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To cite this article: Stefan Lacny (2023) Creating the Polish enemy on the Soviet screen, 1925-1939, *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*, 17:2, 60-79, DOI: [10.1080/17503132.2023.2193009](https://doi.org/10.1080/17503132.2023.2193009)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17503132.2023.2193009>



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Published online: 27 Mar 2023.



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Creating the Polish enemy on the Soviet screen, 1925–1939

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ABSTRACT



This article examines the presentation of Polish characters in Soviet cinema from 1925 to 1939. It argues that the many films made on the so-called ‘Polish theme’ in these years reveal a persistent Soviet anxiety towards Poland, which appears as a potential aggressor representing a military and ideological threat to the USSR in its western borderlands. Through close analysis of selected films from the corpus, the article demonstrates how Soviet cinema processed the perceived threat from Poland by means of gendered characterisations of Poles, Ukrainians and Belarusians. Most commonly, these characterisations take the form of depictions of sexual violence committed by male Poles against female Ukrainians and Belarusians, a repeated narrative feature designed to convey to Soviet audiences the danger posed by Poland to Eastern Slavs on either side of the Polish-Soviet border. Likewise, though, the films seek to alleviate spectatorial concerns by portraying a corrupted patriarchal hierarchy among Polish protagonists that represents a parodied inversion of heteronormative gender standards. By conveying the Polish danger to Soviet nationalities and simultaneously disavowing it through insinuations of Polish societal weakness, Soviet filmmakers aimed to strike a balance between communicating and assuaging spectatorial anxieties towards their western neighbour.

KEYWORDS

Soviet cinema; Poland; sexual violence; gender; foreign enemy; spectatorial anxiety

Introduction

Of the many foreign threats to the revolutionary cause portrayed in early Soviet fiction cinema, none was given greater attention by filmmakers than the danger emanating from Poland. Poles were by a large margin the most frequently shown foreign nationality on the interwar Soviet screen, appearing (according to figures given by Miron Chernenko) in around 70 feature films produced by Soviet studios between 1920 and 1939, significantly more than the 23 works containing American characters and the 19 depicting German protagonists made in the same period. These films on the so-called ‘Polish theme’ (*pol'skaia tema*) are noteworthy both for their sheer number and for the regularity of their production. Works featuring Polish characters first appeared as early as 1920 and, despite shifts in domestic and foreign policy, were released in the USSR every year from 1925 to 1939, indicating a consistency of attention to Poles surpassing that paid to other

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nationalities (Chernenko 1988, 110). Put simply, Poles played a very prominent part in depictions of the external 'other' in the first two decades of Soviet cinema and maintained a perennial presence on the Soviet screen across the period.

The reasons for this prominence may appear straightforward at first glance. For centuries, Polish-Russian relations had been characterised by antipathy, resulting from the Russian state's historical rivalry with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Russia's major role in partitioning the Commonwealth between 1772 and 1795, and the various failed Polish uprisings against the tsarist authorities during the nineteenth century. Furthermore, unlike certain other cinematic 'foreign enemies', the Poles shared a lengthy border with the USSR and were one of the few nationalities to have previously been subject to Russian imperial rule.¹ Yet the centrality of Polish characters to Soviet film in these years is also indicative of a continual sense of unease in the USSR regarding the presence of sizeable Ukrainian and Belarusian populations in the eastern regions of the Polish state (an area known in Polish as the *kresy*). In these lands, fought over by Polish and Bolshevik armies in the war of 1920–21, ethnic Poles and Jews dominated the towns and cities, while the much larger rural population was overwhelmingly Ukrainian (in the south) and Belarusian (in the north), mostly consisting of peasants living in impoverished conditions on the estates of wealthy Polish nobles. Given the confluence of national and class divisions in the Polish east and the separation of Ukrainians and Belarusians living under Polish rule from their compatriots in the USSR, the Polish question occupied a major place in both Soviet foreign affairs and domestic policy. Consequently, between 1925 and 1939 film studios in the Soviet centre and in the national republics produced dozens of historical dramas, contemporary thrillers and films depicting the Polish-Soviet war, in which Poles predominantly appear as devious, decadent and degenerate aristocratic oppressors of the Ukrainian and Belarusian labouring masses who suffer from economic exploitation and attempts at forced Polonisation.

In this article, I argue that these films on the Polish theme betray a persistent Soviet anxiety towards Poland as a potential aggressor that posed a military and ideological threat to the USSR in its western borderlands. Through a close analysis of a selection of films from multiple genres that span the entire period, I will suggest that Soviet cinema presented and processed this anxiety by means of gendered characterisations of Poles, Ukrainians and Belarusians as national groups. Such characterisations operate in a complex dynamic, presenting both the Polish threat through scenes of sexual violence and its simultaneous disavowal to alleviate spectatorial concerns. In this way, gendered distinctions between Poles on screen and Soviet cultural models become a framework through which Soviet apprehensions over national and ideological differences are both showcased and assuaged.

Poland as perennial perceived threat

These cinematic depictions emerge out of, but also complicate, the reality of interwar Soviet foreign policy towards Poland. Serhii Plokhy divides this into two phases: an 'offensive' 1920s, where Ukrainians living in Poland were regarded as an asset that could be harnessed to undermine the Polish state as a precursor to the eventual unification of the Ukrainian lands under Soviet rule (a notion termed the 'Piedmont principle' by Terry Martin); and a 'defensive' 1930s, during which Ukrainians from the west came to be

seen as a 'fifth column' along the Soviet frontier intent on weakening the USSR in preparation for a foreign invasion (Plokhly 2011, 304–305; Martin 2001, 8–9). This categorisation, however, is not reflected in cinema of the era, in which Poland is persistently shown as an aggressor that menaced Soviet Ukraine and Belarus. The extent to which Polish-themed films reflected a consistently 'defensive' attitude towards Poland (at least in the cultural realm if not always in the political sphere) can be seen by increases in cinematic production in the genre at times of heightened Soviet fears of Polish infiltration.

