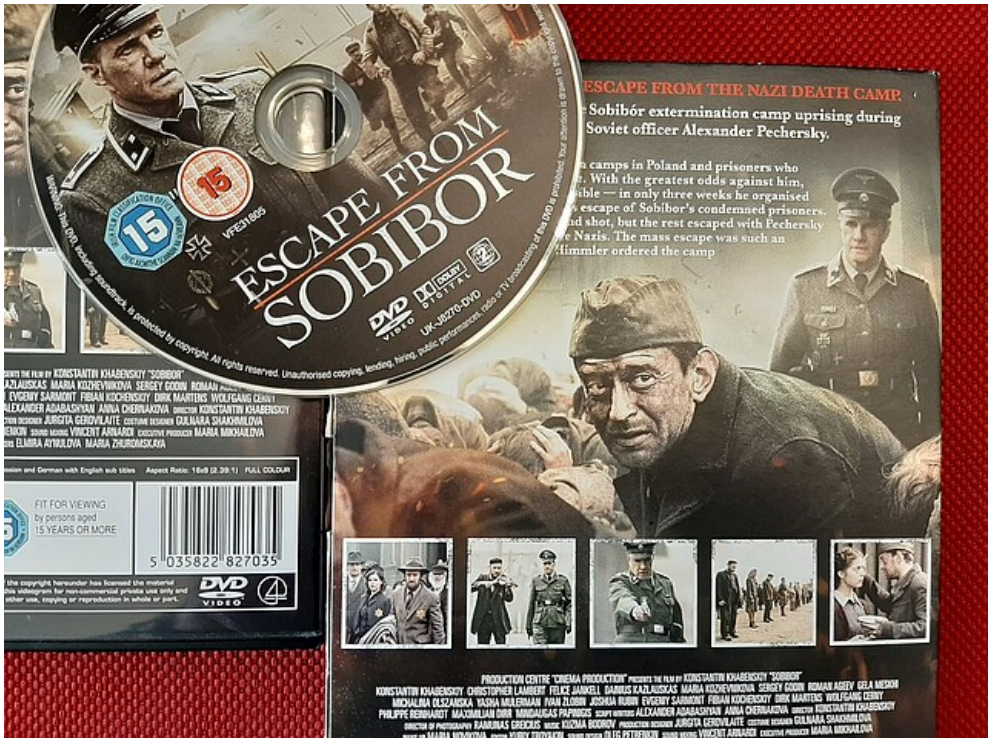

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As part of our continuous Focus on the memory of the Shoah in Central and Eastern Europe, the article discusses the 2018 Russian feature film ‘Sobibor’ and the story it tells about Sobibór and the Holocaust. Apart from revealing the ahistorical character of this movie, as well as its antisemitic undercurrent, the article also highlights the broader political context of this officially sanctioned production, raising questions about the current Russian history policy regarding the Holocaust.

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Stalin in our Hearts. The Russian Film 'Sobibor' by Konstantin Khabensky

In May 2018, a Russian feature film about the Shoah was released. This is particularly noteworthy as the Shoah has been only a marginal theme in Soviet cinema, and post-Soviet Russian films on the subject have been few and far between. Konstantin Khabensky's Sobibor is different for two reasons: first, it comes in the aesthetic form of a blockbuster war movie, and second, it is an exercise in Russian public diplomacy.

The story the film tells us is about the German mass killing centre in Sobibór. It was set up as part of 'Operation Reinhard' during the Second World War, which implemented the German government's 1941 decision to kill the entire population within their reach whom they defined as Jewish.[1] For this purpose, existing concentration camps in occupied Poland were fitted with mass killing facilities, and three new killing centres were constructed: Bełżec, Treblinka and Sobibór. Their sole purpose was to kill as many people as possible in the shortest amount of time. Sobibór was operational between March 1942 and October 1943. Within that period, approximately 180,000 men, women and children were killed by exhaust fumes that were pumped into purpose-built cells. The dead were first thrown into large pits in an artificial clearing in the surrounding forest; later, those corpses were dug up again and burnt along with the newly arrived victims in open air fires.

