

Review

**of the Doctoral Dissertation of Magdalena Danielova Vlastanova, Full-time Doctoral Candidate at the Department of Modern and Contemporary General History, Faculty of History, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", titled –
"American and British Anti-Soviet Film Propaganda (1961–1968)"
for the Award of the Educational and Scientific Degree "Doctor" in the Academic Field 2.2 History and Archaeology**

Magdalena Vlastanova successfully defended her master's thesis in the program "Crises, Conflicts, and Diplomacy in World Politics" at the Faculty of History. As her instructor, I have observed her academic development over the final years of her higher education and can attest to her remarkable progress. Her interest in social and cultural issues of contemporary history is both profound and clearly defined. Her undeniable qualities led to her admission into the doctoral program in the Department of Modern and Contemporary General History. During her doctoral studies, she has consistently demonstrated herself to be a diligent and meticulous researcher.

The doctoral dissertation of Magdalena Vlastanova, titled *"American and British Anti-Soviet Film Propaganda (1961–1968)"*, represents a significant contribution to the study of cultural diplomacy and propaganda within the context of the Cold War. The topic is both timely and well-chosen, focusing on a scarcely explored field in Bulgarian historiography. Moreover, such comparative research is rarely conducted even on a global scale due to the complexity of the topic and the vast amount of material requiring analysis.

The relevance of the subject is underscored today, as we witness a renewed global polarization and the application of Cold War-era tools in so-called hybrid conflicts. The methods employed in these contexts have not evolved significantly, and similar forms of propaganda can be expected to reemerge in contemporary cinema from both sides of the newly forming blocs. For this reason, research into film propaganda will only grow in importance, and Vlastanova's work opens a new chapter in Bulgarian historiography.

The dissertation by Magdalena Danielova Vlastanova, titled *"American and British Anti-Soviet Film Propaganda (1961–1968)"*, is a notable contribution to the study of cultural diplomacy and propaganda during the Cold War. The topic is timely and well-selected, emphasizing a little-studied area in Bulgarian historiography.

The dissertation spans 266 pages, structured into an introduction, three main chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography, and appendices. It draws on more than 150 sources, including monographs, articles, audiovisual materials, and archival records. The analysis incorporates 20 film titles as primary objects, contextualized within the political and social frameworks of the period under study. The use of archival sources, including digitized materials from American and British film archives, substantially enriches the empirical basis of the research.

Methodology

Methodology

The methodology employed in the dissertation is interdisciplinary, encompassing:

- **Historical and cultural analysis**, emphasizing the domestic and foreign policies of both countries.
- **Cinematographic textual analysis**, exploring representations and messages in the films.

- **Comparative analysis**, particularly in the third chapter, where American and British cinematic propaganda are juxtaposed.
- **Empirical methods**, analyzing archival and audiovisual sources.

The **introduction** of the dissertation is of paramount importance as it establishes the theoretical framework for the entire study. The concept of "propaganda" is thoroughly explored, incorporating perspectives from prominent global scholars such as Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (pp. 25–27), David Easton (p. 27), Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell (p. 27), and Jacques Ellul (p. 28).

The introduction also addresses the relationship between film history, cinema, and history as a scholarly discipline, highlighting various theoretical approaches to film history (p. 29). Additionally, the historical evolution of film propaganda is traced up to the period under examination. This section is exceptionally well-structured, covering the main theoretical challenges and directions necessary for a thorough exploration of the issue.

Doctoral candidate Vlastanova has excelled in this section, showcasing a significant contribution to Bulgarian historiography, which has rarely tackled cultural topics of this kind, especially with such a clear focus.

Chapter One

The first chapter of the dissertation spans 58 pages (pp. 40–98) and provides a comprehensive examination of the primary factors that shaped American anti-Soviet film propaganda during the studied period (1961–1968). The chapter is structured into four key sub-sections:

1. External political factors – inspiration for the film industry (pp. 40–49)
2. Internal political factors and their influence on public attitudes (pp. 50–64)
3. Hollywood: "The Propaganda Arm of the American Dream Machine" (pp. 64–76)
4. The German cinema front and the clash between communism and capitalism (pp. 76–98)

This chapter forms the foundation of the research by establishing the main political, social, and cultural contexts that shaped the functioning of the U.S. propaganda apparatus.

The **first sub-section** delves into how the foreign policy crises of the early Cold War period influenced the propagandistic direction of the American film industry. Key emphasis is placed on the Berlin Crisis and the attitudes of the Truman and Eisenhower administrations toward the USSR.