After the release of at least a dozen short *agitfilms* featuring Poles in 1920 (where, unlike in most later works, Polish characters were predominantly viewed not in national-class terms as an external enemy but according to class alone, either as hostile capitalists or as fellow proletarians who could be brought round to the Bolshevik cause), the end of the Polish-Soviet war in 1921 marked the start of a five-year absence of the Polish theme from film production (Chernenko 1988, 111).² The rebirth of the genre, however, was directly connected to apprehensions over Polish influence in the western Soviet republics. Vladimir Gardin's 1925 anti-clerical film *The Cross and the Mauser* (*Krest i mauzer*, discussed below), which became the archetype for future cinematic depictions of Poles, was released during a Soviet anti-religion campaign that especially targeted the (overwhelmingly Polish) Catholic clergy in the Ukrainian and Belarusian republics (Palko 2022). A wave of Polish-themed works arrived on Soviet screens in the wake of Marshal Piłsudski's May 1926 *coup d'état* in Poland, which triggered fears of an imminent Polish invasion due to Piłsudski's previous pursuit of a federative union of Poland, Lithuania and the Ukrainian and Belarusian lands.³ Similarly, a later surge in anti-Polish films in 1930–31 is accounted for by Soviet expectations of a Polish attack on the USSR amid the internal instability caused by the Stalinist collectivisation drive (Martin 2001, 320–322; Narinskii and Sakharov 2001, 29). The number of films portraying Poles decreased from 1932, as relations with Poland settled and greater geopolitical threats began to emerge. It is noteworthy, though, that both the above peaks in production occurred while the 'Piedmont principle' was still official party policy, suggesting a disconnect between the 'offensive' objectives of the Soviet government towards Poland in the years 1923–32 and the fearful attitudes expressed towards Poles in cinematic output of the same decade.

Despite these fluctuations, the possibility of a renewed anti-Soviet alliance between the Polish state and Ukrainian nationalists remained an abiding concern at the heart of Soviet unease towards Poland. This apprehension is notably evident in Georgii Stabovoi and Aksel' Lundin's *P.K.P. (Piłsudski Bought Petliura)* (*Pilsudskii kupil Petliuru*, 1926), which depicts a series of attacks on Soviet Ukraine during the Polish-Soviet war by Ukrainian nationalists supporting the Ukrainian National Republic (UNR) in conjunction with their Polish allies, all of which are eventually defeated by the Red Cavalry of General Grigorii Kotovskii.⁴ Notable for featuring Iurii Tiutiunnyk, a former UNR general who had defected to the USSR in 1923, as himself, *P.K.P.* shows Poles sowing the seeds of unrest and ideological disunity amongst Ukrainians, not only by invading Soviet territory and pillaging raw goods from local peasants but also by sponsoring espionage and propagating Ukrainian nationalism. The menace posed to the Ukrainian SSR from Poland here is twofold, encompassing both military attacks and material exploitation and (more seriously) the risk that Soviet Ukrainians will be swayed from the Bolshevik cause by counter-revolutionary nationalism. The fact that as early as 1926 *P.K.P.* confronts the risk of the 'Piedmont principle' being used in reverse, by Ukrainians in Poland against the USSR,

demonstrates that Soviet insecurities regarding Polish influence over Ukrainians and Belarusians were present in the cultural sphere throughout the interwar decades. The primary cinematic manifestation of these insecurities in gendered terms is the high frequency of sexual violence in films featuring Poles, a subject that will be examined in the following section.

Sexual violence and visual (un)pleasure

As with the oppression portrayed in Polish-themed works more generally, acts of sexual exploitation are consistently depicted along national (and, by extension, class) lines, where male Polish authority figures commit abuses against female Ukrainians and Belarusians from the proletariat or peasantry. Films made throughout the period 1925–39 collectively deploy plots of sexual violence to cast the Poles as ‘other’ and establish the image of a male aggressive Poland that menaces a vulnerable feminised Ukraine and Belarus. Simultaneously, however, filmmakers could not afford to represent Ukrainians and Belarusians (whether under Soviet rule or not) as wholly weak and helpless, meaning that their works had to qualify presentations of the Polish threat with efforts to relieve anxiety among Soviet audiences and bolster confidence in the strength of Soviet defence.

This section will analyse the depictions of sexual violence in two films with contemporary settings, Gardin’s *The Cross and the Mauser* (1925) and Iurii Tarich’s *See You Tomorrow* (*Do zavtra*, 1929). Both these films foreground the act of looking, which is construed as a deed of violation and invasion by male characters against their female counterparts that becomes synonymous with sexual aggression. Each film, however, offers a differing presentation of visual pleasure in relation to this exploitative male gaze on screen, which signals a divergence of approaches adopted by Soviet directors towards the question of how best to portray the threat posed to Ukrainians and Belarusians by Poland.

Though Vladimir Gardin had begun his career in filmmaking before the revolution and had briefly undergone an experimental turn after 1917, by the mid-1920s, he was primarily known for populist cinema appealing to a mass audience, of which *The Cross and the Mauser* is a prime example (Cavendish 2010, 61). The film follows a morally degenerate Polish Catholic priest, Ieronim, serving in a border town in Russian-Empire Ukraine in 1912. Ieronim misses church services, derives perverse pleasure from flagellating the orphan girls under the church’s care and even impregnates one of them, Iul’ka, before arranging for her child to be murdered instantly after birth and its body left outside a tailor’s shop in the Jewish quarter, which soon leads to an antisemitic mob committing a bloody pogrom against the local Jewish community. Iul’ka dies of grief for her child, while her sister Marinka is severely beaten after being caught innocently conversing with a boy through the orphanage walls. In the second part, we re-join Ieronim in 1922 as he leaves the Ukrainian town (now under Polish rule) to become a Vatican spy working in the USSR, where he again encounters Marinka, who is working in the local Soviet administration. When confronted by Marinka about his past crimes, Ieronim unsuccessfully tries to strangle her. As the Vatican spying operation is uncovered, Ieronim is overcome by guilt, quits the priesthood and is burnt alive by his fellow clergy for apostasy, while the remaining spies are shot in combat by Soviet troops. Combining aspects of political intrigue and adventure, *The Cross and the Mauser* is a work whose sensationalist content

undoubtedly contributed to its commercial success, even outgrossing the most popular American hit of the year, Raoul Walsh's *The Thief of Bagdad* (Youngblood 1992, 79).

