



## Memory and counter-revolutionary propaganda in Russia. A reinterpretation of the Decembrist movement in the film *The Union of Salvation*

MEMORIA Y CONTRARREVOLUCIÓN EN LA FEDERACIÓN RUSA. LA RELECTURA DEL MOVIMIENTO DECEMBRISTA EN LA PELÍCULA THE UNION OF SALVATION

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### Abstract

This paper addresses the counter-revolutionary elements of the Kremlin's memory policies, aimed at preventing social protests through the use of the past for propaganda purposes and, at the same time, at justifying the current political system. The counter-revolutionary discourse forms part of the 'conservative turn' in Russian politics and the memory strategy that goes with it, called 'the frame of war' here, which is accompanied by a 'media methodology', one of whose objectives is to discredit past revolutionary myths with the productions of Channel One.

Specifically, the focus is placed on analysing the counter-revolutionary discourse of the film *The Union of Salvation* (*Soyuz Spasenia*) as an example of this course of action.

## Keywords

Russian memory politics, counter-revolutionary propaganda, Decembrists, The Union of Salvation, memory and cinema.

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## 1. Introduction

*They were beautiful times and beautiful people: Russia, the sole global superpower; a country that does not know defeat.*

Vladimir Medinsky, Minister of Culture  
of the Russian Federation

The film *The Union of Salvation* (Andrey Kravchuk, 2019), produced by the Russian Channel One, was premiered on 22 January 2020 and, one month later, screened in the State Duma, thus involving the political class in the intensive advertising campaign accompanying the premiere. Following the screening, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, claimed,

A wonderful film; it portrays an important moment in our history, the nobility of the Russian soul, the emperor's greatness, while also calling on us not to allow any revolution, any revolt, any riot; for they knew that neither should the blood of our people (or other people) be spilled, nor should civil wars be started (Zhirinovskiy, in Berezovskaya, 2020).

With these words, Zhirinovsky expressed the main message that the Russian authorities and the film's producers apparently wanted to convey: revolts against the authorities end badly ... for the rebellious.

*The Union of Salvation (Soyuz Spasenia)* recounts the planning and development of the military rebellion in 1825, led by a group of 'reformist' officers of the imperial army who refused to swear an oath of loyalty to Tsar Nicholas I, following the death of his brother Alexander I. The rebels confronted the troops who had remained loyal to the new tsar in Senate Square, St Petersburg, on 14 December 1825, for which reason the episode is usually known as the 'Decembrist Revolt'. After hours of tension, the new tsar ordered the quelling of the revolt, with the subsequent defeat of the rebels, many of whom were sentenced to death or exile. Thus, from a present-day perspective, a plot in which the reformists espousing liberal ideas confronted the tsar 'on the streets' and, as a result, were harshly suppressed, could not fail but to encourage parallels to be drawn with the present.

Accordingly, the intention here is to understand the film *The Union of Salvation* in its political-media context, which, first and foremost, calls for placing it in the framework of the official memory policies of the Russian Federation, in whose logic it fits well. At the same time, the premiere of the film was accompanied by additional content glossing the film and drawing 'adequate' comparisons with the present to underpin, simplify and radicalise the film's main message. There were press conferences, social media debates, statements issued by politicians, celebrities and educators, monographs, talk shows and documentaries on the Decembrist movement, in general, and on the film, in particular, which form another pillar of the analysis performed here: the media offensive against the Decembrist myth, launched by the productions of Channel One<sup>1</sup> and the methodology that involves the production of films or series by the country's major TV channel, with generous funding and the pretence of becoming audio-visual benchmarks for specific historical episodes. At the same time, the channel itself produces a series of 'satellite programmes' accompanying the films with the aim of drawing 'correct' parallels to the present. Lastly, the involvement of the political class in the promotion of these films guarantees media coverage and, to a certain extent, audience engagement.

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1. For this study, an analysis has been performed on the Channel One's productions dealing with the Decembrists, which include, in addition to the film *The Union of Salvation*, the coverage given in its newscasts to its premiere (December 2019-January 2021), as well as the talk shows *Segodnia Veчерom* and *Pust Govoriat* (January 2020) and the documentary series *A History of Russian Revolts* (Mikhail Elkin and Andrey Stvolinsky, 2016) and *The Case of Decembrists* (Maksim Bespaly, 2017). To these should be added an analysis of the film *Admiral* (Kravchuk, 2008) and the TV series *Trotsky* (Alexander Kott, 2017) and their creators' statements.

*The Union of Salvation* is thus understood here as a cultural product designed to promote one of the main strands of the Kremlin's memory policies, namely, 'to demonstrate', with specific historical examples, that rebellions, uprisings or revolutions, as forms of political change, are, and always have been, foreign to Russian tradition, as well as detrimental to the country's development. According to this same line of argument, revolutionary ideas have been historically 'imported' from the West and implemented by Russians too naïve (or conveniently paid) to understand that they were being used by the enemies of Russia, to wit, those who have always attempted to deprive the country of its global power status.

