

PETER THE GREAT, STATISM, AND AXIOLOGICAL CONTINUITY IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN TELEVISION

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Abstract: Miniseries have become the most popular genre in current Russian television. In 2011 the St. Petersburg government financed Vladimir Bortko's *Peter the First: The Testament*, a miniseries with a distinct statist agenda, portraying the tsar as a "chosen" enlightened autocrat. This portrayal is symptomatic of axiological continuity in contemporary Russian television: just like in a famous 1937/38 Stalinist biopic of Peter I, the need for authoritarian rule in Russia trumps all concerns about the human cost of this rule. Miniseries that blend fictional storylines with implicit or explicit political messages serve as one of the most effective ways for the current regime to remain in power.

Mass media are fundamental for all modern societies. For autocracies, however, controlling and manipulating the national mass media is nothing less than vital, particularly when these autocracies claim for themselves the status of democracies.

In today's Russia, television as the mass medium with the widest audience reach is a key element for maintaining political stability and social functionality. This purpose blends seamlessly with television's enormous profitability. Thus, Russia's mainstream television reflects precisely the political-economic model upon which the Russian autocratic neo-capitalist society is founded. Mainstream television's characteristic blend of uncritical fictional and non-fictional content enables the current political structures to reproduce themselves without fear of being challenged.

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The hugely popular genre of miniseries, which appeals to tens of millions of viewers, plays an important role in conveying and spreading values that are aligned with the current political status quo. Quality miniseries that are produced with considerable state investments – including literary adaptations and historical dramas – legitimize the current power structures by invoking the legacies of cultural classics and legendary, albeit controversial, political leaders such as Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, and Iosif Stalin. Such quality miniseries are especially important since they target the intelligentsia, a stratum that traditionally holds a negative view of mass media, and of television in particular.

This article analyzes the – rather limited – debates surrounding the Russian state’s engagement in television and tests some of the assumptions expressed by their participants. A close viewing of the miniseries *Peter the First: The Testament* (2011) allows for an analysis of the values that are promoted by state-supported quality television in today’s Russia, in other words, the state’s “axiological strategies” and the extent to which these values represent a continuation of Soviet values.

What Is the “Correct Kind of Television”?

In February 2011, the journal *Cinema Art* (*Iskusstvo kino*) published excerpts from a roundtable discussion entitled “Why Do I Not Watch Television?”¹ The debate gave voice to oft heard complaints about the dismal quality of contemporary mass media, but also shed light on the mechanisms that solidify the current status quo in the relationship between state, society, and media business in Russia. *Cinema Art*, one of the few respected Russian publications that consistently address concerns about the country’s television, usually allows for a high degree of pluralism. However, this roundtable was unusual insofar as it featured a combination of media celebrities, public intellectuals, and influential businessmen. Daniil Dondurei, *Cinema Art*’s editor-in-chief, described television as the main instrument for the production of national culture and templates for individual behavior, calling it “an institution for unifying into one entity the people inhabiting a common territory. [Television networks] are invisible secret services for the management of the country, the economy, human capital, and for guaranteeing national security.”² Inspired by such hyperbole in regard to the immense power of present-day television in Russian society, participants began to express their frustration about mainstream channels, primitive formats, transparent bias in presenting news, sub-par language, and repetitive plots. Then, rather unexpectedly, the litany

¹ Daniil Dondurei. 2011. “Pochemu ia ne smotriu televizor?” *Iskusstvo kino*, 2 (February), pp. 5-23.

² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

was interrupted by an interjection that gave the debate an entirely new turn. Petr Aven, chairman of the board of directors of the company “STS Media,” unceremoniously asked whether the roundtable had any practical purpose, causing momentary irritation. He then pushed the discussion from self-righteous displeasure and wishful thinking toward a sober assessment of who the decision-makers in today’s Russian media are, whose interests they represent, and what they will and will not do in their programming. With unabashed directness, Aven described the real communication between private businesses and the Russian state apparatus that he views as fundamental for the creation of the kind of television that could be both quality-oriented and profitable, formulating the following goal: “Which instruments and structures can we build when communicating with the state so that, on the one hand, we won’t lose money and on the other, this will be the correct kind of television [*pravil’noe televidenie*].”³ The latter formulation is conspicuous in its ambivalence, begging the question: who will decide what the “correct kind of television” is, and whose worldview and values determine the “correctness” and legitimacy of media in Russia?

The roundtable discussion reflected the profound transformations that Russian mass media underwent in the two post-Soviet decades. The dynamics of these processes were shaped by economic, political, and, to a lesser degree, internal cultural factors. During the first fifteen years of neo-capitalism, the interaction between the Russian state apparatus, private businesses, cultural elites, and civil society was often dramatic, indicating major shifts in the media sphere, including a decrease in the relative importance of print media, a switch from private to state dominance, and the exponential growth of social media. Yet, despite these shifts and the new media’s increasing impact, especially among the young, “the most dominant media outlet is television in Russia.”⁴ The numbers are staggering – “national television networks reach over 90 percent of the Russian population of over 140 million people.”⁵ Nine out of ten Russians older than age four watch TV for almost four hours daily, five days per week; the audience of television is three times larger than that of the Internet.⁶ Indeed, Russia represents “one of the most television-addicted cultures in the world.”⁷ At the same time, television has become the most reviled

³ Ibid, p. 17.

⁴ Sarah Oates. 2007. “The Neo-Soviet Model of the Media.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 59: 8 (December), p. 1286.

⁵ Masha Lipman. 2005. “Constraint or Irrelevant: The Media in Putin’s Russia.” *Current History* (October), p. 320. This number has not changed much; data from 2013 suggest that 90-105 million people regularly watch television Cf. Daniil Dondurei. 2013. “Telereiting kak vospitatel’ natsii.” *Iskusstvo kino*, 4 (April), p. 5.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Elena Prokhorova. 2003. *Fragmented Mythologies: Soviet TV Miniseries of the 1970s*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, p. 2.

medium – efficiently controlled by the central administration and cynically exploited by corporate business. In Dondurei’s view, television, under the cover of a “provider of free of charge information and entertainment,” supplies audiences with value systems, norms, behavioral examples, and codes of reaction to any type of situation and problem in all spheres of real life.⁸

