

# DO THE RIGHT THING? FEMALE ALLEGORIES OF NATION IN ALEKSANDR ASKOLDOV'S *KOMISSAR* (USSR, 1967/87) AND KONRAD WOLF'S *DER GETEILTE HIMMEL* (GDR, 1964)

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Nations have traditionally been represented as female allegories, and Mother Russia and the French Marianne, the famous icon of revolutionary France, are prime examples.<sup>1</sup> The enduring convention of allegorical representations of nation, be it in the pictorial arts, literature or film, can be explained by the close affinity between allegory and ideology. As Angus Fletcher aptly puts it in *Allegory: theory of a symbolic mode*, 'allegory is the natural mirror of ideology'.<sup>2</sup> It is thus not surprising that allegory is particularly common in highly politicised cultures, which are frequently subject to censorial interference by the state. In such cultural contexts, allegory fulfils a dual, seemingly contradictory function. On the one hand, allegory is used for propaganda while, on the other hand, it is a form of subterfuge to circumvent censorship. This explains why in highly politicised and state-controlled film industries, such as those of East Germany and the Soviet Union, female allegories of nation were a useful encoding strategy, which afforded film-makers a certain degree of ideological latitude. The growing interest in female subjectivity, which manifested itself in a number of Soviet and East German films from the 1960s onwards, transformed the way in which female allegorical figures were constructed. They ceased to be one-dimensional personifications of abstract concepts but instead they became psychologically plausible individuals. At the same time, female subjectivity provided further opportunities for ideological unorthodoxy. Whereas films about national

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history were generally expected to reflect official historiography, films about women could take a more individualised approach and address issues that were on the borderline of what was permissible.

Aleksandr Askoldov's *Komissar* (*The Commissar*) and Konrad Wolf's *Der geteilte Himmel* (*Divided Heaven*) illustrate this strategy. On one level both films explore female subjectivity and woman's role and status in a male-dominated world—a theme that was very topical in films of the 1960s—on another level they use the female protagonists as allegories of national history. They do so by intertwining the personal history of a woman with a momentous historical event—the Russian Civil War and the division of Germany—that deeply affects the female protagonist; both films convey the themes of memory and trauma by means of elaborate montage sequences; and finally, both films underpin the correspondences between national and private history by the use of overtly symbolic iconography.

The two films in question, the histories of their making and their reception are as disparate as they are similar. Both black-and-white films were made in the 1960s and use the then-fashionable wide-screen format. Both are characterised by a self-conscious modernist aesthetic. This is particularly true of Konrad Wolf's *Divided Heaven* with its fragmented time structure, the constant interruption of the narrative flow through highly stylised image compositions in which unusual camera angles and cuts from extreme long shots to close-ups call attention to themselves.<sup>3</sup> Yet while from today's vantage point both films are concerned with momentous historical events, at the time of their making, Askoldov's and Wolf's films belonged to entirely different genres.

*The Commissar* is one of numerous historical films about the Russian Civil War, a very important genre that includes *Arsenal* (Alexander Dovzhenko, 1928), *Chapaev* (*Chapayev*, Sergei and Georgy Vasiliev, 1934), *Shchors* (Alexander Dovzhenko, 1939), *Kotovskii* (Alexander Faintsimmer, 1943), *Sorok pervyy* (*The Forty-First*, Yakov Protazanov, 1927 and Grigory Chukhrai, 1956) and many more. Typically, Civil War films celebrated the heroic victory of the Red Army which secured the Bolshevik rule but elided 'many issues and details', such as 'the conflict's great savagery on both sides' because these films did not aspire to giving a faithful depiction of the Civil War but, like Soviet films in general, were 'inescapably constructed according to the rules mapped out by the political bosses'.<sup>4</sup> Films such as *The Commissar*, which deviated from the prescribed pattern, touching on taboos like the anti-Jewish pogroms and endeavouring to reveal the inhumanity of the Civil War, were likely to be censored.

Konrad Wolf's film *Divided Heaven*, by contrast, is a so-called *Gegenwartsfilm* (literally, film about the present day). These films about contemporary society are based on observation of everyday life and typically revolve around conflicts in the workplace. Consistent with the doctrine of Socialist Realism, the workplace plays a formative role in the personal development of the protagonist and is portrayed as a prime site of socialist consciousness formation. *Gegenwartsfilme* were supposed to help GDR citizens find solutions to the problems they encountered in their daily lives. Yet, significantly, these problems were meant to be shown as resolvable through the purposeful endeavour of the socialist collective and its competent leaders. Many of the critical *Gegenwartsfilme* of the 1960s abandon the unrestrained socialist utopia of earlier films, emphasising instead the struggle of reconciling socialist ideals with sobering reality. In particular, DEFA's 'forbidden films' of 1965/66, including by now famous

titles such as *Spur der Steine* (*Trace of the Stones*, Frank Beyer 1966/1990), *Das Kaninchen bin ich* (*The Rabbit is Me*, Kurt Maetzig, 1965/1990), *Berlin um die Ecke* (*Berlin around the Corner*, Gerhard Klein, 1966/1987) and the ideologically controversial but enormously popular film *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (*The Legend of Paul and Paula*, Heiner Carow, 1973), are prototypes of this important DEFA genre.<sup>5</sup>

The comparison between Askoldov's historical film and Wolf's film about contemporary society is, however, not as far-fetched as it may seem, if one bears in mind that in the context of Socialist film culture, history was never represented for its own sake but with a view to the present. Hence, as David Gillespie notes, 'the Russian historical film [. . .] is not only about representing the past or visualising it as a means of entertainment or instruction. Rather, it is there to legitimise the present, to explain past events in the light of present-day realities and so to point to the future'.<sup>6</sup> The constantly shifting interpretation of the past is reflected in the enigmatic Soviet saying: 'The future is certain. Only the past is still unclear.'<sup>7</sup>

In this article, I propose to read these films against the grain, or rather, I suggest that the use of female allegories of nation makes readings that ostensibly contradict the films' reception histories equally plausible. *Divided Heaven*, a film that narrates the division of the German nation as a romance that ends in separation, is generally interpreted as a partisan film that affirms the erection of the Berlin Wall in August 1961 as a necessary step which would ultimately strengthen the GDR.<sup>8</sup> According to my reading, which centres on the allegorical construction of the film's protagonist, Wolf's film emphasises the sacrifice and trauma which the political juncture of 1961 caused and is, therefore, anything but an ideologically orthodox film. Askoldov's shelved film *The Commissar*, on the other hand, admittedly invites ambiguous interpretations but is by no means the de-heroicised portrayal of the revolutionary cause that it was made out to be, nor does it feature a monstrous Mother Russia devoid of maternal feelings.