This 'counter-revolutionary' element, whose interpretation is broadened so as to lead to a negative appraisal of any confrontation with the authorities, has given rise, for example, to the revision of revolutionary processes, such as that of 1905 or those of February and October 1917. Although the reproof of 1917 episode is normally echoed by the critics of the Soviet regime, the film *The Union of Salvation* faces a difficult challenge: to demystify a revolt that is (or at least was) perceived sympathetically by most of the Russian public. Lastly, with this line of argument the Kremlin is apparently seeking, as will be seen, to justify centralised state authority (understood as something 'inherent' to Russian tradition), regardless of the methods that it is obliged to employ to remain in power.

## 2. Memory and political propaganda in the Russian Federation

Those who hold that what used to be called 'culture' is based on the creation and exchange of meanings that facilitate human communication, would also probably agree that the very process of cultural construction is that of communication. As Lotman (1994, 6) declares, 'Culture is a form of communication between people that is only possible in those groups in which this communication exists.' Culture is also the realm of symbolism, of the quest for meaning that, in turn, fuels identity building. According to Du Gay et al. (1997), this system articulates the processes of representation, identity, production and regulation that, together, shape the *circuit of culture*, 'through which any analysis of a cultural text or artefact must pass, if it is to be adequately studied' (3). Memory, seen as 'the collective representations of the past as they are forged in the present, structures social identities by setting them in historical continuity and providing meaning and direction' (Traverso, 2007: 16). Therefore, memory building forms part of the *circuit of culture* and, especially when the process is institutionally fuelled, often takes the form of memory policies, that is 'actions that mobilize references to the past in order to impact on society and its members and transform them' (Gensburger and Lefranc, 2020: 3).

In this way, culture (and cultural memory) is dynamic and produced in networks in our interactions with others. A sense of community, of which collective memory forms an essential part, is constructed precisely because 'memories do not exist in isolation, but are interlinked with the memories of others' (Assmann, 2016). In our network societies, it would be very presumptuous to claim that decisions on what 'interests us' of the past have been made individually. In other times, it was textbooks that suggested the hierarchy that should be applied to the past: they indicated what was 'important', calling attention to certain characters, nations and historical periods, while leaving a lot out. Even though textbooks still fulfil this function, they have since been joined by other media, especially the broadcast and networked kind, when setting the agenda of our cultural memory.

According to Assmann (2016, 19), 'Memory is formed through the interaction of three components that have to work in concert with one another: there must be a carrier, an environment, and a support.' In the case of cultural memory, 'For its carrier, this memory relies on transferable cultural objects that have been handed down, such as symbols, artefact, media, and practices; as well, it relies on institutions that, by means of transmission, are able to extend the lifespan of those objects beyond that of finite human individuals, thus securing their long-term validity' (20).

This being so, representations of the past that enjoy the institutional and media support of the state (and this goes especially for state authorities that exert a strong influence on the content disseminated by the major media outlets) are able to endure, thus becoming relatively stable over time. To attain and to retain that exclusive category of 'privileged memories' signifies emerging victorious from previous asymmetrical power struggles in order to carve out a niche for themselves in cultural memory (Neiger and Zandberg, 2011). Those struggles often take the shape of battles for the control of the media space, for which reason it is essential to take into account national and international media systems when pursuing the study of cultural memory production. The formats chosen are also relevant: recounting the Decembrist Revolt in a generously funded and well-promoted action film, with the participation of the major film stars of the moment, increases the likelihood that it will be a box-office success. Thus, both *The Union of Salvation's* format (feature film and TV series)<sup>2</sup> and production by the most popular TV channel in the country, to which should be added the institutional support that it has received after being screened in the State Duma and the minister of culture's proposal that it be included in the

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2. The series *The Union of Salvation. The Time of Anger*, released in 2022, is directed by Nikita Vysotsky (one of the scriptwriters of the film *The Union of Salvation*) and produced, as with the film, by Channel One and Direktsia Kino.

school syllabus,<sup>3</sup> indicate that the perspective of the 'revolutionary aristocrats' which it promotes coincides with the representation of the past designed by the authorities in order that it should 'endure' over time.

As is well-known, historical policy changes with the times depending on the political objectives of the present. The discourse of the Russian authorities is no exception, displaying continuities and discontinuities during the period 2000-2021. Regarding the continuities, which began to take shape above all as of Vladimir Putin's second term in office and his 'conservative turn' (Kalinin, 2012; Makarychev and Yatsyk, 2014) the hegemonic memory policies of present-day Russia 'partially rehabilitate the Soviet period, which had to be purified of its specifically communist aspects and incorporated into the *longue durée* of the history of the Russian state.' (Koposov, 2018: 238) The counter-revolutionary element of this conservatism is also expressed in the official discourse about the past by the permanent warning about the loss of stability due to the revolutionary threat (Wijermars, 2019: 218). Consequently, these memory policies emphasise the ancestral unity of the Russian state, explaining in a linear fashion why the country has, is, and always will be one and indivisible, with a shared project imbued with an internal historical rationale that gives it meaning and with which prevailing policies dovetail. This results in the creation of diverse frames that inspire an interpretation of the past and present which contributes to 'normalising' the current state of affairs in Russia.