It is revealing for the worldview of Russia’s oligarchic elite that, in the discussion, Aven consistently reduced the problem of quality to an assumed contradiction between undefined “positive social goals” and profitability. Based on this logic, he called for a stronger financial engagement of the Russian state in matters of media so that companies’ potential financial losses could be absorbed by the state. Aven explicitly bemoaned his assertion that the Russian government does not spend money on achieving its social goals, whereas “for us it [i.e., operating media companies] is nothing but a business, and it cannot be otherwise.” He claimed that the goals of his channel will under no circumstances be political in nature – “Our bylaws state that we do not engage in politics.”⁹ At that point, the debate entered the axiological¹⁰ sphere: what kind of values does Russian television embrace, and which values does it oppose or ignore? When several speakers complained that Russian society is “xenophobic and homophobic” and that, if television began to present foreigners and sexual minorities in a favorable light this could help remedy the pathetic state of affairs,¹¹ Aven retorted: “I am certainly not opposed to any kind of minority, but we and the people who are in charge of our television (...) believe that such plots will not increase our ratings – and that’s all there is.” To Kseniia Sobchak’s objection that an active engagement on behalf of minorities would fulfill precisely the educational mission of television, Aven responded: “But we do not have such a mission. (...) Currently we believe that this is not profitable for us. If it becomes profitable, we will do it. All other questions should be addressed to the state.”¹² He then clarified that his channel could replace its profits stemming from commercials by state funds, using them for more socially useful purposes.¹³ Thus, rejecting any responsibility for the values promoted by his channel (except for political values that are excluded by definition), the media tycoon redirects the issue of socially useful values to the Russian state, whereas for Russian

⁸ Daniil Dondurei . 2013. “Telereiting kak vospitatel’ natsii.” *Iskusstvo kino*, 4, p.5.

⁹ Daniil Dondurei. 2011. “Pochemu ia ne smotriu televizor?.” *Iskusstvo kino*, 2 (February), p. 18.

¹⁰ The term axiological is used here in a rather general sense, denoting ethical values and their derivatives (from the Greek *axiā*, “value”).

¹¹ Daniil Dondurei. 2011. “Pochemu ia ne smotriu televizor?.” *Iskusstvo kino*, 2 (February), p. 19.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

corporate media businesses, the only criterion of assessing values is their profitability. As a matter of fact, such convenient axiological abstinence goes hand in hand with the oligarch's proclaimed political abstinence.¹⁴ However, the conversation participants failed to mention that the Russian state is already engaged in direct funding for the media, and always has been, purportedly to enable culturally useful projects.

It is important to note that discussions such as the one described here are the exception, not the rule, in today's Russian media discourse. In general, despite its status as the most influential institution shaping human capital,¹⁵ television rarely is the subject of public debate. This lack of analysis applies particularly to its fictional content. The current hopelessly stable status quo makes the scholarly analysis of how exactly television as the most powerful mass medium in post-Soviet Russia spreads its messages particularly relevant. However, "[the content] of Russian television is rarely the object of study for experts on modern culture," as media expert Vera Zvereva observed.¹⁶ Indeed, "Television is a 'totalitarian dream,' offering infinite potential for the central control of meanings."¹⁷ One of the most peculiar characteristic features of television – the seamless combination of fictional and non-fictional content – can serve as a tool for cognitive disorientation, making it hard to distinguish one sphere from the other. In this regard, the dominant Russian television genre of the past fifteen years – the miniseries¹⁸ – plays a precarious role by disseminating sociopolitical and ethical values in a pleasurable, often hard-to-notice form, complementing carefully crafted and controlled news segments and other non-fictional content.

Miniseries as the Lead Genre in Russian Television

In the 2000s, the Russian Federation became the leader in broadcasting television miniseries (*serial'nye formaty*), currently producing between 2,500-3,000 hours of miniseries per year. In 2009, on average of five hours of evening primetime TV, three hours and 40 minutes were occupied by miniseries.¹⁹ Characterized as "almost the only instruments of explaining life for the great majority of people," miniseries have a hard-to-measure,

¹⁴ Axiology is here understood as the general concept of what is defined as *good* and *right* in individual and social matters.

¹⁵ Dondurei, Daniil, "Telereiting kak vospitatel' natsii." *Iskusstvo kino*, 4 (April) 2013, p. 6.

¹⁶ Vera Zvereva. 2006. "Vozvrashchenie 'Bol'shogo stilia'? Zakon i kulak: 'Rodnye militseiskie teleserialy.'" *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 4, pp. 305-323.

¹⁷ Beumers, Birgit et al. (eds.). 2009. *The Post-Soviet Russian Media. Conflicting Signals*. London, New York: Routledge, p. 6.

¹⁸ The term "miniseries" here denotes a narrative format on television with a limited number of episodes.

¹⁹ Daniil Dondurei. 2010. "Maksim Stishov – Dmitrii Fiks: 'Otstaem let na tridtsat'." *Iskusstvo kino*, 11 (November), pp. 125-137.

yet profound, impact on their audiences that is likely derived from their orientation toward the subconscious: sexual desire, expectation of violence, fear of death, sense of anonymity and isolation, etc.²⁰ Miniseriies' enormous impact warrants rational and analytical reflection on the part of scholars studying Russia's political system. Yet, while observers of contemporary Russian media do devote considerable attention to political programs, fictional content attracts considerably less attention, even though its influence on popular perceptions runs deep and its effects are likely long-lasting.²¹ The present article's focus is on one specific figure – Peter the Great – and its representation in a state-funded miniseriies,²² with the goal to discern and contextualize its inherent range of values. While the insights gained from a specific thematic analysis are limited by definition, the underlying assumption is that further application of a diachronic comparative methodology to similarly significant, identity-defining historical figures (Aleksandr Nevskii, Ivan the Terrible, Catherine the Great, Nikolai II, Iosif Stalin, etc.) and to genres other than historical drama, including war and espionage films, will help expand this article's findings.

Media debates such as the abovementioned reflect the dilemma of today's Russian intelligentsia vis-à-vis mass media under neo-capitalist conditions: the 1990s are seen by many intellectuals as a lesson on the blatant abuse of private media ownership and are regarded as just as intolerable as the 2000s, when the Russian administration replaced media oligarchs such as Vladimir Gusinskii and Boris Berezovskii with its own minions. The long desired alternative, namely, establishing and protecting mass media as an independent fourth estate that represents and promotes civil society, seemed to be in reach after the break-up of the Soviet Union but today appears merely like a utopia.²³ Critical elite journals such as

²⁰ Ibid., p. 10.

²¹ A noticeable exception is Nancy Condee's analysis of Vladimir Khotinenko's 2005 historical miniseriies *Death of an Empire* (Gibel' imperii) in the article "Perezhivaia chuzhuui katastrofi: imperiia smotrit 'Gibel' imperii,'" *Pro et Contra*, 4 (33) 2006, pp. 29-37; for a discussion of methodological aspects of her study cf. pp. 34-36.

²² Just as Petr Aven suggested in the aforementioned roundtable discussion, to enable the production of *Peter the First: The Testament*, a branch of the Russian state stepped in: even prior to the film's credits proper, the viewer sees the announcement "Made with the Support of the Administration of Saint Petersburg and of the Legislative Assembly of Saint Petersburg." Not only is this announcement factually accurate – it is part of one of the film's conceptual lines: genuine, legitimate culture benefits from active state engagement.

