

## R E V I E W

on the dissertation of Magdalena Danielova Vlastanova on topic

"American and British anti-Soviet film propaganda (1961-1968)"

for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in scientific specialty 2.2.

History and Archaeology

by Prof. Iskra Baeva PhD, Lecturer in Contemporary History at the Faculty of History,

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### **1. Information about the applicant**

Magdalena Vlastanova was born in Sofia and completed her secondary education (2008-2012) at the "César Vallejo" high school, studying Spanish and English in Sofia, then in the period 2012-2016 was a student in the binary major "History and Philosophy" at the Faculty of History of the "St. Kliment Ohridski". She continued her education at the same university and faculty in the Master's program "Crises, conflicts and diplomacy in world politics of the 16th - 21st centuries", based in the Department of New and Contemporary History. In July 2018 Magdalena Vlastanova defended her master's thesis with honors on "Politics and the film industry in the USA at the beginning of the Cold War, the late 1940s and early 1950s". During the year of her graduation, Magdaleva Vlastanova participated in a doctoral competition, which she won and was enrolled in the same department, where she was preparing this dissertation under the supervision of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Gergana Alexieva.

Even while she was a student from 2015 to 2018. Magdalena Vlastanova (Dzhunova) can boast of several publications on diverse topics from the more distant past: antiquity, medieval education, monastic manuscripts, Bogomilism, the Anglo-Boer War of 1880–1881.

After the expiration of her full-time doctoral studies, Magdalena Vlastanova was expelled with the right to defense by decision of the Faculty Council of History Faculty dated September 26, 2023. with protocol No. 11 and with Order RD 20-1826 of the rector A. Gerdzhikov from October 10, 2023.

Magdalena Vlastanova's dissertation was discussed by the Department of New and Contemporary History on August 29, 2024, after which a proposal was made to start a procedure for its public defense. The protocol of the discussion and decision of the department is No. 12/29.08.2024.

## **2. A review of the dissertation**

I will begin my assessment of Magdalena Vlastanova's dissertation "American and British Anti-Soviet Cinematic Propaganda (1961-1968)" with its general parameters. The dissertation work is structured in an introduction, an historical introduction, three chapters realized according to the problem principle and very detailed divided into parts and paragraphs, a conclusion, bibliography and appendices and is in a volume of 289 pages. As can be seen from the topic, it is a continuation of her research interest from her master's thesis.

The topic of film propaganda is specific, since for its development, historical processes in international relations and internal political problems must be combined, on the one hand, with the evolution of the relationship between film art and power, on the other. An important element of this theme is the intervention of the authorities in the creative processes, in other words censorship, which in this period was subordinated to propaganda. The nature of the subject suggests a different source base than what we are used to for sensu stricto historical subjects. This is the explanation for the specific source base of Magdalena Vlastanova, composed of feature films and documentaries (20 audiovisual sources, including the analyzed films) for that part of the dissertation that presents in more detail or more generally the films she had selected in order to defend her research objective and thesis. At the same time, for the purely historical part of the dissertation in the Bibliography (pp. 241–189), the doctoral student indicated a list of published documents (10 items, mainly including the documents on the US foreign policy – FRUS), without, however, this being explicitly stated in the title. In a separate list, four biographies and memoirs are presented, whereby it is striking that Nikita Khrushchev's memoirs were used in English, and not in the version published in Bulgarian. Internet sources of different nature number 96 items, among which we also find catalogs, important again for the artistic part of the dissertation. It seems to me that the place of the 30 items in the next list in the bibliography, entitled "Declarations, Reports, Laws, Orders, Manifestos, Addresses, Resolutions,

Speeches" is rather in the first part with the documents. While that of the four interviews is among the publicity. I don't think the collection of articles should be in a separate list, because in most cases they contain scientific historical studies, and the collection of papers should be in the first untitled section. The next list, Journalistics (36 entries), should probably be entitled Periodicals, because it includes periodicals of a varied character, some of which are purely scientific. It also seems to me that there is no need for a separate section "Articles" (77 items), because all scientific publications, regardless of their size and format, should be presented together in a general list, so their place is next to 102- those items from the "Monographs" list. The used sources, documents, journalism and scientific publications of a total number of 395 are in English and Bulgarian.

