



# Performing Identities and Negotiating Memory in Contested Spaces: Ukrainian Folk Songs in Contemporary Russian War Films

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## ABSTRACT

Every year leading up to Victory Day on 9 May, Russian screens, large and small, show feature films, documentaries, and miniseries about the Second World War. These films have helped unify Russian citizenry and develop patriotism. The year 2015 proved to be notable for war cinematography: three feature films and one twelve-part miniseries premiered in honour of the 70th anniversary of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany. While all of these cinematic releases retell or engage with well-known narratives, these remakes reflect tensions surrounding the conflict that erupted in Ukraine following years of increasing strained relations with Russia. 'Performing Identities and Negotiating Memory in Contested Spaces: Ukrainian Folk Songs in Contemporary Russian War Films' analyses the incorporation a Ukrainian folksongs into Sergei Mokritskii's feature film *Battle for Sevastopol* and Leonid Pliaskin's twelve-part miniseries, *The Young Guard*. In every cinematized version of *The Young Guard*, music has played a significant role. The author asks how directors use these songs to respond to the annexation of Crimea and conflict that erupted in the Donbas in 2014 as the films take place in these two regions. Contextualizing her analysis in scholarship related to collective memory, nationality, nostalgia, and intertextuality, she argues that the directors use the films to take two different approaches: symbolically reuniting the Soviet Union in film one and appropriating a Ukrainian song to underscore suffering caused by Ukrainian and German 'fascists' in the other.

## KEYWORDS:

Ukrainian folk song, Russian war films, Russo-Ukrainian conflict (2014-), negotiating memory, popular culture

The most sacred Russian holiday inherited from the Soviet period remains 9 May, the day that commemorates victory over Nazi Germany in the war Russians call 'The Great Patriotic War.' Every spring, televisions broadcast patriotic programming—feature films, miniseries, documentary films, concerts of young people performing songs about the war while dressed in uniforms, and news footage of the Immortal Regiment marches in which Russians carry photographs of relatives who fought. This programming ritually commemorates the war and unifies Russian speakers by reminding viewers of this great victory, both its heroic deeds and its costs. 2015 proved to be a particularly notable year for Russian war cinema: in honour of the 70th anniversary of Victory, six films or miniseries debuted, all remakes or revisions of well-known narratives.<sup>1</sup>

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1 By 'narrative,' I follow Prince, Dato, Greimas, and Todorov and mean the recounting of several events, fictional or historical, that form a continuant subject and constitute a whole.



While some of these films had been in production for several years, most production took place in 2014 as a new war was raging. Years of rhetoric proclaiming Ukrainian nationalists as ‘fascists,’ the same word used for Nazis, escalated in the Russian media which paid great attention to the plight of mostly Russian speaking Ukrainian refugees from the Luhansk and Donetsk regions. As Jade McGlynn has recently discussed, ‘remembering in Russia is increasingly performative and actualized,’ and ‘By presenting the Great Patriotic War as a frame through which to understand events in Ukraine, the media and government guided domestic political perceptions of the contemporary crisis and encouraged participative shared remembering as a bulwark against threats to Russian national security and historical legacies.’ (McGlynn, 2018, p. 1). Of the six World War II films or miniseries that debuted in 2015, two—Sergei Mokritsii’s Russian/Ukrainian feature film *Battle for Sevastopol* and Leonid Pliaskin’s twelve-part miniseries *The Young Guard*—take place in contested spaces: in Crimea and in Krasnodon, Ukraine—located in the Donbas, Lugansk oblast (region), one of the two Ukrainian regions embroiled in conflict since 2014. The chosen settings and the year in which the films debuted, prompted both directors to mark the Victory anniversary while ‘managing’ the Ukrainian crisis,<sup>2</sup> albeit through drastically different approaches, yet from perspectives sufficiently Russian to secure support from the Russian Ministry of Culture. Both films set in Ukraine include Ukrainian folk songs in the soundtracks.

Authors and filmmakers creating works set in Ukraine, yet aimed at Russian-language consumers, have been shaping and manipulating representations of Ukrainian identity markers—usually through performance of language, song, and costume, often reductionist—for roughly two centuries (Bojanowska, 2017, pp. 227–48; Karpuk, 1997, 209–32), as folklorists gathering folksongs viewed Ukrainian culture as more pristine, less influenced by Russian control. Even the Ukrainian author Nikolai Gogol’ included untranslated verses of Ukrainian folksongs in the Russian-language stories in his collection *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka*, songs that captured the Ukrainian environment and contributed a layer of Ukrainian auditory images. Political objectives have often shaped these depictions, determining whether viewers and readers encountered idealized, romanticized, reductionist, or demonized constructions of Ukrainian identity, often determined by actions, or performance of ethnic identity. Both *Battle for Sevastopol* and *The Young Guard* include well-known Ukrainian folk songs imbedded into the soundtrack ‘The Blackthorn Blooms’ [Цвіте терен] and ‘In the Cherry Orchard’ [У вишневому саду] sung by Russian actresses playing historically Russian characters, both performing Ukrainian identities in the films. Russians and Ukrainians broadly refer to these songs as ‘folk [narodnye] songs.’ Natalie Kononenko defines ballads and lyrics in a Slavic folk context as,

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‘A Dictionary of Narratology — University of Nebraska Press’, *Nebraska Press*, p. 58. <https://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/9780803287761/a-dictionary-of-narratology> [accessed 5 March 2019].