²³ On February 18, 2013, the Presidential Council for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights held a meeting devoted to "The Problem of Pluralism of Modern Television and Civil Self-Consciousness." Parts of the transcripts were published in *Iskusstvo kino*. In his opening remarks, the well-known TV journalist Leonid Parfenov stated: "We once used to have public television channel (...): ORT. It was quasi-state-run and became fully state-run in one minute (...) after a critical report about the catastrophe of the "Kursk," Dorenko's next program was taken off the air. And everybody understood the ramifications right away. From that point on, nothing has changed. (...) When we talk about excessive state influence

Iskusstvo kino have a very small circulation – at best, they can keep alive a resemblance of critical discourse on Russian media at a time when the mass media themselves avoid such debate at all cost. But even in elite outlets there is no doubt that all media-related issues are decided between the state and corporate businesses; intellectuals representing civil society are no longer part of the decision-making structures. This exclusion means that the Russian intelligentsia as a value-producing and value-negotiating stratum has de facto been excluded from mainstream mass media; its role can be marginal and symbolic at best. Obviously, the lack of critical reflection on the effect of television on individuals and society as a whole is part of its successful functioning: television producers and those whose agenda they represent “are not interested in a debate on the technologies that are at work, therefore minimizing or tabooing the results of its work.”²⁴

The miniseries did not become the dominating genre on Russian television overnight.²⁵ After a period of socio-cultural disorientation lasting until the late 1990s, Russian television producers cautiously returned to the tradition of Soviet miniseries that were a significant cultural phenomenon of the 1960s and especially the 1970s.²⁶ Series such as *The Adjutant of His Excellency* (Ad’iutant ego prevoskhoditel’sтва, 1970), *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (Semnadsat’ mgnovenii vesny, 1973), *The Meeting Place Cannot Be Changed* (Mesto vstrechi izmenit’ nel’zia, 1979), and *The Eternal Call* (Vechnyi zov, 1973) shared, despite their thematic and qualitative variance, a number of features. First, they enjoyed unprecedented

on the ether – and let me say that the ether is entirely in the hands of the state in regards to editorial policies, regardless of ownership – [now] it would be reasonable to expect the reverse process: the disengagement of the state from the first three federal networks.” Calling the situation of Russian television today a “national embarrassment,” Parfenov compared it to Ukraine and Moldova that look more positive than “our depressing state of affairs à la the Central Committee of the CPSU.” Without naming concrete names, Parfenov pointed out that the supreme censor is the first deputy of the Administration of the President. Activist Maksim Shevchenko echoed Parfenov’s assessment by stating that “the establishment holds absolutely all leadership positions in television.” And well-known TV personality Vladimir Pozner quoted from his conversation with president Putin: “He who has the power orders the music.” The irony of the situation is reflected by the fact that the very council holding the meeting is part of the President’s administration. Interestingly, a number of participants expressed concern that a disengagement of the state could lead to a repetition of the situation of the mid-1990s, when television channels were owned by oligarchs who used them to politically influence audiences for or against president Yeltsin. Also noteworthy is a statement by Irina Khakamada, who emphasized the role of self-censorship as a factor no less powerful than the direct or indirect intrusion of the state.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 5.

²⁵ For a detailed historical survey of post-Soviet miniseries, see Birgit Beumers. 2009. “The Serialization of Culture, or the Culture of Serialization” in B. Beumers et al. (eds.) *The Post-Soviet Russian Media: Conflicting Signals*. London, New York: Routledge, pp. 159-168.

²⁶ For a profound discussion of the peculiarities of Soviet miniseries, see Elena Prokhorova. 2003. *Fragmented Mythologies: Soviet TV Miniseries of the 1970s*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh.

popularity, literally emptying the streets at night and maintaining this effect during numerous reruns. Second, they became an integral part of cultural mass consciousness, including numerous jokes lampooning these miniseries' plot clichés, character constellations, and repetitive utterances. Third, their popularity never extended beyond Soviet borders – one had to be part of the cultural community in order to fully appreciate this type of entertainment and successfully decode their messages and allusions. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russian television networks showed little interest in the continued production of such serials, both for conceptual and financial reasons. Importing Mexican series was much cheaper and more profitable than trying to respond to the rapid transformation of tastes and viewing habits of a culturally confused neo-capitalist society. However, in the late 1990s, Russian television reacted to a noticeable oversaturation with foreign fare and, especially after the financial crisis of 1998, an economic situation that encouraged and even necessitated the production of domestic serials. Among the available genres, crime became the first choice, reflecting a powerful trend in commercial literature whose boom had begun with cheap thrillers by authors such as Aleksandra Marinina and Dar'ia Dontsova. *The Street of Broken Lanterns* (Ulitsa razbitykh fonarei, 1998) was the new trend's first real hit, signaling an increasingly surefooted engagement in domestic television entertainment. Shot in St. Petersburg, it capitalized on features that are vital for the crime genre: suspenseful plots, recognizable milieus, and social and psychological motivation. These miniseries also conveyed a common yearning for order and justice that was addressed by investigators who were portrayed as ordinary, relaxed, and empathetic individuals. In subsequent years, the exploitation of nostalgic feelings toward the Soviet past proved to be even more successful.²⁷ But in the first year of the new millennium the miniseries that enjoyed unprecedented success was again within the crime genre, only with a radically changed axiology: *The Brigade* (Brigada, 2002) marked the transition from identification with the law to identification with the lawless. The fact that four young, clever criminals lacking any moral qualms were elevated to the status of national superheroes can be interpreted as a shift in audience perception and even mentality. Dondurei sounded the alarm: in an article in *Izvestiia*²⁸ he pointed out that the roughly 200 hours of miniseries offered weekly by various channels were for the most part dealing with criminals and their victims. Calling Russian television a “tear factory” (*fabrika*

²⁷ David MacFadyen has analyzed the specific impact of genres in current Russian television miniseries in his monograph *Russian Television Today: Primetime drama and comedy*. 2008. London and New York: Routledge, including soap operas, costume dramas, and criminal series.