Aleksandr Askoldov's film about a female political commissar during the Civil War 'is one of the best known Soviet portraits of womanhood to appear on international screens'.<sup>9</sup> The interest and critical acclaim which *The Commissar* received in the West following its impromptu public screening at the Moscow Film Festival in 1987 and subsequent screenings at numerous international festivals in the West, including the Berlin Film Festival in 1988 where it won the Special Jury Prize, are in part due to its notorious censorship history.<sup>10</sup> The film was conceived in 1965, shortly after political leadership in the Soviet Union had changed from Khrushchev to Brezhnev and the liberal cultural climate of the Thaw was replaced by what has been termed a period of stagnation by some, and a resurgence of Stalinist dogma by others.<sup>11</sup> Despite being commissioned as one of a number of films that would look back at the revolutionary period in time for the 50th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1967, right from the outset it was apparent that *The Commissar* would not be 'a conventional paean to the new era'.<sup>12</sup> The screenplay is based Vasili Grossmann's short story *V gorode Berdicheve* (*In the Town of Berdichev*, 1934), depicting life in 'the archetypal Jewish shtetl in Ukraine',<sup>13</sup> which in itself was a sensitive topic. But unbeknownst to Askoldov when he adapted Grossmann's story, four years previously the manuscript of Grossmann's novel *Zhizn i sudba* (*Life and Fate*, 1960) had been seized by the KGB because it was considered to be hostile to the ideals of the Revolution. Grossman's discredited position made the literary source of *The Commissar*

ideologically suspect from the start. Another crucial factor to contribute to the banning of Askoldov's film was the outbreak of the Six-Day War between Israel and the Arab countries in June 1967. With the Soviet government taking a pro-Arab stance, the positive depiction of Jews in Askoldov's film precluded its favourable reception by the state censors. Askoldov's intransigence over complying with any suggested changes, in particular any references to the Jewish theme and the Holocaust scene, resulted not only in the banning of *The Commissar* but also in the director's dismissal from the film industry and the Communist Party. *The Commissar* has remained Askoldov's first and only feature film to date.

Konrad Wolf's film *Divided Heaven*, which is based on one of the GDR's canonical literary texts, Christa Wolf's novel of the same title, is internationally relatively unknown. Like *The Commissar*, *Divided Heaven* centres on a female protagonist whose life is affected by a momentous historical juncture: the division of Germany. The film is largely set in summer 1961, shortly before the erection of the Berlin Wall made the borders between East and West Germany impermeable, putting an end to the exodus of tens of thousands of East Germans to the West, which jeopardised the GDR's economic viability. Except for a small number of so-called *Mauerfilme* (Wall films), made during the 1960s, which portray the erection of the Wall in partisan terms, the definitive division of Germany in 1961 was a highly sensitive subject matter which East German film-makers preferred to avoid.<sup>14</sup> Not so Konrad Wolf, one of the GDR's most famous film directors who was held in high esteem as an artist and as a high-ranking cultural official. Konrad Wolf was the son of the German writer Friedrich Wolf, a communist and Jew, who together with his wife and two sons emigrated to Moscow during the Third Reich. The sons, Markus and Konrad Wolf, became naturalised Soviet citizens, but both returned eventually to Germany where they assumed important positions in the German Democratic Republic. Markus Wolf became head of East German espionage. Konrad Wolf returned to Germany as a Red Army officer in 1944 and took on various roles within the Soviet Military Administration in the Soviet occupied zone. A convinced communist, he was committed to building a socialist society and culture both through his films and through assuming key roles in the GDR's bureaucratic apparatus. He was a member of the Central Committee of the GDR's ruling party, the SED, and President of the Academy of Arts (1965–1982), a highly prestigious position. Like the ill-fated Askoldov, he had studied film at the Moscow State Institute of Cinematography, VGIK. But unlike his Soviet counterpart, Wolf embarked on a very productive career as a film director, making no less than 13 features with DEFA (Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft), East Germany's state-owned and -controlled film production and distribution company, between 1956 and 1980. His *oeuvre* includes celebrated masterpieces such as *Ich war neunzehn* (*I Was Nineteen*, 1968), a semi-autobiographical account of Wolf's homecoming to Germany as an officer of the Red Army, as well as controversial films such as *Solo Sunny* (1980) and *Sonnensucher* (*Sun Seekers*, 1958). Although film-making in the GDR was considered a collective endeavour, incompatible with the notion of *auteur* cinema, Wolf is often referred to as DEFA's greatest *auteur*. *Divided Heaven* is an early example of Wolf's modernist style, successfully combining subjective authenticity with the depiction of contemporary socialist society.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, when *Divided Heaven* was reviewed in the national press and discussed at a meeting at the Berlin Academy of Arts in June 1964, controversy centred on the film's modernist aesthetics and its high degree of subjectivity, which was perceived as incompatible with the doctrine of Socialist Realism.<sup>16</sup> But the film's ambiguous ideological position *vis à vis* Germany's division was elided. Was it Konrad Wolf's stature as one of the GDR's greatest artists that afforded him and his film protection from censorial interference? Had the ideological battles already been fought over Christa Wolf's novel, published in 1963, which meant that they did not need to be revisited?<sup>17</sup> Were the GDR's cultural officials and censors themselves ambivalent about the events of August 1961 and did they decide to turn a blind eye to, what I consider to be the critical or even subversive undercurrent in Wolf's film? Or was it the skilful construction of female allegory of nation, combined with female subjectivity, which enabled Wolf to critique official historiography and remain unscathed?