Gardin thematises the act of looking in *The Cross and the Mauser* through multiple instances of voyeurism. These scenes both offer visual pleasure to the spectator and draw attention to the moral and ideological complications of that same pleasure in looking. In one prominent example, Ieronim, having recently arrived on his espionage mission in the USSR, comes across a group of nude young women swimming in a lake and furtively spies on them through the branches of a tree. Upon spotting the women, Ieronim instantly recalls a French libertine novel he had been reading earlier (Jean-Baptiste Louvet de Couvray's *Les Amours du chevalier de Faublas*, 1787–90), whose cover is displayed immediately after the priest catches sight of the bathers, a juxtaposition of shots that indicates the erotic motivations behind his subsequent actions. Next, the camera alternates between a series of medium and long shots of the women, unaware of the priest's presence, and close-ups of Ieronim's face as he gazes at them with lurid fascination (Figure 1). On one level of analysis, this scene foregrounds a dichotomy between Soviet and capitalist bodies. Viewed through this prism, the healthy exercising bodies of the female bathers may be interpreted as a manifestation of Soviet attitudes towards 'physical culture' (*fizkul'tura*), a term encompassing a range of issues from sport and recreation to hygiene, health and education, all of which was collectively regarded as an important means of inculcating socialist ideals into citizens (Grant 2012 1–3; Goff 2017). In contrast to the exemplary female bodies at leisure before him, Ieronim is defined by his inability to restrain his deviant voyeuristic urges and stands out as the antithesis of a model of socialist controlled physicality at a time when contemporary Soviet sexual discourse called on individuals to overcome bodily desires including sexuality itself.⁵

More conspicuously, however, the scene presents a blatant example of scopophilia that draws attention to the power imbalance between the male onlooker and the females on display. Writing on traditional Hollywood cinema, Laura Mulvey in her influential 1975 article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' formulates her concept of the 'male gaze', which has since been adopted and expanded on by subsequent theorists.⁶ According to Mulvey (1975, 11), the pleasure derived from looking in cinema (for both protagonists and spectators) is 'split between active/male and passive/female' and women, as the



Figure 1. Ieronim's (and the camera's) voyeuristic gaze. *The Cross and the Mauser* (Vladimir Gardin, 1925).

recipients of the patriarchal male gaze, are 'simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact'. The arguments made in 'Visual Pleasure' are a response to the cinema of the capitalist west rather than the USSR and have later been challenged (and even refuted) from a multitude of more recent feminist perspectives.⁷ Nonetheless, Mulvey's ideas provide a useful conceptual framework for understanding the gender dynamics at work in *The Cross and the Mauser*.

In the scene in question, Ieronim's role as a scopophilic onlooker onto a group of unsuspecting female figures marks him as the possessor of a male gaze that is undeniably exploitative but also designed to create visual pleasure for the spectator. Through alternating shots of Ieronim and the female bathers, the camera adopts the priest's voyeuristic perspective over the spectacle, thereby merging the gaze of the protagonist with that of the spectator. The erotic potential of this shared look between camera and protagonist is naturally heightened by the nudity of the female characters being viewed, a rare feature of Soviet fiction cinema at the time. According to Cavendish (2010, 61), *The Cross and the Mauser* was the first Soviet film to display naked female breasts in a scopophilic context. In true sensationalist style, the exploitative male gaze described above is also showcased in an earlier scene that features elements of both voyeurism and sadism. As Marinka is repeatedly whipped in the church orphanage by a nun under the watchful eye of Ieronim, rapid editing juxtaposes close-ups of the girl's bare lacerated back and tear-strewn cheeks with shots of the priest's face displaying obvious signs of erotic enjoyment (Figure 2). This further instance of Ieronim's look merging with that of the spectator combines with images of a helpless, physically beaten Marinka, here acting as an embodiment of what Mulvey (1975, 11) terms female 'to-be-looked-at-ness', to induce spectatorial reactions of both moral condemnation and voyeuristic pleasure.



Figure 2. Marinka as object of invasive looking. *The Cross and the Mauser* (Vladimir Gardin, 1925).

Nevertheless, any visual pleasure presented for the spectator in these sequences is significantly complicated by the context in which the male gaze is shown in *The Cross and the Mauser*. Mulvey (1975, 12–13) establishes that in Hollywood cinema the spectator is led to identify with the main male hero, projecting his look onto that of the protagonist and sharing 'the active power of the erotic look' to provide 'a satisfying sense of

omnipotence'. However, while this premise relies on the male protagonist in question being a positive hero, in Gardin's work the 'bearer of the look of the spectator' is both a sexual deviant and an ideological enemy of the Soviet state. By merging the visual perspectives of the camera and the anti-hero, the film effectively implicates the spectator in Ieronim's transgressions, relating to both the priest's unrestrained sexual urges and his espousal of the militant Catholicism that is portrayed as such a threat to the revolutionary cause. To use Mulvey's terms, the 'erotic look' of both protagonist and spectator in the two aforementioned scenes does indeed appear omnipotent. In each instance, Ieronim stares down onto his female victims from an elevated position, establishing via the cinematic gaze a vertical hierarchy of power and control. Furthermore, when Ieronim spies on the bathers, his (and the camera's) voyeuristic viewpoint remains unobstructed by the branches around him and unreturned by the objects of his attention. This omnipotence, though, is far from fully 'satisfying' for the spectator given the degeneracy of the character whose visual perspective is projected on screen.