²⁸ Daniil Dondurei. 2002. “Ekstremal'noe TV. Seriinye ubiistva stali serial'nymi.” *Izvestiia*, July 12, p. 9.

slez, a pun derived from the Russian term for “dream factory” – *fabrika grez*), Dondurei was particularly concerned about the fact that in this “new generation of miniseries,” private business is portrayed as criminal by its very nature. “This is another Russian paradox: our television’s aggressive fight against the market (...) while being funded by the latter’s favorite offspring – advertising.”²⁹

Post-Soviet Russian miniseries generally are situated in a framework of conflicting critical hierarchies. On the one hand, there are pure entertainment criteria oriented toward the lowest common intellectual denominator in order to gain maximum profits and solely measured through commercial rankings: the more viewers watch a program, the greater the numbers that can be manipulated in their role as consumers. On the other hand, there is a competing intellectual-cultural hierarchy which uses quality standards inherited from earlier periods of Russian history. Despite Russian television’s profound commercialization, professional critics and culturally discriminating segments of the viewership continue to assess the quality level of fictional television production on a continuum ranging from purely commercial (low-brow) to predominantly intellectual (high-brow). In the early 2000s, competing with the openly commercial type of television miniseries that often adapts Western formats, genuine quality television made a significant comeback, particularly in the genre of literary adaptation.³⁰ This was possible due to increased financial opportunities that a stabilized Russian economy created in the second post-Soviet decade, as well as the realization by parts of the media establishment that a referral to traditional values represented by classical literature could be both prestigious and profitable.³¹ The new trend, in clear opposition to the exploitation of crime and violence, began with Vladimir Bortko’s ten-part *The Idiot* (Idiot, 2003), faithfully adapted from Feodor Dostoevsky’s novel, which was celebrated as a national event. The film’s outstanding cast, historical authenticity, and skillful narration all contributed to its success that clever producers immediately tried to replicate by adapting other Russian classics. It is typical of Russian literary adaptations that they stay close to the text. However, they are by no means axiologically and politically neutral or entirely defined by the literary classic’s worldview. Bortko’s adaptation is distinct in its selective emphasis on the novel’s anti-Western elements rather than Dostoevsky’s bitter depiction of a deformed and

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Soviet television in the 1970s and 1980s did produce several superb miniseries that were quite successful with audiences, for example, *The Life of Klim Samgin* (*Zhizn’ Klima Samgina*, 1986) from Maksim Gor’kii’s novel, *A Raw Youth* (*Podrostok*) adapted from Feodor Dostoevsky’s 1874 novel, and *Red and Black* (*Krasnoe i chernoe*, 1976) from Stendhal.

³¹ Russia is not alone in this emphasis on its literary tradition: the literary adaptation has been a mainstay of such powerful television conglomerates as the BBC.

defunct Russian society – an emphasis that apparently went unnoticed by viewers and reviewers when the miniseries was first aired but that in hindsight appears significant for axiological trends in Russian television as a whole. Indeed, non-ethnically defined patriotism, juxtaposing values of the Russian nation to those of the West (Russian compassion and transcendence of class barriers vs. Western greed and hypocrisy) increasingly appears as a characteristic feature of both literary adaptations and historical epics.

From a strictly aesthetic point of view, it is convenient and to a certain degree legitimate to raise objections against the vast majority of Russian miniseries.³² However, as a whole, the genre represents a lively cultural stratum with rich quality gradations and a wide range of themes. While it is the quantity of miniseries output that most impresses – and disturbs – outside observers, the different quality levels, covering the entire spectrum from trash to art, deserve particular attention. The Russian state predominantly supports high-brow productions, either through central funding from the Ministry of Culture or through a regional administration such as the Moscow municipality. Invoking the demands for greater state involvement quoted at the beginning, it is legitimate to ask what values such miniseries espouse. A highly indicative example is *Peter the First: The Testament* (Petr Pervyi. Zaveshchanie, 2011). Adapted from a novella by Daniil Granin and directed by Vladimir Bortko, it is representative of post-Soviet Russian quality television and value-oriented miniseries with a direct engagement of the state.

Peter the Great and the State Theme

Already during his lifetime, Peter the Great (1672-1725) acquired a semi-mythical stature that only grew in the following centuries and shaped the tsar's depiction in historical fiction, cinema, and even opera. The first cinematic portrayal of Peter the Great was released as early as 1910.³³ The two-part Soviet epic *Peter the First* (Petr Pervyi, 1937/38) opened the genre of monumental biopics as a mainstay of Stalinist cinema, marking a sharp turn from a class-based to a personality-centered assessment of history.³⁴ Seventy years later, the prestigious miniseries *Peter the First: The*

³² For a discussion of Russian television genres in relation to their Western counterparts, see chapters 6 (sitcoms) and 7 (game show) in Stephen Hutchings and Natalia Rulyova. 2009. *Television and Culture in Putin's Russia: Remote Control*. London and New York: Routledge.

³³ *Peter the Great* (Petr Velikii) aka *The Life and Death of Peter the Great* (Zhizn' i smert' Petra Velikogo), directed by Kai Hansen and Vasilii Goncharov.

³⁴ This change was initiated by the Communist Party, beginning with a decree issued on May 16, 1934, "On the Teaching of Civil History in the Schools of the USSR," followed by editorials in *Pravda* criticizing "unpatriotic" films and theater plays. For a discussion of this trend, see *Istoriia sovetskogo kino*, vol. 2: 1931-1941, Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1973, pp. 228-31, and Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society 1917-1953*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 161.

Testament offers a post-Soviet interpretation of this historical figure – a “Peter the Great for our time.” It consists of four one-hour episodes, the first of which provides the narrative exposition introducing all macro- and micro-plots and conceptual themes. Naturally, any film that deals with well-known historical figures such as Peter the Great is facing an uphill battle to generate suspense because the audience is already familiar with the essential facts, a problem that distinguishes historical drama from other television genres. In order to awaken viewers’ interest despite the known ending, filmmakers are forced to pay increased attention to the psychological plausibility of characters so that their development and interaction become intriguing in themselves. *Peter the First: The Testament* reveals from the very beginning that it was made by experienced professionals who are dealing with this obstacle in a solid manner. The narrative is composed so that the viewer is eager to learn how it will unfold, even though it is clear that Peter is inevitably going to die – indeed, the title itself leaves no doubt about the ending.

From the start, the film presents the viewer with a prematurely aged and visibly ailing tsar who is still trying to rule with an iron grip, fighting rampant corruption and disloyalty. Peter’s court notices the unmistakable signs of weakening prowess and secretly negotiates varying alliances for the time after his passing. To protect his legacy – a robust centralized state that continues to modernize Russia – Peter needs a male heir. Since his wife, Ekaterina, can no longer give birth, his devoted second-in-command, the sly Prince Menshikov, searches for a new spouse and seems to succeed: when attending the wedding of Moldovan Prince Dmitrii Kantemir, Peter is enchanted by the host’s nineteen-year old daughter from his previous marriage, Maria, who performs an exotic dance. Father Kantemir is not opposed to a liaison with the Russian ruler, the more so as it could help him return to Moldova’s throne. But Maria, an unusually educated and emancipated young woman who prefers libraries to court functions and who dreams of loving and marrying an intellectual equal whom she can respect as a true partner, is put off by the idea of living with a man thirty years her elder whose behavior often comes across as vulgar and outrageous. In the meantime, the ailing Peter is tormented as much by kidney stones as by scheming courtiers. The schemers hope to maintain their influence once Ekaterina succeeds her husband on the throne, expecting her to protect them from the wrath of Peter’s grandson, Petr Alekseevich, who is feared to revenge his father’s execution. To the courtiers’ dismay, Maria ultimately acquiesces to Peter’s advances and eventually develops genuine feelings for the state ruler (*gosudar’*). He, in turn, proves his virility and impregnates her – but Ekaterina’s henchmen instigate a miscarriage. At the end, Peter dies in horrible pain and without a male successor.