The German personnel were not very numerous. Only 20 to 30 members of the SS were present at any given moment. The Germans were assisted by a much larger group of non-German guards, mostly recruited from among Soviet prisoners of war. Much of the actual killing process was left to several hundred forced labourers who were removed from the deportation trains. They were forced to participate in the murder of their own communities and very often their own families. This work, however, did not increase their long-term chances of survival: the forced labourers were left alive as long as the Germans saw fit, then they were killed and replaced by others taken from the trains.[2]

The film shows the pivotal event in the history of Sobibór: the uprising of the forced labourers destined to die on 14 October 1943. Its main protagonist is one of the leaders of the uprising, the Jewish Red Army officer, Alexander Aronovich Pechersky.[3] Along with other Jewish Soviet prisoners of war, he had been deported from Minsk to Sobibór to perform forced labour and to be killed whenever the Germans found it convenient. However, together with the existing secret resistance network led by Leon Felhendler, Pechersky organised the uprising and mass escape of some 500 prisoners from Sobibór of whom approximately 50 survived the remainder of the Second World War.

The film has enjoyed tremendous official Russian backing.[4] The authorised media partners have made it an element in their campaign to remind the world that it was the Red Army who not only liberated Auschwitz but defeated Nazi Germany and thus ended the Holocaust.[5] Most explicit among them is a foundation in the name of Alexander Pechersky. Claiming to enjoy the support of Pechersky's surviving family, the foundation expands on this theme and is aimed at "preserving the tragedy of war", the "heroism of Soviet soldiers", and the "patriotic education of Russian citizens". On its website, the foundation continues:

> Recently, especially after the release of the film Sobibor, the uprising in the Sobiborsky camp organized by Red Army prisoners of war has become a symbol of the courage of the Soviet people, their readiness to fight the enemy even at death, to resist at the risk of death and dehumanization.

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Initiated and generously funded by the Russian Ministry of Culture, the film was jointly viewed by Russian president Vladimir Putin and Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu during the latter's state visit to Moscow; it was screened at the United Nations in New York, at the European parliament and at the German Bundestag – all in the name of Russia fighting supposed falsifications of history.[6]

The historical events at Sobibór have been well established in historiography, and the political character of Khabensky's film has been identified since its release. What is missing, however, is a look at what kind of story the film tells us. Given that cinema is perhaps the most potent producer of images and stories about the Shoah, it is particularly important to understand what is happening in this film as a film. The following will attempt to illustrate this.

A Film about Sobibór without Sobibór

Unfortunately, there is nothing we can learn about Sobibór from this film. It all begins with the film set itself, which is pure fantasy. It just so happens that Sobibór is perhaps the most archeologically researched site of the three killing facilities set up during the course of 'Operation Reinhard'.[7]There are a number of photographs and survivor accounts, all of which would have allowed for a serious attempt at visual reconstruction.[8] Instead of what Thomas Toivi Blatt, a Sobibór survivor, has called the illusion of "a beautiful village",[9] we see wooden barracks like the ones in Auschwitz; we see brick buildings reminiscent of Auschwitz; and, of course, we see the smoking chimney of a crematorium, supposedly modelled on the ones in Auschwitz. Needless to say: since Sobibór did not have a crematorium, it did not have a chimney either. What the filmmakers did, in fact, was to transfer an imaginary Auschwitz to the swamps and forests of Eastern Poland. This alone would tell us that there was no real interest on the part of this production to actually engage with Sobibór. To assemble a few set pieces out of the 'Auschwitz Iconography' box means that there was never any intention to explain or to familiarize the audience with aspects of Shoah history that are not very widely known. In fact, by creating this absurd film set, the filmmakers have removed Sobibór from this film entirely.

Moses, Stalin and Love

Things do not improve when we take a closer look at the characters of this story and the way in which they are presented. It is no surprise that the perpetrators are depicted in the most stereotypical way conceivable. All of them are extremely brutal, violent, mentally deranged and sexually questionable sadists. More interesting is the portrayal of the imprisoned forced labourers. We hear them speak in many languages: Polish, Dutch, German and Yiddish, which is one of the redeeming features of this film. Russian, however, is reserved for the protagonists, and it is no coincidence that this pairs nicely with the message that without Pechersky and his Red Army comrades they would have all fought each other until they were killed by the Germans. Indeed, some critics praised the film for the way it shows infighting, intrigue, betrayal and collaboration among the forced labourers.[10] This comes at a price, however.