Foremost among these is what is called here the 'frame of war', as an interpretive filter not only for reviewing the past, but especially the present and the future. This frame is constructed by disseminating representations that underscore militarism, the external and internal threat (which also calls for defining external and internal enemies), the need for strong leadership, and (heroic) personal sacrifice for the good of the nation, as well as a permanent 'state of emergency' that makes it necessary to sacrifice rights and freedoms for the sake of the country's security and very existence. In the same way, Isaev (2016) makes a point about the militarization of culture in Russia, claiming that 'the Russian past is mostly represented around or inside war, while the criticism of war is becoming less and less important for popular cinema.' (31) Historical films in general and war movies in particular contribute to consolidating this trend. In fact, between 2000 and 2015, 27 out of the 100 most popular Russian films were historical, while in the USA the figure for the same period was significantly lower, eight. (Isaev, 2016)

3. Shortly before the premiere of the film, the then minister of culture Vladimir Medinsky remarked, 'My dream is that the film will one day be obligatory for all school children studying Russian history' (Uskov, 2019), before adding that the ministry would put forward a proposal for its inclusion, as recommended subject matter, in school textbooks.

The past makes sense in the present conversation and, when this is altered, its interpretation also tends to change. To modify that conversation it is essential to be able to influence it, with the institutions with the power to do so putting into circulation the discourse that should be disseminated (Castells, 2009). One of the institutions currently underpinning the memory policies of the Russian Federation is the Russian Historical-Military Society, led by the ex-minister of culture Vladimir Medinsky, which is behind most of the audio-visual productions analysed here. The society promotes a patriotic memory of which 'to feel proud', replete with military heroes and national and foreign traitors, which is in line with the approach of the Russian government to the past in recent years.

*The Union of Salvation* is yet another example of an old form of "identity propaganda" (Reddi, Kuo and Kreiss, 2021), whose advocates claim 'to defend the national' (Russia's special historical path as a civilisation) in opposition to the influence of the 'Western-foreign'. In Russia, this perspective, adapted to different contexts, has a past that transverses the national history of journalism and has impregnated some of the so-called 'Slavophiles', while also being visible in the Soviet propaganda during the Cold War and, in part, that disseminated by contemporary conservative Russians. In this vein, the Decembrists, the film suggests, were infected by the virus of European ideas, something that has been historically interpreted as a source of problems for Russia. So, the opposition to those ideas has become, according to this discourse, a national identity trait.

In sum, the external threat has usually come from the West and has normally been combated efficiently by strong leaders, who include Putin himself. Likewise, and according to the logic of the Kremlin, those citizens and national organisations receiving funding from abroad represent the internal threat or a sort of 'fifth column' (or 'foreign agents', in today's discourse). The recovery of an imperialist, orthodox and counter-revolutionary perspective of the past is one of the components of this interpretative framework, which also involves (positively) reviewing the role of tsars like Nicholas I, who quashed the Decembrist Revolt, and, in passing, to draw the pertinent comparisons with the present as explicitly as possible. As the former Minister Vladimir Medinsky pointed out:

Nicholas I was a sympathetic monarch who somehow recalls the current president: a professional soldier, he did not strive or seek to become tsar; a sportsman, highly educated and not at all ill-intentioned, by the way. The punishment that he meted out to the Decembrists was 'not only humane, but also incredibly soft' (in Erikh, 2015, 118).

So, while *The Union of Salvation* hints at and suggests parallels, the minister of culture underscores and specifies them to avoid misinterpretations.

### 3. Cinema, memory and the media system in Russia

*Let us recall how Hollywood helped shape the consciousness of several generations of Americans. It promoted values and priorities that were rather positive in terms of national interests and public morals. Russia could learn from that experience.*

Vladimir Putin

Todorov (2013) began his influential essay on 'The Abuses of Memory' asserting that twentieth-century totalitarianism had brought us face to face with the danger of 'the suppression of memory'. Even though it is true that the threat still hangs over us, many contemporary authoritarian governments have understood that the aspiration to control, prohibit and suppress all awkward information on the past is all but a pipedream at a time when the opportunities for being globally interconnected are increasing exponentially. Be that as it may, the combination of the control of the 'major media outlets' of national communication systems, the intervention in school syllabi and the legal prosecution of dissidents has proven to be a successful formula, at least when prolonging the life of authoritarian regimes like that of the Russian Federation.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, national media structures often adapt their design to fulfil that challenge. In this vein, the Russian media system, including the media industry, has been called Neo-Authoritarian (Becker, 2018), Non-democratic (Toepfl, 2014), Neo-Soviet (Oates, 2007), while Hallin & Mancini (2004) underline the difficulties to classify it. Lehtisaari (2015) describes the system as "a mixture of market forces, state ownership, power struggles between actors in different sectors, obstacles to media freedom and challenges within the media convergence", and Tarin and Sánchez (2018) focus on media laws that promote self-censorship and a "well-established network of [media] owners, politicians and economic power" (17). The latter becomes a key aspect to understand, for instance, the criteria in the allocation of funding for Russian films (Dovbysh and Belyuga, 2020), being film industry a critical part of the media system.