2 I use the term “crisis” because I am also referring to the period of rising tension leading up to the Maidan protests, the annexation of Crimea, and the conflict in the Donbas as these films were already in process before the crisis turned violent.



Ballads are story songs, and ballads [...] belong to everyone. Most people have sung ballads at some point in their lives. [...] Lyric songs express loneliness [...] and [...] are productive. They deal with emotions that are an ever-present part of life. [...] Because both lyric songs and ballads deal with the common problems of humanity, there is overlap between them. The difference between a ballad and a lyric song is that the ballad tells the story of a common human problem, such as the conflict between parents and children, and a lyric song expresses the emotions that the conflict generations. Lyric songs are typically descriptive rather than narrative. They capture the emotion that the singer wishes to convey by focusing on a scene, usually in nature, or on a natural object and describing it in detail (Kononenko, 2007, pp. 43–46).

With this definition in mind, I identify ‘The Blackthorn Blooms’ as a lyric song for the poetic laments her grief as her beloved has left her. I would argue that ‘In the Cherry Orchard’ exists at the intersection of lyric and ballad as a mother and daughter discuss where the daughter spent the night, with whom, and the daughter’s feelings after parting with her loved one. Most Ukrainians and many Russians would know these songs, identify them simply as ‘folk’ and explain ‘we usually sing them around the table as we drink’ or ‘we all known them.’ These two songs are sufficiently well-known and representative of Ukrainian folk songs, they are two of ten songs chosen for the 1978 Smithsonian Folkways Ukrainian collection, *The Dove*, and on lists of beloved songs such as the Speak Ukrainian Online Language School’s list of ‘Top 10 Beautiful Ukrainian Folk Songs.’<sup>3</sup> As such, these songs have diachronic histories outside of these films into which directors placed them, however, they both occupy central spaces within key plots in Russian films that delineate and redefine Ukrainian identity. They both remind viewers of the Ukrainian setting, in spite of Russian-language soundtracks, while presenting two different visions of Ukrainian identity palatable to Russian viewers. Likewise, these narratives have long histories—layers of memory akin to palimpsests—as they are a biopic and a remake, both based on the lives of real people. They also belong to a cohort of films that debuted at a symbolic time—the 70th anniversary of the conclusion of the Second World War and roughly a year after the Ukrainian crisis became violent, which we now recognize as the beginning of Russia’s war on Ukraine.

Thus, both films and both songs imbedded within them come with associations and histories from previous lives before they were united in 2015 as part of a larger cohort of Russian war films commemorating the Second World War. In this paper, I ask how and when the directors incorporate these well-known Ukrainian songs into their films and what function these folk songs play within the cinematic texts. As both *Battle for Sevastopol* and *The Young Guard* are both loosely based on the lives of

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3 *The Dove, Smithsonian Folkways Liner Notes*, 1978. <https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/MON00797.pdf> and <https://www.speakua.com/10-ukrainian-folk-songs/> [both accessed 13 February 2023]. The Speak Ukrainian list claims that “In the Cherry Orchard” was written in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but other sources do not corroborate that information.



war heroes and serve as the latest reiterations of well-known narratives, I consider how the points of divergence from previous versions reveal the dynamic nature of nationality and memory and how the shapers of cultural memory appropriate these Ukrainian songs, as well as other markers of Ukrainian identity, to promote post-Soviet Russian claims to Ukrainian territory.

I argue that the films present two different Russian options for Ukrainian identity: Ukrainian identity is fine when it is isolated and performed by Ukrainians who speak unaccented Russian, recognize no significant national differences, and defend Soviet—and by extension, Russian—imperial aims. In the other scenario, the director represents Ukrainian identity so that the viewer understands it to be dangerous and aligned with fascism. Ukrainians collaborate. To blend in as a Ukrainian, a Russian performs a Ukrainian folksong while wearing a cheap reproduction of a folk song before Nazis. These films exemplify two ways that the Russian Ministry of Culture supported directors who appropriated Ukrainian folk culture to serve the same political goal: delineating acceptable from dangerous Ukrainians. This article will outline the methodology and national context, and for each film, introduce the films and their predecessors, and discuss the performance of the songs within the 2015 films. The conclusion addresses how these songs, along with the films into which they are imbedded, relate to Russian collective memory of the Soviet past. If numerous scholars have analysed how musicians perform nationality through songs, what are the consequences when a nation appropriates another nation's songs and performs them in a manner that undermines the original nation's sovereignty?

## THE NATIONAL CONTEXT: WHO ARE WE? WHO IS 'OURS'? WHO IS 'OTHER'?

Homi Bhabha defines a nation as 'a system of cultural signification,' in which national identity is located in a nation's cultural signs: its narratives, images, monuments, and heroes.<sup>4</sup> Upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russians began debating their identity as a nation, as an 'imagined community,' to use Benedict Anderson's term (2006, pp. 6–7), re-evaluating, rejecting, and embracing cultural signs and revising the history and myths inherited from the Soviet past (Smith, 2002; Wertsch, 2002; Boym, 2001; Gessen, 2017). As relations among newly independent post-Soviet states

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4 Bhabha (1990, p. 2) in his preface, writes 'Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully encounter their horizons in the mind's eye'. From this seemingly impossibly metaphorical beginning, this volume confronts the realities of the concept of nationhood as it is lived and the profound ambivalence of language as it is written. From Gillian Beer's reading of Virginia Woolf, Rachel Bowlby's cultural history of Uncle Tom's Cabin and Francis Mulhern's study of Leaviste's 'English ethics'; to Doris Sommer's study of the 'magical realism' of Latin American fiction and Sneja Gunew's analysis of Australian writing, *Nation and Narration* is a celebration of the fact that English is no longer an English national consciousness, which is not nationalist, but is the only thing that will give us an international dimension.