The most prominent victim of this narrative is the character of Leon Lejb Felhendler, head of the underground committee in Sobibór, who had been planning to resist before Pechersky arrived.[11] His detailed knowledge about the workings of Sobibór and his authority among fellow prisoners made him an equal partner when coupled with Pechersky's experienced military leadership. In the film, however, Pechersky accuses Felhendler of merely trying to survive – and Feldhendler confesses obligingly: "We

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need a Moses." In the end, Felhendler is reduced to helping Pechersky in the execution of his plan, and he dies during the mass escape at the end of the film. This is one of the many factual errors. In reality, Felhendler survived the escape and died in Lublin in April 1945 under unclear circumstances. The Russian narrative becomes evident when the Red Army comrades discuss how Pechersky managed to energize all those supposedly weak and passive Polish Jews to fight against the Germans. The answer, given by the film script, is that Pechersky "has Stalin in his heart."

Another historical figure whose portrayal in this film goes against everything we know is the character of Luka. Gertrud Poppert (as was her real name) provided cover for Pechersky to meet with Felhendler in the women's barracks: she was, therefore, a crucial enabler of the uprising.[12] Her role in the film, however, is to embody passivity, and she repeatedly tells Pechersky that the only thing one could do is "to believe and to endure." The second task of Luka's character is to provide a love interest for the hero Pechersky culminating in some of the film's most awkward dialogue. Pechersky tells her that he now understands that the point of "this entire war, this death camp, was only to find you", to which Luka replies: "I am feeling so good now. Lord! Thank you!" At this point, the soundtrack surges and engulfs this moment of kitsch with what amounts to a love-theme.

Violence as Distraction

One of the most disturbing aspects of this film is its approach to violence. The killing of approximately 180,000 men, women and children by means of poisoning them with engine fumes in tightly packed and purpose-built cells is shown, yet, the depiction is relatively mild – there is no panic, there is no terror, no horrible rush on the way into the poison gas cells. They are not overcrowded, there is no desperate fight for air and survival. And again, the soundtrack makes the entire sequence a relatively gentle one, quickly to be forgotten by the viewer. This is because other scenes of violence are much more prominent and made to be much more memorable.

On the eve of the uprising, the film tells us, the Germans hold the most hellish of circus games using the helpless prisoners as horses to draw carts. For almost ten minutes, we see random shootings, men being whipped to death; we see them forced to drink alcohol; we see them collapse from sheer exhaustion and terror. All this takes place well into darkness of night, and the set is illuminated by torches and fires thus evoking the mood of Dante's inferno. Another example: several times during the uprising, the viewer is shown in great detail how German officers are killed. Blow by blow, we are made to witness how one German soldier's head is smashed in by means of the blunt end of an axe.

Now, this is not to argue that events like this did not take place, and there is no doubt that they are deeply appalling and, indeed, upsetting. The problem, however, is that these acts of violence were not the major crimes committed in Sobibór. This was, of course, the wilful, pre-meditated and systematic killing of at least 180,000 men, women and children –not random and arbitrary acts of violence. Yet, what remains in the viewer's mind are the visuals of such 'excess crimes' – they are much more explicit and therefore memorable than the depiction of genocidal mass killings. In many ways, this has always been a staple of films on the Shoah. Always, the one individual crime has lent itself to storytelling so much better than the self-repeating process of killing thousands upon thousands of people. The narrative effect of all this is dramatic as it highlights the excess crimes and it downplays the criminal core of what happened at Sobibór. Here, the individual crime does not stand pars pro toto, but it detracts from what made places like Sobibór unique.

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Antisemitism and the Holy Spirit

In a film extensively making use of stereotypes, it does not come as a huge surprise that antisemitism is among them. Throughout the story, Jewish characters are associated with money and valuables. We see some forced labourers lovingly handling mountains of jewellery, and a (fictional) deportation train from Paris arriving laden with luxuries like Cognac or perfumes by Chanel. The message is clear: Jews are rich. And the subtext is equally clear: this is why they were killed.

In this context, perhaps the most difficult moment of the film comes right in the beginning when the screen is still black. A dedication appears which is a quote from the New Testament, Acts 10:47: "Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." The passage relates to a moment of great significance for early Christianity – the question of whether non-Jews can become Christians, too. Theologically, one of the central aspects here is ritual purity as the Roman officer Cornelius, who converts in this story, was considered impure by Jewish law. What happens, however, is that the Holy Spirit enters him nevertheless thus making the impurity argument largely irrelevant.