Cinema has the ability to absorb us, to transport us to its world during a brief time in which we 'live' the story that it is telling us. It should come as no surprise then that few media have participated so intensely in the construction of contemporary mythologies, including those that are politically motivated and which include the use of the past for propaganda purposes to reach political objectives in a specific present.<sup>5</sup> Cinema provides us with the fictions necessary

4. On this perspective of the Russian media system, see Tarin et al. (2018).

5. For the use of cinema for political purposes in contemporary Russia, see, among others, Beumers (1999);

for constructing our recollections. Indeed, as Morris-Suzuki (2005) claims, by and large cinema provides the 'only image' that most of the citizenry will have of some episodes of the past.

Fiction films thus transport us from the present to the past (and vice versa) at their pleasure; as members of the audience we become prisoners of the 'time' that the director proposes, who directs our gaze towards specific moments of the past (and particular interpretations of those moments) and establishes 'correct' connections between those moments and the present, while giving us the sensation of objective rigour, of witnessing what 'really happened'. As Rosenstone (2006) claims, 'film has given us tools to see reality in a new way - including the realities of a past which has long since vanished from our sight.' (158) In doing so, it has questioned a non-written rule, and namely 'the notion that a truthful past can only be told in words on the page.' (Rosenstone, 2006: 5)

Moreover, cinema forms part of an industry struggling to engage audiences so as to turn a profit. For their part, major film productions, aided by intensive advertising campaigns and, in the case of *The Union of Salvation*, by official memory policies, have the ability to place certain interpretations of the past on current agendas. When they recreate a historical event, 'blockbusters' can become interpretative benchmarks to which our imagination turns when we are called upon to offer a representation of that moment of the past.<sup>6</sup> Schindler's List is not perhaps the best film ever made about the Holocaust, but, due to its impact, will certainly be discussed at congresses and in the literature on the subject. Occasionally, it will be the place to which our mind returns when searching for images of the Holocaust. As with other directors, Spielberg made aesthetic decisions when defining his perspective of Auschwitz, which implied certain ethical (and political) options. Converting the trauma into entertainment, with the making of a spectacular and moving action film, the director did what he does best: transforming everything that he touches into a lucrative entertainment product and also placing Auschwitz yet again on the agenda. Notwithstanding the cultural and budgetary differences, *The Union of Salvation* seems to pursue the same goal with its interpretation of the Decembrist Revolt. In fact, in post-soviet times, the history of blockbusters is intimately related to historical films and the development of a patriotism that differentiates between 'they' and 'we' while promoting the construction of an Other, an enemy, very often identified with the 'soulless bourgeois pragmatism' (Sulkin, 2008:123), which is supposed to be

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Hashamova (2007); Larsen (2003); Norris (2012).

6. Andrey Kravchuk, the director of *The Union of Salvation*, also has some experience in producing big-budget historical films whose arguments are in line with the Kremlin's memory policies. To offer just two examples, *Admiral* (2008), a romantic look at Alexander Kolchak, one of the leaders of the White Army, and *Viking* (2016), about Vladimir the Great, Prince of Novgorod, mythically remembered for having introduced Christianity into ancient Rus.

characteristic of the West. As Norris (2012) points out, “the birth of blockbuster history— or the way American cultural practices could be adapted to make Russian historical epics— parallels the rise of Putin and the resurgence of Russian political nationalism”. (5) Paradoxically, intrinsically Russian values are promoted through imported formats (from the ‘enemy’) and at the same time, these values confront the Soviet approach to the Russian past: ‘Post-Soviet cinematic narratives directly responded to the Soviet memory project.’ (Norris, 2012: 6)

As could not be otherwise, the impact of this blockbuster is down to the fact that it holds all the trumps, not least the film industry’s all-powerful position as a vehicle for dissemination and promotion. With a budget of 980 million roubles (a little under US\$ 13.5 million), the film, subsidised by the state Cinema Foundation of Russia, was produced by Channel One through Direktsia Kino, a company run by Anatoly Maksimov. Channel One, whose main shareholder is the state,<sup>7</sup> has been, together with the other two major channels (Rossya and NTV), one of the media outlets that, for over a decade now, has disseminated the government agenda, including memory policies, among the largest number of viewers. Both Konstantin Ernst, the director general of Channel One, and Maksimov himself have been fully involved in the promotion of the film which, however, has been less of a box-office hit than expected, in part as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>8</sup>

Just as cinema, above all if it is well-funded and well-promoted, has the ability to participate in the construction of myths about the past, so too can it collaborate in their destruction.

#### 4. Destroying the myth of the ‘romantic revolutionary’: *The Union of Salvation and the memory of the Decembrists*

In December 2011, following the presidential elections in Russia, tens of thousands of people took to the streets to protest against what had been in their eyes a questionable and unclean process. At the time, Ilya Klishin and Roman Fedoseev (2011) published an article on the protests in Moscow entitled, ‘The New Decembrists’, comparing the protesters with those who had confronted the tsar back in 1825. They included Aleksei Navalny, who more recently has been

7. As the media ownership system in Russia is complex and not always an example of transparency, it is not easy to understand who controls the major media corporations. In the case of Channel One, the state is directly involved in the shareholder structure through the Federal Agency for State Property Management and VTB Bank, in which the state has a majority stake, and indirectly through media companies like the National Media Group, presided during the past decade by people very close to President Putin, including Yuri Kovalchuk and, currently, Alina Kabaeva.