shifted, Russians asked if their former compatriots remained ‘ours’ or had become ‘other?’ In search of post-Soviet identity, some sought answers in Russian Orthodoxy and others in folk culture (Olson, 2004, p. 4). As Gregory Carleton and Stephen Norris have shown, upon assuming the presidency in 2000, Vladimir Putin began drawing upon the memory of the Great Patriotic War as a unifying means of forging a post-Soviet Russian identity (Norris, 2012; Carleton, 2017). He began investing in cultural products that would bolster patriotism, including high-quality, big-budget films and mini-series depicting key battles on Soviet land. After Putin reassumed the presidency in 2012, his regime became more authoritarian and room for ambiguity that deviated from political aims evaporated (Norris, 2021, p. 299–300).

While some of the storylines are entirely new, all films in the 2015 cohort are re-workings of myths and elaborations of narratives known to citizens raised in the Soviet Union (Norris, 2012, p. 120). Particularly in the case of *The Young Guard*, I find it useful to approach these canons of films and literary works as ‘palimpsests,’ (Genette, 1997) to use Gerard Genette’s term, because multiple versions of the same narrative exist and older versions affect the reception of new versions. The nature of the palimpsest both preserves the distinctness of the individual texts, yet exposes the contamination of each other, the layering of texts. By combining Genette’s approach with scholarship on national identity and collective memory, these new films, their cultural precedents, and the relationships among them reveal areas of evolution and points of tension. Furthermore, reviews and conversations in forums (on kinopoisk.ru and kino-teatr.ru) and on YouTube give evidence that many viewers approach post-Soviet remakes through their memories of Soviet versions of various genres.<sup>5</sup> Published interviews show directors to be highly aware of previous versions of their remakes. In the case of *The Young Guard*, which includes folk performances in multiple versions, I consider how these performances differ from each other—both in terms of execution and of relation to the larger work.

## UNIFYING THE NATION: MOKRITSKII’S BATTLE FOR SEVASTOPOL

The increasing tension between Russia’s imperial aims and Ukraine’s insistence on its independence and sovereignty since the dissolution of the USSR, which culminated in armed conflict in 2014, has both complicated the narratives of the heroes depicted in these two films and underscored their relevance. Both of these films take place in multi-ethnic borderlands, in places that Russians lay claim to in 2014.

Sergei Mokritskii’s quasi-biographical film depicts the wartime experience of Hero of the Soviet Union Liudmila Pavlichenko, the Soviet sniper who killed 309 Nazis. During the war, journalists, both Soviet and Western, published accounts of Pavlichenko’s battle successes and American folk singer Woody Guthrie composed a song about her

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<sup>5</sup> Soviet citizens would have encountered these war heroes in myriad genres, both narrative: feature films and miniseries, fiction, official histories and biographies, textbooks, newspaper articles, rumours and myths; and visual: monuments, paintings, postage stamps, and museum exhibits.



‘Killed by her Gun.’ She, herself, published a short autobiography in 1960, and the Brezhnev years saw numerous short biographies. A book-length biography and novel appeared in 2014 (Begunova, 2014; Pavlichenko & Pegler, 2018; Vinogradova, 2017).<sup>2017</sup> In addition to Pavlichenko’s biography, Mokritskii also engages with a larger ‘Defence of Sevastopol’ narrative that dates back to the Crimean War (1853–56).

In *Battle for Sevastopol*, Ukrainian-born Russian director and screenwriter Mokritskii approaches national identity by implying and identifying ethnic identity then blurring and blending ethnic markers into an overarching Soviet identity, juxtaposing the Soviet Union with the United States, and tapping on nostalgia for the Soviet past. For example, Ukrainian-born Pavlichenko’s surname points to ethnic Ukrainian heritage, but she acquired her name from an ex-husband; her maiden name, Belova, betrays a Russian background. As Mokritskii eliminates the husband from his film and attributes the Pavlichenko surname to her father, viewers would assume Ukrainian heritage unless they know otherwise, making Pavlichenko a particularly useful example of a seemingly Ukrainian Soviet hero who identifies as ‘Soviet’ and risks her life to save Sevastopol, synecdochally the Soviet nation, in Crimea<sup>6</sup> and who eventually relocates to Moscow, the centre of Soviet power, after the war. While Mokritskii does not address the surname question in interviews, he explains other conscious decisions he made so that this feature film might be a unifying experience. These choices include working with Ukrainians in the film industry, shooting the film in Russian—almost entirely unaccented by Ukrainian—and dubbing the entire film into Ukrainian for Ukrainian audiences, releasing the film in both countries on the same day, April 2, 2015, and choosing a Ukrainian title *Indestructible* or *Unbreakable* [Незламна], and as ‘Battle for Sevastopol’ would sound politically incorrect in light of Russia’s February 2014 annexation of Crimea.<sup>7</sup>