On the level of primary plot, the film intrigues the viewer with the

question of how the tsar's amorous plans will unfold. Focusing on this private issue is particularly effective because few people know about Peter's purported affair with Maria Kantemir, a story that is scarcely documented and likely comes as a novelty even to historically well-versed viewers.³⁵ While it must be clear to any minimally educated viewer from the beginning that Peter will not be able to hand his legacy to a male heir since he was succeeded by his widow, suspense is generated by the question of how exactly his plan will fail – an excellent pretext for historical drama. The secondary plotlines also make continued viewing worthwhile, fleshing out the relations between competing courtiers whose characters are drawn out quite deftly by prominent performers, as well as the deterioration of spousal relations between Peter and Ekaterina and the progression of the tsar's illness. But it is the film's conceptual plane that offers the most intriguing questions engaging the viewer on a level far beyond simple entertainment. It is represented by the following themes:

1. *Autocracy*: The ruler's principles of how to efficiently govern the Russian empire are systematically illustrated and verbalized in the vast majority of scenes. The theme of autocracy, which is traditional for most fictional works dealing with Peter the Great, is introduced at the beginning when the insomniac tsar has visions of violence during the 1682 Streltsy revolt³⁶ (shown in black-and-white), and continues with scenes of Peter's interaction with the Senate and individual courtiers. Conspicuously, Prince Kantemir's teenage son, Antiokh, presents Peter with a Byzantine imperial belt in anticipation of the tsar's elevation to the rank of emperor; the allusion to Byzantium serves as a reminder of Russia's claim to be the Third

³⁵ Maria Kantemir (1700-1757) was the daughter of Moldovan ruler (*gospodar'*) Dmitrii Kantemir who lost his country after Peter the Great's unsuccessful 1711 Prut campaign against the Ottoman Empire. Prince Dmitrii lived in St. Petersburg since 1720, actively participating in the court's life. However, his second wife and his daughter Maria were not fond of the many festivities and abstained, citing illness as the reason – this fact angered the tsar, who ordered an investigation. The affair between Peter and Maria began in winter 1721 and, according to some sources, lasted until the tsar's death. Maria, just like Peter's wife Ekaterina, accompanied the tsar during his 1722-23 Persian campaign, where she had a miscarriage. She later was part of Moscow high society but never married. The main source of information about Maria Kantemir and her liaison with Peter is an article by the influential historian Leonid Maikov (1839-1900), "Kniazhna Mariia Kantemirova [sic!]" that appeared in the journal *Russkaia starina*, vol. 89 (1897), no. 1 (pp. 49-69), no. 3 (pp. 401-417), no. 6 (pp. 425-451), and no. 8 (pp. 225-253) and was part of a monograph on Maria's famous brother, satirist Antiokh Kantemir (publ. 1903). Maikov cites sources such as the correspondences of the French ambassador to Russia, de Campredon, and the collection of anecdotes about Peter by Scherer. However, Maikov's textological methods have been repeatedly criticized (cf. M.D. El'zon, "Maikov Leonid Nikolaevich." *Russkie pisateli 1800-1917. Biograficheskii slovar'*, t. 3. Moskva: Nauchnoe izdatel'stvo Rossiiskaia entsiklopediia, 1994, pp. 462-63. Conspicuously, Maikov's article has inspired works of fiction rather than academic scholarship.

³⁶ Streltsy were guardsmen armed with firearms; after a 1682 revolt, Peter the Great gradually dissolved their units.

Rome, which gives Peter a metaphysical stature and a mission transcending common standards of tsarist rule.

2. *Corruption*: This phenomenon is depicted as a deep-rooted feature of Russian society. The first scene following the credits shows the interrogation and torture of the former vice-governor of Yaroslavl, Poptsov, in which Peter personally participates. The theme is further developed through Poptsov's execution, followed by a scene in which the methods of high-level thievery are depicted directly: the seasoned prince Kurbatov, responsible for the treasury, nonchalantly inflates the costs of a masquerade ball so as to take the extra cash for himself; he, too, is later executed. At one point, Peter accuses Menshikov openly of being the greatest thief of them all, to which he responds with a smile "This is true - but I am one of us."

3. *Expansionism*: Russia's territorial expansion is presented as a geopolitical and civilizational necessity and a matter of course. Peter is informed that Sweden has finally been defeated and that, after 18 years of war, the Swedish fleet has been driven from the Baltic Sea, to which he comments in lionessque manner: "From now on, Russia will forever be a part of Europe," followed by another crucial remark: "unless the people succeeding us will mess it up," which implicitly refers to Russia's post-Soviet geopolitical dilemmas. Paradoxically, the expansionist theme is complemented by culturally pro-European attitudes; thus, Menshikov declares, "Europe is our teacher and example." Russia's subsequent expansionist wars are repeatedly referred to as the natural course of events.

4. *Multinationalism*: The Russian empire is shown to be multinational by nature and mission. In one scene, Ukrainians (*malorossiiane*) complain to the senate about their harsh treatment by the central state, a petition that is brushed off by the tsar. Moldova, according to Kantemir, aspires to join the Russian empire because it is a Christian power. A Lezgin,³⁷ one of Kantemir's servants, saves the tsar's life during an assault, and Peter hires him on the spot as a member of his guard.

5. *Populism*: The connection between the Russian people and their ruler is depicted as vital. A peasant by the name of Efim Nikonov purports to have invented a submarine. During its practical demonstration in a pond, the device sinks, to the laughter of courtiers. The only one not laughing is Peter. He takes the peasant's idea seriously and orders the continuation of his experiments.

All five themes are essentially statist. Furthermore, all are mutually dependent and reinforcing, forming a semantic nexus: Russia is an empire in need of a strong ruler in order to fight its innate corruption, to advance its geopolitically vital expansion and multinational mission which are

³⁷ Lezgin, or Lezgian: a member of an ethnic group in Southern Dagestan and Northern Azerbaijan.

naturally promoted by the ruler's connection with common folk and his appreciation of their talents. All five statist themes are introduced in the first episode and consistently developed in subsequent installments. As a matter of fact, it is the ongoing struggle between the Russian state doctrine embodied by Peter the Great and the particular interests of the courtiers that generates a psychological and intellectual suspense no less powerful than the erotic plotline. Thus, in *Peter the First: The Testament*, the viewer is overtly and subconsciously encouraged to identify with the ruler's perspective, i.e. understand and evaluate the events from the viewpoint of the autocratic state, its functioning and its sustained vitality as embodied by Peter. This effect is furthered by the fact that the major and minor plotlines are closely intertwined with the five conceptual themes and derive their motivational logic from them.

