

OPINION

by Assoc. Prof., Dr. **Silviya Nikolova Aleksandrova**,
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on the thesis

“American and British Anti-Soviet Film Propaganda”

presented for the awarding of the educational and scientific degree “**Doctor**”
(**PhD**) in the field of higher education: **2. Humanities**; professional field: **2.2**
History and Archeology (Modern and Contemporary World History -
Contemporary History)

PhD student: **Magdalena Danielova Vlastanova**

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Data about the PhD student and the PhD program

Magdalena Danielova Vlastanova graduated from 157 Language High School “César Vallejo” in 2012. From October 2012 to July 2016 she was a bachelor’s degree student in “History and Philosophy (Teacher Qualification)” at SU “St. Kliment Ohridski” and graduated with honors. In October 2016 was enrolled in the MA program “Crises, Conflicts and Diplomacy in World Politics 16th -21st centuries” of Sofia University and graduated in July 2018, also with honors. In February 2019 Vlastanova was enrolled as a full-time PhD student in the doctoral program “Modern and Contemporary World History - Contemporary History” of SU “St. Kliment

Ohridski" with doctoral thesis on "American and British Anti-Soviet Film Propaganda" and research advisor Assoc. professor, Dr. Gergana Aleksieva.

As a doctoral student Magdalena Vlastanova has successfully passed all the exams required by the Regulations for obtaining the scientific degree "Doctor" and has fulfilled all the tasks and commitments stipulated in her individual study and research plan. After the expiration of the regulated period of three years, the doctoral student was released with the right of defense by Rector's Order No. PД20-1826/10.10.2023. On 29 August 2024 the dissertation text was discussed at a meeting of the Department of Modern and Contemporary History and directed for public defense (Protocol No. 12/29.08.2024).

M. Vlastanova is fluent in English and uses Spanish language.

Data and opinion about the dissertation, the abstract and the scientific publications

I would like to begin my statement with a belief of mine: the decision to pursue a doctoral degree in World History deserves respect by itself. Because it means that the doctoral student is ready to take the academic risk of researching foreign peoples' history and the inevitably associated with it need to use foreign language(s), foreign names and foreign events, which are often unfamiliar, and sometimes even completely unknown, in researcher's own country.

The dissertation deals with the period of the 1960s - one of the most tense and crisis-ridden periods in the history of the Cold War. The current international situation, and especially the war in Ukraine and the events in the Middle East, have made the propaganda in all its forms (and especially the media/audio-visual one), very much a topic of the day. In this sense, the presented for defense dissertation is interesting and highly relevant.

The problem of the American and British anti-Soviet film propaganda in the

period 1961 - 1968 has not been studied by Bulgarian researchers. This makes the presented for defense thesis an original research work. Structurally the dissertation is well balanced and follows the established academic standard for doctoral theses in History: an introduction, three chapters, and a conclusion, supplemented by a bibliography, appendices, and synopses.

The introduction formulates the thesis, outlines the evolution in the main points of the American and British anti-Soviet film propaganda from its beginning up to the research period, indicates the goal and tasks of the study, as well as its object and subject. The author correctly highlights the specific ability of the cinema to send propaganda messages that are indirect, more refined and subtle. It is much easier for such kind of messages to take hold of the audience's perceptions and thinking, hence their effects tend to last longer. I commend the fact that neither the PhD student nor her research adviser succumbed to the temptation to use widely known films as "Apocalypse Now", "Platoon" or "JFK" to illustrate the thesis. These films do indeed send very strong messages, both artistic and political. In my opinion however, the chosen focus on movies made only during the research period of the thesis, was the right approach. It lends greater scholarly credibility to the text and prevents the temptation to analyze retrospective artistic interpretations and suggestions.

The chronological boundaries (1961-1968) of the study are based primarily on the political leadership of the United States, namely the Democratic administrations of Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, which do not overlap with the changes of British governments. However, I accept the argument that, from foreign policy point of view and in the Cold War context there was, if not complete identity, then at least some parallel directions and continuities in the course of successive British Conservative and Labour governments. This created a corresponding closeness of the ideological and propaganda messages of the American and British

film industries during the research period.

The research methods are correctly reflected in the introduction and adequately used by the author in the text. In fact, the dissertation topic is very beneficial in terms of the opportunity it provides for a truly interdisciplinary research and for the use of a polymethodological tools of study and analysis.

The historiographical overview is extensive and reflects the audio-visual, archival and a significant number of interpretative sources used by the researcher. I personally would have welcomed at least a brief presentation of studies with similar topics by Soviet/Russian authors. At the same time, considering the current situation, related to the limited access to Russian books and publications, I mention this more as a recommendation, or suggestion, to the author in case she plans to publish her PhD thesis as a monograph.

The introduction - "Propaganda. Cultural and cinematic features" („Пропагандата. Културни и кино особености“ [*sic.*]) - is a necessary element of the work, as it was meant to facilitate the understanding of the specific and interdisciplinary subject-matter and terminology used in the exposition. I think that Vlastanova's undergraduate training (especially the philosophy element of it) must have helped her in tackling the difficult matter of propaganda theory, propaganda models and cinematic tools/approaches used for an ideological competition purposes. Still, in my view, the text here shows a tendency to rely on indirectly gained information about theses and interpretative works when a direct knowledge and personal critical analysis would have led to a clearer, more compact and readable presentation.

