

**THE POLITICS OF MEMORY IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN CINEMA:
DEAR COMRADES! (2020)**

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Abstract

This article examines Andrei Konchalovsky's Dear Comrades! (Dorogie tovarishchi! [Дорогие товарищу!], 2020) as a subtle intervention in the politics of memory in contemporary Russian cinema. The film weaves together ideological repression, generational trauma, and the silences in authoritarian historiography by presenting memory as a fractured and contested field rather than following the rules of didactic historical reconstruction. At its centre is Lyudmila, a devout Stalinist who starts to doubt her political beliefs when her daughter goes missing during the state's brutal suppression of a workers' protest. Memory here is not legacy but struggle. This article builds a tripartite theoretical framework by closely examining three key scenes, drawing on Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin's "regimes of memory", Michel Foucault's "counter-memory", and Marianne Hirsch's "postmemory". From intergenerational conflict and the aesthetics of violence to the affective transfer of unresolved trauma, each paradigm sheds light on a different aspect of the film's mnemonic architecture. Alongside historical realism, Konchalovsky's formal choices—constricted aspect ratio, monochrome cinematography, and meticulously composed mise-en-scène—also show the director's critical stance towards the ideological framing of memory. Ultimately, this article argues that Dear Comrades! is a cinematic exploration of Soviet memory, addressing the moral obligations of remembrance in a context of denial, distortion, and loss.

Keywords: Russian cinema, historical film, Novocherkassk massacre, regimes of memory, counter-memory, postmemory

Araştırma Makalesi

Date Received (Geliş Tarihi): 03.06.2025

Date Accepted (Kabul Tarihi): 25.06.2025

DOI: 10.58306/wolllt.1712539

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ÇAĞDAŞ RUS SİNEMASINDA HAFIZA SİYASETİ: *SEVGİLİ YOLDAŞLAR!*

(2020)

Öz

Bu makale, Andrei Konchalovsky'nin Sevgili Yoldaşlar! (Dorogie tovarishchi! [Дорогие товарищу!], 2020) başlıklı filmini, çağdaş Rus sinemasında hafıza siyasetine yönelik incelikli bir müdahale olarak irdelemektedir. Film, ideolojik baskıyı, kuşaklar arası travmayı ve otoriter tarih yazımındaki suskunlukları bir araya getirerek, hafızayı didaktik tarihsel yeniden inşa kurallarına tabi olmayan, parçalı ve tartışmalı bir alan olarak sunar. Merkezinde, bir işçi protestosunun devlet tarafından acımasızca bastırılması sırasında kızı kaybolunca siyasi inançlarını sorgulamaya başlayan sadık bir Stalinist olan Lyudmila yer alır. Burada hafıza, bir mirastan ziyade bir mücadele alanıdır. Bu makale, Susannah Radstone ve Katharine Hodgkin'in "hafıza rejimleri", Michel Foucault'nun "karşı-hafıza" ve Marianne Hirsch'in "ardıl hafıza" kavramlarına dayalı üçlü bir teorik çerçeve geliştirerek filmdeki üç temel sahneyi yakından inceleyecektir. Kuşaklar arası çatışmadan şiddetin estetiğine ve çözümlenmemiş travmanın duygusal aktarımına kadar her bir paradigma, filmin hafızaya dair mimarisinin farklı bir boyutunu aydınlatır. Tarihsel gerçekliğin yanı sıra, Konchalovsky'nin biçimsel tercihleri—dar en-boy oranı, siyah-beyaz sinematografi ve titizlikle kurgulanmış sahne düzeni—yönetmenin hafızanın ideolojik çerçevelenişine yönelik eleştirel duruşunu da ortaya koyar. Sonuç olarak, bu makale Sevgili Yoldaşlar! filminin, Sovyet hafızasının sinematik bir incelemesi olduğunu ve inkar, çarpıtma ve kayıp bağlamında hatırlamanın ahlaki yükümlülüklerini ele aldığını savunmaktadır.

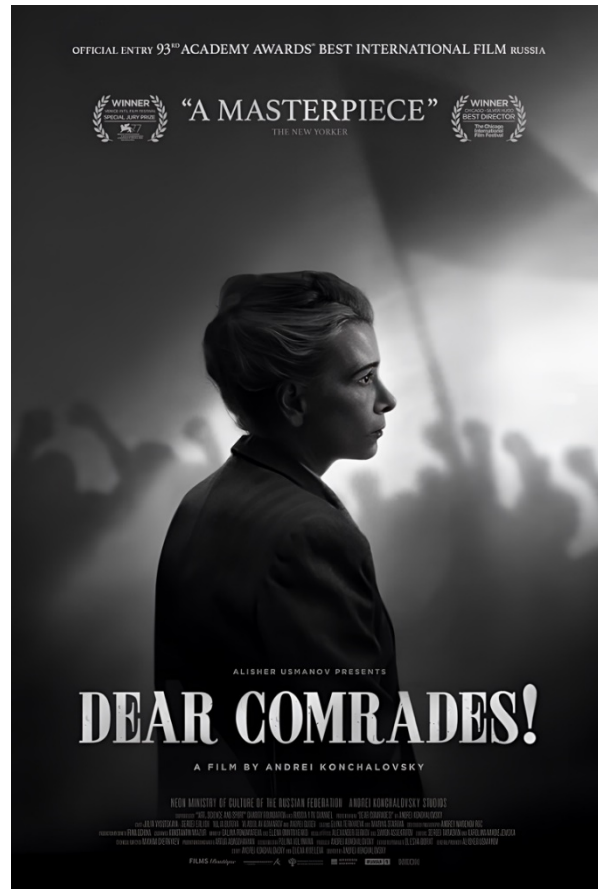
Anahtar Sözcükler: Rus sineması, tarihsel film, Novoçerkassk katliamı, hafıza rejimleri, karşı-hafıza, ardıl hafıza

1. Introduction

Russian film director Andrei Konchalovsky's *Dear Comrades! (Dorogie tovarishchi! [Дорогие товарищу!], 2020)* revisits one of the most violently repressed episodes in Soviet history: the Novoçerkassk massacre of June 1962, when state forces opened fire on striking workers protesting food price hikes and wage cuts. The killings—swiftly concealed by the authorities and omitted from official historiography for decades—remain a site of unresolved trauma in Russia's national memory. Konchalovsky co-wrote the screenplay with Elena Kiseleva, drawing heavily on newly declassified

party documents, which, he notes, provided the basis for nearly half the film’s dialogue and narrative structure (Menashe, 2021, p. 47). Konchalovsky’s film resists framing the massacre as a spectacle of political martyrdom. Instead, it stages the event as a private catastrophe, unfolding not across the heroic landscape of collective resistance, but within the intimate collapse of a single life. In *Dear Comrades!*, Konchalovsky offers little in the way of contextual scaffolding for the events that culminate in what came to be known as the Novocherkassk massacre. The film opens not with the structural causes of the unrest but with its aftermath already in motion, signalled through snippets of discontent—rising food prices, sudden wage cuts, and offhand nostalgic comparisons to Stalinist policy (“Under Stalin, prices went down”). Yet the specifics remain conspicuously absent. As Shpolberg (2021) observes, “Though ostensibly about a strike, the film does not seem particularly interested in the workers, only ever seen *en masse*, from a distance or from above” (p. 645). The viewer is never told why, on that particular day, workers at the Novocherkassk Electric Locomotive Works (NEVZ)—a sprawling Soviet industrial site employing over thirteen thousand—chose to lay down their tools. No attention is paid to the particular grievances that fuelled the strike, nor to the individuals who may have acted as organisers or spokespersons. Even the decision to march into town—drawing fellow workers, residents, and children in its wake—is presented not as a deliberate political act but as a spontaneous eruption, unexplained and unresolved. This narrative abstention is deliberate. Rather than construct a historical anatomy of protest, Konchalovsky privileges the psychological aftermath over the political origins. His interest lies not in the dynamics of collective resistance but in the breakdown of certainties—familial, ideological, generational—occasioned by its violent repression. The result is a film that displaces the expository conventions of historical drama in favour of an interiorised account of trauma and complicity, positioning the massacre not as an event to be explained but as a moral rupture whose consequences unfold in silence. Konchalovsky’s film is not merely a historical account; it is a formally rigorous and philosophically charged meditation on the regimes through which memory is produced, fractured, and transmitted in Soviet Russia. Shot in stark black and white and framed in an era-appropriate 1.33:1 aspect ratio, *Dear Comrades!* evokes not only the material textures of the early 1960s—from clothing and interior spaces to shops, kitchens, and bureaucratic offices—but also the visual grammar of Soviet cinema from that period. Cinematographer Andrey Naydenov’s camera remains notably static, its compositional restraint enhancing the sense of historical immersion.