For the discriminating viewer whose socialization took place in the Soviet period, *Peter the First: The Testament* offers an additional intellectual challenge – the comparison with preexisting fictional renditions of the legendary historical personality, particularly Aleksei Tolstoi's hugely popular novel (1929-45) and Vladimir Petrov's two-part biopic (1937/38) whose larger-than-life portrayal of the tsar became canonical since its release. Because the latter has been regularly shown on television, Petrov's film is still on many Russian viewers' minds; in particular, Nikolai Simonov's interpretation of the title character has remained emblematic.³⁸ The underlying issue of political, cultural, and axiological continuity and discontinuity is decisive for the understanding of contemporary Russian society. Television miniseries, as the currently most popular of all cultural forms, are significant indicators for the interpretation of socio-cultural perceptions and trends. The often articulated hypothesis of a seamless continuity between Soviet and post-Soviet culture can be tested by comparing the Stalinist epic to Bortko's miniseries.

The production of *Peter the First* was begun at Lenfilm studio in 1935, a massive undertaking both logistically and artistically. The unprecedented investment in the recreation of period buildings, vessels, and costumes, together with an all-star ensemble gave the film an authenticity that supports its ideological message, the propaganda of statist values with particular emphasis on autocratic methods. A lot was at stake: this was to be the first biopic to visualize a new, essentially non-Marxist concept of history as created by "great men." Peter is shown as a passionate giant – both physically and intellectually – who forces internal and external foes, including his son Aleksei, to accept his state consolidation agenda or perish. The film opens with a low point in Peter's career – his shameful

³⁸ Vladimir Bortko admitted that "we all imagine the actor Nikolai Simonov in that role." Cf. Pochiniuk, Oleg, "Zaveshchanie velikogo Petra." *Krasnaia zvezda*, no. 85 (18 May 2011), p. 24.

defeat by the Swedes in the battle of Narva and the betrayal of his son who wishes to roll back his father's reforms and even sides with Russia's foreign enemies, and the constant opposition and sabotage of reactionary boyars. But the larger-than-life Peter is able to overcome the setbacks; moreover, he is egalitarian in his approach and intuitively understood and loved by common folk.

The three-hour long epic was released in two parts, the first in 1937, the second in 1938, and became an immediate hit. Based on a screenplay by Aleksei Tolstoi, an author with a long-standing interest in historical fiction and particularly in Peter the Great, *Peter the First* depicts the tsar as a genius whose will was decisive in determining Russia's future as a geopolitical superpower. Stalin personally met with Tolstoi and Petrov and approved their concept of an enlightened autocrat who rises above the limitations of his time, putting an end to controversies surrounding the film.³⁹ "Everything was conceived in breadth, there was no time for pity," exclaims the tsar in the film, a statement that was later ascribed to Stalin himself. Contemporary audiences viewed *Peter the First* both as a fascinating period piece and as a political statement addressing their own time and their own supreme leader, creating the impression of continuity through the ages.

Of the five statist themes that form the axiological foundation of *Peter the First: The Testament*, the first (autocratic principles), the third (expansionism), the fourth (multinationalism), and the fifth (populism) are all prominently present in the 1937/38 epic. These commonalities confirm the hypothesis of considerable continuity between the 1930s and the 2010s. However, the Stalinist rendition completely leaves out the second theme, Russia's intrinsic corruption.⁴⁰ Instead, it emphasizes the incompetence and downright stupidity of the boyars as a reactionary class that is ready to side with Russia's foreign enemies – an implicit justification for autocratic methods to neutralize high-ranking "enemies of the people" in the 1930s. It is noteworthy that the boyar theme is absent from Bortko's post-Soviet miniseries. Furthermore, the Stalinist epic repeatedly shows Peter's rejection and mockery of the Orthodox Church and her values; this anticlerical theme, too, is absent from Bortko's miniseries – the post-Soviet portrayal of the tsar endows him with a piety that is unimaginable in the Stalinist biopic. Thus, in Episode Two of the miniseries, Peter prays and speaks to an icon, asking forgiveness for having killed his own son and having shed so much blood, but also justifying his deeds before God by claiming that

³⁹ Cf. Marina Kuznetsova, 2000. "Petr Pervyi." *Shedevry rossiiskogo kino*, Moskva, "Andreevskii flag," p. 204.

⁴⁰ There is one scene in which Peter catches his favorite Menshikov stealing and punishes him on the spot; however, this is a far cry from Bortko's miniseries where thievery is shown consistently as a systemic problem in Russia.

he did it all to give the Russian nation dignity. The Soviet film portrays Peter in his prime, being surrounded by devoted friends who help him carry out his ambitious plans; the only person he distrusts is his own son, whose firm Orthodox faith and conservatism are coupled with a lack of patriotic loyalty.⁴¹ In the post-Soviet miniseries, Peter the Great is a lonely genius surrounded by collaborators appearing as interchangeable, negligible characters whose importance evaporates when the ruler is absent.⁴²

The analogy between Peter the Great and Stalin, both of whom supposedly had no choice but to act ruthlessly for the good of their nation, was an ever-present subtext in the Stalinist period. Later films about Peter the Great, especially Sergei Gerasimov's dilogy *Peter's Youth* (*Iunost' Petra*) and *In the Beginning of Great Deeds* (*V nachale slavnnykh del*, 1980), carry on implicit polemics with the Stalinist interpretation of Peter's rule, instead emphasizing his openness to the West and his support of education. But the director of the 2011 miniseries, Vladimir Bortko, once again – and explicitly! – likened Peter the Great to Stalin, stating that both leaders “radically changed the destiny of our country and of the world as a whole.”⁴³ Since Peter the Great traditionally symbolizes the idea of “enlightened” autocratic statehood and embodies both its reformist potential and personal vulnerability, the viewer of the miniseries increasingly becomes an object of persuasion of the crucial role that the ruler's personality plays for the future of the nation. This is another common element of Bortko's portrayal in the 2010s and Petrov's in the 1930s: the destiny of Russia's statehood is claimed to depend on the success or failure of one man.

Overall, a comparison between the Soviet and post-Soviet film allows the conclusion that axiological continuity between the 1930s and 2010s can be detected on the level of fundamental statist themes, rendering the functionality and mission of the state and autocratic principles of rule into central axiological criteria.⁴⁴ However, there is no continuity regarding the themes of class tension and spirituality.