The main part of the thesis, in its three chapters, provides a wealth of information on the historical, political and ideological canvas on which the propagandistic anti-Soviet messages of the American and British films of the period are built, as well as about the different approaches, plot specifics and technological

techniques implemented by the makers of the individual movies analyzed by the PhD student. In the films selected by Vlastanova, the Soviet Union and the Russians are almost uniformly presented not only as an ideological but also as a military threat to the United States, the United Kingdom, and the entire "free world." The exposition adequately reflects the similarities between American and British films which were based on the Cold War realities and the shared ideology. At the same time the author did not miss the differences, related mostly to the UK-specific issues such as the collapse of the colonial system or the loss of UK's position as a leading global great power. The third chapter is particularly original in its direct comparison between American and British films. It highlights the main points in the plots of the American films with their stereotypical approach to who the "good guys" and the "bad guys" are in the USA -USSR confrontation and contrasts them with the main points in the plots of the British films, which reflect ideological and propaganda stereotypes, too, but at the same time manage to convey concerns that Britain could be harmed if drawn into the "clash of the titans" or if the Cold War suddenly transforms into a direct "hot" military conflict.

Undoubtedly, the scope of a doctoral dissertation does not allow for a research analysis of all the American and British films containing elements of anti-Soviet propaganda. From this perspective, the dissertation's focus on movies related to specific issues (the Berlin question and the nuclear threat/competition) of the Cold War period 1961-1968 is understandable. Still, I am surprised that films like "Red Nightmare" and "The Manchurian Candidate" from 1962, or the British spy thriller "The Spy Who Came in from the Cold" from 1965, are not even mentioned in the text, especially since Magdalena Vlastanova has a printed paper discussing "The Manchurian Candidate"¹. I am tempted to note here the fact that a film directly

¹ Властанова, Магдалена. Сравнение между американската и британската представа за комунистическата подривна дейност и отговорът на демокрацията във филмите "The Manchurian

related to the nuclear race and released in theatres in 1964, was also neither included in the main analyses of the exposition, nor mentioned in the introduction (or the notes) to the thesis. I am talking about Sidney Lumet's "Fail-safe", which could have highlighted some serious anti-nuclear warnings, but also a very subtle and indirect anti-Soviet film propaganda.

The conclusion summarizes the factual and illustrative material and adequately represents the core findings of and conclusions of the dissertation. The appendices and synopses complement the main text and facilitate the understanding of the analyses in the exposition.

Remarks and recommendations

I have some critical remarks about the dissertation. The first of them is related to the perception that the PhD student had less than satisfactory respect for the spelling and the style of the Bulgarian written language, as well as for the technical precision required while preparing a doctoral thesis text for printing. I hate to get into the shoes of a "grammar policeman", but still - a doctoral thesis in humanities should not only reflect the research findings on the topic, but also serve as a model of literary language with all the resulting requirements for strict compliance with the linguistic - both grammatical and stylistic - rules. I will not list here the spelling/typographical errors and omissions – of them in the text there are many. However, while some of them are mere irritants for the reader, there are errors that lead to factual inaccuracies. An example of such an inaccuracy can be found in note 374 on p. 76, where the surname of the famous American journalist Joseph **Alsop** is written as **Aslop**. This is most likely an uncorrected typographical error. However, the same interpretation

candidate” и “Dr. Strangelove or: How I learned to stop worrying and love the bomb” – В: Баева, Искра, Александър Сивилов (ред.) Войната за историята – 75 години от края на Втората световна война. София: Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски“, 2023, с. 290-305.

could hardly explain why the surname of “Seven Days in May” ’s director John Frankenheimer, is abbreviated in the text of the dissertation (pp. 175, 176, 181, etc.), as well as in the doctoral student's publication presented in Appendix 3 (which comments on another Frankenheimer film - "The Manchurian Candidate") to Frankheimer² (see Appendix 3, pp. 291-2-5, etc.). Frankenheimer’s surname is written correctly only in the synopsis of the film on p. 282 of the dissertation.

I have some critical remarks on the correctness of the citation of interpretive sources, especially in the historiographical overview part of the dissertation, as well. These remarks can be found in the Bulgarian language version of my opinion on the PhD thesis. In addition, I believe that the PhD thesis would have only benefited if the foreign language texts used by the author, were carefully edited. And I can’t help mentioning that Vlastanova's claim that "The Cuban Crisis was a one-time act" (p. 21) just grates on me, even though I understand (in the context of the paragraph) what the author wanted to say. I feel the same regarding the definition of education as "the main supporter of class society" (p. 22) And the United Kingdom does not consist of a single island, so I consider the use of "The Island" as its synonym to be a bad, or at least incorrect, habit.

These critical remarks are in no way intended to belittle the dissertation or its contributions. They are rather a recommendation for serious editorial work, should Magdalena Vlastanova decide to publish her dissertation as a monograph. I also made them as a reminder that the academic standards in Bulgaria, especially when related to doctoral and higher theses in humanities, require a high level of linguistic (grammatical and stylistic) quality of the text and precision of the information presented.

The dissertation abstract meets the requirements and I concur with the

² Франкенхаймер, by the way, is the way John Frankenheimer's last name is spelled in Russian.

academic contributions listed in it. Magdalena Vlastanova has 11 already published papers on the dissertation topic. This number of publications considerably exceeds the legal requirements for defending a doctoral dissertation.

Conclusion

M. Vlastanova's PhD thesis is original and contributory, and meets the requirements of the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act (DASRBA), the Regulations for the Implementation of the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act and the Regulations on the Terms and Conditions for Acquiring Scientific Degrees and Holding Academic Positions at SU "St. Kliment Ohridski". The dissertation is undoubtedly a result of serious and in-depth research work on the topic. The critical remarks and recommendations do not diminish its merits. All this gives me grounds to propose to the esteemed Scientific Jury **to award Magdalena Danielova Vlastanova** the educational and scientific degree of "**Doctor**", in in the field of higher education: 2. Humanities; professional field: 2.2 History and Archeology (Modern and Contemporary World History - Contemporary History).

5 December 2024

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(Assos. Prof., Dr. S. Aleksandrova)