The ideological implications of this shared gaze between anti-hero and spectator become particularly problematic when viewed through the prism of conflict between nationalities. In the scenes outlined above, a Catholic clergyman, an unmistakable male personification of Poland, commits acts of aggressive unwarranted looking at female Ukrainian (or, in the case of the bathing women, at least Soviet) characters, a trope whose repetition throughout the film highlights the signification of the male gaze as a metaphor for external violence directed by Poland at the western Soviet republics. The threat accompanying the foreign gaze onto Soviet (or, in the film's pre-revolutionary first part, would-be Soviet) subjects is made even more explicit by the fact that Ieronim is actively engaged in an espionage mission against the young socialist state, a plot element that reinforces the invasiveness of his look in both a voyeuristic and political sense. The illicit gaze in *The Cross and the Mauser*, therefore, ultimately creates an unsettling effect by placing the spectator in the position of the foreign intruder intent on breaching Soviet defences and endangering state security. Despite the degree of visual pleasure offered by the film, the viewing position during scenes of voyeurism is inherently unstable and conveys a sense of horror at the potential for foreign intrusion and infiltration.

While *The Cross and the Mauser* demonstrates the potential of the foreign male gaze to convey visual pleasure as well as invasive threat, in Tarich's *See You Tomorrow* it appears as a tool of unqualified violation. *See You Tomorrow* focuses on the plight of a group of Belarusian children living in an orphanage and school in Poland's eastern territories. The children suffer from impoverished conditions, exacerbated by the exploitative actions of the Polish headmistress Madame Bawerda and her son Boris, who take for themselves items from aid packages sent to the orphanage from abroad. The orphans look with hope towards the USSR and smuggle in banned copies of Soviet Belarusian newspapers, for which one of them, Iazep, is denounced to the police by Boris and arrested. As fears of revolutionary activity at the orphanage grow among the local authorities, Iazep's friend, Liza, is expelled from the school after being caught trying to send him a food package in prison, leaving her forced to seek accommodation and employment at the butcher's shop of Madame Puchalska. When Madame Puchalska is out at church, her husband, a former Russian prince, attempts to rape Liza who fatally stabs him in the struggle. On the discovery of Soviet newspapers among her possessions, Liza is charged with political murder as an 'agent of Moscow' and sentenced to eight years of hard labour despite her

young age. Before her sentence can begin, however, she is liberated by a revolutionary crowd led by the recently freed Iazep and her classmates that storms the courtroom. Iazep and Liza decide to escape over the border into Soviet Belarus, vowing to return one day to establish Soviet power in the region.

Throughout Tarich's work, sexual violence appears as a representative trope of Polish rule over the Belarusian population, and even before the attempted rape scene, the film is replete with depictions of sexual harassment, mostly targeted at the character of Liza. In the opening sequence, Boris spies on Liza while she washes and grabs her clothing before being fought off by other boys. Liza later finds herself at a dinner where she and two female pupils are plied with wine and subjected to physical molestation by sexually predatory school governors. After being expelled from the school, she is the object of unwanted advances from a man in a public park and even from a policeman investigating the prince's death. The status of these plot elements as a metaphor for a wider Polish aggression directed at Soviet nationalities is made unmistakable in a dramatic montage sequence in which the Polish press' accusations of political murder against Liza are juxtaposed with shots of barking, growling bulldogs and images of a map on which black ink spills over from Poland into the USSR. In many of the scenes outlined above, close-ups of male hands clutching at Liza's clothes or body parts are used to reflect the rapacious designs of Poles on the western Soviet republics. The most pronounced cinematographic feature signifying the Polish threat, though, is the violating male gaze seen from the viewpoint of the female victim.

Let us examine how this gaze is construed through an analysis of the first instance of sexual violence in *See You Tomorrow*, in which Boris attacks Liza as she washes. The scene begins with Boris spotting Liza through a small gap in the wooden barrier separating the girls' and boys' washing areas. The camera initially adopts Boris' visual perspective peering through the gap and catching a glimpse of Liza, but this male gaze onto an unwitting female object is quickly interrupted by Liza noticing the intrusion, looking back at Boris (and the spectator) and splashing him with a deterring handful of water through the partition. Clearly, the unhindered voyeurism enjoyed by Ieronim in *The Cross and the Mauser* will not be tolerated here. In response, Boris cuts a wider hole through the wooden barrier and stares greedily at Liza. Again, the camera briefly shares the viewpoint of the aggressor looking onto the washing Liza before the scopophilic illusion is broken and the heroine responds, returning the gaze and screaming in horror. Having begun with two shots where the camera displays an interrupted male look onto a female character, the scene now reverses visual perspective and intersperses views of Liza struggling against Boris (who by now has seized her by her clothing) with three consecutive close-ups of a malevolently smiling Boris staring straight into the camera, as he would be seen by Liza herself (Figure 3). Taken as a whole, this series of shots resists the kind of cinematic look offering visual pleasure that is showcased in *The Cross and the Mauser* and opts instead to display the invasive male gaze from the position of the victimised female, in the process conveying a sense of shock and violation onto the spectator.



Figure 3. Boris' invasive male gaze. *See You Tomorrow* (Iurii Tarich, 1929).