Some subplots of the miniseries contribute to human interest in a manner that is only indirectly associated with statist themes, for example, the competition between the powerful yet aging Ekaterina and the young Maria for Peter's sexual attention. A theme that is unique to the post-Soviet portrayal of Peter the Great is that of an aging potentate whose days

⁴¹ A much more differentiated interpretation of the relationship between Peter and his oldest son and their underlying differences was the theme of *Tsarevich Aleksei* (1997), a little seen feature film by Vitalii Mel'nikov whose implied polemics against the Stalinist picture was typical of the 1990s.

⁴² Marina Suranova, “Rezhisser Vladimir Bortko: “To, chto segodnia v televizore – eto antikhudozhestvenno i amoral'no.” *Novye Izvestiia*, n. 82 (20 May 2011), p. 1.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Bortko's explicit and implicit didacticism is also part of his miniseries' connection with fundamental assumptions of Soviet cinema as a cultural institution.

are numbered and who is forced to realize the uncertain outcome of his projects and his legacy.⁴⁵ However, any human aspects proper are dominated by the themes specifically related to the Russian state. While on the surface, the film appears as a lavishly executed historical drama, making it attractive for large target audiences, its underlying and all-pervasive focus is Russian statehood, its builders, supporters, and foes.

Bortko has always demonstrated a rare ability to sense the Russian zeitgeist and respond to it both on the big and small screens, beginning with the mildly anti-Soviet Bulgakov adaptation *Heart of a Dog* (1989) that shot him to national fame. *Peter the First: The Testament* shares with Bortko's previous works (that also include a solid if somewhat pedestrian *Master and Margarita*, 2005) a meticulous approach to mis-en-scene, a dramatic script, an outstanding cast uniformly delivering excellent performances, and a gripping score with memorable leitmotifs – all evidence of the filmmaker's high degree of professional mastery and essential marks of quality television.⁴⁶ His controversial Gogol adaptation *Taras Bulba* (2009), which was criticized for its overt anti-Polish message, was one of the costliest Russian films in whose financing the state had a stake. Following global financial crisis, however, Bortko experienced considerable difficulties in getting his feature film project on Peter the Great funded. In an interview, he described the efforts that the author Daniil Granin undertook to help the project, approaching government officials at the highest level, to no avail.⁴⁷ Apparently, the failure to secure funding for a feature film led to the project of a miniseries, a format that Bortko himself at some point mentioned as the only profitable one in Russia today, likening it to prostitution, weapons trade, and drug trafficking.⁴⁸ (On another occasion, however, he also stated that only a miniseries can fully capture the complex narrative structures of a novel.⁴⁹) Ultimately, it was the administration of St. Petersburg that provided essential financial support. Whatever the initial artistic considerations may have been, the format of a miniseries shown on primetime television secured Bortko's film a maximum number of viewers, incomparably higher than even the most successful feature film would have had.

⁴⁵ Bortko stated that the film project for him started with the image of an old man with a cane running through the city and still trying to accomplish something when nobody is obeying him and nobody is afraid of him anymore." Oleg Pochiniuk. "Zaveshchanie velikogo Petra." *Krasnaia zvezda*, no. 85 (18 May 2011), p. 24.

⁴⁶ Bortko's *Peter the First* is certainly superior to the 1986 U.S. miniseries starring Maximilian Schell.

⁴⁷ Vladimir Zheltov, "Vladimir Bortko: My ubili kino sobstvennymi rukami." *Nevskoe vremia*, n. 58 (April 6, 2010).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Cf. Pochiniuk, Oleg, "Zaveshchanie velikogo Petra." *Krasnaia zvezda*, no. 85 (May 18, 2011), p. 24.

Ideological Messages in Historical Disguise

Regarding the ideological underpinnings of *Peter the First: The Testament*, its numerous references to Russia's contemporary situation are particularly intriguing. While Bortko's miniseries can certainly be seen as a serious, albeit controversial, contribution to the discourse on Russian statehood and the conditions under which its continuity can be secured, the film never questions the Russian state's legitimacy as such. This curious lacuna is key to the understanding of the film's underlying axiological framework and its relation to Russia's current situation. Surely, Granin's story about "Peter the Great's last love" is not firmly corroborated by mainstream historiography, even though the plot, while arguably tending toward the currently popular genre of "alternative history," does present a plausible hypothesis. But that is beside the point – after all, neither the novella nor the film were meant as scholarly treatises.⁵⁰ Rather, moving the idea of a male heir as a condition to secure state continuity to the narrative center is indicative of the miniseries' goal to get a mass audience interested and involved in the film's axiological foundation. In other words, as soon as the viewer is hooked on the court intrigue about Peter's desperate need for a son, the film has achieved its major incentive: engaging the audience in the statist themes. What is both problematic and revealing for this approach is the fact that Bortko, while capturing the sad final days of a self-proclaimed mega-reformer, leaves out what exactly he was reforming. As a matter of fact, Bortko takes the concentration on the statist theme even further than his Stalinist predecessor, in which an important subplot illustrates the plight of a fugitive serf who is tortured by a boyar and exploited by a capitalist but appreciated by the tsar. The 2011 film does not question, or even address, the inherent importance of Peter's policies for the Russian people – their benevolence is taken for granted, as if legitimate per se. What Bortko conveys to the viewer is not an analysis of the nature of the Russian state and its institutions and laws, but the urgency to protect them and secure their survival.

It is remarkable how little attention the constructive side of Peter's rule receives as opposed to his authoritarian decisions, gestures, and speechifying. Peter is right and righteous from beginning to end; there is not one serious opponent who would dare to probe the legitimacy of his autocratic policies at any point. Instead, even those characters who are intellectually on par with him, such as Dmitrii Kantemir and his daughter, share his statist goals and do their utmost to advance his autocratic agenda. Bortko shows Peter the Great as a ruler without alternative, whose viewpoints still seem sound and modern and who selflessly fulfills a historical mission whose true dimensions are visible to him alone. While the cruel

⁵⁰ Conspicuously, the credits do not list the usual "expert consultants."

practices of Peter's administration are not concealed, they are not critiqued either – nor is any alternative to them ever even mentioned. Thus, an entire historical discourse debating Peter's rule and legacy that took place in the 19th and early 20th century is excluded. Just like Petrov's portrayal in the 1930s, Bortko's film approves unconditionally of autocratic principles as the only reasonable policies for Russia. The main arguments for this approval are the external threats to Russia's integrity from competing empires and the internal threats of rampant corruption and shortsighted group interests. Corruption is purported to be a specifically Russian problem. Not coincidentally, Bortko's film opens with the aforementioned scene in the torture chamber, where a jailed official is forced to admit his bribery. The tsar, frustrated by his inability to root out the problem, exclaims "Why don't the Germans take bribes, why don't the Dutch – and why do the Russians?" The film never provides an answer, simply taking corruption in Russia as a given that every ruler has to face. Peter's fight against it is merciless, yet even his closest allies are fallible to the temptations of riches. To the question of why under Peter thievery was so common, Bortko responded: "Thievery always blossomed in Russia, for a thousand years. Nobody was ever able to do anything about it."⁵¹ Thus, the miniseries' entire anti-corruption theme is intended to prove that only an independent autocrat is able to take on this phenomenon.