In this regard, films such as *Escape to Berlin* (1962) are analyzed as emblematic representations of the ideological struggle between East and West. The author meticulously examines how American foreign policy utilized cinema to reinforce the U.S.'s international image while depicting the USSR as the primary aggressor.

The **second sub-section** investigates the domestic political factors that encouraged the production of propaganda films. Key themes include the spy panic, the role of the Baby Boomer generation as a new audience, and cultural transformations within American society.

Special attention is given to issues related to Soviet espionage and fears of communist infiltration in the United States. The section also explores the processes of McCarthyism and its evolution, providing a detailed overview of cultural shifts linked to the "Beat Generation."

An important aspect discussed is the role of Baby Boomers, who became a key demographic group among moviegoers. This new reality reshaped the structure of the film industry and influenced the themes it addressed. The doctoral candidate's approach is particularly significant, as it effectively highlights the connections between social and demographic transformations and their impact on state policy.

The **third subsection** focuses on the development of Hollywood, including the emergence of structures within the American film industry and government intervention up until 1945. A key issue presented is the repression of screenwriters associated with the American Communist Party, known as the "Hollywood Ten" (p. 68). The discussion of the legal framework that restricted the film sector in the United States is particularly valuable.

The **final subsection** of the first chapter is the most extensive, examining the direct relationship between state institutions and Hollywood productions. Special attention is given to the role of the United States Information Agency, which actively funded and promoted the creation of anti-Soviet films. The mechanisms used to embed propagandistic messages are analyzed in detail. The author also notes the shortcomings of Hollywood's approach, particularly its excessive ideological framing, which at times led to artificial or formulaic narratives.

The **fourth subsection** addresses the German issue as part of the cinematic front line of conflict. It focuses on the activities of the United States Information Agency. This section includes a detailed analysis of four films: *One, Two, Three*, *Escape from East Berlin*, *Escape to Berlin*, and *Torn Curtain*. The chapter's conclusion successfully showcases the author's analytical skills. All relevant factors influencing the development of American film propaganda are thoroughly covered. However, a more robust justification of the selected film titles might have been beneficial. Frequent references to Bulgarian authors, such as Prof. Rusi Marinov (p. 94), may seem unusual, especially given the topic's more extensive treatment in American and British publications.

Regarding the **first chapter**, it can be summarized as providing an in-depth examination of key aspects of American film propaganda. The chapter's length and structure allow for a detailed study of the external and internal factors influencing film production. The author skillfully combines historical and cultural analysis, utilizing specific examples and film citations.

The chapter's weaknesses are minimal, relating mainly to the relatively superficial analysis of certain aspects, such as the interaction between Hollywood and independent filmmakers. Nevertheless, the first chapter lays a solid foundation for exploring propaganda within the context of the Cold War.

Second Chapter

The second chapter of the dissertation spans 63 pages (pp. 99–162) and investigates the development of British film propaganda during the period 1961–1968. This chapter examines the social, political, and cultural factors shaping the distinctive characteristics of British anti-Soviet-themed films. It is divided into four key subsections:

1. External political factors (pp. 99–110)
2. Internal political factors (pp. 110–127)
3. The film industry (pp. 128–140)
4. The spy film: "Intriguing because it is a parable of our time" (pp. 140–161)

As previously mentioned, the second chapter focuses on British anti-Soviet film propaganda from 1961 to 1968. The chapter delves deeply into how political and social factors influenced the themes, stylistic elements, and messages of British films during this period.

The first section of the chapter focuses on British foreign policy in the context of the Cold War and its role in shaping propaganda cinema. The United Kingdom, aiming to maintain its influence in international relations, found an effective tool for cultural diplomacy in the film industry. The alliance with the United States, often referred to as the "special relationship," played a pivotal role in shaping anti-Soviet themes in British films. The political transformations in British governments and the evolution of relations between the two nations, particularly during Macmillan's tenure, are presented in a highly coherent and synthesized manner (pp. 101–103).

Foreign policy crises, such as the Berlin problem, are also reflected in film productions. These crises are depicted through narratives that emphasize the threat of Soviet expansion and the necessity of united efforts by the Western bloc. The framework for attitudes toward the USSR is outlined, including the issues surrounding the Suez Crisis (p. 105). The films reveal a comparatively softer stance toward the Soviet Union.

The second section examines the impact of internal social and political processes on British film propaganda. During the 1960s, the United Kingdom experienced significant social changes that were reflected in its cinema. The emergence of youth movements and increasing generational tensions shaped the themes and styles of films. The pursuit of new forms of expression and more dynamic storylines mirrored the cultural revolution characteristic of the decade.