By separating the gaze of the spectator from that of the aggressor, the scene depicting Boris' attack on Liza demonstrates the capacity for violence carried by the look, a feature that is equally noticeable from the sequence showing the attempted rape of Liza by the Russian prince. (It should be noted that, despite the prince's Russian identity, his association with a specifically Polish male aggression is expressed through a repeated interspersion of his image with a Polish-language sign placed in the shop window.) Immediately prior to the assault, the camera holds a medium shot of the prince positioned behind Liza and staring at her as she washes linen. Here the prince's fixed voyeuristic gaze onto the oblivious Liza foregrounds his role as the assailant and presages the brutality to come. During the subsequent struggle, the violation in the scene is largely portrayed symbolically through images of intrusive looking, with close-ups of the characters' hands juxtaposed with extradiegetic shots depicting in succession the heads of four cartoon-style figures with bulging eyes and an ornamental bear head, all peering downwards as if at the female protagonist herself as she fights off her attacker (Figure 4). Though they do not literally reflect Liza's frame of view, these images, each repeated immediately after the prince is fatally stabbed, convey the impression of her being stared at and, hence, violated visually as well as physically. Notably, like the earlier frames of Boris leering at Liza, the extradiegetic heads in these shots appear to look directly out at the spectator, thereby positioning the latter on the receiving end of the intrusive gaze. In both the above scenes, then, Tarich reconstrues the foreign male gaze, stripping it of the visual pleasure (albeit qualified) present in *The Cross and the Mauser* and emphasising its inherent aggression by placing the spectator, like Liza, as its object rather than its subject. The portrayal of invasive looking in *See You Tomorrow* from the perspective of the victimised female imbues the exploitative gaze with *visual unpleasure* (to adapt Mulvey's term) in order to provoke spectatorial reactions of shock and revulsion to the abuses of the young Belarusian heroine by Polish male figures.

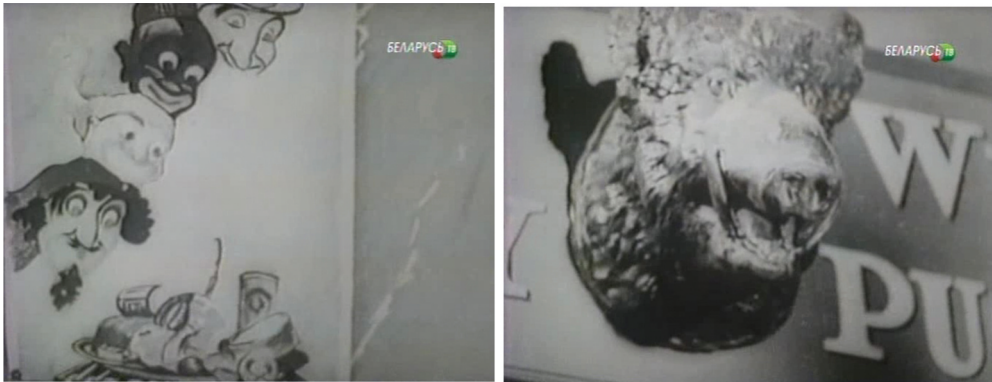


Figure 4. Looking as violation. See *You Tomorrow* (Iurii Tarich, 1929).

The Cross and the Mauser and *See You Tomorrow* have much in common in their presentations of the Polish threat, both containing sensationalist plot features and showcasing the invasive, violent potential of acts of looking in order to instil an element of horror in the spectator. The contrasts in the extent to which visual pleasure (or its opposite) is present in the films relate, I suggest, to the different levels of anxiety and reassurance each director wishes to convey to Soviet viewers regarding the danger posed by Poland to Ukrainians and Belarusians on both sides of the Polish-Soviet border. Whereas *The Cross and the Mauser* combines the horror of Polish violence with a degree of (male) visual satisfaction by merging the unobstructed gaze of the antihero with that of the spectator, *See You Tomorrow* deploys striking montage and camera angles from the position of the female victim to shock the spectator into feelings of outrage towards the Pole as enemy. Notably, Liza's traumatic experiences serve as an education in revolutionary action, spurring her into fighting back against Polish authorities and leading her towards ideological enlightenment under the Soviet banner. By showing invasive looking from Liza's viewpoint, Tarich presents a cinematic model of resistance against the violating gaze, encouraging the spectator to respond to foreign aggression with similarly decisive action. Despite these formal differences, however, both films point towards the need for a balance to be struck in films on the Polish theme between communicating and assuaging anxieties towards the USSR's western neighbour, a theme that will be explored further in the next section.

Foppish men and domineering women: Poland's inverted gender hierarchy

At this stage, it is worth highlighting that the portrayal of gendered sexual violence as a metaphor for military aggression is itself far from unique to interwar Soviet cinema on the Polish theme. Ellen Rutten (2010, 17) has observed that across modern Europe from the late eighteenth century gendered national allegories become more common in cultural production during wartime (or when war is perceived to be imminent) and notes the popularity of 'the strategic representation of one's country as a female figure who is (threatened with being) raped or captured by a masculinized enemy'. This

tendency surfaces frequently in a Slavic context, for instance in nineteenth-century Russian poetry, where Evdokiia Rostopchina's ballad 'The Forced Marriage' ('Nasil'nyi brak', 1845) and Aleksandr Odoevskii's poem 'The Marriage of Georgia and the Russian Kingdom' ('Brak Gruzii s russkim tsarstvom', 1838) liken Russian imperial expansion in Poland and Georgia respectively to a forced marriage between a masculine coloniser and a female colonised nation (Brouwer 2016, 153). A similar characterisation of Russia as male oppressor is found in the Ukrainian literary canon, most prominently Taras Shevchenko's (1984, 27–45) narrative poem 'Kateryna', in which the tsarist exploitation of Ukraine is told allegorically through the story of a young Ukrainian woman who is seduced, impregnated then abandoned by a Muscovite soldier. Films portraying Polish sexual violence, then, broke little ground in their narrative metaphors alone, instead reconfiguring familiar tropes to implant among Soviet audiences a sense of military and civilisational threat emanating towards the Ukrainian and Belarusian lands from Poland.