The Soviet film industry tended to prefer symphonic music in cinema (Rees, 2015, p. 2) and the Ukrainian national symphonic orchestra provided the background music for the soundtrack. Nevertheless, the Mokritskii and the film’s composer Evgenii Galperin incorporated popular music at certain key points relevant to the film’s secondary romance plots, balancing a song written and performed by the popular Ukrainian rock band Okean elzi, ‘Embrace Me’ [Обійми] with Russian singer and 2015 Eurovision contestant Polina Gagarina’s new recording of Russian-Korean singer Viktor Tsoi’s classic ‘Cuckoo’ [Кукушка].<sup>8</sup> Within this context, roughly 55 minutes

6 A review on the Ukrainian database kino-poisk.ua, written by Vitalii Vashchuk on March 28, 2015, attests to the fact that viewers assumed Ukrainian heritage “One can say a lot from many different points of view about the story of the notable Ukrainian girl-sniper Liudmila Pavlichenko, finally having erupted on the screen...it’s ours—Ukrainian” ‘Bitva za Pavlichenko — Retenziia na fil’m Nezlamna ‘Kino-Teatr.ua’ <https://kino-teatr.ua/review/nezlamna-2921.phtml> [accessed 29 March 2019].

7 Zakhar Vinogradov, ‘Sergei Mokritskii: Eto fil’m pro Sevastopol’, *misticheskuiu territoriiu*, *RIA Novosti*, <https://ria.ru/20150508/1063345608.html> [accessed 1 March 2019].

8 ‘Okean El’zi — Obiimi (OST Bitva za Sevastopol’) — YouTube’ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4WNNKig00VSQ> [accessed 1 March 2019]; ‘Polina Gagarina — Kukushka (OST



into the film, one encounters the lyric song ‘The Blackthorn Blooms,’ a sad song about a young woman’s grief as her beloved has gone off to look for another. The camera captures a medical tent marked by a red cross illuminated against the night sky and as the viewer hears several women’s voices harmonizing as they sing the following lines of ‘The Blackthorn Blooms’:

Хто в любові не знається,  
Той горя не знає.

Whoever is not familiar with love  
Does not know sorrow.

А я молода дівчина,  
Не буду я спати,  
Буду його виглядати,  
День і ніч чекати.

But I am a young woman,  
I will not sleep  
I will look for him  
And wait, day and night.

Viewers approach the tent from the perspective of Captain Makarov, Pavlichenko’s love interest at that point in the film. When the cinematographer shoots the inside of the tent, the viewer sees specifically Pavlichenko singing the song. As the scene continues, the voices split according to gender: the men drink to Odessa while the women sing. Immediately after the song, an established couple Grisha and Masha rush off together, a pilot forcefully attempts seducing Pavlichenko only to be interrupted by Makarov after Pavlichenko has fought off the would-be suiter, Pavlichenko runs after Makarov, finds him in the fog, and kisses him.

Within the film, the song serves three purposes. On a simply artistic level, it foreshadows the unhappy trajectory of the developing romances, as both Makarov and Masha’s Grisha will soon perish. The Blackthorn symbolizes suffering and obstacles in Ukrainian folklore and literature.<sup>9</sup> The song provides an additional layer of the gendering that occurs throughout the film: to make his film compatible with 2015 gender norms, Mokritskii takes liberties with Pavlichenko’s biography and frames military rituals and the performance of a soldierly femininity so that the film depicts women’s participation in combat as transgressive and out of character from their ‘true,’ traditionally-feminine nature. Namely, he ensures that viewers understand Pavlichenko to be attractive to heterosexual men, interested in men, longing for children, and friendly with other women. The performance of this lyric song from a woman’s perspective simply underscores the director’s careful shaping of her complicated gender identity as a woman who kills Nazis yet remains traditionally feminine.

Most importantly, the scene captures a performative Ukrainian identity and shows a Ukrainian presence, even though all main characters speak unaccented Russian. It draws a connection to Russia’s first feature film, Aleksandr Khanzhonkov’s and Vasily Goncharov’s 1911 *Defence of Sevastopol* about the siege of the city in the Crimean War. Although the film is silent, between scenes of carnage, men and women over-

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Bitva za Sevastopol’) — YouTube’ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuPX8mjeb-E> [accessed 1 March 2019].

9 Taisiia Povalii, ‘Tsvite teren,’ <https://dovidka.biz.ua/tsvite-teren-tsvite-teren-analiz/> [8 February 2023]



come by a national sentiment spend a minute and a half performing a Ukrainian kick dance; in spite of their dire situation, they cannot help but dance, simply because they are Ukrainian. The performance in *Battle for Sevastopol* seems equally spontaneous, an authentic performance, unpractised, acapella, unifying the young women in harmony—yet reminding viewers that these Russian-speaking nurses, the Russian-speaking officers drinking to Ukrainian cities, and Pavlichenko herself were part of a multinational Soviet people that defended Odessa, Crimea, and Ukraine.

Though composer Russian Galperin Evgenii carefully balanced Ukrainian and Russian contemporary songs in the soundtrack, he did not include a Russian folk song as a counterpart for this song. Perhaps there was no need—though Russians acknowledge it as a Ukrainian folk song, they love it and even perform it for Russian audiences as the Russian folk singer Pelageia performed it at a concert in the Moscow Kremlin in 2018.<sup>10</sup> An international community commented favourably, primarily in Russian.

The film leaves viewers, most of them Russian, with a nostalgic longing for a Soviet-past when all nationalities depicted—Russians, Ukrainians, and Jews in *Battle for Sevastopol*—fought as one nation against a formidable enemy, at time when the Ukrainian language was allocated secondary status to Russian. Mokritskii depicts idealized pre-war years in Kiev and Odessa, Khrushchev years in Moscow, and wartime years in Odessa and Sevastopol, symbolically reunifying the Soviet Union without reference to the Russian/Ukrainian border.

