*, pp. 119-120, 122-4, 137, 156.

59 The first Stirlitz anecdotes were created soon after the film's first broadcast and more are still being invented in the present day. This poses a methodological problem: because the anecdotes are undated, it cannot be determined when they were first told. I therefore only make use of anecdotes that do not explicitly reference the post-Soviet era. Nevertheless, some of the anecdotes possibly date from after the fall of the USSR.

60 On the intertextuality of anecdote to film, see Graham, *A Cultural Analysis*, pp. iv, 138.

61 Prokhorova, *The Post-Utopian*, p. 136. In a way, his semi-official function recalls Levitan, the radio newscaster who read the Sovinformbiuro's news from the front during World War II. However, Kopelian reads with much less pathos in his voice. Vladimir Tol'ts, Aleksandra Arkhipova, "Novyi Shtirlits," *Istoriia i sovremennost'*, 23-07-05, accessed December 12, 2012. <http://archive.svoboda.org/programs/TD/2005/TD.072305.asp>, accessed December 9, 2012, p. 3.

62 *Literaturnyi proekt Dmitriia Kravtseva*, <http://maximych.ax3.net/shtirlits.html>, accessed December 9, 2012.

63 Prokhorova, *Fragmented Mythologies*, p. 96.

64 Baudin, *Le Phénomène*, p. 65.

65 Prokhorova, *Fragmented Mythologies*, p. 110.

66 Nepomnyashchy, *The Blockbuster*, p. 263.

him sexual relationships, mostly with the radio operator Käthe. Thus an anecdote featuring the Gestapo boss Müller, for example, has him asserting that he knows everything about Stirlitz and Käthe. Stirlitz promptly admits to being a Soviet spy, but Müller does not believe him and rejects the statement as a trick for circumventing child support. This insinuation undermines the agent's integrity that had received so much emphasis in the original film. Aside from the stories that embed the revelation of a secret sexual relationship in other communication, there are also diverse short anecdotes that mention Stirlitz and Käthe having just had sex.⁶⁷

Further anecdotes mock the way that Stirlitz manoeuvres himself out of difficult situations with excuses that do not hold water. At the same time the anecdotes poke fun at Müller's gullibility.⁶⁸ A typical anecdote recounts how Müller enters his office to find Stirlitz sitting near the safe, raising the suspicion that he wants to steal important documents. Müller takes him to task and Stirlitz answers that he is waiting for the tram. Initially, Müller accepts that as an adequate explanation and leaves the office again, but in the corridor he begins to doubt. Wondering how a tram could run through his office, he hurries back, but Stirlitz has disappeared. Instead of becoming even more alarmed, Müller assumes that his enemy has already left by tram.⁶⁹

These anecdotes about the narration and Stirlitz's self-discipline can be understood as a subversive reaction to attempts to steer the series' reception through the omniscient narrator and as a reaction against the stylization of Stirlitz as an unbeatable superhuman. The stories make Stirlitz's heroicism laughable

without completely undoing his hero status. They also make irony of the narrative's inconsistencies and the composition of the characters. The tellers of the anecdotes make themselves into "media critics"⁷⁰ and produce counter-narratives to particular aspects of the series. They re-form Stirlitz into a more human hero with inadequacies—such as a disposition to alcohol—and sexual needs.

A further group of anecdotes concerns the contradictory, multiple, or blurred identities of the Stirlitz character which clearly fascinated viewers: on one hand he was the Soviet secret agent Isaev and on the other, a member of the SS. As a result, anecdotes represent Stirlitz as a person who has trouble managing his multiple identities. For example, Stirlitz wakes up in a cell and wonders which person he should be, depending on who the guard is. He decides to call himself Stirlitz if confronted by a German guard and Isaev if a Soviet soldier walks in. The anecdote continues in a way for which Stirlitz is unprepared: he meets a Soviet policeman, but the policeman addresses him as Tikhonov, and accuses him of having been incredibly drunk the day before.⁷¹ Thus, the anecdote is not chiefly about the self-image of the character Isaev/Stirlitz, but about that of the actor Tikhonov who forgets his real identity because he is so absorbed in his film role. The context of this anecdote is that in the series' reception the character Stirlitz and the actor who played him, Viacheslav Tikhonov, fused into one person.⁷²

It is also noteworthy that national boundaries become porous in many of the Stirlitz anecdotes, such that characteristics of the political

70 Graham, *A Cultural Analysis*, p. 148.

71 *Semnadtsat' mgnovenii vesny: Sait liubimogo teleseriala. Anekdoty*, accessed December 10, 2012, <http://mgnoveniya.ru/anedkdoty/>.

72 Nepomnyashchy, *The Blockbuster*, p. 257. Prokhorova, *Fragmented Mythologies*, p. 108.

67 *Literaturnyi proekt*.

68 Nepomnyashchy, *The Blockbuster*, p. 261.

69 *Literaturnyi proekt*.

systems in the USSR and Nazi Germany start to melt. This type of anecdote probably hints at the film's visible parallels between the two countries. To name one example: Müller announces to Stirlitz he will have to participate in a *subbotnik*, that is, in unpaid work during leisure time for the benefit of Soviet society. Stirlitz reports for work and realizes that he has uncovered himself by doing so. Then he admits to being a Soviet spy. Müller then calls Stirlitz's superior Schellenberg and tells him that people are inventing the most impossible excuses to avoid the *subbotnik*.⁷³ This story takes a particular form of labor mobilization from the Soviet Union and transfers it to Nazi Germany.

Were these anecdotes a subversive practice that held the potential to destabilize the political system, or were they humor that functioned within and stabilized the system? Many anecdotes had a certain subversive quality because they criticize the dominance of the narrator's interpretation over the audience's own. This applies to the stylization of Stirlitz as a superhero and to the shortcomings in plot and character composition. Collectively, however, their subversive potential was far more limited than that of anecdotes about Soviet leaders or Communism's central dogmas. This has much to do with the setting of *Seventeen Moments* in World War II. The main statement of the series pertains to the heroic struggle in defense of the country, and the Stirlitz anecdotes never question this.

Conclusion

As this analysis shows, *Seventeen Moments of Spring* is not only one of the most important

products of official popular culture in the USSR, but also a successful PR project on behalf of the KGB. It contributed to the strengthening of patriotism and masculinity at a time when both were in crisis in the USSR after Stalin's death. The series was also successful in terms of its Cold War context. Stirlitz proved to be a viable alternative to his British counterpart Bond and embodied the superiority of the USSR over the west in a way that fascinated his home public. The Soviet viewers received the series with great enthusiasm, but also appropriated it and criticized its weaknesses, as the many Stirlitz anecdotes indicate. However, the subversive potential of this popular culture "from below" was rather restricted and never put into question communist ideology or leadership. On the other side of the Iron Curtain, the series could not develop any PR-like effect because it remained – and remains – unknown.

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⁷³ *Semmadtsat' mgnovenii*.