### **Allegory + female subjectivity = ambiguous unorthodoxy**

Allegories in their purest form are often personifications of abstract ideas, such as the blindfolded figure of Justice holding scales and sometimes a sword or the figure of Death as the grim reaper, a skeleton with a scythe. However, not all allegories are as easy to decipher because, by their very nature, they are highly ambiguous signifiers. As Victoria E. Bonnell notes in her discussion of 'The representation of women in early Soviet political art', '[a]llegory is not inherent in the image but depends on the competence of the viewer. Only viewers conversant with the association between an image and an idea or conception will appreciate the complexity of meaning'.<sup>18</sup> And Fredric Jameson persuasively argues with reference to national allegories in Third World literature—though his frame of reference has been productively extended to other literatures and art forms—that there is no simple one-to-one relationship between the tenor and the vehicle in allegorical texts. The process of allegorisation, Jameson explains, is polysemous, 'profoundly discontinuous, a matter of breaks and heterogeneities, for the multiple polysemia of the dream rather than the homogenous representation of the symbol'.<sup>19</sup> Thus, allegories of nation are complex signifying structures which project certain homologies between the private individual destiny and that of the nation. However, as the allegorical tenor and vehicle changes places, allegories have the capacity to 'generate a range of distinct meanings or messages, simultaneously'.<sup>20</sup>

The polysemous and, consequently, ambiguous nature of allegories would help explain why Askoldov and Wolf use allegorical constructions to comment on pivotal and controversial moments in their national histories. The allegorical process enabled them to revisit official historiography in a way that was open to conflicting interpretations. However, other reasons for the choice of female allegories in both films also need to be taken into account.

As already mentioned, female allegories of nation stand in a long pictorial tradition and are found in many cultural contexts. In the cultural history of Russia, female allegorical figures have played a central role in the mythology, traditions and culture of Russia, as Joanna Hubbs details in her study *Mother Russia: the feminine myth*

in Russian culture. The famous Matrioshka doll is only one of many embodiments of Mother Russia. For centuries, Russia was a predominantly agrarian culture and the land was referred to as mother. Her features were given maternal epithets, with rivers being referred to as 'little mothers', such as Matushka Don or Matushka Volga.<sup>21</sup> The worship of the Motherland extended to the worship of all motherhood, including divine maternity. According to the Russian Orthodox Church, 'the mother of God was a mother rather than the virgin worshipped in the Western Church [. . . and] the importance of Mary's motherhood soon became a central tenet of the faith. More weight was placed upon Mary than on her son [. . .] The Russian Mother of God is [. . .] the universal mother and mistress of all things'.<sup>22</sup> In the customs and traditions of the peasantry, the concepts of Mother of God, Mother Earth and Mother Russia were conflated in a universal worship of motherhood.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the fact that female iconography of Mother Russia became unacceptable for nearly 20 years after the Revolution because of the Bolshevik's internationalist perspective and because of the tsarist legacy of this iconography, the cult of the mother remained a cornerstone of post-Revolutionary culture.<sup>24</sup> To some extent, the cult of the mother was driven by pragmatic reasons. Maternal duty was woman's moral obligation because, according to Aleksandra Kollontai, she had to 'guarantee a steady stream of workers for the workers' republic' and thus safeguard the future of the revolutionary cause.<sup>25</sup> Thus several post-Revolutionary films, including Eisenstein's *Staroye i novoye* (*The Old and the New*, 1929), feature mothers who are allegorical representations of Mother Russia by virtue of being connected to the land and the rhythms of nature, while at the same time being closely linked to the revolutionary cause. Pudovkin's film *Mat* (*Mother*, 1926) is a prime example. As Lynne Attwood suggests in *Red Women on the Silver Screen*, not only the mother but the entire family is an allegorical construction, a political microcosm of the old and the new order. The cruel and abusive father 'represents the forces of the reaction [. . .] The son, on the other hand, is the golden future, "a world of freedom, equality and justice". [. . .] Once again, [the mother] is the land and the people: the mother is actually Mother Russia'.<sup>26</sup> Under the tutelage of her enlightened Bolshevik son, she develops a revolutionary consciousness and begins to participate in collective action. Although mother and son die in the end, their death does not call the revolutionary cause into question. 'In her final moments the mother is seen holding aloft the revolutionaries' banner and gazing statuesque toward the future—perhaps a Russian version of Marianne, the French symbol of the Republic and of civic virtue'.<sup>27</sup>

The female commissar and mother in Askodov's film, made some 40 years after Pudovkin's, is a far more complex allegory, not a blatantly propagandist one, the meaning of which can be easily decoded. Although commissar Klavdia Vavilova is clearly an allegorical figure, she is much more than that: she is at the same time a psychologically differentiated character—complex, credible and contradictory. Her subjective authenticity adds an additional layer of ambiguity to *The Commissar*.

In fact, film-makers in both the East and the West have argued that one of the reasons for choosing female protagonists in the first place was that the depiction of women frequently went hand in hand with a high degree of female subjectivity. In politicised, state-controlled film cultures the depiction of female subjectivity was a strategy that enabled film-makers to subtly voice dissent or broach taboos.<sup>28</sup> Similarly—albeit for entirely different reasons—the West German film-maker Rainer

Werner Fassbinder centred his FRG Trilogy, consisting of *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (*The Marriage of Maria Braun*, 1979), *Lola* (1981) and *Die Sehnsucht der Veronika Voss* (*Veronika Voss*, 1982), on three allegorical women characters who represent the neuroses of a repressed past and the material greed of the economic miracle of the early days of the Federal Republic. Fassbinder explained his preference for female protagonists with reference to the greater degree of flexibility afforded to women in society: 'Men in this society are much more forced to play a role than women, who have a role but can break out of it much more easily or deviate a step or two from the path'.<sup>29</sup> They are, therefore, more interesting as dramatic characters. Moreover, by rendering women as absorbed in their private lives and detached from politics and the public sphere, they are better suited to Fassbinder's declared aim to render 'history from below' by supplementing 'official historiography with a psychological dimension'.<sup>30</sup>

In what follows I shall explore how Aleksandr Askoldov and Konrad Wolf combine what are essentially conflicting aesthetic impulses, namely the psychological realism with which the protagonists' internal conflicts and desires are conveyed and their allegorical dimension.