## THE YOUNG GUARD: MEMBERS AND LEGACY

While ‘The Blackthorn Blooms’ plays a relatively minor role within the rest of the *Battle for Sevastopol* soundtrack, ‘In the Cherry Orchard’ functions as an instrumental leitmotif in several episodes of *The Young Guard* and occupies a prominent role as a performance that distracts Nazis while allowing Young Guard members to engage clandestine activities. The film uses the song to accompany scenes that deliver an overtly anti-Ukrainian message.

Over the past seventy-five years, few, if any, Soviet war heroes have inspired as many commemorative representations as resistance group known as ‘The Young Guard.’ Points of divergence among the narratives reveal the dynamic nature of nationality in the Young Guard narrative and how the performance of music functions as a means to construct nationality and reshape memory through the Young Guard narrative. During January and February 1943, Nazis tortured and executed 80 young people, mostly teenagers, for engaging in underground activity in the occupied mining town of Krasnodon, Ukraine. After the liberation of the town, news of the Young Guard spread across the Soviet Union and five members were decorated posthumously with the highest Soviet honour, as Heroes of the Soviet Union. While historians and relatives and conspiracy theorists still debate exactly what the

10 Garekht, Syromlia, Golan and Pelageia, ‘Tsvite Teren — Final — Golos deti Sezon 5’ — YouTube’ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fioTEUi7P7A> [12 February 2023]





group did and who served in which role, the group's importance lay—and lies—in its cultural legacy, for this group of young people inspired numerous works of literature and film in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. Because the Young Guard operated in Ukraine, rather than in Russia, the nationalities of members and enemies have always been relevant. Soviet authors and filmmakers used a variety of means to ensure that readers and viewers understood that these young Soviet citizens comprised an international group, as the group's international nature contributed to their heroes' propagandistic value.

While references to Ukrainian identity and the Eastern Ukrainian setting in the Donbas have always shaped the story of the Young Guard, a comparison of versions reveals that the significance of nationality as seen through performance—singing songs, donning folk costumes, especially embroidered shirts, speaking in Ukrainian or with Ukrainian-accented Russian—evolves in this well-known narrative that happens to take place in a disputed borderland embroiled in violence since 2014. The novel and three films that comprise the core of the Young Guard canon were written by Russians for a Russian-speaking audience—especially the 2015 miniseries.

In archival documents from July 1943, the Communist Youth League identified 35 of 70 participants as Russian, 26 as Ukrainian, two as Belorussian, an Armenian, a Jew, and an Iranian. Of the five young people canonized 'Heroes of the Soviet Union' in 1943, three were Ukrainians and two were Russians. Viktor Tretiakovich, written out of previous narratives but positioned as the protagonist in the 2015 version, was Belorussian (Petrova, 2015, pp. 359–68). As a testament to the perceived potential of the Young Guard story already in 1943, the Komsomol Central Committee commissioned a novel from Aleksandr Fadeev, the first secretary of the Soviet Writer's Union; the first edition appeared in late December 1945.<sup>11</sup> In spite of the fact that Fadeev's novel was a work of fiction, most readers interpreted it as historical truth. The nation's most elite director and composer Sergei Gerasimov and Dmitrii Shostakovich collaborated on the cinematized version of Fadeev's novel, which premiered in 1948. Meanwhile in Krasnodon, relatives fought among themselves over the deceased' legacies. Fadeev had eliminated Tretiakovich from his novel, but in 1959, Tretiakovich's relatives succeeded in rehabilitating him. In 1965, a large palatial museum opened in Krasnodon, reproducing Fadeev's pantheon; Soviet children celebrated initiatory rituals in the museum, and eventually, many Soviet youth simply tired of the perfect young heroes as represented by Fadeev and Gerasimov (Furst, 2010, pp. 137–56). When perestroika and glasnost presented the opportunity to update the curriculum, pedagogues abandoned the novel. After Putin began repositioning World War II as a unifying event, the novel saw reprints and pedagogues began trying to reincorporate it into the curriculum. Two unsuccessful attempts to update the story appeared in the mid-2000s: a miniseries drenched in Orthodox Christian themes and images and an adventure novel aimed at youth yet teeming with sexual content.

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11 In 1951, he would be compelled release a rewritten version of the novel which embellished the role of adult communist leaders.

## DEFINING THE NATION IN 2015: THE YOUNG GUARD IN THE CHERRY ORCHARD



The deterioration in Russian-Ukrainian relations, as well as Russian claims that ‘fascists’—which can refer to World War II era Nazis, Ukrainian collaborators, or present-day neo-Nazis—had come to power after the Maidan protests, gave new meaning to a narrative of fascist oppressors occupying Krasnodon. In stark opposition to Mokritskii’s unifying approach, Pliaskin highlights and fosters ethnic tension and division in his 12-part miniseries *The Young Guard* by representing Ukrainians in an almost entirely negative manner and revising the narrative to such an extent, parts of it are unrecognizable. While Pliaskin claims that he based his version on archival documents and on relatives’ testimonies,<sup>12</sup> archives do not support many of personages or events that Pliaskin added to his version. Rather than ignoring any Ukrainian collaboration as Fadeev had done, Pliaskin not only acknowledges the existence of Ukrainian collaboration, but develops it. In almost all cases, if a character speaks Ukrainian or Ukrainian-accented Russian, wears an embroidered shirt, or drinks Ukrainian horilka, moonshine, the character is also involved in rounding up and murdering Jews, torturing and killing peaceful Russian-speaking citizens, and, in general, displaying levels of both cruelty and stupidity that far surpass the film’s German Nazis.