Figure 1 The poster for Andrei Konchalovsky's *Dear Comrades!* (*Dorogie tovarishchi!*, 2020).



Set in the industrial city of Novocherkassk, the film centres on Lyudmila “Lyuda” Semina (Yuliya Vysotskaya), a fervent Party *apparatchik* and unwavering Stalinist whose ideological convictions begin to unravel when her teenage daughter Svetka disappears during the state’s violent suppression of a factory strike. The strike, triggered by wage reductions and soaring food prices at the Electric Locomotive Plant, is met not with reform, but with force. The shootings are swift, the bodies buried in secret, the city placed under lockdown. Official memory is already at work, transforming victims into silence. As Lyudmila searches for Svetka (Yuliya Burova) in an atmosphere of fear and state control, her loyalty to the Party begins to fracture. What unfolds is not merely a mother’s search for her child, but a descent into the moral dissonance of a regime that demands faith while systematically erasing truth. Accompanied by a quietly sympathetic KGB agent, Lyudmila’s search leads beyond the sealed city perimeter to a provincial cemetery, where a police officer tasked with burying the victims describes a girl matching Svetka’s photograph—right down to the torn stocking Lyudmila had urged her to mend. The detail devastates her. The presumed death becomes a metonym for all that has been lost: her daughter, her ideology, her sense of certainty. But the film resists finality. Returning home, Lyudmila finds Svetka alive, trembling on the rooftop. The reunion is wordless, staggering in its emotional force.

“We’ll do better,” she murmurs—not as a slogan of political renewal, but as a fragile pledge of human survival. In that moment, the film transcends the machinery of history and ideology, offering not resolution but a brief, unsentimental glimpse of moral awakening.

Andrei Konchalovsky occupies a singular position within the evolution of Russian cinema, spanning both Soviet and post-Soviet contexts. A scion of the culturally distinguished Mikhalkov family, his six-decade career is marked less by formal consistency than by a sustained interrogation of Russia’s historical imagination. Trained within the literary and theatrical traditions of Moscow, Konchalovsky’s early works—*A Nest of Gentry* (*Dvoryanskoe gnezdo* [Дворянское гнездо], 1969) and *Uncle Vanya* (*Dyadya Vanya* [Дядя Ваня], 1970)—demonstrate a fidelity not only to the tonal subtleties of Chekhov but to a moral sensibility that privileges interiority over ideological assertion. This aesthetic reaches a broader historical scale in *Siberiade* (*Sibiriada* [Сибиряда], 1979), a generational epic that offers a panoramic account of twentieth-century Russian development, staged through the intersecting lives of two Siberian families. Yet it is *The Inner Circle* (*Blizhniy krug* [Ближний круг], 1991) that perhaps best encapsulates Konchalovsky’s evolving cinematic method—a claustrophobic study in complicity that refracts Stalinism through the banal rituals of the dictator’s projectionist. The result is a portrait of ideology not as doctrine, but as quotidian experience: internalised, embodied, and silently endured. This capacity to render the operations of power through oblique, often intimate perspectives forms the foundation of Konchalovsky’s cinema of critical retrospection—one that rejects heroic narratives in favour of ambiguity, rupture, and unresolved tension. His films do not seek to recover history as stable truth; rather, they approach the past as a contested terrain shaped by silences, ruptures, disavowals, and spectral returns. Now in his eighth decade, Konchalovsky continues to excavate the psychic debris of Russian modernity, asserting himself not merely as a chronicler of historical events but as a filmmaker attuned to the affective afterlives of a nation’s unmastered past.

Konchalovsky was in his mid-twenties when the massacre at Novocherkassk unfolded. At the time, however, Konchalovsky was immersed in the creative ferment of Soviet auteur cinema, co-authoring the screenplay for *Ivan’s Childhood* (1962), the debut feature of Andrei Tarkovsky. The violence in Novocherkassk passed in silence, shrouded by a state-imposed news blackout. “No memory whatsoever,” the director would later remark, noting that rumours of a strike and shootings barely registered amid the ambient murk of Soviet censorship. “We heard vague rumours,” he recalls. “Whispers about a strike, about gunfire—but none of it registered. It left no real impression on me at the time.” It was not until the 1990s, when the apparatus of official forgetting began to dissolve and archival investigations resumed, that Konchalovsky encountered the event in full historical detail. Though he first contemplated a filmic response two decades earlier, the project lay dormant until his staging of *Oedipus at Colonus*, in which his wife, Julia Vysotskaya, played Antigone. Watching her performance, Konchalovsky discerned the contours of tragedy—not merely in the dramatic sense, but

in its classical dimension: as reckoning, resistance, and mourning. Vysotskaya's own roots in Novocherkassk infused the material with a personal charge. Thus, *Dear Comrades!* emerged not simply as an act of commemoration but as a belated confrontation—with a past unspoken, a violence ungrieved, and a silence that had endured too long (Macnab, 2021).

At the heart of *Dear Comrades!* lies a triadic structure of generational memory. The three central characters—Lyudmila, her father (Sergei Erlich), and her daughter Svetka—each embody a distinct “regime of memory.” Her father, a monarchist nostalgic for Tsarist Russia, represents an older order defined by cultural conservatism and deference to imperial power. Lyudmila, forged by Stalinist orthodoxy, is the product of mid-century Soviet authoritarianism, loyal to a system that demands ideological purity at the expense of moral clarity. Svetka, by contrast, gestures toward the tentative reforms and suppressed dissent of Khrushchev's Thaw. These figures do not simply mark historical succession; they form a contested mnemonic field in which familial intimacy becomes the site of political rupture. The film, thus, stages memory not as inherited consensus, but as a fractured continuum of loss, misrecognition, and affective tension. To analyse these entangled histories of memory and trauma, this article draws upon three interlocking theoretical frameworks. First, Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin's concept of “regimes of memory” approaches memory as a politically structured field of practice, in which remembrance is produced and policed by institutions of power. Second, Michel Foucault's notion of “counter-memory” conceptualises history as a discursive battlefield, where suppressed experiences resurface to destabilise hegemonic narratives. Finally, Marianne Hirsch's theory of “postmemory” traces the affective legacies of trauma across generations, emphasising how inherited silences and fragments shape contemporary subjectivities. These frameworks, when placed in dialogue with Konchalovsky's formal strategies, illuminate the complex ways in which the film refracts national history through personal disintegration.