In the Introduction, Magdalena Vlastanova first formulated the thesis of her work as follows: *"in the period 1961-1968 in Great Britain and the USA, entertainment films with anti-Soviet propaganda themes are actively produced, which serve the goals set in the Cold War. The inclusion of cinema to build a negative image of the enemy is a necessity in order to mobilize the population through an additional propaganda channel to win the battle against him... If in the initial period of the Cold War there was an overlap in their representation as the embodiment of everything negative, immoral and unacceptable in films, then in the 1960s there was a divergence... in relations with the USSR, hopes for cooperation and peaceful coexistence were built."* (p. 6).

While the purpose of the dissertation is: *"to highlight the commonalities and specifics of the American and British tapes of the period 1961-1968. through the prism of propaganda by tracing the trends in the production of their anti-Soviet propaganda messages"* (p. 6). The doctoral student has also set herself four specific tasks, which, paraphrased by me, mean the following: to follow the path of the creation of a given film; to place the films referred to in the context of the historical development of the United States and Great Britain; to track the results of film propaganda; to look for the reasons for its failure. (pp. 6–7) She has also added an object, subject and expected outcome of the research, as well as two questions, but they rather repeat the thesis, aim and tasks, so I see no point in stating them explicitly.

In my opinion, a very important place for the development of the topic of the dissertation is the "Historical Introduction", since in it Magdalena Vlastanova traced the development of the

term propaganda, the various attempts to formulate it and, above all, the propaganda practice in the Cold War era, when it developed the action of the events of the dissertation. Her main focus is on the role of cinema as one of the most influential means of propaganda in society. Various views on propaganda in the Cold War era are presented, which in most cases are defined by Noam Chomsky's thesis: "*Anti-communism as a national religion and control mechanism*" (p. 25), as well as by the various propaganda institutes west of the "Iron Curtain". Magdalena Vlastanova paid special attention to the other main subject of the dissertation - cinema: how it developed and how it was used in this era.

Structurally, the thesis is subordinated to the problematic principle, and in the first two chapters, film propaganda is presented in parallel and almost in mirror form in the two countries - the United States and Great Britain. They begin with the formation and implementation of American and British film propaganda in the context of the foreign and domestic political challenges faced by both countries: the USA as a superpower and Great Britain as a former world empire becoming a European country with an increasing dependence on its overseas ally. The following is a story about the development of the relevant film industry as a cultural and commercial product, what principles and regulations it obeys, how creators react to the changing geopolitical situation and social challenges. The conclusion is dedicated to a specific presentation of the action of a films (synopsis), characters, actors and the realization of the films on which the idea of the dissertation is based. This approach allows a comparison to be made between the two film industries and to highlight the leading role of the American in the face of Hollywood over the British, as was the role of both countries in the Cold War. In these first two chapters, the films analyzed are not coincidentally related to the two main themes in the confrontation between East and West: the German question (the construction of the Berlin Wall in the summer of 1961), where one of the most important and dangerous dividing lines for world peace crossed, as well as with the current scandals related to the activities of the Soviet intelligence (spy affairs).

The third chapter is again thematic, but this time the focus is on films that center around the theme of nuclear weapons (the atomic bomb), which became particularly relevant in the 1960s in the light of the Caribbean crisis of October 1962, which brought the world before the danger of nuclear war. In this chapter, Magdalena Vlastanova has united the American and

British film industries, presenting the main problems faced by each country. And these, according to her, are related to the disputes between analysts on both sides about the impact of nuclear weapons on historical development and on humanity in general, the public reaction that led to the creation of the anti-war movement in the two nuclear states, to end again with a detailed presentation of the selected four films each from the American and British film production, dedicated to the nuclear danger. And in this chapter, as well as in the previous two, the doctoral student tried to choose such films that belong to different film genres (documentary, comedy, drama, action-thriller, fiction) and that show diverse approaches to the problem.

When presenting the dissertation, it is worth noting one specific feature that I have not encountered in other similar scientific studies. This means that each chapter begins with a distinct introduction and ends with a conclusion. I don't know to what extent this is necessary, because at the beginning it is briefly told about what will be presented, and at the end there is a retelling of what has already been written. At the same time, the conclusions are completely in place.

There are also appendices to the dissertation that touch on some of the problems discussed in the analysis, such as: the birth rate in the USA; The Hollywood Ten, a list of filmmakers suspected of communism; home theater listings; the data on the box-office performance of the various films; British films, funding; summaries of the films used. These appendices undoubtedly complement the text of the dissertation, but it seems to me that the place of some of them (for example, the birth data) is rather in the text, because they are illustrative in nature, and at the end of the text they are already outside the events.