### **Commissar Klavdia Vavilova is the Mother of revolutionary Russia**

Klavdia's allegorical dimension as the Mother of revolutionary Russia is evoked through the interplay of various signifiers, notably casting, montage and iconography. Klavdia is played by the popular actress Nonna Mordyukova who, by virtue of her performance and roles in films such as *Molodaya gvardia* (*The Young Guard*, Sergei Gerassimov, 1948), *Vozvrashcheniye Vasiliya Bortnikova* (*The Return of Vasily Bortnikov*, Vsevolod Pudovkin, 1952) and *Predsedatel* (*The Chairman*, Aleksey Saltykov, 1964) had become so closely linked with the land, the people and the national spirit that she was seen to embody Mother Russia. A portrait in the journal *Soviet Cinema* described her as 'an actress endowed with the rare quality of being true to the Russian national spirit [. . .] Her talent is rooted in the Russian land. She makes no effort to look typically Russian for she is just that. [. . .] All the principal and secondary roles Nonna plays are of women who are truly Russian'.<sup>31</sup> Of course, no mention is made of her role in *The Commissar*, a film that was not released until 1987. However, the casting of Nonna Mordyukova as Klavdia in *The Commissar* suggests that the positive attributes of her previous roles were intended to resonate in her ambiguous role as female commissar. According to Askoldov's own testimony, he wrote the script of *The Commissar* with Mordyukova in mind.<sup>32</sup>

Askoldov's historical film is set in southern Ukraine during the final days of the Russian Civil War in the 1920s, which culminated in the victory of the Reds over the White Guards and eventually consolidated the rule of the Bolsheviks. The film's protagonist, Klavdia Vavilova, is a political commissar who leads a Red Army battalion. She is an austere, masculine beauty, wearing leather trousers and a military greatcoat. By her dress code alone she is identifiable as an activist Bolshevik woman, dressed in clothing that had until the Civil War years been reserved for men. She is fully committed to the ideals of the Russian Revolution; it is her religion, the truth in

which she believes and for which she is prepared to sacrifice her life. Such is her commitment to the victory of the Reds over the Whites in the Civil War that she unquestioningly emulates male military virtues. In one of the film's early scenes, she orders the shooting of a Red Guard who left the battalion for one night in order to visit his sick wife. Deserting the battalion, even for the most humane reason, is unacceptable to Klavdia. Next, we see her in a discussion with the field commander whom she informs about her pregnancy. Since her duty in the battlefield prevented her from having an abortion in time, she now unhappily swaps her military role for that of a mother. She is billeted with a Jewish family in a small village to give birth. Under the caring influence of Yefim, Maria and their six children, she is gradually transformed from an androgynous warrior to a Bolshevik Madonna. Yet soon after having given birth to a son, Kirill, she is informed of an offensive of the Whites. Following the call of duty, she leaves her newborn son with the Jewish family to rejoin her battalion, presumably never to see him again.

Nowhere does the allegorical dimension of Klavdia become more apparent than in the scene in which she gives birth. In an elaborate montage sequence, shots showing Klavdia in labour are juxtaposed with shots of the battlefield. The act of pushing out the baby is equated with the struggle Klavdia and the soldiers experienced when trying to push a cannon up a sand dune in the desert. Klavdia's screams of pain are juxtaposed with the screaming of a blindfolded soldier who cries out for help and the rhythmic sound of bullets and grenades exploding somewhere in the distance. The actual moment of giving birth to her son Kirill brings back memories of the baby's father, also named Kirill. In a flashback, we see Klavdia and Kirill, both clad in the same black leather uniforms, kissing passionately in the heat of the desert. Yet in the background looms the surreal image of death in the shape of a row of soldiers approaching Klavdia and Kirill reaping the sand of the desert with their scythes. Next, Kirill is shown in a cavalry charge, in which he is fatally wounded. Shot in slow motion, his round glasses, which identify him as a member of the intelligentsia, tumble to the ground. Still on horseback, he bares his wounded breast, a scene reminiscent of a similar scene in Dovzhenko's film *Arsenal*, where the bullets can do no harm to the hero Timosh. Kirill opens his mouth in a final scream of agony, but the soundtrack records Klavdia's final scream of labour as she is pushing out the baby.

Klavdia's allegorical dimension as the Mother of the Revolution is most clearly evoked by the back-story conveyed in the birth–battle sequence. Giving birth to a son who was conceived during the Civil War, sired by a father who sacrificed his life for the revolutionary cause, Klavdia is to all intents and purposes 'a bearer of the future' in the sense that Alexandra Kollontai described woman's maternal duty.<sup>33</sup> The birth of Klavdia's and Kirill's son will ensure that his father's death was not in vain for he will continue to realise the goals of the Revolution.

So why did the cultural officials of the State Cinema Committee find fault with this heroic Mother Russia? And why, as Elena Stishkova details in her close reading of the film's censorship history, were opinions among cultural officials who scrutinised the screenplay and various versions of the film divided? Why did some important representatives of Goskomitet praise it as 'a great piece of work', whereas others denounced it as 'unheroic'?<sup>34</sup> The protagonist Klavdia was at the centre of the controversy. She was perceived to be simple-minded, lacking the 'political

sophistication' that was deemed necessary to reveal to the common soldiers 'the ideological tasks of the struggle and the details of the political movement'.<sup>35</sup> She was seen to fall short of the ideal of a Bolshevik commissar. More significantly, this Mother of revolutionary Russia was considered to lack precisely those qualities associated with motherhood and, consequently, distorts

the humanist essence of the proletarian Revolution [. . .] We all know that the Revolution, through its unprecedented influence has revealed hidden spiritual powers and humanity to millions of people [. . .] Thus we cannot accept the fact that in the scenario of *Commissar* the Revolution appears as a force which distorts the human nature of the heroine, depriving her of simple, everyday feelings, even of the instincts of motherhood, love, and femininity.<sup>36</sup>

Admittedly, at face value, Klavdia's decision to abandon her baby seems inhumane. However, this critical assessment of Klavdia's decision ignores the fact that Askoldov took great pains to depict Klavdia's intense inner struggle before leaving her baby with the Jewish family. She does not follow the call of duty lightly. Only when she learns from the field commander that the Whites are approaching in throngs and she fears the defeat of the Reds does she decide to rejoin her regiment. Her motivations are entirely noble and heroic. So committed is she to the vision of a communist utopia that she is prepared to sacrifice her maternal love and her own life for the cause. 'We shall live! And there shall come the harmony of the working people on earth', she declares in a debate with Yefim, who, by contrast, advocates the 'international of kindness' as preferable to the 'international of the workers'.