8. According to data provided by the Cinema Foundation of Russia (2021), *The Union of Salvation* was the fourth most successful Russian film in 2020 as regards spectators (2.1 million) and box-office earnings (571.3 million roubles, some US\$ 7.7 million). <http://www.fond-kino.ru/news/itogi-kinoprokata-v-2020-godu/>

the object of the same comparison, while on the Wikipedia page devoted to his wife Yulia Navalnaya he states, 'Yulia has always behaved like a wife and loyal companion ("the wife of a Decembrist")' (Wikipedia, 2019).

These two examples will perhaps help to understand the image of the Decembrists, as well as that of their wives, which has prevailed in the national memory for decades.<sup>9</sup> They have often been depicted as romantic heroes who renounced their privileges when, in the pursuit of social justice and the common good, they confronted the tsar, paying for it with repression, exile and, in some cases, their own lives. This image is accompanied by a series of platitudes, many of which stem from the interpretation of the Leninist perspective of Russia's revolutionary past, which was omnipresent in the Soviet period, and of the role that the Decembrists played in it. Some of those platitudes are that the Decembrists served as a role model for subsequent revolutionaries ('they awoke Herzen'), the friendship of the Decembrists with the poet Alexander Pushkin and that it was small group without any real contact with the people, owing to its members' aristocratic origins. Special mention should go to the representation of the 'wives of the Decembrists' who, more often than not, accompanied their husbands, without being obliged to do so, when they departed into their Siberian exile. Accordingly, they tend to be presented as embodying the feminine ideal of loyalty and selfless and committed love, an image that is paradigmatically represented in the Soviet film *The Captivating Star of Happiness*, the forerunner of *The Union of Salvation* and the big screen rendering, albeit with nuances, of the Soviet Decembrist myth.<sup>10</sup> So, the Soviet myth of the Decembrists as ethically faultless aristocratic revolutionaries has been fuelled during nearly a century and it is that representation that *The Union of Salvation* and its 'satellite productions' are currently attacking.

As Erlikh (2015b) claims, however, the myth of the Decembrists has historically adopted different forms which, to a greater or lesser extent, are still present in the popular memory of present-day Russia. To this should be added that those images are activated (or not) depending on the stimuli habitually received through the media and films such as those analysed here. Chronologically speaking, the first image of those participating in the revolt of 1825 which was disseminated was that which Erlikh himself called 'the monarchical-orthodox counter-myth' produced by the powers that be and already in the nineteenth century by the

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9. In her study of the memory of the Soviet experience in contemporary Russia, Cherepanova (2011, 74) underscores how some of the interviewees resort to the narrative of the Decembrist myth to describe their experience of the Second World War; 'Just as this took shape in Russian culture from A. Pushkin, A. Herzen, L. Tolstoy, N. Nekrasov and M. Tsvetaeva to the Soviet cult film *The Captivating Star of Happiness*, shot in 1975.'

10. Directed by Vladimir Motyl in 1975, *The Captivating Star of Happiness* tells the story of the fate befalling some of the Decembrists after the revolt, placing the spotlight on the role played by their wives (the film is dedicated 'to Russian women') who decided to share the hardships of their husbands in exile.

proponents of the tsarist autocracy such as Count Dmitry Bludov and Baron Modest von Korff; secondly, the 'Decembrist myth of the intelligentsia', created by Alexander Herzen and his interpretation of Decembrism; and, lastly, the 'Soviet myth of the Decembrists', developed as of 1917 and largely based on the Leninist conception of the 'three generations'<sup>11</sup> (Erlikh, 2015, 398-399).

In his paper entitled, 'The Decembrist in daily life', Yuri Lotman (1994) provides some of the keys to the meaning of 'Decembrism' as a behavioural model which the Kremlin considers to be 'dangerous'. So, the Decembrists break with the duality inherent to the Europeanised aristocracy of the first quarter of the nineteenth century, which was ideologically expressed following the patterns of European Enlightenment, but behaved according to the traditions and circumstances prevailing in Russian at the time, which included, for example, accepting the serfdom and subjugation to the caste system imposed since the time of Peter I. On the contrary, as Lotman (1994, 336) stresses, the revolutionary aristocratic Decembrists took the ethical coherence of their actions very seriously, which had to follow 'a certain unique norm [that guided ethically] correct actions'. Unlike the image of impulsive and somewhat frivolous young men offered in *The Union of Salvation*, 'The Decembrists cultivated seriousness as a form of behaviour [...]. All their statements were [formed part of] a programme' (Lotman, 1994, 336). The Decembrists saw themselves as the objects of study of future historians: the theatricality of their behaviour and the lengths to which they went to 'call things by their proper name' in their daily lives, guided by a sense of honour, meant that they were very well-known 'conspirators' and members of secret societies that were no secret for practically anyone.