An important aspect covered in this section is the influence of real events on film narratives. Spy scandals, such as the Profumo affair (p. 121), not only sparked public debate but also inspired directors to create productions that balanced fact and fiction. This enabled British cinema to construct compelling and impactful narratives that resonated with audiences.

The third section analyzes the development of the British film industry within the context of legislative and cultural changes during the 1960s. Legislation enacted during this period encouraged the production of national films that reflected British values and cultural heritage. Of particular interest is the topic of the "War of the Films," which highlights the rivalry between the American and British film industries (p. 131). This competition provided the British film industry with an opportunity to assert its independence and uniqueness compared to Hollywood.

This section also examines the technical and artistic innovations characteristic of British productions. The emphasis on realism and depth in storytelling became a hallmark of British cinema, appealing to both national and international audiences.

The final section is dedicated to the spy genre, which occupies a central place in British film propaganda. Spy films from this period are distinguished by their tense plots, complex characters, and moral dilemmas. They successfully combined entertainment elements with political messages, becoming a powerful propaganda tool. Titles associated with James Bond and Harry Palmer are discussed in detail (pp. 140–159).

The protagonists of these films are often portrayed as moral and intelligent agents who embody Western values, while their Soviet counterparts are depicted as ruthless and malevolent.

Spy films also reflect the social issues of the time, including domestic political contradictions and global tensions.

The second chapter offers a thorough and well-structured analysis of British anti-Soviet film propaganda. The author successfully connects political and social factors with specific aspects of the film industry, demonstrating how films both reflect and shape public attitudes.

The third chapter differs from the previous ones in its chosen approach. It focuses on the nuclear threat and anti-Soviet propaganda in American and British films during the period 1961–1968. Spanning 66 pages (pp. 163–229), the chapter explores the specific theme of nuclear threat as part of anti-Soviet propaganda in films produced in the United States and the United Kingdom. The chapter integrates American and British perspectives, emphasizing both shared characteristics and differences in the approaches of the two film industries.

Its structure is somewhat unconventional. It begins with an introduction and a separate section titled "*Historians and Atomic Culture: British vs. American Perspectives*" (pp. 163–168). Following this, the first subsection examines American anti-Soviet nuclear-themed films (pp. 168–198), while the second focuses on British nuclear-themed anti-Soviet films (pp. 198–229). The differing structural approach is not clearly explained and creates a sense of disconnect within the chapter. Nevertheless, it remains one of the most significant contributions of the entire study. The aforementioned separate section dedicated to historians appears slightly tangential to the overarching concept and could potentially be minimized.

This part explores how historians and cultural theorists in both countries perceived the nuclear threat. The divergence in their views is reflected in the films produced in the respective nations. While American films often depict heroic efforts to avert nuclear catastrophe, British films offer a critical and satirical perspective on political decisions.

The **final section** of the chapter analyzes how British films used the nuclear threat to critique the policies of superpowers. These films blend realistic scenarios with elements of satire and social criticism.

A seminal example is the film *Dr. Strangelove: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), which satirically exposes the paradoxes of nuclear deterrence. This production stands out for its unique style and provocative message, and it is exceptionally well-covered in the dissertation.

The third chapter provides a profound analysis of the nuclear theme in the context of anti-Soviet propaganda. By comparing American and British films, the author successfully identifies key differences in cultural approaches and ideological messages.

Despite the in-depth analysis, there is a lack of detailed data on public reactions to these films. Additionally, the discussion of British films is less comprehensive compared to that of American films, leading to a slight imbalance.

This chapter serves as a convincing conclusion to the dissertation, effectively demonstrating how the theme of nuclear threat was utilized to reinforce anti-Soviet messages in cinema.

The Conclusion of the dissertation surprised me. Despite the exceptionally well-developed individual chapters and their conclusions, the final section's summaries, analysis, and conclusions are not sufficiently compelling. While it is logical to reiterate the main points from other sections of the study, this section lacks the necessary overarching synthesis. The key titles are indeed presented, and the depictions of Soviet anti-heroes are discussed, but conclusions about the essence, success, effectiveness, and reasons for the emergence of this type of propaganda are not fully analyzed or synthesized.

Despite these critiques, the dissertation is an outstanding scholarly work, uncovering unexplored aspects of the Cold War in Bulgarian historiography.

In addition to the core dissertation, Vlastanova's published academic articles during her research period further expand her expertise, showcasing her ability as a historian to address issues beyond the scope of her primary research interests.

For all the reasons outlined above, I recommend that Magdalena Vlastanova be awarded the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor" in the academic field 2.2 History and Archaeology.

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