It is not her revolutionary fervour alone that drives her back onto the battlefield. When she learns that the White Guards are approaching, she is concerned about the safety of Maria and Yefim's family. If it became known that they are offering shelter to a Red Army commissar, they would be executed. Yet significantly, Klavdia anticipates a far worse fate for her Jewish hosts—or rather, for the Jews as such. In a flash-forward, she foresees the deportation of the Jewish family, alongside many other Jews wearing the yellow star of David, to a concentration camp.

This anachronistic scene, which refers to the genocide of the Jews during the Third Reich, was the main reason for the ferocious censorship of *The Commissar*, since it alludes not only to the pogroms against the Jews that occurred during the Russian Civil War, but also to the anti-Semitic tendencies that continued to exist in the Soviet Union. As Richard Pipes notes in his examination of the belligerently atheistic war on religion during the Russian Revolution and the ensuing Civil War, which affected all religions but which was particularly relentless in the persecution of Jews: 'In every respect except for the absence of a central organisation to direct the slaughter and the looting, the pogroms of the Russian Civil War anticipated the Holocaust.'<sup>37</sup>

Following the logic of this argument, the actress Raissa Nedashkovkaya, who plays the ideal mother Maria in the film, legitimises Klavdia's action to abandon her baby as the heroic attempt to reverse the wheel of history and to avert the fate of the Jews some 20 years later.<sup>38</sup> Misguided in her belief that the Bolshevik victory would create a more humane world order—and thus prevent the Holocaust—Klavdia musters superhuman strength and forces her way into the barricaded house of Yefim and Maria

to retrieve her military uniform or, significantly, just her boots and greatcoat, while keeping her dress and headscarf on. In this attire, she nurses her baby one last time before abandoning him, explaining to him who his father and his mother are and dispensing advice on how to take care of himself in a dangerous and hostile world. Her eyes are filled with sorrow and foreboding while she sings one last lullaby. Klavdia, wearing a headscarf and holding her baby, is depicted as a *Mater Dolorosa*.

The religious iconography of the leave-taking scene establishes a link with the film's opening sequence, which shows the statue of a Madonna, however, significantly a Madonna without a child.<sup>39</sup> In this emotionally charged scene, Klavdia's transformation from androgynous warrior to Bolshevik Madonna has been completed. As her changed dress code—a combination of a military uniform and a woman's dress and the traditional *babushka*—and her softened, saddened features suggest, the commissar who returns to the battlefield is no longer the brutal, inhumane Bolshevik commander she was at the outset. She is a mother who sacrifices her motherhood for the revolutionary cause. But, whereas in Pudovkin's film *Mother* such superhuman sacrifice for the common good was portrayed in unequivocally positive terms, in Askoldov's film the subordination of Klavdia's personal desires to the demands of the common good is a much-contested issue.

Askoldov himself offered a number of contradictory assessments of Klavdia's controversial decision after his film was released in 1988. In an interview published in *Film Comment*, he justifies Klavdia's decision to leave her child by making reference to his own mother, who left him during the Second World War to work as a military doctor at the front.<sup>40</sup> In another interview he is more equivocal, condemning the 'unctuous depiction of the Civil War in our art' and referring to the Civil War as 'an absolutely inhumane thing'.<sup>41</sup> However, he passes no judgement on his heroine's controversial decision to abandon her baby.

The polysemous nature of the allegory coupled with female subjectivity provide no unequivocal answer: is Klavdia really a monstrous Mother of revolutionary Russia or is she rather a Bolshevik Madonna, whose personal sacrifice is not validated by the outcome of the Revolution, as her mournful gaze towards the future suggests? If the Bolshevik victory in the Civil War and the communist order failed to create a more humane society—in particular, failed to prevent the Holocaust, as Askoldov's film suggests—then Klavdia's sacrifice has been without purpose.

### **Rita represents the trauma of Germany's division**

Set against the background of Germany's division, *Divided Heaven* is the retrospective account of Rita's and Manfred's romance and their eventual separation. The film begins with Rita's physical collapse and nervous breakdown, tracing what caused her breakdown in a series of flashbacks that dramatise her memories, her mourning and her gradual convalescence. Nineteen-year-old Rita is portrayed as an idealistic young woman who firmly believes in the GDR, which, to her mind, is clearly the 'better' Germany. During her work experience in a railway carriage factory and at the teacher training college, she learns to reconcile her ideals of socialism with the less than perfect reality. In spite of the manifold problems she encounters, she remains committed to the collective-orientated culture of East Germany. Her fiancé Manfred,

by contrast, 10 years her senior and an ambitious doctoral student of chemistry, is ambivalent about the new social order. He is depicted as a cynical individualist who becomes entirely disenchanted with socialist society when one of his inventions is not adopted for industrial production. He defects to the West and hopes that Rita will join him. Rita is faced with the dilemma of thousands of East Germans who contemplated leaving the GDR while this was still possible.<sup>42</sup> Shortly before the erection of the Berlin Wall, Rita visits him in West Berlin. She has to make a choice between her love for Manfred and her commitment to socialism. When Rita realises that the ideological rift between herself and Manfred has resulted in their emotional estrangement, she forsakes her fiancé and returns to the GDR. But her decision is not presented as an unambiguous affirmation of the GDR. Such is the trauma Rita experiences as a result of her separation from Manfred that she suffers from a nervous breakdown and even tries to commit suicide.

Whereas in earlier DEFA films, such as *Roman einer jungen Ehe* (*Story of a Young Marriage*, Kurt Maetzig, 1952) and *Eine Berliner Romanze* (*A Berlin Romance*, Gerhard Klein, 1956), the female protagonists succeed in convincing their men of the merits of socialism and win them over to living in the GDR, this is no longer the case in *Divided Heaven*. As in many other DEFA films of the 1960s, the common good and individual happiness are no longer in perfect harmony. This signals a gradual loss of the utopian socialist vision.

If we accept the hypothesis that Rita is constructed as an allegorical figure, embodying the trauma of Germany's division and the nation's ensuing identity crisis, the film actually provides a far less partisan account of Germany's recent history than has been previously suggested. But what evidence is there in the film to legitimise the claim that Rita, the quintessentially positive heroine of Socialist Realism, is at the same time a female allegory of nation, whose personal history calls the GDR's official account of Germany's division into question?