The film and other productions of Channel One in this respect cast doubt on the honesty and coherence of their actions, an essential aspect of the Decembrist myth. In the film, the Decembrist Pavel Pestel is represented as cruel and corrupt, while Pyotr Kakhovsky is shown murdering the respected General Mikhail Miloradovich from behind. For its part, the documentary series *The Case of Decembrists*, also broadcast by Channel One, on the trial following the revolt, portrays the Decembrists as liars who humiliate themselves before the authorities, while betraying their comrades-in-arms in order to receive lighter punishment.

11. For Lenin (1975 [1912]), both the Decembrists and Herzen formed part of the first generation of aristocrats and landowners who contributed, in the long run, to the Russian Revolution. According to this version, they were a small group aloof from the people, who, nevertheless, initiated the process of revolutionary agitation. The torch was taken up by the second generation of *raznochintsy* revolutionaries, who included Chernyshevsky and the members of *Narodnaya Volia*, among others. Although the *raznochintsy* were much closer to the people, only the third generation, now proletariat, would be at the forefront of the real revolution, whose first phase had been represented (Lenin was writing in 1912) by the 1905 Revolution.

However, the 'frame of war', which serves as a filter for the Kremlin's memory policies, does not require revolutionaries who undermine the existing 'stability'. This is the reason why the centenary of the October Revolution was practically ignored by the Russian media (Malinova, 2015). Be that as it may, Channel One premiered the series *Trotsky* (2017), yet again produced by its director general Konstantin Ernst and with Oleg Malovichko as the scriptwriter, in which the Bolshevik revolutionaries are not portrayed in a very flattering light. Ernst himself makes his stance very clear on the series' official website: 'All revolutions follow the same pattern and always end in the same way. A banal statement, which is true, as all banalities are: "Revolutions devour their own children." That is why Trotsky's biography is a perfect reflection of such a fate. Details change, but the essence of the revolutionary's tragedy remains the same' (Ernst, 2017).

Trotsky, also occasionally mystified as a romantic revolutionary intellectual who paid for his opposition to Stalin with his life, is represented as an ego-centric fanatic, incapable of thinking about others and whose ideas were influenced by his education and stays in Europe. As also occurs in *The Union of Salvation*, the series *Trotsky* does its utmost to debunk the idea of the main character as a role model that should be followed, stressing the hidden moral turpitude of this 'romantic revolutionary'. Paraphrasing Ernst, all revolutions end in the same way, but to this should be added that there is something more in the message that *Trotsky* and *The Union of Salvation* convey: revolution is not a way of bringing about change, revolutionaries are not what they seem to be and the authoritarian leaders who confront them (whether they be tsars, secretary generals or presidents) have good reason to quash rebellions for the sake of stability.

On the other hand, the Decembrists would also be the forerunners of those Russian intellectuals who, infected by foreign revolutionary ideas, intended to alter the 'normal' course of Russian history and to fragment the country's territory in order that it should cease to be a power. Although the counter-revolutionary bias has been evident in the government propaganda of the Russian Federation since the first years of the twenty-first century, Erlikh (2015, 108) holds that this campaign would have begun to affect the Decembrist myth as of 2005, when some of the opponents of the Putin government started to use, as already noted, the Decembrists as a historical mirror in which to look at themselves. So, eradicating the revolutionary benchmarks, from Pugachov to Trotsky, but perhaps alluding to those who are currently being held in the prisons of the Russian Federation, now forms part of the country's official memory policies.

## 5. *The Union of Salvation. The film in its media context*

This is a film about a period of history that has not ended yet.'

Anatoliy Maksimov, producer of *The Union of Salvation*

It is understood here that the intention of producing a film like *The Union of Salvation*, as well as the TV series going by the same name, was to establish a particular interpretative, and even aesthetical, canon when representing the Decembrist Revolt and, by extension, a way of approaching the history of social protest and rebellion in Russia. Therefore, its objective is to become a source of mental images and the initial reference point when interpreting, at least in the near future, the Decembrist Revolt of 1825.

The premiere of *The Union of Salvation* is only a milestone, albeit important, in an attempt to destroy the good reputation that might be enjoyed by those who dared to contest the stability represented by the 'tsarist state' throughout Russian history. The media methodology employed for that purpose follows a certain pattern that has repeated itself on other occasions.<sup>12</sup> More often than not, Channel One produces programmes on a revolutionary episode with the aim of discrediting it and placing it on the agenda. In a second phase, the channel itself produces a blockbuster, with state funding, thus taking the historical topic in question to the big screen, while also including it in its newscasts, talk shows and so forth, and involving the political class and a 'select' group of historians and 'experts' whose role is to give the propaganda message an academic sheen.<sup>13</sup> Konstantin Ernst, General Director of Channel One from 1999, is behind this modus operandi. Bogomolov (2008) describes a similar system in the promotion of the film *The Irony of Fate: Continuation*, one of whose producers was Ernst himself. The film had an intense presence in news programmes, talk shows, cookery shows and programmes involving politicians like the "open session" of the film with the Vice-president Dmitri Medvedev and various members of the production team.