What is the fundamental message conveyed by showing a quote from the New Testament in a film about the Shoah? First, it strikes a somewhat dissonant chord. Why would one refer to the New Testament; why would one want to associate Sobibór with the biblical story of salvation? The obvious answer is, of course, to create meaning. The friendly reading would be that in God's eyes, there are no differences between human beings, and believing in him is open to all. However, the film does not tell a story of religion or God at Sobibór. A less friendly reading would make a little more sense: a route to salvation is offered by the uprising, led by Pechersky who, of course, has Stalin in his heart. This, alas, would still leave open the problem of conversion, which the biblical quote is all about. Who is converting and to what? Is it the Jewish forced labourers who, the film has us believe, initially do not trust Pechersky? The unfriendly reading, however, makes the most sense in the context of the story the film tells – you can be impure, squabbling, distrustful Polish Jews, and still Stalin's Red Army officer Pechersky will save you. You can be the lowest of the low, a Jew, and Stalin's holy spirit will save you. And, as if to amplify the antisemitic message, all of this comes under the heading of a New Testament story about baptism.

Conclusion

It is somewhat natural to look to other cinematic representations of Sobibór in search of context, and several come to mind: the 1978 TV mini-series Holocaust, the 1987 production Escape from Sobibor and Claude Lanzmann's two films Sobibor, 14 octobre 1943, 16 heures and Les quatre soeurs.[13] All of these are considered honest attempts at cinematographic representations of historical events and figures, regardless of whether they are feature films or documentaries. Alas, this line of tradition does not lead to Khabensky's film. His film is not a film about Sobibór, and not even about the Shoah. Rather, it must be regarded as one of the more recent cinematic vehicles for Russia's official historical policy and an instrument for popularizing an official Russian historical narrative. Khabensky's Sobibor has much more in common with Russian historical blockbusters like The Admiral or The Barber of Siberia than with any of the films on Sobibór mentioned above.[14] Russian historical blockbusters, in contrast, share an approach which could, perhaps, be characterized as eclectic heroism. This is a reflection of the eclectic and inherently contradictory narrative at the heart of post-Soviet Russian historical policy: sometimes the

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Bolsheviks are the enemy, as in The Admiral when Kolchak (incidentally played by Khabensky), the leader of the Whites, fights the essentially un-Russian Blosheviks in the Russian civil war. As always, the story has an anti-Western tilt. The same is the case in The Barber of Siberia when modern (Western) technology threatens the supposed eternal link between Russians and their land. Yet, sometimes the Bolsheviks are depicted as the heroes – just as Pechersky and his comrades are portrayed in Sobibor.

This eclectic heroism also operates by omission. Pechersky and his fellow Jewish Red Army soldiers were not the only Soviet citizens in Sobibór. Obviously, there were other victims, mostly deported from Belarus. There was, however, a large group of Soviet prisoners of war who worked as guards under German command, known as "Trawniki men".[15] Approximately 400 men belonged in this group, and in victims' testimonies they are usually called "the Ukrainians". Not all of them were Ukrainians, though, but a very large part of them were Soviet prisoners of war. Faced with the German policy of letting millions of Soviet prisoners starve to death in heavily guarded open-air camps, joining the enemy was a survival strategy for many of them, and it would be difficult to classify them all as volunteers.[16] All of this is completely missing from the picture. It is, perhaps, no coincidence that the archives of the Russian state prosecution services have now been closed to historians. After all, Soviet prosecutors did investigate a number of Trawniki men within their reach, and their archives hold all of the corresponding files. Their stories are not heroic ones.

Released just in time for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Sobibór uprising, Khabensky's film with his focus on Pechersky's Soviet heroism, was not only designed to claim the Shoah for Russia's narrative about the Second World War. It did have a purpose much more specific: namely, to reiterate the Russian desire to be included in the re-design of the Sobibór memorial. In 2008, the governments of Poland, the Netherlands, Slovakia and Israel decided to take on this project together.[17] In November 2020, most elements of the new landscape design, a new museum building and a new permanent exhibition have become a reality.[18] However, Russia has not been included in this undertaking. Seen in this context, Khabensky's film almost takes on the role of a substitute. Unable to influence the shape of the new memorial in situ, the film creates a virtual lieu de mémoire, and it is perhaps no coincidence that the version of the picture for international release comes under the title Escape from Sobibor – as if to replace Jack Gold's 1987 film of the same title. Historically, the exclusion of Russia from the project has certainly been problematic. Yet, in light of the narrative put forth by Khabensky's film, such exclusion is understandable.