Though the depiction of sexual violence to represent the threat posed by a foreign 'other' appears across multiple national and temporal contexts, one element that is particular to many films on the Polish theme is the presentation of a sexualised external threat emerging from a society in which heteronormative gender standards are inverted. Through the association of Polishness with lavish aesthetics, I suggest that the films convey a degraded model of Polish masculinity marked by foppishness and weakness of will. In conjunction, Polish femininity is defined by over-assertive, domineering behaviour and the manipulation of men by means of guile and sexual allure. These characterisations of Polish gender roles, consistently tied to recognisable attributes of a uniquely Polish culture, are the antithesis of the patriarchal gender hierarchy that the Polish nobility is supposedly meant to epitomise. In addition, they stand in diametric opposition to the various gender norms promoted for Soviet citizens in the cultural discourse of the 1920s and 1930s. The understanding of Soviet gender norms in these decades is a complex matter, and articulations of exemplary masculinity and femininity underwent significant changes between 1925 and 1939. It has been well documented that 1930's Stalinist culture promoted a hypermasculine code of conduct and featured an abundance of healthy, muscular men, such as the male figure in Vera Mukhina's monumentalist statue *Worker and Collective Farm Woman* (*Rabochii i kolkhoznitsa*, 1937), usually accompanied by women who play an active but secondary role (Clark 1993; Bonnell 1997, 20–63; Hellebust 2003; Livers 2004). In conjunction, my understanding of gender roles in the 1920s follows Eliot Borenstein's (2000) argument that revolutionary masculinity in these years was premised on the notion of male comradeship forged by ideological ties that produced a collective with little place for women. Overall, then, Polish society is shown to be built around a corrupted patriarchal model whose stark differences from accepted social structures in the USSR make it both an object to be condemned and a source of reassurance for Soviet audiences against the regular reminders of the danger constituted by Polish aggression.

The category of films that most evidently showcases an association between Polishness and visual aesthetics is that of historical drama, in which the use of period costumes allowed for a greater display of sumptuous fabrics than in works with contemporary settings. Favst Lopatyns'kyi's *Karmeliuk* (1931), for instance, a film following a group of rebellious Ukrainian peasants led by folk hero Ustym Karmeliuk that launches

raids on the estates of Polish landowners in the 1830s, demonstrates the centrality of textiles to the self-definition of the ruling Polish nobility.⁸ Its opening sequence establishes the estate of young Count Piłowski to be the site of a 'factory' in which Ukrainian serfs labour to produce fine tapestries. Through a succession of shots of toiling women weaving threads culminating in the sight of a completed tapestry adorning the wall of a palace room, *Lopatyns'kyi* illustrates how the Polish noble enthusiasm for fine fabrics is responsible for the cruel exploitation of the Ukrainian peasantry, creating working conditions that soon force the count's best tapestry maker to flee the estate. Beyond mere class conflict, though, the primacy of fabric in *Karmeliuk* largely defines the image of the count himself, who appears throughout the film wearing lavish dandy clothes complete with a frilled shirt and an elaborately knotted cravat (Figure 5). Persistently characterised by material excess, the count is the epitome of foppishness and enjoys socialising with the equally finely attired ladies at his court, who are shown wearing silken dresses, white gloves and jewellery while holding intricate fans. In his preference for female company (a factor that is visually tied to the material excess of both male and female aristocrats), the count differs from the predominantly male fellowship of *Karmeliuk* and his peasant followers, marking his taste for luxurious fabrics as an element that places him in opposition to the ties of male comradeship that, according to Borenstein (2000), lay at the heart of revolutionary masculinity in 1920's Soviet culture. Viewed in the context of the new gender roles being shaped in Soviet society, the kind of masculinity embodied by the count in *Karmeliuk* comes across as weakened and effete, since his material excess becomes associated with an anti-revolutionary rejection of homosocial bonds.



Figure 5. Count Piłowski. *Karmeliuk* (Favst Lopatyns'kyi, 1931).

The debilitating effects of the Polish penchant for opulent textiles are likewise at the forefront of another film directed by Vladimir Gardin, *Kastus' Kalinovskii* (1927), which narrates the struggle of an army of Belarusian peasants against the forces of Imperial

Russia and, later, the Polish nobility during the 1863 Polish Uprising. Towards the end of the film, the Polish elite celebrates its recent truce with the tsarist regime by holding an exquisite ball at a Polish noble estate, indulging in the delights of wine and dancing as Kastus' Kalinovskii's peasant army draws near and ultimately attacks the palace (Figure 6). Here the highly decorated costumes and dresses, all composed of expensive fabrics, worn by the Polish nobles, together with the military band music being played, are shown to have an intoxicating impact on the military men at the ball, who are blind to the approaching military danger, including one officer who, seduced by the luxuriant aesthetics of the scene, embraces a young lady in the palace gardens. Distracted by material pleasures, the male Poles of *Kastus' Kalinovskii* display an emasculating lack of watchfulness (*bditel'nost'*), a character trait whose importance was foregrounded most prominently in the Soviet border guard films that were released in large numbers in the 1930s but trace their origin to earlier works such as Arnol'd Kordium's *Case No. 128c* (*Delo No. 128c*, 1926) (Graffy 2011, 163–164).



Figure 6. Material pleasures. *Kastus' Kalinovskii* (Vladimir Gardin, 1927).

The portrayals in *Karmeliuk* and *Kastus' Kalinovskii* of a Polish masculinity weakened by an over-indulgence in aesthetic pleasure are closely associated with indicators of a specifically Polish cultural identity. The sequence in *Karmeliuk* highlighting the nobility's preoccupation with tapestries is prefaced by six consecutive views of the Baroque exterior of Count Pigłowski's palace. These images, each of which offers a more detailed perspective of the palace's design than the last, are held by the camera for far longer than conventional establishing shots, instead serving to showcase the features of the building whose Baroque style implicitly ties it to Roman Catholicism and Polish civilisation. The recognisably Polish architecture seen in Lopatyns'kyi's work finds its counterpart in

a display of Polish elite fashion in *Kastus' Kalinovskii*, whose primary noble character, Count Skirmunt, is depicted as extravagantly foppish, both through his collection of pristinely groomed dogs and through his ornate oriental-style attire consisting of a velvet jacket and what appears to be a fez (Figure 7). This apparel is reminiscent of the customs of Sarmatianism (*sarmatyzm*), common among the Polish nobility for much of the duration of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, according to which male nobles would dress in quasi-Ottoman style (Thompson 2019, 17). The count's eccentric Sarmatian appearance is accompanied by his caricatural unassertive personality, exemplified by his inability to beat one of his female Ukrainian serfs without being humiliatingly stopped and chastised by her. The degraded masculinity displayed by Polish male characters in these films, then, is not that of a generic foreign 'other', but rather is linked with identifiable tropes of Polishness, thereby marking Poles' failure to conform to hetero-normative standards of masculine conduct as a national attribute.