Controversially, Pliaskin completely reshuffles the Young Guard hierarchy, positioning 18-year-old Belarusian Tretiakovich (whom Nazis identify as Russian) as the commissar at the expense of Ukrainian Oleg Koshevoi, the commissar in previous versions; the entire cast seems older than in historical reality and previous versions and as a result, Pliaskin was able to add a fair amount of sexualized content such as Liubov Shevtsova’s work in a cabaret, entertaining Nazis as she participates in underground activities. Shevtsova, always coquettish, captivates Nazis as a sexy femme-fatale.

In Fadeev’s and Gerasimov’s Stalin-era versions, performance of Ukrainian folk music contributes to the celebration of multi-national comradeship, characteristic of Stalin-era propaganda. In both versions, as the young people celebrate May Day, a Ukrainian song organically prompts Cossack kick dancing and reflects the spontaneous exuberance for life and beauty that characterizes the Ukraine of stereotypes, including the Stalin-era representations of Ukraine. After the kick dancing, Liubov calls for ‘one of ours, a Russian dance’ and astounds her audience with her rhythm and skill. In the novel, after this cheerful competition, the youngsters sing Soviet hymns signifying their collective identity and comradeship—regardless of the language (Russian), they were ‘our hymns.’ In the 1948 film, something similar happens: the dancers start with a 1930s song in a folk style and follow it with a Ukrainian folk dance. The most important hero (Koshevoi) and a woman wearing a Ukrainian embroidered blouse dance together. Russian Liubov follows them with astounding Russian stamping (Fadeev, 1973, pp. 143–48). The viewer sees equally rich traditions of both peoples within this international union; through the folk music, they briefly

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<sup>12</sup> He never visited the Komsomol archive in Moscow nor did he talk to the leading Young Guard historian, Nina Petrova, a historian who has published two books on the group.



forget the war; it unifies them as they appreciate each other.

In 2015, composer Maksim Koshevarov's inclusion of folk music complicates the simplified, flat portrayal of Ukrainian identity. Liubov, now a cabaret actress, speaks beautiful German in addition to her native, unaccented Russian. She performs on stage before Nazi officers six times: five times in German and once, in Ukrainian, when she sings 'In the Cherry Orchard.' While some viewers might have missed the few lines of 'The Blackthorn Blooms' in *Battle for Sevastopol*, Liubov's performance is longer and 'In the Cherry Orchard' appears two other times in the miniseries, making it impossible to miss.

The song concerns three people: a young woman, her beloved who keeps her out all night, and the mother whom the young girl must face in the morning when she returns home, hair unbraided, pointing to sexual experience and a loss of innocence. Time passes in the song—from the night when the young man would not let her return home, to dawn. Spring is in the future and perhaps marriage as well. The song points to a life hidden from one's parents and, in the tradition of girls' songs prior to nuptials, the time in young people's life when they separate themselves from their parents and begin their lives together. The perspective switches several times: from the girl's voice, the boy's voice, the mother's voice, and back to the girl. One can thematically connect the song lyrics to the three scenes that include it.

### ОЙ, У ВИШНЕВОМУ САДУ (IN THE CHERRY ORCHARD)

Ой, у вишневому саду  
там соловейко щебетав.  
Додому я просилася,  
а він мене все не пускав.

Oh, in the cherry orchard  
There a nightingale was chirping.  
I pleaded to go home,  
But he wouldn't release me.

Милий ти мій, прошу тебе  
зоря зійшла, пусти мене.  
Проснеться матінка моя,  
буде питать, де була я.

My dear one, I beseech you  
Dawn has risen—release me,  
My mother will wake  
And ask where I was.

А ти, мила, скажи в отвіт:  
'Дивись, яка чудова ніч.  
Весна іде, красу несе,  
а в тій красі радіє все.  
Весна іде, красу несе,  
а в тій красі радіє все.'

And you, dear, respond:  
'Look: what a magical night!  
Spring is coming, bringing beauty,  
And in this beauty, all rejoice.  
Spring is coming, bringing beauty,  
And in this beauty, all rejoice.'

Доню моя, у чому річ,  
де ти гуляла цілу ніч?  
Чому розплетена коса,  
а на очах бринить сльоза?

My daughter, what's up?  
Where did you go all night?  
Why is your hair unbraided,  
And in your eyes shine tears?

Коса моя розплетена —  
її подруга розплела.  
А на очах бринить сльоза,  
бо з милим розлучилась я.

Мамо моя, прийшла пора,  
а я весела, молода.  
Я жити хочу, я люблю,  
мамо, не лай дочку свою.  
Я жити хочу, я люблю,  
мамо, не лай дочку свою.

My hair is unbraided  
—her friend unbraided it.  
And in my eyes shine tears  
Because I parted with my dear one.

My mama, the time has come,  
And I am happy and young.  
I want to live, I love,  
Mama, don't scold your daughter.  
I want to live, I love,  
Mama, don't scold your daughter.