'Sobibor' by Konstantin Khabensky is available on amazon prime.

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Footnotes

1. Still the best study about 'Operation Reinhard' is by Yitzak Arad, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987. For a more detailed investigation, see Marek Bem, Sobibor Extermination Camp 1942–1943, Amsterdam: Stichting Sobibor, 2015.
2. For a comprehensive overview of academic literature on Sobibór, see the website: https://sobibor.de/allgemeine-literatur-zu-sobibor/
3. On Pechersky, see Selma Leydesdorff, Sasha Pechersky: Holocaust Hero, Sobibor Resistance Leader, and Hostage of History, London and New York: Taylor & Francis, 2017.
4. Jakob Reuster, Sobibor 1943: Ein Film über den Häftlingsaufstand in Sobibor – und über die Wahrnehmung des Holocaust in Russland, Zeitgeschichte-online (15 May 2018), retrieved 20 November 2020; Isabel Sawkins, Russia's State Mobilization of the Holocaust Onscreen – Konstantin Khabensky's Film Sobibor (2018), Modern Languages Open, 23, no. 1 (2020): 1–8; Cnaan Lipshiz, Why a gory Holocaust film is a blockbuster in Russia, Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA) (10 May 2018), retrieved 20 November 2020.
5. See for example, Anton Skripunow, Europa vergisst, wer es vom Holocaust befreit hat, Sputnik Deutschland (25 January 2019), retrieved 20 November 2020.
6. Reuster, 2018.
7. See the recent overview by Marek Bem: Sobibór: archeologia terenu po byłym niemieckim obozie zagłady 2000–2017, Warszawa, Włodawa, 2019, with references to earlier publications on the subject.
8. Bildungswerk Stanislaw Hantz e.V./ Forschungsstelle Ludwigsburg der Universität Stuttgart, eds., Fotos aus Sobibor: Die Niemann-Sammlung zu Holocaust und Nationalsozialismus, Berlin: Metropol-Verlag, 2020.
9. Sobibor survivor: 'I polished SS boots as dying people screamed', Independent (17 January 2010), retrieved 20 November 2020.
10. Lipshiz, 2018.
11. Jules Schelvis, Vernichtungslager Sobibór, Hamburg and Münster: Unrast Verlag, 2012, pp. 170–171. For more on Felhendler, see Adam Kopciowski, Lejba (Leon) Felhendler: A Biograhical Sketch, Lublin: Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku, 2018; see also the summary on the website of the State Museum Majdanek in Lublin.
12. Schelvis, 2012, pp. 153–154.
13. Marvin J. Chomsky, Holocaust (USA, 1978); Jack Gold, Escape from Sobibor (United Kingdom, 1987); Claude Lanzmann, Sobibor, 14 octobre 1943, 16 heures (France, 2001); Claude Lanzmann, Les quatres soeurs (France, 2017);
14. Nikita Mikhalkov, Sibirskiy tsiryulnik (Russia, 1998); Andrey Kravchuk, Admiral (Russia, 2008).
15. Reuster, 2018.
16. For a nuanced discussion of the Trawniki men, see Angelika Benz, Handlanger der SS: Die Rolle der Trawniki-Männer im Holocaust, Berlin: Metropol-Verlag, 2015, pp. 275–278.
17. Tomasz Kranz, Die geplante historische Ausstellung auf dem Gelände des ehemaligen deutschen Vernichtungslagers in Sobibór – Konzeption und Struktur, in Die „Aktion Reinhardt": Geschichte und Gedenken, edited by Stephan Lehnstaedt and Robert Traba, Berlin: Metropol-Verlag, 2019, pp. 375–376. On the history of the area up until the 1970s, see Raphael Utz, Sobibór nach den Deutschen: Vom Tatort zum Friedhof?, in Lehnstaedt and Traba, 2019, pp. 291–313.
18. See the website of the State Museum Majdanek, of which the Sobibór memorial and museum has been a branch since 2012.

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The official trailor (image) of the film 'Sobibor' by Konstantin Khabensky
(c) Samuel Goldwyn films / snapshot: www.youtube.com/watch?v=-hBacXWZrfM

The new museum and memorial Sobibor
(c) Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku | Snapshot: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UaJG098ReC8

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