This article argues that *Dear Comrades!* stages a cinematic archaeology of memory under authoritarianism: a landscape marked by ideological complicity, state-enforced forgetting, and the disintegration of narrative coherence. Through a tightly controlled aesthetic—black-and-white cinematography, constricted 1.33:1 framing, and recursive mise-en-scène—the film constructs a visual grammar of surveillance and epistemic breakdown. Its refusal of sentimentality and catharsis is not merely a stylistic decision, but a political one: it denies the viewer the comfort of narrative closure, forcing a reckoning with memory's fragility and the ethical ambiguity of bearing witness. The methodological framework of this article merges theories of historical memory with formal and textual analysis. Drawing on the writings of Foucault, Radstone and Hodgkin, and Hirsch, it examines how Soviet memory is cinematically represented within broader discourses of power, cultural transmission, and the politics of remembrance. These theoretical insights underpin a focused case study of Konchalovsky's film, in which the mnemonic functions of its narrative, visual, and aural elements are

critically examined. By combining theories of historical memory with formal and textual analysis, the article's dual-layered methodology enables it to both situate the film within a wider cultural and historical context and identify the specific cinematic strategies used to construct and convey Soviet memory on screen. Structured across a historical overview followed by three analytical sections, the article begins by examining the domestic confrontation scene between Lyudmila, her father, and her daughter Svetka (Konchalovsky, 2020, 36:35–42:59) through the lens of Radstone and Hodgkin's notion of "regimes of memory." It then analyses the massacre scene (Konchalovsky, 2020, 43:00–56:43), interpreting its aesthetic rupture through Foucault's concept of "counter-memory." Finally, it turns to the curfew dialogue scene (Konchalovsky, 2020, 1:10:15–1:15:10), where Hirsch's theory of "postmemory" offers insight into the emotional and generational aftershocks of political violence. In each instance, *Dear Comrades!* compels us not simply to remember, but to confront the ethical stakes of remembrance in a world where history has been weaponised, and where even silence speaks with a political charge.

2. The "Bloody Saturday": The Novocherkassk Massacre, 1962

Before analysing the film's politics of memory and its depiction of memory regimes in Soviet Russia, it is necessary to first outline the historical context that shapes its narrative. What most unnerved Soviet authorities in the post-Stalin era was the spectre of mass unrest—an inherently volatile and unpredictable force with the potential to undermine the architecture of state authority with disquieting speed. The decade following Stalin's death revealed the brittle foundations upon which much of the regime's social and administrative control rested: a sequence of disturbances in provincial and industrial centres—Kemerovo (1955), Tbilisi (1956), Podolsk (1957), Grozny (1958), Temir-Tau (1959), Kaunas (1960), Krasnodar (1961), Aleksandrov (1961), Murom (1961), Novocherkassk (1962), Bronnitsy (1964), Frunze (1967), Chimkent (1967), and Slutsk (1967)—demonstrated the latent instability of a system whose monolithic surface belied deep and unresolved tensions (Kozlov, 2002; Kulavig, 2003; Hornsby, 2013). Of these, it was the events of 2 June 1962 in Novocherkassk, former capital of the Don Cossack region, also known as the "Новочерка́сский расстрёл [Novocherkassk massacre]"—subsequently enshrined in memory as "Кровавая суббота [Bloody Saturday]"—that most vividly laid bare the internal contradictions of the post-Stalinist state. Shrouded for decades in official obfuscation, the episode now stands as a tragic emblem of rupture: not merely between an embattled working class and the bureaucratic machinery that claimed to represent it, but between the ideological fiction of a proletarian utopia and the lived realities of deprivation, disillusionment, and disenfranchisement.

At the epicentre of the 1962 Novocherkassk uprising stood the Electric Locomotive Works (NEVZ), a showcase of Soviet industrial modernity whose polished façade masked a more corrosive truth: the widening gulf between official economic policy and the material conditions of the working class. The immediate provocation was twofold. On 17 May, the Central Committee ratified a Council of

Ministers decree that sharply raised the prices of basic foodstuffs—meat and poultry by 35 per cent, milk and butter by 25 per cent—effective from 1 June. Simultaneously, labour norms at NEVZ were increased, effectively reducing real wages by demanding greater output for the same pay. These twin measures, introduced without compensatory relief, crystallised the contradictions of Khrushchev’s economic stewardship: a system that proclaimed allegiance to the proletariat while steadily undermining its subsistence. Compounding the discontent, housing conditions in the city were dire, food shortages frequent, and access to communal services severely limited. The resulting pressure upon an already strained workforce ignited a protest that the authorities neither anticipated nor understood. When workers sought recourse through official channels, they were met not with concern but with contempt cloaked in absurdity. The plant director, Boris Kurochkin, reportedly responded to complaints with a quip: “If there isn’t enough money for meat and sausage, let them eat *pirozhki* [pasties] with liver” (Baron, 2022, p. 26). In its cavalier dismissal of hardship, the remark encapsulated the wider failure of the Soviet technocracy to comprehend the erosion of everyday life. That such a phrase was repeated, mocked, and reviled within hours speaks not only to the intensity of popular anger but to the profound alienation that characterised the waning days of Khrushchev’s Thaw—a moment when the promise of reform met the reality of repression (Hornsby, 2013, pp. 175-176).

On 1 June, what began as a demonstration of several hundred workers escalated into a citywide protest, as thousands downed tools and marched in solidarity (Baron, 2022, pp. 22-50; Kozlov, 2002, pp. 224-250). Some workers began chanting what would become the strike’s defining slogan: “Мясо, масло, повышение зарплаты! [Meat, milk, pay raise!]” Demonstrators blocked a nearby railway line, brought a train to a halt, and scrawled “Хрущева на колбаса! [Let’s make sausages out of Khrushchev!]” across its engine. Several factory offices were vandalised, and official portraits were torn down and destroyed. Notably, the demonstrators did not position themselves in opposition to socialism per se. Rather, their rhetoric—and indeed their iconography—was saturated with appeals to the foundational myths of the Soviet project: portraits of Lenin, invocations of “justice,” and demands couched in the vocabulary of socialist entitlement. Theirs was a politics of betrayed fidelity, not of rejection. That said, the performative grammar of loyalty proved insufficient to forestall repression. As the protestors moved from the factory gates to the city square, the response of Khrushchev and the rest of the communist leadership shifted from inaction to alarm. Soon, key members of the Soviet government arrived in the city, including Communist Party Secretary Frol Kozlov, First Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan, and Aleksandr Shelepin, who had only recently stepped down as head of the KGB. Large contingents of troops and KGB operatives were deployed to suppress the protest (Andy, 2009). The presence of senior Party officials, dispatched from Moscow to assess the situation, produced no coherent strategy beyond vacillation. Whereas Mikoyan is said to have shown an ephemeral sympathy, Kozlov adopted a punitive stance, advocating immediate suppression.

Figure 2: The first photographs of the Novocherkassk demonstration did not enter the public domain until 1991. Published by *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, these images were not original prints but photocopies—partial reproductions of photographs originally taken by the KGB. These images had served a sinister purpose: to identify and apprehend participants in the protest. In 1990, a journalist and founding member of the Novocherkassk Committee for Investigating the Events of 1962 succeeded in copying a selection of these materials. Shortly thereafter, however, the original photographs mysteriously vanished during the relocation of a government office. Their disappearance remains unexplained.



Source: Soviet Red Archives, Records of RFE/RL (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty), HU OSA 300-80-1.

The climax unfolded on the morning of 2 June, when an estimated 30,000 people—workers, their families, and local residents—gathered in the city square in an act of collective protest (Baron, 2022, pp. 51–76; Kozlov, 2002, pp. 251–287). What followed remains one of the most harrowing episodes of state violence in the Khrushchev era. In the absence of dialogue, de-escalation, or any coherent strategy of negotiation, the state defaulted to repression. Security forces, including military units and KGB operatives, opened fire on the unarmed crowd. The square, once a site of civic presence, was transformed into a field of slaughter. Men, women, and children fell under a barrage of bullets, gunned down in full public view. The massacre did not merely expose a failure of governance; it revealed a deeper rupture—an utter incapacity on the part of the Soviet state to imagine dissent as anything other than treason. The demand for bread and justice was met not with reform, but with rifles. What occurred was not a crisis mismanaged, but a foundational collapse in the state’s political imagination: the

reduction of all opposition to “hooliganism,” the conflation of protest with subversion, and the refusal to recognise the moral agency of the very citizens the regime claimed to represent. In this moment, the ideological edifice of the Soviet workers’ state was laid bare—not as a protector of the proletariat, but as its executioner.