As a matter of fact, the reinterpretation of the Decembrist movement through the productions of Channel One, with official funding, did not start with *The Union of Salvation*. In 2016, under the title of *The History of Revolts in Russia*, the company Indigo Studio, which produces programmes for Channel One with the funding of the Ministry of Culture, started to broadcast a series of historical

12. Similar processes can be observed in other films produced by Channel One, including *Viking* (Andrei Kravchuk, 2016) and the TV series *Trotsky* (Alexander Kott, 2017).

13. In the case of the Decembrists, some of the most 'used' historians and experts have included Oksana Kianskaya, Olga Eliseeva and the ex-minister Medinsky himself.

documentaries about the ‘true history of violent revolts in Russia, which is a history of the struggle for power and senseless cruelty’ (Indigo Studio, 2016). One of the documentaries making up the series is devoted to the Decembrists, with a view to demonstrating ‘that the real objective of the group of nobles was to establish a dictatorship and to murder the tsar’s family. It was a revolt based on lies and personal ambition’ (Indigo Studio, 2016b). The series, which also address the rebellions in the eighteenth century (the so-called ‘Salt Riot’ and the insurrection led by Pugachov), portrays a number of criminals, driven by their ambition and thirst for violence, who threatened the stability of the tsarist autocracy, always seen as the ‘natural’ order in Russia. This is one of the ideas that remains clear, especially in the documentary devoted to the Decembrists: without them, the 1917 Revolution would have never occurred. In this respect, the Russian authorities’ perspective of the country’s contemporary history is diametrically opposed to the Leninist interpretation: if in Leninist propaganda there was a line running from 1825 to the Great October Socialist Revolution, for the country’s current propagandists, that line led to the Great October Disaster. Furthermore, the film director, Andrey Kravchuck includes *The Union of Salvation* as part of his historical trilogy, along with *Admiral* (2008) and *Viking* (2016), both playing a “role in the radical revision of the Soviet historical narrative and in conservative identity formation in contemporary Russia” (Budraitskis, 2021: 392).

At the film premiere, the minister of culture announced his proposal to include the film in the school syllabus, while the anchors of Channel One’s newscasts emphasised that it told the ‘truth’ based on ‘facts and documents’ (Sharafutdinov, 2019), without pointing the finger at the guilty and giving the audience ‘complete freedom to take sides’. Ernst was quite clear about the memory arguments that should be deployed against the film’s critics: ‘[...] and what especially strikes me is that some of the radical representatives of the so-called “creative class” are very critical about the film, speaking in favour of the Decembrists. But, in fact, it was Herzen who spoke in favour of the Decembrists, and then his successors were, to some extent, the Bolsheviks. And it is extremely odd that people who associate themselves with liberal ideas are the direct successors of the Bolsheviks’ (Ernst, on *Segodnia Veчерom*, 2020).

On the occasion of the film premiere, Channel One produced a large number of programmes dealing with the Decembrists: together with the aforementioned TV series, they were the topic of talk shows, documentaries, reports and so forth, in which some of the ideas suggested by the film were underscored and explained. Indeed, from our perspective *The Union of Salvation* could be regarded as a ‘sophisticated’ propaganda product, at least in contrast to other

historical films produced in recent years.<sup>14</sup> Although, as already observed, the film attempts to undermine the revolutionary image of Decembrism, audiences are not transmitted an unequivocal message and may leave cinemas harbouring doubts that, it should be said, are immediately allayed with the statements of its producers (or ministers like Medinsky), as well as the aforementioned programmes broadcast before its premiere.

In this vein, Oleg Malovichko, one of the scriptwriters, highlights the film's general approach, which boils down to a clash between those who yearn for stability, even though this involves imposing it with an 'iron fist', and those striving to change everything ... at any cost: 'People change on either side, but the conflict between those who are trying to stabilise the situation in the country, despite the maintenance of the archaic system [архаики], and the modernists who are willing to fan the flames of social unrest to change Russia, is eternal. These people have never been able to reach an agreement, even among themselves' (Malovichko, 2019).

Reducing the historical complexity to the dichotomous choice between 'revolution or stability' was repeated ad nauseam on the talk show *Segodnia Vecherom*, to which the main actors appearing in the two blockbusters about the Decembrists – namely, *The Captivating Star of Happiness* and *The Union of Salvation* – were invited. The talk show, which was at first devoted to the nostalgic reminiscences of the old Soviet film stars, soon started to divide the actors and actresses of both films into two groups, those 'on the Decembrists' or on the Tsar's side'. Vasily Livanov (Nicholas I in the Soviet film), set the tone of the conversation: 'Nicholas I was an amazing person, very serious, very talented [...]. I cannot accept the [representation of the] Decembrists. They were Russian Masonic officers returning from France and infected with the French Enlightenment. Pestel was just a murderer and a scoundrel who sought to eliminate, physically eliminate, the tsar, the tsarina and their children' (Livanov, on *Segodnia Vecherom*, 2020).