Figure 7. Count Skirmunt. *Kastus' Kalinovskii* (Vladimir Gardin, 1927).

The depictions of Poles surrounded by opulent aesthetics found in films of the late 1920s and early 1930s continued to appear in similar form during the era of Socialist Realism. In Ivan Kavalieridze's *Koliivshchyna* (1933), set in 1768 during an uprising in Left-bank Ukraine against Polish magnates, the courtiers of the aristocratic villain wear not only metal breastplates (symbolic of Polish militarism) but also powdered wigs and fur-lined cloaks, continuing the association of Poles with superfluous fabrics. Later, in Eduard Arshanskii's *Nightingale* (*Solovei*, 1937), a work detailing a fictional Belarusian peasant revolt against the Polish nobility in the 1790s, the source of the retrograde masculinity exhibited by Polish protagonists is extended from textiles alone to a broader preoccupation with cultural matters. The film's indecisive Polish nobleman,

Lord Waszemirski (played by none other than Vladimir Gardin), is unconcerned with maximising profit from his estate and instead shows a slavish attachment to Western European high culture, insisting that the Belarusian serf girls under his rule attend dance classes in an attempt to provide them with ‘nobility and refined manners’. On the most transparent level, these efforts stand out as an example of the forced Polonisation of the Eastern Slavic peasantry, which Chernenko (1988, 115) identifies as a recurring plot feature of films on the Polish theme. Perhaps more fundamentally, though, the scenes in which the peasant girls are taught to dance the minuet hold up Poland’s strong historic links with Western European civilisation as an object of ridicule. At the heart of this characterisation is the French dance tutor employed by the lord, a risible figure whose exaggerated gestures, effeminate mannerisms and insistence on speaking only French indicate the degeneracy of the Western European culture upon which Polish society, represented by Waszemirski, has modelled itself. Against the backdrop of a shift in Soviet political discourse towards the rehabilitation of Russian national patriotism in the mid- to late 1930s, *Nightingale* may be understood as alluding to the old Pan-Slavic view, common in nineteenth-century Russia, of Poland as a betrayer of the cause of Slavdom for its attachment to Roman Catholicism and its western-leaning cultural and political inclinations.⁹

Crucially, the corrupted Polish masculinity displayed in these films appears as the antithesis of the masculinity propagated for Soviet citizens in contemporaneous cultural production. As referenced above, Borenstein (2000) argues that the 1920s saw the development of a concept of male comradeship founded on a shared ideology and intended to replace traditional family bonds. This new model of revolutionary masculinity was formed during a decade that, according to Naiman (1997), was characterised by deep anxieties over sexuality and saw frequent expressions in public discourse of the need to control citizens’ sexual activities in order to preserve the health of the ‘collective body’ of Soviet society. Moving into the 1930s, many scholars have documented the rise of what Clark (1993, 48) terms a ‘fantasy of extravagant virility’ in high Stalinist culture (Bonnell 1997; Hellebust 2003; Livers 2004). Haynes (2003), for instance, has written on the application of this iconography to Stalinist cinema, in which the depiction of exemplary Socialist Realist male heroes was accompanied by the imposition of a patriarchal hierarchy under which the primary purpose of female protagonists was to foreground the attributes of their male companions. Despite the evolution of promoted gender norms over the interwar decades, thematic continuities certainly exist, as demonstrated by Kaganovsky’s (2008, 4, 67–118) observation that Stalinist culture maintained (albeit in altered form) the 1920’s reluctance for homosocial male bonds to be broken by heterosexual romance. When viewed against these criteria, then, the male Poles depicted on the Soviet screen consistently fail the test of acceptable masculine conduct. Not only do they represent the opposite of the hypermasculine heroes of Socialist Realism, but, in their consistent association with luxurious textiles, their indulgence in aesthetic pleasure and their rejection of homosocial bonds in favour of female company, they also defy the example of masculine behaviour encouraged in 1920’s discourse, instead embodying a degraded parody of heteronormative conduct designed to appear risible to a Soviet audience.

Equally transgressive of Soviet gender norms is the presentation of Polish femininity, which is characterised by shrewd manipulation, sexual allure and dominance over men. Perhaps the prime example of the guileful Polish woman in cinema of the period is

Jadwiga, the sister of Lord Waszemirski in *Nightingale*, who functions as the film's primary villain. Unlike her weak-willed brother, Jadwiga (whose name denotes a warrior) displays a brutal capitalist instinct and plans to have the Belarusian peasant village on the estate demolished to make way for a more profitable winery and a new road to transport goods to Warsaw. Though not possessing the formal power of the lord, Jadwiga relies on emotional blackmail to assert her will over him, overcoming his opposition to her construction plans and inducing him to break his promise to leave the peasant village intact. Jadwiga's imperious personality is conveyed cinematographically through repeated camera angles of her shot from below to show her towering over the local peasants and, in contrast to her brother who disappears entirely during the film's final scenes, she displays decisive action by fearlessly facing down the revolting peasants (Figure 8). In an indication of her would-be *femme fatale* status, she unsuccessfully attempts to charm Belarusian hero Symon, who remains undistracted from class warfare and ultimately leads the anti-Polish rebellion. But throughout *Nightingale*, the noblewoman's assertiveness and indomitable attitude draw attention to the lack of such qualities in her male counterpart, whose subservience to his sister undermines the foundations of the traditional patriarchal structures on which Polish society is seemingly built.