Figure 3: The 1962 Novocherkassk uprising. Screenshot from Andrei Konchalovsky’s *Dear Comrades!* (*Dorogie tovarishchi!*, 2020)



The aftermath was characterised by a meticulous, almost ritualised, erasure. The city was sealed, the dead removed under cover of night, and a blanket of secrecy imposed. Funerals were banned; information suppressed; survivors threatened into silence (Baron, 2022, pp. 77-92; Kozlov, 2002, pp. 288-292). The judiciary was deployed not in the service of justice, but of retribution: over one hundred protestors were prosecuted, seven of whom were executed. Dozens of others received prison sentences, many on the basis of demonstrably fabricated charges. Even now, the exact number of those killed—and the location of their burial—remains shrouded in uncertainty (Baron, 2022, p. 117). In official accounts, the uprising was ascribed to “hooligan elements”—a formulation whose very banality underscored the Party’s refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of popular grievance. Yet the state did respond—if not in rhetoric, then in practice. Quotas were quietly revised, food shipments dispatched,

and NEVZ underwent infrastructural improvements (Hornsby, 2023, p. 279). That such concessions followed so swiftly in the wake of brutal suppression only sharpened the paradox: reform was possible, but only after the fact, and only at the cost of blood. The bloodshed deeply unsettled the Soviet leadership—despite the fact that they had almost certainly authorised the use of force. Repressing socially marginalised peasants had long been tolerated by the regime, but the massacre of the urban proletariat posed a different kind of crisis: it struck at the heart of the Soviet Union’s ideological self-image as a “workers’ paradise.”

For decades, the events at Novocherkassk remained shrouded in secrecy, confined to rumour and the fragile terrain of private memory. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the famed Russian dissident, was among the first prominent figures to break the silence enforced by the Kremlin. In his monumental work *The Gulag Archipelago*, he described the massacre as “a turning point in the modern history of Russia,” noting that, for the first time, “the people have spoken out” (Solzhenitsyn, 2007, p. 507). It was only in the twilight years of the Soviet Union that the incident began to re-enter public discourse. Dissidents played a vital role in this process, working to expose the truth and bring the massacre into broader awareness. Under Gorbachev’s *glasnost*, the long-suppressed narrative gained visibility and, in the early post-Soviet years, finally received official scrutiny. The historical record, once denied, was gradually reconstructed—through eyewitness testimonies, archival fragments, and the persistent efforts of dissident historians. In this retrospective light, “Bloody Saturday” came to represent more than a brutal episode of state violence; it became a moment of reckoning—a collapse of the social contract at the heart of the Soviet mythos.

3. Framing the Past: The Regimes of Memory

Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin’s theorisation of “regimes of memory” constitutes not merely a terminological intervention in the field of memory studies but a conceptual reorientation of its very object. Memory, in their formulation, is neither the involuntary spark of inner recall nor the organic trace of personal or collective experience; rather, it is a discursive practice—shaped, structured, and sanctioned by historically contingent formations of power, knowledge, and cultural authority. Their project is animated by a critical distrust of essentialist accounts, which too often presuppose memory as a pure, unmediated retrieval of the past. Instead, they propose that every act of remembrance is already inscribed within a regime: a system of norms, technologies, metaphors, and institutional protocols that govern not only what is remembered but how, by whom, and to what end. Therefore, the central concern of their project lies not in the “inside” of memory but in its “outside”—with an emphasis on epistemological rather than ontological questions. Radstone and Hodgkin (2003) direct their inquiry toward the “discursive productions of memory” as cultural and political constructs (p. 1). These regimes are inextricably bound to shifting configurations of subjectivity. The modern Western subject, imagined as a bounded and self-possessed individual who “contains” memory, appears not as a transhistorical

constant but as a figure whose coherence is continually produced—and unravelled—within these very mnemonic structures. The analogy between memory and technology becomes particularly instructive here. From the archive and the photograph to the digital interface, the metaphors by which memory is conceived shape not merely its expression but its ontology. Mediation, then, is not an external layer that obscures a pristine past but the very condition through which memory is rendered thinkable. Spatial and temporal coordinates are no less implicated. Whether through the monumental architecture of national remembrance or the recursive temporality of trauma, memory regimes organise experience into legible, if never stable, forms. Politically, such regimes perform a double function: they consolidate dominant narratives while making space—however unequally—for counter-histories to emerge. Radstone and Hodgkin resist the temptation to cast memory as intrinsically oppositional or redemptive. What they offer, instead, is a framework for analysing memory not as a repository of truth but as a terrain of struggle—produced, policed, and persistently contested.

Konchalovsky's *Dear Comrades!* opens, not with the spectacle of revolt or the machinery of repression, but in the modest intimacy of a bedroom on the morning of 1 June 1962. Lyudmila and her illicit lover Oleg Nikolaevich Loginov (Vladislav Komarov) lie in bed, their early-morning lethargy soon giving way to quiet consternation over the worsening scarcity of basic provisions. Their conversation is banal, domestic, almost affectionate—circling around the rising price of kefir, the empty butcher's shelves, and the creeping impossibility of obtaining meat. Yet beneath the surface of this quotidian exchange lies the fault-line of an economic crisis about to rupture into collective defiance. In typical fashion, Konchalovsky eschews didactic exposition: instead, he embeds the political within the personal, revealing how the mechanisms of state failure have already permeated the texture of daily life. In this regard, the sequence functions not simply as narrative exposition but as ideological mise-en-scène, establishing a world in which national collapse is felt first not on the street, but in the kitchen. The transition to the next scene is seamless in tone, but seismic in implication. At a local grocery store, bodies collide in desperation; the camera tracks through disorder, as people jostle and shove for rapidly vanishing goods. It is here that the viewer encounters the contradiction at the heart of the Soviet social compact: Lyudmila, as a loyal mid-level Party functionary, is ushered behind the counter and granted access to a private cache—Lithuanian cheese, canned meats, and, in a moment that borders on black comedy, a bottle of Unicum, a Hungarian herbal liqueur reserved for special patrons. Privilege persists amidst the chaos. The scene captures with bitter clarity the two-tiered structure of Soviet life, in which ideological fidelity is rewarded with access while the masses are consigned to scarcity. Even so, disquiet seeps through. "Are we going to die of hunger?" the shop assistant ventures, a question that cuts through the transactional politeness like a blade. Lyudmila's response is immediate and defensive, her voice rising with a fury born less of conviction than of fear: "Do you even hear yourself? Who do you think you are? I am a Soviet woman." Her outburst crystallises a foundational paradox of Soviet ideology—

that truth is not a function of reality, but of political necessity. Hunger, in this schema, cannot exist, for to acknowledge its presence is to confess the failure of the state. “Hunger is impossible in the USSR,” she asserts. Not because it is not there, but because its recognition would constitute ideological betrayal.

Such early scenes serve not merely to establish narrative momentum but to foreground the film’s principal concern: the disjuncture between lived experience and authorised discourse. This thematic tension intensifies with the sudden descent of top Party officials—Frol Kozlov (Pjotr Olev), Anastas Mikoyan (Goga Pipinashvili), and Aleksandr Shelepin (Ivan Martynov)—into the city, their arrival depicted not as reassurance but as foreboding. Their presence signals the impending state response to the unrest and prefigures the film’s most penetrating sequence: the confrontation between three generations within the cramped confines of Lyudmila’s kitchen (Konchalovsky, 2020, 36:35–42:59). Konchalovsky’s deployment of the domestic interior is masterful. The camera is positioned at the corridor, peering in through a series of doorways. Shot with Konchalovsky’s signature frame-within-frame composition, the kitchen scene unfolds on the evening of 1 June, confining the characters in a series of visual enclosures that mirror their psychological and ideological entrapment.

Figure 4: The kitchen-table conversation between Lyudmila, her daughter Svetka, and her father. Screenshot from Andrei Konchalovsky’s *Dear Comrades!* (*Dorogie tovarishchi!*, 2020).