On the level of plot, Rita is a role model of socialist virtues, firmly embedded in the collective culture of the GDR and committed to the construction of the 'better' Germany. She follows her political convictions rather than her emotions; her bond to the socialist collective—in the shape of her fatherly mentors Schwarzenbach and Meternagel—is stronger than the bond of love. It is through her choices, actions and words that Rita is inextricably linked to the new social order of the GDR. However, if it depended simply on her being a mouthpiece of the socialist utopia and choosing to do the right thing, the allegorical link between her destiny and that of her nation would be rather tenuous. Although the thematic correspondences between Rita's private history and Germany's national history are obvious, they alone would not suffice to underpin the claim made by several scholars that Rita is an allegorical representation of Germany's history.<sup>43</sup>

What supports this interpretation is primarily the film's distinctive iconography, which establishes a complex web of structural correspondences between Rita's personal trauma and the national trauma of Germany's division. The film's narrative is rhythmically punctuated by shots of the sky, invariably fragmented by towers, smoking chimney stacks or a double row of poplar trees, shot from a very low angle, jutting against the sky. Images illustrating the film's overtly symbolic title, such as the repeated shot of the motorway bridge that cuts the sky above Rita's home in half, are used as visual leitmotifs while at the same time structuring the narrative by signposting

each of the successive flashbacks. Similarly, Rita's and Manfred's attic room in his parents' home in Halle is dominated by an enormous skylight window that dissects the sky into a cage-like grid of quadrangles. When Rita and Manfred meet up in West Berlin the temptation of West German consumer culture, embodied by a gigantic woman on a billboard holding up a packet of Persil washing powder, separates them and blocks out the vista of heaven altogether. In case these visual leitmotifs require any further explanation, Rita and Manfred comment upon them when saying farewell. Manfred, looking up to the star-lit sky remarks: 'At least they cannot divide heaven'. Rita replies: 'They can. Heaven is divided first'.<sup>44</sup>

That a divided heaven is a trope for the ideological divide that separates East and West Germany, and Rita and Manfred, and culminates in the erection of the Wall would have been clear to any German audience in 1964. The shock of the summer of 1961 was still fresh in people's memories at the time when Konrad Wolf's film was released in East Germany. Moreover, the poetic prologue and epilogue—spoken by a female voice-over narrator—further reinforce the historical references: 'During this summer the city was breathing more heavily than normal. [. . .] People found it hard to bear the oppressively heavy sky'.<sup>45</sup> The epilogue, which is in parts a verbatim repetition of the prologue, evokes an even stronger sense of crisis—yet a crisis that has passed:

Sometimes, we will be tired, sometimes angry and bitter. But we are no longer afraid and that is worth a lot. We will get used to it and can sleep peacefully again. We live life to the full, as if we had more than enough of this peculiar substance called life. As if it would last forever.<sup>46</sup>

These vague references to an undefined existential crisis—the building of the Wall on the political level, Rita's breakdown on the private level—are coupled with a tentative optimism that only merits the subjunctive.

One of the most striking anomalies in the reception of Konrad Wolf's film is that the issue of its partisanship was largely avoided. There were a few heated discussions and film reviews questioning the film's modernist aesthetics and its high degree of subjectivity, which were perceived as incompatible with the doctrine of Socialist Realism.<sup>47</sup> But no review mentioned the fact that Rita barely survives the trauma of separation from her fiancé and the trauma of Germany's division. Admittedly, the film merely hints at her nervous breakdown and suicide attempt, but these subtle references are undeniably there from the beginning. Were the GDR's cultural officials oblivious to the film's critical undertone? Or did they possibly share Wolf's ambivalence and decide to collude with the film's allegorical subterfuge?

The GDR's artists and intellectuals, like the rest of the population, were certainly shocked by the regime's decision suddenly to roll barbed wire across the still open frontier in the middle of Berlin on the night of 13 August 1961. The erection of the Wall was much more than a reinforcement of the frontiers of communism; it was tantamount to a second founding of the GDR as a separate German state.<sup>48</sup> Yet in spite of the violation and brutality which accompanied this second founding, many of the GDR's cultural elite accepted the Wall—in GDR-speak euphemistically referred to as the 'anti-fascist protection mount'—as a necessary measure that would in the long run ensure the GDR's inner stability. After all, the majority of East Germany's

artists and intellectuals who had chosen to live and work in the GDR firmly believed in the socialist project and hoped that the erection of the Berlin Wall would eventually result in a relaxation of the regime's internal vigilance. This was indeed the case for a few years. Until the infamous Eleventh Plenum of December 1965, one of the most ferocious instances of state censorship in the history of the GDR, it seemed as if artists, writers and film-makers had been given the freedom to examine contemporary society in a more critical way than had hitherto been possible.<sup>49</sup> Konrad Wolf's film is a good example of this new departure. Not unlike the so-called 'forbidden films', which were banned at or shortly after the Eleventh Plenum of 1965, *Divided Heaven* engages critically with the sobering reality of socialism, with its tensions, shortcomings and contradictions. However, if *Divided Heaven* had been produced only one year later, it would most likely have suffered the same fate as the forbidden films.<sup>50</sup>

These considerations take us back once more to the polysemous nature of allegorical constructions, which invite a plethora of occasionally conflicting interpretations. In the case of Rita, cultural officials obviously decided to adopt the most favourable reading they could. As was pointed out in a discussion of the film at the Academy of Arts in Berlin in 1964, Rita's biography embodies the trauma of division but it also embodies the rebirth of the GDR as an increasingly autonomous state:

The contradiction between the two social orders on German territory goes right through her [Rita's] love . . . Rita derives the strength to overcome her own conflicts from the insight that the resolution of these conflicts in socialism and the GDR is a resolution in favour of human beings and humanity, of life and the future. The film dismisses us with the insight and conviction that admittedly, a love had to die, because it was too lightweight to survive, but a new human being was born.<sup>51</sup>

In this comment, the depiction of Rita's existential crisis is given a positive spin. It is interpreted as a rite of passage that will result in the creation of a new human being, the new socialist woman who personifies the new socialist state. But the optimistic pathos ascribed to Rita's experience fails to take into account the fact that *Divided Heaven* also demonstrates that a radiant future comes at a price, the price of human suffering. And it is precisely the emphasis Wolf's film places on the theme of suffering and sacrifice which makes *Divided Heaven* an ideologically far more controversial film than it seems at face value.

