

Dear Comrades!

Andrei Konchalovsky, 2020

Screenwriter: Andrei Konchalovsky

Place: Russia

Studios: Andrei Konchalovsky Studios

Length: 120 minutes

Language: Russian

Kieran Wakeley, University College London.

Testing the limits of partiinost:

Andrei Konchalovsky's tense new film masterfully dissects the burdens of loyalty and dissidence in Soviet Russia. Already having picked up the Special Jury Prize at Venice, and currently in the running for Best International Feature at this year's Academy Awards, *Dear Comrades!* arrives in the U.K. riding a justifiable wave of critical acclaim for one of Russia's most prestigious writer/directors. Konchalovsky's distinguished career includes writing credits for *Ivan's Childhood* (1962) and *Andrei Rublev* (1966), and more recent back-to-back directorial acclaim winning the Silver Lion for *The Post Man's White Nights* (2014), and *Paradise* (2016).

No stranger to the weighty themes of historical tragedy, faltering faith, and personal suffering, Konchalovsky delivers a stark and uncompromising testimony of Russia's repressive past in which one woman's faith in the system she upholds is stretched to breaking point. *Dear Comrades!* recounts the events leading up to the 1962 Novocherkassk massacre in which a crowd protesting wage cuts and soaring food prices were fired upon by soldiers. The state-sanctioned disaster presented a challenge to Khrushchev's post-Stalin reforms, and the killing of twenty-six people, with as many as eighty others being injured, was quickly covered up.

Konchalovsky explores the events of the massacre through the eyes of the fictional character of Lyuda (Yuliya Vysotskaya), a local party official, former front-line Red Army nurse, and loyal Communist Party supporter. As the mismanaged crisis unfolds around her, Lyuda frantically searches for her daughter Svetka (Yuliya Burova) who goes missing in the aftermath of the fatal protest.

As Lyuda desperately struggles to locate Svetka, she must navigate the military curfew, and the stonewall of a bureaucracy she has so steadfastly supported. Vysotskaya's terse portrayal of faltering conviction and suppressed personal anguish is brilliantly counterbalanced by the outrage and resolve of the protesters. Their faith in the political system hinges on whether the illusive promises of "immanent abundance" can withstand the realities of the alleged "temporary hardship" - they could not. For Lyuda this crisis is wholly existential; caught

between her lifelong unshakable loyalty to the party and the naked truth of its crimes she asks in a rare moment of vulnerability, “what am I supposed to believe in if not communism?”

Approaching the erasure of history with an uncompromising eye, Konchalovsky eschews the sepia sentimentality and hand-held documentary affect that have become commonplace in historical dramas for flat 4:3, and the hard chiaroscuro of black and white photojournalism - imbuing his images with a historical veracity and piercing clarity. The film is also noticeably lacking in score as if to reinforce its sparse authenticity. On rare occasions diegetic music floats in the background on state radio and TV broadcasts, appearing both to drown out the horrific violence that unfolds, and as a form of self-soothing for Lyuda as she sings half remembered patriotic anthems to bolster her resolve.¹ Perhaps this is intended to offer an unredacted account of history such that was denied to the massacre victims and kept buried until the 1990's.

Konchalovsky, however, reminds us that the past does not remain buried, but erupts to challenge our temporal myopia. Whether it is Lyuda's admission in a moment of despondent reflection of a past affair with a married man, or her aged father's hidden subversive letters and religious iconography, history repeatedly returns to confront the present. Much like the blood-soaked asphalt of the town square, we may attempt to pave over the ugly truths of our past, but they are prone to resurface, testing one's faith through the painful negotiation of memory.

Dear Comrades! is a timely reminder both of the importance of truth in the struggle for political freedom, and the dangers of exercising individual integrity amidst the bitter realities of institutional violence and systemic inequality. Konchalovsky honours the murdered workers of Novocherkassk not simply with an act of bearing cinematic witness, but by exposing the fragility of authoritarian psyche in all its hypocritical glory.

¹ An interesting dynamic of song and refuge considering Konchalovsky's father, an accomplished author in his own right, is perhaps best known for writing the Soviet national anthem.