The viewer first encounters an instrumental version at the beginning of episode three as the only positive figure who speaks with a Ukrainian accent, Uliana Gromova's father, cuts off his daughter's braid in an attempt to make her less appealing after an attempted rape and then buries the would-be rapist. The song's parent-child dynamic mirrors Uliana's interactions with her father and Uliana has lost whatever innocence she possessed prior to occupation. The violence of the braid cutting contrasts with the ritual unbraiding in Slavic folk wedding traditions and it mirrors the violent sexual assault Uliana has suffered, as well as the desecration of the motherland. The cherry symbolizes one's native land, Ukraine, and the bride.<sup>13</sup> Uliana's face bruised and bloodied, Gromova asks her father how they will live—in light of the fact that she killed her Nazi attacker—rephrasing the final lines left unsung in this instrumental version: 'I want to live, I love, / Mama, don't scold your daughter.' She does live until her execution at the end of the series, and she loves, as viewers see the next time they hear 'In the Cherry Orchard.'

The song reappears in its entirety in episode 8 when Liubov performs it in the cabaret, clad in a theatrical folk costume that looks nothing like the costumes traditionally worn in that part of Eastern Ukraine. Her costume is a cheap, kitschy version of a costume from another region, cut at the knee (Vasina, 2006, p. 151). Liubov also wears a single woman's wreath and a fake braid for the performance. By donning a stage costume rather than a more authentic folk-embroidered shirt, the costume designer differentiates Liubov, a Russian pretending to be a Nazi sympathizer, from the ethnic Ukrainians, who in this version, are 'fascist' collaborators, usually wearing authentic looking vyshyvanky (embroidered shirts). While she merely dons the costume for the benefit of her performance, the collaborators' embroidered shirts are meant to reflect their true identity as fascists. Why a Ukrainian rather than Russian folk song? By impersonating a Ukrainian in that folk song, Liubov continues to perform a Ukrainian identity before Nazis. They understand her to be a collaborator and all other collaborators exhibit Ukrainian ethnic markers. Considering the plot and the reality of life in occupied Ukraine, a Russian folk song would likely be a poor choice for an audience of Nazi officers. In any case,

13 'Vishnia — Pro Ukrainu' <<http://about-ukraine.com/vishnya/#more-417>> [accessed 5 March 2019].



her audience does not appreciate the song and requests a German march after she finishes her performance.

As Liubov sings for an audience of Nazi officers, the camera cuts to Uliana as she emerges from her home in the rain, at night, at the word ‘dawn.’ She finds and picks up a bouquet of flowers, runs through the rain to her beloved, and they kiss; as in the song, she lives and loves, but their love will not end happily. After a return to Liubov’s performance, the director cuts to the other member of the Young Guard, Sergei. Having returned home after a merciless interrogation, Sergei sleeps, blood seeping through his bandages, as he lies head to toe with one of his many siblings. The camera pans across the hut, across the sleeping bodies of his many siblings until it comes across his mother, sewing and crying before an icon, praying ‘Please Lord. When will this damned war end?’ The camera focuses on the anguish evident in her face. She does not know what her son does at night, but she recognizes the danger. His bloodied body recalls the Uliana’s battered face the last time we heard the song.

The song returns at the end of the film—again accompanying scenes of suffering. As the truck carrying the soon-to-be-martyrs arrives at the execution site, Liubov’s version of ‘In the Cherry Orchard’ returns. The snow blows—they are scantily clad, some barefoot, but they do not feel the cold. All are bruised and bloodied, and several have just sorrowfully bid their parents farewell. Blood and suffering connect all three scenes (Uliana’s beaten face, Sergei’s lashed back, the beaten bodies of the heroes after days of interrogation, Uliana’s and Sergei’s parents’ emotional anguish) and while not mentioned explicitly in the song, the unbraided hair points to a loss of virginity. Incidentally, as another point of connection between the song and the film’s execution scene, in a folk context, marriage serves as a metaphorical death to a young woman’s family.

In previous versions, music cloaks the execution of the Young Guard members with meaning, helping readers or viewers to understand their martyrdom. In Fadeev’s novel, the heroes sing ‘The International’ as Nazis throw them into a mine. Gerasimov’s 1948 film concludes with ‘The International.’ This choice conveys the clear message that the members of the Young Guard died not just for their nation, but also for the international communist cause. The 2006 miniseries concludes with mournful Orthodox chanting as the truck carrying the young people passes the church that had operated as their clandestine meeting place. The chanting then progresses into a glorious alleluia—obviously, the members of the Young Guard have become Orthodox martyrs. At the conclusion of the 2015 version, ‘In the Cherry Orchard’ ends just as Ukrainian collaborators aim at the young guard members. In other words, one sees drunken Ukrainian ‘fascists’ aiming at Russian-speaking volunteers who have armed themselves in response to the massacre of innocents—viewers are free to make connections to the present day. For whom or what did these young heroes die? If one understands the cherry as a symbol of Ukraine, they died to prevent the spread of fascism and to save innocent Ukrainian citizens, then and now. While *Battle for Sevastopol* presents a unified nation of Soviet citizens fighting a formidable, foreign enemy, *The Young Guard* shows a Ukraine divided into Russian-speaking heroes and innocent victims and ‘fascists’ who speak, dress, and drink in manners punctuated by Ukrainian ethnic markers.