Seated around the kitchen table in this scene are three generations of a Soviet family: Lyudmila, a devout Stalinist and mid-level Party functionary; her daughter Svetka, shaped by the tentative liberalism of Khrushchev’s Thaw; and Lyudmila’s father, an ageing monarchist still tethered to the memory of Imperial Russia. Their conversation—tense, fractured, and ideologically irreconcilable—

serves as a microcosm of the film's broader interrogation of historical memory. Each character embodies a distinct regime of memory, in the sense developed by Radstone and Hodgkin: a historically specific configuration of remembrance shaped by ideological, technological, and affective structures. In Konchalovsky's staging, memory is not a stable inheritance but a contested terrain, fractured along generational lines. Lyudmila's father evokes the spectre of Tsarist autocracy, his worldview defined less by political theory than by affective residue—Orthodoxy, hierarchy, and a spiritual nostalgia for a lost order. His reverence for the past emerges from personal loss rather than ideological conviction. Lyudmila, by contrast, is the product of Stalinist orthodoxy: loyal, rigid, and internally disciplined. Her belief in the Soviet project is performative yet deeply internalised, requiring the erasure of doubt to maintain the coherence of faith. Svetka, the youngest, quietly defies both paradigms. A child of post-Stalinist reforms, she voices a muted scepticism and gestures towards alternative futures. In foregrounding these mnemonic disjunctions, the film constructs not a narrative of reconciliation but of rupture. It dramatises not only familial conflict but the epistemological crises produced by overlapping, incompatible histories. Memory, here, is not a bridge across time but a battleground of competing truths. The family becomes a spectral nation in miniature, its members bound not by a shared past but by the irreparable gaps between what they remember, what they forget, and what they are forbidden to speak.

What follows is not so much a conversation as a collision of historical worldviews. Svetka, having returned from the demonstrations, speaks of her generation's desire for transparency, reform, and constitutional rights. "People didn't want to leave," she explains. "But they sent in soldiers and we got pushed out." Her language evokes not radicalism but civic duty. Yet for Lyudmila, such speech is nothing short of sedition. "You're not going anywhere!" she barks, before denouncing the protesters as "drunkards" and "hooligans." Svetka's rejoinder is pointed: "They're workers." The exchange crystallises a deeper crisis—not only of political ideology but of historical continuity. When Svetka invokes the revelations of the 20th Party Congress, citing Stalin's crimes and the need for truth, Lyudmila's composure shatters. "What do you know about Stalin?" she screams. The question is rhetorical, but it reveals her deeper panic: if Stalin's authority can be questioned, then so too can the entire moral scaffolding of her life. The confrontation crescendos in violence. When Svetka accuses Lyudmila of being afraid—"You too, aren't you?"—the question lands not as a challenge but as an unmasking. Lyudmila, stripped of rhetorical defence, erupts. She strikes her daughter across the face; plates crash to the floor; and in an instant, the kitchen—once the last semblance of order—fractures into chaos. Authority gives way to panic. Svetka flees, and Lyudmila is left shouting into the void: "You come back right now!" The camera lingers as she collapses into a chair, framed in the kitchen doorway, a woman visibly unmoored. This is not simply a moment of emotional breakdown, but one of epistemological rupture: the disintegration of a memory regime unable to withstand contradiction. In the adjoining room, her father remains silent. When Lyudmila begs for his response—"Why are you

quiet?!”—his answer is devastating in its resignation: “I’m glad I’ll soon be dead. Let it all burn.” If Lyudmila represents the crisis of a regime undone by its own myths, then her father, a Tsarist veteran, embodies the ghost of a regime long since buried, but not forgotten. This generational fracture is rendered even more poignant in the subsequent scene. While Lyudmila lies in bed, her father opens an old chest, withdrawing an icon of the Kazan Mother of God and a neatly folded Tsarist military uniform. As he dresses, the act is ceremonial, funereal. When Lyudmila discovers him standing before the mirror in full regalia, her horror is immediate: “Have you gone mad? They can put you in prison for those stripes!” His reply—“You’ll bury me in this”—is not defiance in the conventional sense. It is something quieter, more enduring: an act of remembrance that refuses erasure. The father does not seek to resurrect the past; rather, he insists on its right to exist, to be seen, to be worn.

Figure 5: Lyudmila and her father are framed in a split-screen, frame-within-a-frame composition that visually reinforces their isolation within distinct ideological worlds. The meticulous shot design underscores how each character remains confined within their own regime of memory—each bounded by an ideologically conditioned vision of the past. Screenshot from Andrei Konchalovsky’s *Dear Comrades! (Dorogie tovarishchi!, 2020)*.



Cinematographer Andrey Naydenov’s camera captures this tableau with exquisite restraint. Reflections in the mirror, the threshold between rooms, the dim hallway beyond—each becomes a metaphor for historical distance and the opacity of remembrance. The mise-en-scène transforms the domestic space into a theatre of memory, where what is visible is often less important than what is withheld. The father’s uniform is not just a relic; it is a form of counter-memory, an embodied archive

whose contents are inaccessible to both Lyudmila and Svetka. In this house, memory does not travel between generations. It lingers in rooms, locked in chests, worn in silence. Thus, what emerges is not a cohesive historical narrative but a mosaic of dissonant fragments—each incomplete, each contending for legitimacy. Konchalovsky's film offers no reconciliatory gesture, no synthesis of these perspectives. Instead, it insists on the structural conditions under which memory is produced, denied, or violently enforced. The regime of memory, in *Dear Comrades!*, is not merely a metaphor for history; it is the apparatus through which history is disfigured. And it is through the domestic, not the monumental, that this disfigurement is most acutely felt.

4. Unframing the Past: The Politics of Counter-Memory

Michel Foucault's concept of "counter-memory" may best be understood as a critical intervention into the structures of historical knowledge—a means of unsettling those official narratives that have long dominated the public record. Rather than presenting a straightforward alternative to the sanctioned version of events, counter-memory offers a strategic reactivation of marginalised or repressed experiences. Its purpose is not to replace one orthodoxy with another, but to reveal the very processes by which certain truths are constructed, legitimised, and preserved, while others are excised from memory altogether (Foucault, 1977). Located at the core of Foucault's genealogical method, counter-memory functions as a tool of disruption. It contests the linear continuity and coherence often assumed in conventional historiography, favouring instead a historical perspective marked by rupture, contingency, and discontinuity. Genealogy does not seek an origin; it excavates a layered and conflicted terrain, shaped by power and its exclusions. In this respect, Foucault's intellectual debt to Friedrich Nietzsche is unmistakable. Like Nietzsche's critical history, counter-memory is designed not to preserve the past but to mobilise it—as a resource for transformation and, at times, resistance. The political implications are clear. Counter-memory calls attention to the uses of history in the service of power, while simultaneously opening a space for subjugated voices. It gives form to histories that were not allowed to be histories, and by doing so, it allows for new forms of subjectivity to emerge. As both conceptual apparatus and political act, counter-memory empowers individuals and collectives to challenge dominant discourses and to reassert control over the ways the past is remembered, interpreted, and deployed in the present. It is, in short, a way of thinking against history as it has been told—and of imagining what might be otherwise.

Genealogy, for Foucault, is an epistemological insurrection. In *Dear Comrades!*, Konchalovsky stages such an insurrection—not to retrieve a lost truth, but to destabilise the very grounds upon which truth is imposed. His politics of counter-memory in the film is, therefore, based on a genealogy of memory in Soviet Russia. To narrate history is never merely to recount the past; it is to perform a gesture of power. Andrei Konchalovsky's *Dear Comrades!* responds to this gesture not with reverence, but rupture. At the heart of the film lies a fourteen-minute scene that dramatises the 1962 Novocherkassk

massacre—not as spectacle or historical reconstruction, but as cinematic counter-memory (Konchalovsky, 2020, 43:00–56:43). In this pivotal scene, Konchalovsky performs a Foucauldian intervention, mobilising film’s formal and narrative mechanisms to unearth what Foucault (2003) called “subjugated knowledges”: the fragments of experience buried under official memory, silenced, and excluded—in Foucault’s own words, “historical contents that have been buried or masked in functional coherences or formal systematisations,” “disqualified knowledges,” “a historical knowledge of struggles,” “the raw memory of fights,” or “the very memory that had until then been confined to the margins” (pp. 7-9). This section reads the cinematic portrayal of the Novochoerkassk massacre through the lens of Foucault’s concept of counter-memory, focusing not only on what is shown, but on how it is mediated, framed, and ruptured. It traces the *mise-en-scène* of anxiety, the Brechtian discord between sound and image, and the intergenerational mnemonic fractures that structure the sequence. In doing so, it reveals how Konchalovsky withholds historical closure in favour of ethical disorientation—transforming *Dear Comrades!* into a provocation against forgetting.