In fact, two memorable shots capture the intense suffering which the protagonists of both films experience as a consequence of subordinating their personal happiness to a higher mission: the image of Klavdia as a Bolshevik Madonna, sacrificing her maternal love, and a static close-up of Rita's immobile face, tears of mourning welling from her eyes. It is this image, reminiscent of a Greek tragic mask, which introduces the film's protagonist in the credit sequence. Thus both *The Commissar* and *Divided Heaven* communicate critical subtexts in the allegorical construction of the films' protagonists. While the heroines' selfless and heroic decisions to do the right thing ostensibly affirm the GDR's and the USSR's official historiographies, the films actually call the ethics of the Revolution and the division of Germany into question by suggesting that political systems which require such sacrifices are ultimately inhumane.

## Notes

- 1 Victoria E. Bonnell, The representation of women in early Soviet political art, *The Russian Review*, 50 (1991), 267–288, suggests that allegorical representations of women after the Bolshevik Revolution were influenced by ‘the neoclassical tradition transmitted by the French Revolution. The Bolsheviks paid close attention to French revolutionary history; it served as a key element in their master narrative of the world historical struggle for liberation and a source of symbols and images for expressing new political ideas’, 270.
- 2 Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca and New York, 1963), 368.
- 3 Cf. Marc Silberman, Remembering history. The filmmaker Konrad Wolf, *New German Critique*, 49 (1990), 163–191.
- 4 Louis Menashe, *Chapayev and company: films of the Russian Civil War*, *Cineaste*, 30(4) (2005), 18–22.
- 5 For a discussion of these *Gegenwartsfilme*, as well as the so-called *Alltagsfilme* (films about everyday life) see Daniela Berghahn, *Hollywood behind the Wall: the cinema of East Germany* (Manchester, 2005), 134–174 and 196. *The Legend of Paul and Paula* is, strictly speaking, an *Alltagsfilm* since it is devoid of the ever-optimistic faith in a perfectible society.
- 6 David Gillespie, *Russian Cinema* (Harlow, 2003), 60.
- 7 Cited in Julian Graffy, Russia: the shelf, in Derek Jones (ed.) *Censorship: a world encyclopedia* (London and Chicago, IL, 2001), vol. 3, 2118.
- 8 As evidence of the film’s affirmative political stance critics quote Konrad Wolf’s remark that he made *Divided Heaven* with the intention of strengthening the GDR, see Wolfgang Jacobsen and Rolf Aurich, *Der Sonnensucher: Konrad Wolf* (Berlin, 2005), 305. Wolf’s comment is usually taken at face value, not least because the prestige and privileges that Wolf enjoyed made him and his films somewhat suspect to those who stood in opposition to the regime. Therefore, the idea that *Divided Heaven* could actually contain traces of political dissent is refuted, in particular, by those who fail to distinguish between Wolf’s public pronouncements and his films. For a discussion of Wolf’s contested position, see Silberman, Remembering history, 165–166.
- 9 Lynne Attwood, Women, cinema and society, in Lynne Attwood (ed.) *Red Women on the Silver Screen: Soviet women and cinema from the beginning to the end of the Communist era* (London, 1993), 17–130, here 91.
- 10 For the film’s censorship history, cf. Julian Graffy, Aleksandr Askoldov, in Jones, *Censorship*, vol. 1, 117–118, and an interview with Askoldov reproduced on the Russian Cinema Council DVD release of *The Commissar*.
- 11 Elena Stishova, Passions over *Commissar*, *Wide Angle*, 12(4) (1990), 62–75, here 71.
- 12 Richard Taylor, Nancy Wood *et al.*, *The BFI Companion to Eastern European and Russian Cinema* (London, 2000), 20.
- 13 Frank Beardow, Soviet cinema: women—icons or individuals?—Part 1, *Rusistika*, 9 (1994), 22–42, here 24.
- 14 The so-called *Mauerfilme* are . . . *Und deine Liebe auch* (. . . *And Your Love Too*, Frank Vogel, 1962); *Der Kinnhaken* (*The Knock-Out Punch*, Heinz Thiel, 1962); *Sonntagsfahrer* (*Sunday Driver*, Gerhard Klein, Karl-Georg Egel, Wolfgang Kohlhaase, 1963) and *Geschichten jener Nacht* (*Stories of That Night*, Karlheinz