With a daring soundtrack and a spectacular reconstruction of nineteenth-century St Petersburg, *The Union of Salvation* follows the habitual pattern of the historical thrillers produced in Hollywood. Visually appealing, the storyline is, however, difficult to follow: the jumps in time without the narrative rhythm letting up make it difficult for the audience to become even faintly acquainted with the characters—there is no time for that. As is well-known, some of the leaders of the Decembrist Revolt, such as Muravyov-Apostol, had fought in the Patriotic War of 1812, in which the Russian imperial army defeated Napoleon and entered Paris in

14. Some of the state funded productions dealing with the Second World War, like *T-34* (Aleksei Sidorov, 2019) and *Panfilov's 28 Men* (Andrey Shalopa, 2016), have been much less 'ambiguous' in their propaganda.

triumph. From the very beginning of the film, it is stressed that Muravyov-Apostol has been educated in France since he was a child. Soon afterwards, while he is celebrating the victory over the French emperor with champagne, the young Muravyov-Apostol, interpreted by Leonid Bichevin, exclaims euphorically: 'We've beaten Napoleon; now anything's possible!' Henceforth, the film becomes the staging of the confrontation between two different standpoints that might well "be understood as the struggle of the two orders, where only one is truly Russian and the other is inspired from abroad" (Szymborski, 2020). That inspiration turns the film into "the epic chronicle of a deserved failure. The characters are naïve boozers and neurotics, ready to drown Russia in blood for a good cause" (Dolin, 2019). The lack of a proper context explaining the causes of their actions makes the director base his methodology, as Budraitskis (2020) points out in "psychologizing", "discovering the meaning of an event not in its social and political context, but in the "personality" of the participants. Russian audiences have long accepted this approach to the events of 1917 (the revolution was bad because it was led by immoral people), so why not 1825 as well? (392).

In a way, the portrait of the Decembrists that the film paints is grounded in that image: with their youth and romanticism (Muravyov was 17 at the time), they mistook France for Russia and attempted to import a system foreign to the 'historical path of Russia'. Infected with the foreign revolutionary virus, they decided to rise up in arms against the powers that be to make their dreams of equality come true: 'Both you and we have fair objectives, but criminal methods,' Muravyov tells Nicholas I after the uprising. The script also stresses that, what begins as an adolescents' game can end up getting out of hand, and that, in the transition, those willing to spill blood always appear. Pestel plays that role when claiming that he is prepared to 'kill as many as required', if this is the price to be paid for achieving his dreams of reform, thus personifying the antithesis of the Decembrist myth: he is cruel, corrupt and violent. By contrast, the film shows Nicholas I in a very favourable light. The producers of *The Union of Salvation* portray the tsar as a person who 'had no other option' but to order his loyal troops to open fire on the rebels: 'I might be forgiven for being cruel, but never for being weak,' the fictional Nicholas I remarks. Thus, the also young tsar (Nicholas I was 29 at the time) has totally assumed the idea that Alexander I, his brother and predecessor on the throne, transmitted to him, a point that is repeated three times in the script: in Russia, 'His Imperial Majesty's will is the law.' The paternalistic image of a tsar who knows what is best for his subjects is not, of course, exempt from references to the present. The interpretation to which the script seems to lead is that obedience to the law (and the tsar's word is law) is the sole alternative to the bloodshed among Russians to which rebellion ultimately leads. A rebellion, it should be added, led by young men who did not understand either the gravity of

their actions or that these were serving foreign interests, irrespective of whether they were aware of this or not. The Decembrists in *The Union of Salvation* are clearly in favour of radical and violent change, while “their idea of a constitution is abstract and divorced from Russia’s historical development; true reforms must be carried out from above, gradually, without social upheaval (Budraitskis, 2020: 393). At the end of the film, a narrator remind us of the tsar Alexander II, who implemented some of the reforms claimed by the Decembrists. Surprisingly, the narrator adds that this tsar was later killed by terrorists. Apparently, it is therefore pointless to follow peoples’ wishes in Russia” (Szymborski, 2020). In sum, they were ‘foreign agents’ who were subject— as continues to be the case—to the full force of the law, namely, the word of the tsar.

## 6. Conclusions

The past that ‘we choose’ to remember, with institutional and media support, influences the future possibilities of social change in our societies. And this is achieved by offering interpretations of the past (and rejecting others) that serve as examples for constructing the future. Discrediting present public protests with the memory of failed revolutions and their disastrous consequences for the country, as well as the image of the ‘revolutionary’ as a role model, forms part of the memory strategy of the contemporary Russian authorities. The aim of that strategy would be to maintain the stability of the current political system in the Russian Federation and, above all, its elites in power.

On the other hand, the Russian media system, as it has been designed in recent years, serves that objective. In point of fact, the major traditional media outlets, in particular the three main national TV channels (Channel One, Rossya and NTV), have all but drawn a veil over public protest actions. The historical productions of these channels, especially those of Channel One, have served to convey a counter-revolutionary message that, in a society sorely in need of ‘ethical’ benchmarks, prevents them from being found among ‘honourable revolutionaries’ like the Decembrists.

I have described here how the memory policies and media strategies of the Russian authorities have been implemented through a TV channel (Channel One) and a feature film (*The Union of Salvation*), accompanied by institutional statements and infotainment programmes. As could not be otherwise, this strategy has elicited a reaction from the citizenry, which is invisible in the major media outlets, but not on social networking sites or in ‘alternative’ media, notwithstanding the restrictions imposed on them in Russia.

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