Figure 8. Jadwiga. *Nightingale* (Eduard Arshanskii, 1937).

A similar depiction of a dominant, manipulative Polish femininity is found in *Kastus' Kalinovskii*, in which the daughter of Count Skirmunt (also, and not coincidentally, named Jadwiga) uses her powers of seduction to subvert the eponymous hero's uprising. In the film's opening scene, this second Jadwiga is shown firing two pistol shots with great accuracy at a target bearing the image of Tsar Alexander II, revealing a martial spirit that sets her apart from her brother Stas' who soon proves his military incompetence during engagements with imperial Cossack forces and ends up being captured by Kastus'

Kalinovskii's peasant troops. Notably, Jadwiga, who has a romantic past with Kastus', relies on her sexual allure to gain the hero's trust before deceiving him and helping Stas' escape capture, inflicting a heavy blow on the uprising's chances of success. To a certain extent, the betrayals by the two Jadwigas (the forced abandonment of the promise to protect the peasant village in *Nightingale* and the deception of Kastus' in *Kastus' Kalinovskii*) build on negative stereotypes of Poles as treacherous, arrogant and disloyal that had been common in the Russian Empire throughout the nineteenth century and were even propagated by Aleksandr Pushkin in his 1831 patriotic poem 'To the Slanders of Russia' ('Klevetnikam Rossii'; Pushkin 1957, 222–223), penned in support of Russian efforts to suppress the Polish November Uprising of 1830–31 (Levintova 2010; 1341–1342; Giza 1993, 29–39). Nevertheless, the fact that such characteristics are predominantly attached in the films to female warrior Poles points to the depiction of an inversion of traditional gender roles in a Polish society where women wield power over men. The authority exercised by female Polish characters over men, relying on a combination of seduction and guile, on the one hand exemplifies the unrestrained female sexuality that, according to Naiman (1997), was feared by many in early Soviet society as a threat to social cohesion and wellbeing. Simultaneously, though, it exports this anxiety to a foreign social context and portrays how Poland's supposedly patriarchal system is built on a subverted framework under which male control is an illusion.

The portrayal of manipulative women controlling weak, foppish men does admit the disruptive potential of a dominant femininity to challenge the presiding gender discourse of early Soviet society, which was premised on circumscribing heterosexual desire and, by the mid-1930s, promoted male pre-eminence. More fundamentally, however, the dominant conduct of female Polish protagonists further highlights the emasculating weakness of male Poles, whose lack of virility by Soviet standards makes them (and, by extension, Poland) an object of mockery for Soviet audiences. Though to a minor degree the works examined in this article recycle old Russian imperial stereotypes of Poles, their depictions of an inverted gender hierarchy and a degraded Polish masculinity were designed to popularise a new characterisation of internal Polish vulnerability that would, in turn, assuage the anxiety generated among spectators by the constant cinematic reminders of the danger Poland represented to Soviet territorial integrity during the 1920s and 1930s.

Conclusion

There is a paradox highlighted in this article that films depicting Poles simultaneously sought to convey to audiences the peril posed by Poland to the western Soviet nationalities and to downplay the severity of that threat through the suggestion of inherent Polish social weakness. It has been argued in some scholarship that Soviet public discourse in the interwar decades attempted to represent Poland as a 'minor enemy' not capable of inflicting significant harm on the Soviet Union (Rosowska-Jakubczyk 1993, 15–25; Ryabov 2006; Tokarev 2006). Yet this implication of a dismissal of the Polish threat does not accord with the large number of Polish-themed films released in the years 1925–39 and the regular on-screen presentations of sexual violence committed by male Poles against female Ukrainians and Belarusians, suggesting that Soviet fears of Polish aggression did indeed remain acute throughout the period. Rather, responding to the possibility

of a Polish invasion and to the continual unease generated by Polish rule over the western Ukrainian and Belarusian lands, Soviet filmmakers, I argue, formulated a coherent portrayal of Polish social atrophy in gendered terms in order to keep in check spectatorial anxieties towards Poland. In this sense, depictions of Polish male inadequacy and an inverted patriarchal hierarchy became a coping mechanism that reasserted a sense of Soviet civilisational superiority over the Polish foe and persisted in Soviet cinema up until the final elimination of the threat from Poland in September 1939.

Notes

1. Another notable nationality to fit this description is the Finns who, by contrast, feature rarely in Soviet cinema before 1939, one example being Rafael' and Iurii Muzykant's *For the Soviet Motherland* (*Za sovetsskuiu rodinu*, 1937). Finns only appear with any regularity as a 'foreign enemy' on the Soviet screen after the start of the Winter War in 1939, leading to such works as Viktor Eismont's *Girl Friends at the Front* (*Frontovye podругi*, 1941), Evgenii Shneider's *In the Enemy Rear* (*V tylu vruga*, 1941) and Iulii Raizman's *Mashen'ka* (1942).
2. These years coincide with a period of low film production across the USSR in the aftermath of the Civil War. See Graffy (2011), 162–163; Macheret (1961).
3. This proposed union was known as 'Intermarium' (Polish: 'Międzymorze') since it was intended to stretch from the Baltic to the Black Sea. See Zimmerman (2022), 5–7, 335–341.
4. The film's title is a play on words, referencing both the alliance between Piłsudski and UNR leader Symon Petliura and the Polish state railway enterprise, *Polskie Koleje Państwowe*.
5. On Soviet sexual discourse in the 1920s, see Naiman (1997); Borenstein (2000).
6. See, for instance, Kaplan (1983).
7. See, inter alia, DeTora (2010); hooks (1992/1992).
8. The story of Karmeliuk was addressed again in the period, in a film of the same title directed by Heorhii Tasin in 1938.
9. On the rehabilitation of Russian national patriotism, see Brandenberger and Dubrovsky (1998). On Pan-Slavic views of Poland, see Kohn (1960), 171–173.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Emma Widdis for her guidance and encouragement during the writing of this article and Julian Graffy for his generous and constructive feedback.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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