The scene opens with a stark intertitle—“June 2, 1962”—followed by an extreme long shot of a desolate road. In the next frame, a military vehicle halts at a roadblock established by two tanks; soldiers disembark. The following shot reveals the Local Communist Party Headquarters. Rather than symbolising omnipotence, these images express the state’s nervous self-surveillance. The *mise-en-scène* is geometrically rigid; its symmetry radiates unease. Inside the Party headquarters, a propagandistic television broadcast praises Khrushchev’s visit to a youth centre. The contradiction is glaring: the celebration of Soviet futurity blares while history prepares to collapse. This disjunction is not irony but strategy—what Foucault might identify as a rupture in the discourse of power. When a Party official mutters, “Doesn’t he [Khrushchev] know what’s going on here?”, and Lyudmila replies, “He should’ve asked you, right?”, the ideological facade begins to fracture. The headquarters, both architecturally and symbolically, becomes unfit to contain the rising contradiction. As the protestors approach, bearing red flags and portraits of Lenin, Loginov exclaims in disbelief: “They’re bringing Lenin against the Soviet state!” This moment is more than irony—it is a reversal. Lenin, the mythic figurehead of Soviet legitimacy, is now reappropriated by the people to indict the system that invoked him. This is counter-memory in action: not a rejection of history, but its *détournement*—its reactivation against the apparatus that once mobilised it. The revolutionary father becomes the accuser.

The Party building itself serves as a metaphor for the architecture of containment. Protestors are first glimpsed through glass, doorways, and corridors—framed, surveilled, distanced. These frames visually encode the epistemology of power: to see without being seen, to control without being touched. But when the crowd breaks through, the frame is breached—symbolically and cinematically. Memory bursts through the walls of state narrative. For Foucault, memory is never passive; it is a regime of subjectivity. Here, Konchalovsky renders those regimes spatial, embodied, and discordant. The camera

lingers on the shattered threshold, marking the point where repression fails and the uncontainable enters. Inside, the response is absurd. Vodka is poured. Orders go unanswered. Phones ring into the void. A strange figure flees to the rooftop, whispering code into a silent radio: “Cuckoo is here.” No one replies. This is not power in command; this is bureaucracy in freefall. Foucault warned that when power can no longer speak in its own voice, it reverts to force. The massacre that follows is not the logic of sovereignty; it is its convulsion. The Soviet soldiers’ shooting of local citizens does not arrive with grandeur. It begins abruptly, chaotically, refracted through the mise-en-scène. We see it through the window of a coiffeur’s shop—a quintessential frame-within-frame. The viewer becomes complicit: protected, yet implicated. We watch as the state annihilates its people through a pane of sanctioned glass. The field of vision narrows; the camera frame tightens. Outside, disorder swells; inside, the radio broadcasts its well-rehearsed official fiction: “Radio broadcast for workers! Everything will be okay.” The irony is palpable, and then suddenly punctured. A single bullet pierces the glass, producing not only a physical rupture but a symbolic one: the state’s ideological façade collapses under the weight of its own violence (Konchalovsky, 2020, 53:09–53:14). Propaganda and realpolitik converge within a single frame—the promise of stability sundered by the very mechanisms that claim to secure it. The hairdresser falls, wounded. The composition splinters. Doorways, panes, and interior divisions carve the image into segments, reflecting the fragmentation of historical truth. Lyudmila appears isolated in the rightmost quadrant of the frame, scanning the street in rising panic, enclosed within a spatial logic that mimics the ideological structure to which she once gave absolute allegiance. She is not merely looking; she is framed—visually and ideologically—trapped within an epistemology that no longer coheres. Cinematographer Andrey Naydenov’s camera does not offer completeness. Its partiality is the point. Each frame meticulously composed—even in the midst of intensity or chaos. What is withheld from view—what lies just beyond the edge of the frame—is not absence but repression. Naydenov’s denial of a panoramic gaze becomes a politics of vision: what cannot be seen becomes that which must be remembered.

Figure 6: The massacre is shown through the window of a coiffeur’s shop, employing a quintessential frame-within-a-frame composition. Screenshot from Andrei Konchalovsky’s *Dear Comrades! (Dorogie tovarishchi!, 2020)*.



The visual aesthetics of *Dear Comrades!* foreground the extent to which historical reality is always already ideologically framed under authoritarian regimes. In such regimes, the past is not merely remembered but edited—unruly fragments are eliminated, and selected events are curated and reassembled into a coherent narrative that serves the state’s interest. The critical task, therefore, is not only to interrogate this official version of the past but to dismantle it—disassemble the dominant framework and examine what remains. Yet even this is not enough. Counter-memory is not merely concerned with the residual traces of the past, as these remnants offer only a fragmented glimpse into historical truth. Rather, counter-memory also seeks to illuminate what has been lost—ghosts, absences, spectres—the histories excluded from the frame. In cinematic terms, this principle is articulated visually through the recurring motif of *frames-within-frames*. As Radstone and Hodgkin argue, memory regimes do not operate solely through erasure but through selection—by circumscribing what may be seen, said, and mourned. Konchalovsky’s persistent use of architectural thresholds—doorways, windows, mirrors, enclosures—is no mere aesthetic flourish. It constitutes a formal logic, one that stages a Foucauldian politics of memory. The frame-within-frame becomes a structural metaphor for the very process of historical delimitation: memory not as archive, but as curation; not as preservation, but as containment (Konchalovsky, 2020, 55:46–56:44). What is captured by the camera is already mediated, already authorised. But what lies outside—unrecorded, unspoken, ungrievable—is where counter-memory gathers force. In that silence, in that invisibility, in that refusal, the film speaks with its greatest clarity.

Figure 7: Cinematographer Andrey Naydenov masterfully employs deep focus to expose the contradictory layers of reality within a single frame—juxtaposing, with unsettling clarity, the immediate horror of the massacre unfolding in the foreground against the distant, unblinking presence of Lenin’s statue in the background. The effect is one of visual irony: the Soviet regime’s brutal repression of the

proletariat set against the enduring monument to its founding myth. Screenshot from Andrei Konchalovsky's *Dear Comrades!* (*Dorogie tovarishchi!*, 2020).



The diegetic sound persists. A buoyant Soviet melody plays on, its brightness now grotesque. The cheerful tune grates against the brutal imagery it accompanies, creating a jarring dissonance. In this moment, sound becomes the regime's most violent lie. This is no accident. The collision of sound and image enacts a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*—an alienation effect that refuses *catharsis*. The scene does not solicit sympathy but invites critique. Formal harmony is denied so that political contradictions might be made audible. Realism fractures. In its place, Konchalovsky deploys formalist estrangement: ideology exposed through its tonal collapse. The victims' cries cut through the noise. Their voices are the only authentic sounds. Their screams rupture the diegesis, reminding us that counter-memory is also affective. They resist composure. They refuse the aesthetics of control. Lyudmila pulls a wounded woman into the shop. The door opens, and with it, the outside world rushes in—undeniable, unsanitised. Despite the regime's systematic efforts to suppress or obscure historical trauma, the real intrudes—uninvited, excessive, irrepressible. As Lyudmila closes the door behind them, another bullet enters—striking the woman fatally in the neck. Blood sprays across the glass in a sudden, arresting gesture. The screen is no longer transparent; it is stained. The moment becomes a cinematic *punctum*—what Barthes (1981) would call a wound (p. 49). What we see is not clarity but trace. This, too, is Foucault's lesson: memory is not an archive; it is a battlefield of fragments. Lyudmila retreats behind a hairdresser's chair. From her point of view—now shared with the spectator—the street reappears, once again mediated by the frame of a window. She is encased yet exposed, sequestered in a space that offers no protection from

what lies beyond. The radio still plays. Its message of order rings absurd in the context of massacre (Konchalovsky, 2020, 54:37–54:46).