- Carpentier, Ulrich Thein, Frank Vogel, Gerhard Klein, 1967). Other DEFA films in which the German division is a central theme include *Die Flucht* (*The Escape*, Roland Gräf, 1977); *Das Leben beginnt* (*Life Begins*, Heiner Carow, 1960) and *Verfehlung* (*Near Miss/Misdemeanour*, Heiner Carow, 1992).
- 15 For an excellent account of Konrad Wolf's life, see Jacobsen and Aurich, *Der Sonnensucher*.
  - 16 For a discussion of *Divided Heaven* at the Academy of Arts, see Deutsche Akademie der Künste zu Berlin (ed.) *Probleme des sozialistischen Realismus in der darstellenden Kunst behandelt am Beispiel des DEFA-Film 'Der geteilte Himmel'* (Berlin, 1964).
  - 17 For a comprehensive account of the debate surrounding Christa Wolf's novel, see Martin Reso, *Der geteilte Himmel und seine Kritiker: Dokumentation mit einem Nachwort des Herausgebers* (Halle, 1965).
  - 18 Bonnell, The representation of women, 270, n. 12.
  - 19 Fredric Jameson, Third World literature in the era of multinational capitalism, *Social Text*, 15 (1986), 73. For a critique of Jameson's concept of national allegory, see Aijaz Ahmad, Jameson's rhetoric of otherness and the 'national allegory', *Social Text*, 17 (1987), 3–25.
  - 20 Jameson, Third World literature, 74.
  - 21 Joanna Hubbs, *Mother Russia: the feminine myth in Russian culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN, 1988), xiii.
  - 22 Hubbs, *Mother Russia*, 100–101.
  - 23 Hubbs, *Mother Russia*, 114.
  - 24 Bonnell, The representation of women, 275.
  - 25 Attwood, *Red Women*, 26.
  - 26 Attwood, *Red Women*, 40; see also Judith Mayne, *Kino and the Woman Question: feminism and Soviet silent film* (Columbus, OH, 1989), 91–109.
  - 27 Attwood, *Red Women*, 41.
  - 28 Cf. Christl Gräf, Waren Ostfrauen wirklich anders? Zur Darstellung von Frauen in DEFA-Gegenwartsfilmen, in Raimund Fritz (ed.) *Der geteilte Himmel. Höhepunkte des DEFA-Kinos 1946–1992*, vol. 2 (Vienna, 2001), 107–118, here 108.
  - 29 Fassbinder cited in Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat: the return of history as film* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1989), 82.
  - 30 Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat*, 82.
  - 31 Mikhail Ulyanov, Nonna Mordyukova. A tribute to a fellow-worker, *Soviet Cinema*, 3 (1975), 16–18, here 17.
  - 32 Interview with Askoldov reproduced on the DVD release of *The Commissar* by the Russian Cinema Council.
  - 33 Kollontai cited in Mayne, *Kino and the Woman Question*, 105.
  - 34 Stishova, *Passions*, 69 and 66.
  - 35 E. Surkov, On the shortcomings of the scenario *Commissar*, cited in Stishova, *Passions*, 67.
  - 36 E. Surkov, On the shortcomings, cited in Stishova, *Passions*, 67.
  - 37 Richard Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution* (London, 1995), 264.
  - 38 Interview with Raissa Nedashkovkaya reproduced on the DVD release of *The Commissar*.
  - 39 Although I have found no references to the Christian iconography associated with the commissar in any of the articles discussing the censorship history of the film, the depiction of a political commissar as a Madonna figure doubtless contributed to the

- controversy surrounding *The Commissar*. The Bolsheviks considered religious beliefs a superstition and organised religion had no place in communist society. During the Civil War church valuables and consecrated objects were confiscated and desecrated; the clergy lost their privileges. In the past, images and statues of Mary had been used as miracle-working icons for the protection of soldiers during battle, but this tradition was abandoned during the Bolshevik atheism campaign. See Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution*, 333ff.
- 40 William Wolf, Askoldov. The man who made *Commissar*, *Film Comment*, 24(3) (1988), 68–72, here 72.
- 41 Interview with Askoldov on the DVD release of *The Commissar*.
- 42 Between 1949, when the two separate German states were founded, and 1961, when the Berlin Wall was erected, an estimated three and a half-million people left the GDR for the West.
- 43 Cf. for instance Barton Byg, *Geschichte, Trauer und weibliche Identität im Film Hiroshima mon amour und Der geteilte Himmel*, in Ute Brandes (ed.) *Zwischen gestern und morgen. Schriftstellerinnen der DDR aus amerikanischer Sicht* (Berlin, 1992), 95–112, here 111; Joshua Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary: depictions of daily life in the East German cinema 1945–1989* (Chapel Hill and London, 2002), 119.
- 44 ‘Den Himmel wenigstens können sie nicht zerteilen.’ Rita replies. ‘Doch. Der Himmel teilt sich zu allererst.’ Christa and Gerhard Wolf, Konrad Wolf, Willi Brückner and Kurt Barthel, *Der geteilte Himmel* (screenplay), VEB DEFA Studio für Spielfilme (Potsdam-Babelsberg, 23 August 1963), 345.
- 45 ‘Die Stadt atmete in jenem Sommer heftiger als sonst [. . .] Die Leute fanden diesen Himmel ungewöhnlich schwer zu ertragen’, Wolf, *Der geteilte Himmel* (screenplay), 2.
- 46 ‘Ich weiss, wir werden manchmal müde sein, manchmal zornig und böse. Aber wir haben keine Angst, das wiegt vieles auf: dass wir uns gewöhnen, ruhig zu schlafen. Dass wir aus dem Vollen leben, als gäbe es übergenug von diesem seltsamen Stoff Leben. Als könnte er nie zu Ende gehen’. Wolf, *Der geteilte Himmel* (screenplay), 363.
- 47 The film’s modernist aesthetics dominated the discussion of Wolf’s film at the Berlin Academy of Arts, see note 16. Several East German film reviews comment on the film’s complex time structure and elaborate montage sequences, cf. Rosemarie Rehan, *Risiko ist eingeplant*, *Wochenpost*, 2 May 1964; H. Geier, *Ein filmisches Kreuzworträtsel?*, *Sonntag*, 18 October 1964; Günter Karl, *Filmexperiment im Streitgespräch*, *Neues Deutschland*, 5 September 1964.
- 48 Cf. Charles S. Maier, *Dissolution. The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (Princeton, NJ, 1997), 24.
- 49 For a comprehensive account of the Eleventh Plenum, cf. Günter Agde (ed.) *Das 11. Plenum des ZK der SED 1965. Studien und Dokumente* (Berlin, 2000 [1991]).
- 50 A film review published in the West German newspaper *Frankfurter Rundschau* comments on the sudden change of the GDR’s political climate in the wake of the Eleventh Plenum, as a result of which Konrad Wolf was not given permission to travel to the Federal Republic of Germany when *Divided Heaven* was released in West German cinemas. *Der geteilte Himmel*, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 21 January 1966.
- 51 ‘Der Widerspruch zwischen beiden Gesellschaftsordnungen auf deutschem Boden geht mitten durch ihre [Ritas] Liebe hindurch . . . Die Kraft zur Überwindung ihrer

eigenen Konflikte schöpft Rita aus der Erkenntnis: Die Lösung der Widersprüche zugunsten des Sozialismus und der DDR ist eine Lösung zugunsten des Menschen und des Menschlichen, des Lebens und der Zukunft. Wir werden mit der Erkenntnis und Gewißheit aus diesem Film entlassen, daß zwar eine Liebe sterben mußte, weil sie das Leben zu leicht befand, daß aber ein neuer Mensch geboren wurde.' Günther Dahlke, Hauptreferat, in Deutsche Akademie der Künste, *Probleme des sozialistischen Realismus*, 3–22, here 18.

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