Peter the First: The Testament makes it abundantly clear what the tsar is fighting *against*, but not what is he fighting *for*. Except for the scene in which the wooden submarine is tested and a discussion on whether it is reasonable to furnish a naval expedition to find a possible connection between Asia and America, Peter's creative activities are never put on display. However, merely enforcing laws and acting violently is not sufficient for either improving matters in a country or for state-building. As a matter of fact, reducing Peter the Great's practice to endless interrogations and executions supports precisely what his opponents had been accusing him of all along: that his rule was more totalitarian than enlightened. The Russian people, in whose name the draconian measures are carried out, appear in the miniseries too rarely to prove that they benefit from the autocratic system. If at all, their reward lies in a nebulous notion of "Russian dignity" and "progress" and is projected into an imaginary future. This oversight is not coincidental; it lies at the heart of Bortko's and Granin's worldview and values: it is not the actual Russian people who gain from a stable power structure – it is the state itself that appears as an absolute value. State stability and continuity are consistently invoked as values *per se*, needing no further legitimization. This priority of the state's protection and survival as a supreme value even overshadows Peter's actual

⁵¹ IrinaTumakova, "Zveshchanie Petra." *Izvestiia*, n. 21 (February 8, 2011), p. 10.

policy of promoting meritocracy which should have been observed by his successors and rarely was. Conspicuously, both Aleksei Tolstoi's novel and Vladimir Petrov's film did make upward mobility and meritocratic decisions important elements of their subplots, likely because they were seen as pillars of the new classless system in the Soviet Union. Bortko's film, made in a time period that no longer promotes classlessness, instead emphasizes Peter's insistence on his absolute entitlement, which is shown as an indispensable part of successfully ruling Russia. In an interview prior to the film's premiere, Bortko explicitly stated his interest in the political aspects of the story which, according to him, is about the decision-making of the highest ruler of the state, "regardless of what it is called: Father-Tsar, General Secretary, or President."⁵² Further developing Granin's sufficiently speculative hypothesis,⁵³ Bortko's film suggests that after Maria lost Peter's child due to court schemes, the anointment of her younger brother Antiokh Kantemir as the future tsar was a realistic option. Indeed, that would have given the Russian crown to one of the most advanced minds of his time – in other words, it would have put an intellectual on the throne. Such wishful thinking was characteristic of enlightenment and echoed by the communist reformist intellectuals of the 1960s, the so-called *shestidesiatniki*; obviously, it is still alive among post-Soviet intellectuals.

Conclusions

Peter the First: The Testament premiered May 14 and 15, 2011, on the *Russia (Rossiia)*⁵⁴ network. If ever there were any doubts, in interviews given prior to the premiere, Bortko expressed his sincere belief in legitimate authoritarian statehood as the only model that works for Russia. Surely, he shares this view with numerous Russian intellectuals past and present, including some former dissidents, extrapolating it to the current Russia, whose successful future is not at all a given. In *Peter the First: The Testament*, Bortko chose a bold move to visualize this need for statist continuity: at the end of Episode Four, in 1725, when Peter's collaborators carry the open casket with the dead tsar, their procession continues into modern-day St. Petersburg with its blinding streetlights and endless lines of cars. Referring to the fact that Peter did not leave a testament, Bortko stated polemically: "But he did leave a testament to you and me! He left us a country, the city of Petersburg, and whatever is going to happen to

⁵² Tat'iana Shipilova, "Vladimir Bortko: Ne tol'ko pro liubov'." *Sovetskaiia Sibir'*, n. 83 (May 12, 2011).

⁵³ The male successor was not a condition sine qua non in Russia – after all, Peter's wife Ekaterina succeeded him on the throne. Had he really intended to elevate a more educated and moral person to the highest position in Russian society, he could have divorced Ekaterina, married Maria Kantemir, and declared the latter his successor.

⁵⁴ *Rossiia* is a state-owned channel founded in 1991.

all that depends on us.”⁵⁵ Thus, the testament of the film’s title makes its way into contemporary Russia, as if to remind today’s citizens to not squander what the great ruler had left them three hundred years ago. Such a metaphor concludes the line of implicit and explicit references to the future – i.e., to Russia’s present and its autocratic state model – and appeals to 21st-century audiences, both of which are indicative of the film’s didactic mission. Needless to say, the direct appeal to the audience is a feature characteristic of Soviet cinema, too – another element of cultural and axiological continuity. The symbolic ending leaves no doubt as to how Bortko and those who financed this large-scale miniseries interpret Peter the Great and his relevance for contemporary Russia. It also points to a partial axiological consensus of current Russian elites when calling for a stronger involvement of the Russian state in shaping Russian mass media, particularly television. It is not the fight against currently popular attitudes toward foreigners and minorities that the state funds – it is the proclamation of the vital importance of the state itself.

Both in Soviet and post-Soviet cinema, Peter the Great has been an object for projections, with different authors prioritizing certain aspects of his rule in order to claim historical precedents and thus continuity. While the two compared interpretations of Peter’s rule are devoted to a distinct time period – Petrov’s 1937/38 picture focuses on the years of power consolidation, Bortko’s 2011 *Peter the First: The Testament* on the final four years – both share the positive portrayal of Peter the Great as the “chosen” enlightened autocrat.⁵⁶ Neither of them pay attention to the plight of the tens of thousands of serfs who perished during the building of the new capital, or to the profound contradiction between the *raison d’état* promoted by the ruler and its horrific consequences, thus ignoring the alternative interpretation of Petrine rule from Pushkin’s “Bronze Horseman” to Merezhkovskii’s *Peter and Aleksei*.⁵⁷ This selectiveness is remarkable in itself, but also stands as a sign of axiological continuity: both in Soviet and in post-Soviet media, the success of Peter as the imperial statist *per se* trumps humanist considerations.

⁵⁵ Shipilova, *op.cit.* In a similar vein, Bortko formulated: “During his reign, the ministries were formed, the industry, science, and to whom did he leave all that? To us.” Cf. “Petr pervyi: poslednie uroki,” *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, n. 96 (May 5, 2011), p. 15.

⁵⁶ An interesting counter-image is given in Yury Il’enko’s Ukrainian film *A Prayer for Hetman Mazepa (Molitva za hetmana Mazepu)*, 2002) where Peter, shown from the point of view of desired Ukrainian independence, appears as a ruthless powerbroker and pervert.

⁵⁷ One of the most recent, and profoundly revisionist, contributions to the debate on Peter the Great’s role in Russian history is a book by the controversial popular historian Andrei Burovskii, 2013. *Petr Okaiannyi. Palach na trone* Moskva: Eksmo.

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