After the massacre, a quiet descends. The camera does not cut; it waits. The square lies littered with corpses, as though the truth itself had been discarded. Officials move with procedural detachment, loading the bodies onto trucks—as if the memory of the event might also be erased through administrative routine. A firefighter arrives to rinse the blood from the stones. The gesture is meticulous, methodical. Cleansing becomes an act of concealment. Yet not all traces vanish. Shoes of the dead remain—mute and eloquent, testimony to the lives erased but not quite effaced. The camera lingers. Water runs across the cobbles, washing the surface, but not the history beneath. This is the grammar of state memory. The Lenin statue presides silently over the square—a grotesque totem of ideological collapse. The frame contains history, but cannot reconcile it. No catharsis is offered. Only residue. The film ends not with truth, but with trouble. Not with memory, but with its interruption. Through this sequence, Konchalovsky does not simply narrate a massacre. He stages a cinematic insurrection. *Dear Comrades!* becomes a film not about history but against it—against its closures, its sanitised frames, its redemptive fictions. It reclaims memory not as content, but as conflict. And in doing so, it fulfills Foucault’s imperative: to think against forgetting, to remember as resistance.

5. Family Frames: Postmemory and the Intimate Past

The concept of “postmemory,” coined by Marianne Hirsch (1997, 2012) in the early 1990s, has become a foundational term within the field of contemporary memory studies. Originally developed in the context of Holocaust representation, the term has since been extended to encompass a broader constellation of historical traumas, including slavery, forced displacement, and genocide. Yet postmemory does not refer to memory in any straightforward or experiential sense. Rather, it describes a specific mode of cultural and intergenerational transmission in which the traumatic experiences of a previous generation are inherited not through direct recollection, but through narratives, visual traces, and affective structures embedded within familial and social environments. What distinguishes postmemory as a theoretical construct is the paradox it articulates. These are not memories in the conventional sense: they are mediated, deferred, and inherited. And yet, they are experienced with the emotional immediacy and psychic intensity typically reserved for first-hand knowledge. In this way, Hirsch challenges the conventional boundary between personal memory and cultural history, proposing instead a liminal space in which representation substitutes for recollection, and in which the affective proximity to the past collapses temporal distance without collapsing critical perspective. Crucially, postmemory is not a passive condition but an active, interpretive practice. It entails a form of cultural labour, through which the post-generational subject engages imaginatively and ethically with a past that remains unfinished, unresolved, and often resistant to narrative closure. What is transmitted is not the event itself, but its resonance—its emotional debris, its spectral presence. In some cases, these inherited

memories may encroach upon or even eclipse the subject's own autobiographical narrative, producing what Hirsch calls an "afterlife" of trauma: a condition in which the self is persistently shadowed by a catastrophe it did not witness but cannot disavow.

To characterise postmemory solely in terms of loss or absence, however, would be reductive. It is, at once, a reparative and creative mode of engagement—an effort to recover, reconfigure, and make visible that which has been repressed, denied, or forgotten. Its temporal logic is not restorative in the traditional sense; postmemory does not aim to recover the past as it was, but to sustain the ethical distance necessary to confront its ruptures. In this, it resists both amnesia and nostalgia, offering instead a model of remembrance grounded in responsibility. Hirsch's theorisation of postmemory thus constitutes more than a conceptual intervention in Holocaust or trauma studies. It is one of the most compelling frameworks for thinking about the intergenerational transmission of historical violence in an age increasingly defined by cultural memory and mediated experience. By foregrounding the affective, imaginative, and representational dimensions of inherited trauma, postmemory enables us to understand how history persists—not as settled fact, but as haunting, legacy, and demand.

This final section examines the quietly harrowing curfew scene, in which Konchalovsky stages an emotionally and ideologically charged confrontation between Lyudmila and her father, set against the backdrop of state violence and enforced silence during a citywide lockdown (Konchalovsky, 2020, 1:10:15–1:15:10). The official announcement—cold, distant, and authoritarian—floods the streets via a loudspeaker: the city is under curfew, and those without authorisation risk being shot. The disembodied voice sets the tone for the intimate exchange that follows, contrasting the state's mechanical declarations with the raw, human testimony that emerges within the domestic space. As the radio, television, and loudspeakers broadcast official fictions of order, inside the home a different kind of archive is unfolding—one rooted in personal memory, grief, and disillusionment. This dissonance between external and internal narratives is a defining feature of postmemory, as the scene dramatises the haunting presence of traumas inherited but not directly experienced.

Figure 8: Screenshot from Andrei Konchalovsky's *Dear Comrades!* (*Dorogie tovarishchi!*, 2020).



The conversation begins with Lyudmila's incredulous question: "Since when are you praying?" Her father's response is neither confessional nor devotional. Instead, he turns to memory as a form of resistance: "Sit down. I want to read you something." What follows is not a plea for transcendence, but a descent into the material and moral wreckage of the early Soviet years. He reads from a letter dated to the early 1920s, an unadorned litany of famine, confiscation, executions, rape, and systemic persecution:

"Where is it now? They killed Uncle Timofey too. So many were gunned down—left naked, thrown onto carts in heaps. Arms and legs dragging along the ground. Uncle Timofey's legs were sticking straight up... it was a disgrace. I tried to attend school, but they said I couldn't. My father was branded a traitor, so they barred me. I rarely go now. But it doesn't bother me—the school's nothing but propaganda and blasphemy. Then they came, took our last bit of corn, and fined us too. Mama says we'll die of hunger. And she's right. This isn't the first time. Not just here, not just our village—everywhere."

The language is frank, even grotesque, conveying the brutal corporeality of historical trauma. The past is not abstracted into ideology—it is rendered in dismembered limbs, in naked bodies dumped unceremoniously into mass graves. The voice is not official, but intimate; not historical, but testimonial.

It is memory at its most insubordinate. What follows deepens the wound. The father shares his own account, supplementing the letter's narrative with his personal recollections of atrocity: "This is Nastyusha—my niece, so your cousin. This must've been in 1922 or 1923. As soon as I got the letter, I rushed back to the village. But I was too late. They were already dead—dumped in a ditch, both of them naked. They say they were raped first... then killed." These recollections challenge the sanitised official narrative Lyudmila still clings to, invoking the painful realities that have been silenced or overwritten by state ideology. Her father's story represents a rupture in the regime of memory she occupies; it is a testimony from an earlier mnemonic regime—monarchist, familial, intimate, and suppressed—now resurfacing in defiance of socialist historical closure. In other words, his account revives what Foucault would describe as a counter-memory: a buried narrative structure that resists the totalising script of official historiography. Lyudmila, however, refuses the terms of this reckoning:

Lyudmila — What else could they have done? Tell me—was there another way? Terrible things were happening in the Don region. The kulaks, the Whites... even the Cossacks turned savage. What choice was there? Sholokhov wrote about all of it—you should read his novel.

Her invocation of Sholokhov is telling—a recourse to literature that has been subsumed into the cultural apparatus of state legitimacy. But her father does not flinch:

The Father — If your Sholokhov had told the truth, no one would even know his name. They would've exiled him—or shot him, just like the rest.

As the exchange unfolds, the conversation slips from dialogue into confrontation. The issue is no longer merely what happened, but how one chooses to remember—and at what cost. Lyudmila's tone shifts from defensive to defiant:

Lyudmila — Oh, please. You think I'm scared? I stood in those lines—I saw everything. I know, I know exactly what you're about to say.

Yet her protestations only underscore the limits of her seeing, which remains confined to the visible dimensions of official history. With that, the ideological façade begins to collapse. Her father continues with an even more horrific anecdote:

The Father — You’ve seen a lot, I know. But nothing like this. In a village I knew, an old Cossack called the commissar a barbarian. So, they cut out his tongue, nailed it to his chin, and paraded him through the streets until he died. That’s why I say, my daughter—there’s no God in the Don. And we need to talk about that.

Figure 9: Screenshot from Andrei Konchalovsky’s *Dear Comrades!* (*Dorogie tovarishchi!*, 2020).