## CONCLUSION

Both Mokritskii and Pliaskin use well-known, beloved Ukrainian folk songs to present messages to Russian viewers that supported the Russian annexation of Crimea and intervention in the Donbas conflict in 2014 and ultimately the unprovoked attack on Ukraine 24 February 2022. Mokritskii's use of 'The Blackthorn Blooms' introduces a type of Ukrainian ethnic marker that Russians find appealing—the beautiful songs they associate with Ukraine. Much more offensively, Pliaskin appropriates a Ukrainian folksong to use as a leitmotif, connecting scenes of suffering supposedly caused by Nazis and the Ukrainian collaborators who support them. All twelve episodes of the miniseries demonstrate how 'fascists' torture innocent, Russian-speaking people. Language and loyalty to the Soviet Union and Red Army delineate 'Russians' from 'Ukrainians' in his miniseries.

While Mokritskii presents the women who sing 'The Blackthorn Blooms' as Ukrainians, Pliaskin's Russian cabaret actress performing 'In the Cherry Orchard' in a professional context, reflects a Soviet imperial attitude that Russian music includes Moldovan, Belarusian, and Ukrainian musical groups and artists, as David-Emil Wickstrom has explored (Wickström, 2008, pp. 60–88). Russian and Ukrainian arguments in the comments of these songs on YouTube give evidence of the emotionally charged space these songs, as well as other Ukrainian songs, occupy; both Ukrainians and Russians lay claim to this music. Comments range from praise in Ukrainian and Russian for the songs, impassioned pleas to for peace among 'brother Slavs,' and proclamations of Ukrainian independence.<sup>14</sup> YouTube clips of Russian songs do not prompt such controversy. In both films, the performances of the songs serve as moments in which characters cross metaphorical ethnic borders, becoming Ukrainian: in *The Young Guard*, Liubov switches from a 'Russian' identity to the marked 'Ukrainian' identity of a female collaborator serving Nazis—in short, a whore. In *Battle for Sevastopol*, Mokritskii momentarily reminds the viewer of Pavlichenko's supposed Ukrainian heritage in place of her non-ethnic Soviet heritage. If one is watching the film with the original Russian soundtrack, 'The Blackthorn Blooms' functions as a rupture, punctuating Russian dialogue.

While the special effects repackaged and updated Soviet narratives for younger viewers, the familiar stories and references to Soviet life and a Ukraine unified with Russia play into older viewers' nostalgia for the Soviet past. Svetlana Boym defines 'nostalgia' as,

a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship. A cinematic image

<sup>14</sup> 'Gurt Ekspres Oi u vishnevomu sadu.' YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Mt-wBRyDRr8> [accessed 25 March 2019]; 'Taisiia Povalii. Tvite Teren.' YouTube, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lUc\\_ojv6d\\_4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lUc_ojv6d_4) [accessed 29 March 2019]; 'Garekht, Syromlia, Golan and Pelageia, 'Tsvite Teren — Final — Golos deti Sezon 5,' YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lAPBpdKfCtA> [accessed 29 March 2019].



of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, a past and present [...] At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams (Boym, 2001, pp. 13–15).

As Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich writes in *Secondhand Time*, ‘There’s a new demand for everything Soviet...Everything Soviet is back in style’ (Aleksievich, 2016, pp. 10–11). The comments, on both songs on YouTube, and the films on forums underscore this Russian nostalgia. While many of the commenters on forums complain about the liberties that Pliaskin took or Uliana’s boorishness or Liubov’s provocative nature, some express the hope that these heroes might serve as examples for Russian youth, that they might lead the fight against the new threat of fascism, even though youth are the demographic least likely to vote for Putin, most likely to protest. One Kino-poisk.ru review claims that the miniseries possesses one undoubtable positive property: this remake shows young people that a person lives not only on ‘i-phones and hamburgers,’<sup>15</sup> setting the wartime events in Krasnodon in juxtaposition to young people’s materialistic infatuation with western imports that characterize the post-Soviet period. Fadeev’s *The Young Guard* was the first novel divided into chapters that many Soviet citizens read independently—the novel’s actions happened in these readers’ homeland, a homeland which, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, became a place abroad. Perhaps composer Koshevarov choose to include a Ukrainian folk song because the Ukrainian folk performance was such a memorable part of Gerasimov’s film, amidst Shostakovich’s orchestral music.

What are the consequences when a nation appropriates another nation’s songs and performs them in a manner that undermines the original nation’s sovereignty? For decades, russocentric makers of culture have been rebranding and reshaping Ukrainian culture to suit Russian objectives. In this case, the 2015 cohort of World War II films add a new vital layer in the all-encompassing memory of the Great Patriotic War; the two films set in Ukraine specifically remind viewers of the stakes of the war for which all Soviet citizens fought. *The Young Guard* shows what happens when fascists run amok in Ukraine and both films demonstrate what individuals can accomplish when they love their homeland while *Battle for Sevastopol* captures the destruction the fascists caused. ‘The Blackthorn Blooms’ and ‘In the Cherry Orchard’ invoke images of loyal women and an unspoiled native land not contained by post-Soviet borders. Just as Nikolai Lebedev’s 2002 blockbuster *Star* reminded viewers that Soviet soldiers—Russians, Ukrainians, and Central Asians gave their lives to liberate Czechoslovakia and Poland, *The Young Guard* and *Battle for Sevastopol* show viewers Russian and Soviet sacrifices for a peaceful Ukraine. The appropriation of these two songs by directors of Russian war films reflect a perceived need to respond to the crisis in 2014 by managing and contributed to the unjustified Russian claims to Ukrainian territory and today’s war on Ukraine.

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15 *Molodaia gvardiia* 2015 <<https://www.kinopoisk.ru/film/880743/>> [accessed 5 March 2019].

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