Konchalovsky’s cinematographic choices reinforce this schism with precision. Lyudmila is repeatedly framed through the threshold of a doorway—a literal *frame-within-a-frame*—which confines her within the spatial and ideological architecture of Soviet orthodoxy. Her father, by contrast, is filmed without such visual constraints. His presence occupies open space, and his voice emerges uncontained by the discursive limits that govern Lyudmila’s speech. This visual composition is not incidental: it materialises their divergent relationships to the past. Lyudmila, encased within the frame, speaks from within the sanctioned memory regime. Her father, unframed, speaks from its outside—resurrecting a suppressed archive of familial recollection. His family narratives do not seek to “win” the argument—they function instead as historical fissures, as moments of unassimilable pain that resist the discursive

closure Lyudmila attempts to impose. Such stories, uncontained by historical textbooks or ideological validation, embody the lived residues of violence that official memory systems erase. The scene culminates not in reconciliation, but in quiet despair, as Lyudmila pours him a Hungarian liqueur—once associated with celebration, now repurposed for mourning. “Let’s drink to the dead,” he says solemnly. The toast functions not as a gesture of reconciliation, but as a quiet refusal of forgetting. It anchors the present not in utopian futures or dialectical certainties, but in the ungrieved losses of the past. In doing so, it reorients the film’s moral compass—locating memory not as a vehicle of ideology, but as a site of reckoning with the nation’s enduring traumas.

6. Conclusion

Dear Comrades! concludes not with resolution, but with residue. Its political commitment lies not in the rehabilitation of historical truth, nor in the construction of a consoling narrative, but in the deliberate refusal of both. In his *Russian Cinema*, David Gillespie (2003) argues that history in Russian cinema has always been visualised through the lens of the state’s official ideology, regardless of whether it belongs to the Soviet or post-Soviet periods:

“In Soviet Russia, history was a particular problem. Coming to terms with the past — learning the truth — is the key to understanding the present, but that ‘truth’ was always subject to the Party’s control and manipulation. [...] Therefore, the Russian historical film, be it pre-1991 or subsequent, is not only about representing the past or visualising it as a means of entertainment or instruction. Rather, it is there to legitimise the present, to explain past events in the light of present-day realities and so point to the future. Thus, there is in Russian cinema a constant effort to reinvent history” (p. 60).

While this argument may hold true for the period in which the book was written, today there are, albeit limited, examples within Russian cinema—such as Andrey Zvyagintsev’s *Leviathan* (2014) and Konchalovsky’s *Dear Comrades!*—that succeed in offering a critical perspective on Russia’s recent past and present, articulating a politics of memory that challenges official narratives. Konchalovsky characterises *Dear Comrades!* as a portrait of his parents’ generation—“the good, obedient communists, let down by the state” (Brooks, 2020). As in his earlier film *The Inner Circle* (1991), which centred on Stalin’s personal projectionist, the Russian auteur director carefully avoids aligning himself with any particular stance on contentious political legacies—be it Tsarism, nationalism, Stalinism, or simply nostalgia for communism. In an interview, Konchalovsky articulates his own position regarding the regimes of memory: “Let me tell you. I know the Russian society very well—I lived in that society. It was deeply permeated by fear, a particular kind of fear tied to political correctness. Communist political

correctness. People in Russia criticise me and say I made a film for American imperialists. I say, you're wrong—it's a Soviet film. I'm a Soviet director. I'm Soviet. I simply put into the film everything I knew about that world" (Pulver, 2021). What Andrei Konchalovsky stages across his film is a sustained interrogation of the very conditions under which memory can be articulated, transmitted, and contested under authoritarian regimes.

The film's central concern is not simply with *what happened* in Novocherkassk in June 1962, but with *how those events have been remembered*—or more precisely, *how they have been structurally forgotten*. In resisting catharsis, the film resists closure; and in resisting closure, it refuses the ideological finalities on which authoritarian memory regimes depend. The article has argued that *Dear Comrades!* is best understood as a cinematic archaeology of memory, one that excavates the layered, often conflicting mnemonic terrains of Soviet and post-Soviet historical consciousness. Through the intersecting frameworks of Radstone and Hodgkin's "regimes of memory," Foucault's "counter-memory," and Hirsch's "postmemory," the analysis traced how the film dramatises memory not as possession, but as conflict—something always already mediated by power, disrupted by trauma, and transmitted through affective and visual residue. Each theoretical lens illuminated a different stratum of the film's engagement with a difficult past: Radstone and Hodgkin offered a way to read the intergenerational domestic confrontations as symptomatic of incompatible mnemonic logics; Foucault's genealogy revealed how the film's aesthetic choices work to subvert the epistemological scaffolding of official historiography; and Hirsch's account of postmemory gave shape to the film's insistence on the afterlives of trauma, particularly as they persist within familial silence and state-mandated forgetting.

Konchalovsky's formal strategies play a central role in this mnemonic politics. The persistent use of black-and-white cinematography, narrow 1.33:1 framing, and mise-en-scène constructed from architectural thresholds—windows, doorways, mirrors—are not merely aesthetic decisions, but visual enactments of memory's constraints. They produce a cinematic language of surveillance, restriction, and affective compression. Characters are literally and symbolically framed—confined within ideological architectures they cannot escape. In such a visual grammar, memory becomes less a recovered truth than a structuring absence: what is visible is often what is permitted, while what is repressed resides at the edges of the frame, unspeakable but constitutive. In this sense, Konchalovsky's cinema recalls what Foucault described as the genealogist's task: not to restore memory to its rightful place, but to disturb the grounds upon which truth is claimed. The massacre scene, perhaps the most harrowing segment of the film, does not dramatises the event as spectacle, nor does it offer the viewer an omniscient perspective. Instead, it presents the massacre through fragmentation, spatial discontinuity, and sensory dissonance—registering the violence not only as an event but as an epistemic rupture. The camera's refusal to provide full visual access parallels the regime's refusal to acknowledge its own crimes. Yet in that refusal, a counter-memory takes form: one that mobilises absence, silence, and partiality as political weapons. The

breach in the glass—a bullet shattering the window of the coiffeur’s shop—becomes emblematic of a larger symbolic shattering: of narrative, of ideology, of the state’s monopolisation of historical truth.

Equally vital is the film’s emphasis on intergenerational transmission. Through the figure of Lyudmila and her family, *Dear Comrades!* stages the collapse of ideological inheritance. The kitchen scene, where Lyudmila, her daughter Svetka, and her father clash over their respective pasts, becomes a microcosm of national dissonance. The characters speak across temporal and ideological registers, unable to translate memory into shared meaning. The result is not reconciliation but rupture—a living archive of misrecognition. Svetka inherits not her mother’s ideology, but her silences. Her trauma is not her own, but it is felt with the weight of inheritance. Here, the concept of postmemory becomes indispensable: Svetka’s subjectivity is shaped by histories she did not witness but must carry. The curfew scene deepens this transmission, as Lyudmila’s father resurrects long-buried traumas through testimony. His stories, long-suppressed and harrowing, do not merely supplement the film’s historical account—they fracture it. They serve not as illustration but as interruption, and in doing so, they resist the normalising narrative arcs of both trauma and history.

Ultimately, *Dear Comrades!* refuses the viewer the fantasy of historical mastery. It does not allow us to “understand” the past in any redemptive sense, nor does it offer memory as a form of healing. Instead, it insists that to remember under authoritarianism is already a political act—fraught, fragmentary, and frail. Its ethical imperative is not to commemorate but to confront: to dwell in the disjunctions between experience and ideology, testimony and fiction, silence and speech. In this, Konchalovsky’s film becomes an act of resistance—not just against the dark chapters of Soviet history, but against the broader desire to contain and resolve the violence of memory. If memory, as Radstone and Hodgkin argue, is a field of struggle; if counter-memory, as Foucault insists, is an insurgent practice; and if postmemory, as Hirsch suggests, is a haunted inheritance—then *Dear Comrades!* becomes a cinematic articulation of all three. It is not merely a film about the past. It is a reckoning with its afterlives.

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