### **3. Evaluation of the scientific results obtained**

My overall assessment of the dissertation is that the topic is original and interesting, located on the border between the classic historical narrative and the study of the politics-history-art relationship. It is originally structured, subordinated to the problem principle, and the thesis is defended convincingly enough as source and analytical material.

In my opinion, Magdalena Vlastanova has successfully realized the set goal: to highlight the general and the specific in American and British cinema on the selected topics from the point of view of the effectiveness of propaganda. She chose to compare 16 films: eight American

(**One, two, three** of Billy Wilder; **Escape from East Berlin** of Robert Siodmak; **Escape to Berlin** of Will Tremper; **Torn Curtain** of Alfred Hitchcock, **Seven Days in May** of John Frankheimer; **File-safe** of Sidney Lumet; **The Russians are Coming! The Russians are Coming!** of Norman Jewison; **Ice Station Zebra** of John Sturges) and eight British (**From Russia with Love** of Terence Young; **Ring of Spies** of Robert Tronson; **Funeral in Berlin** of Guy Hamilton; **Billion Dollar Brain** of Kenneth Russell; **The Day the Earth Caught Fire** of Val Guest; **Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb** of Stanley Kubrick; **The Bedford Incident** of James B. Harris; **The War Game** of Peter Watkins). The author of the dissertation has discovered and emphasized both the general propaganda trends and the differences, determined mostly by the different positions of the two countries, which in the American case are that of a global leader country, and in the British case of the smaller one that has become a junior partner, trying to be both the main American ally in Europe and occupy an intermediate position between the two superpowers.

Magdalena Vlastanova has placed the analysis of the selected films in the context of the history of the Cold War and the development of the USA and Great Britain, thereby demonstrating a good knowledge not only of the history of international relations and specific events, but also the evolution of film production and its political motivated regulation. In the analysis of the films, the doctoral student has shown a good knowledge of the history of cinema, her evaluative instinct and her ability to look for the intersections between real events and their artistic interpretation. She also demonstrates a willingness to defend her opinion, even when she has to be critical to famous directors such as Alfred Hitchcock or Billy Wilder.

When comparing the text of the dissertation with the contributions stated by the doctoral student, I can say that they are formulated modestly (presentation of historiography unknown to Bulgaria, complementing the picture of the ideological confrontation; the use of films as historical sources for the great confrontation between the USA and the USSR in the years of the Cold War) and have undoubtedly been realized.

My assessment is also positive for the conclusions formulated by Magdalena Vlastanova in each of the three chapters of the dissertation.

#### **4. Evaluation of the dissertation publications**

The dissertation publications are much more than the minimum requirements because they are 11 in number, with only one in print. One is in English in a Ukrainian edition, and the remaining 10 are in Bulgarian. The nature and editions of the publications show that most of them are the result of Magdalena Vlastanova's participation in scientific projects or scientific forums. Magdalena Vlastanova's publications follow the ideas of the dissertation work or expand them by introducing the scientific community to moments from the dissertation work.

In the documentation on the procedure for the defense of Magdalena Vlastanova's dissertation work, there is information about 12 of her participations in scientific forums, but unfortunately only the topics of her reports appear, but not the forums where they were presented.

#### **5. Evaluation of the abstract**

The abstract of Magdalena Vlastanova's dissertation "American and British Anti-Soviet Cinema Propaganda (1961-1968)" has a volume of 23 pages and outlines the main parameters of the dissertation work. It presents the important characteristics of the research: the thesis, the object, the subject, the goal and the specific tasks that Magdalena Vlastanova set herself. The doctoral student formulated the methodology of her work, defended the choice of the 1960s as a chronological scope. The documentary and historiographic basis of the dissertation is convincingly defended. The structure and content of the three chapters of the study have been adequately followed. There is also the self-assessment for the scientific contributions of the dissertation, as well as a list of the doctoral student's numerous publications related to the topic of her dissertation work.

The content and layout of the abstract meet the academic requirements.

#### **6. Evaluation of the scientific indicators**

The general evaluation of the scientometric indicators of the scientific activity of Magdalena Daniela Vlastanova on the topic of direction is positive. It is due to the 50 points obtained for the dissertation and 30 points for her other publications, giving a total of 80 points.

This means that the doctoral student Magdalena Vlastinova meets the scientometric requirements for the awarding of the educational and scientific degree "doctor".

## 7. Critical comments and recommendations

My positive evaluation of the dissertation does not mean that I have no disagreements, critical remarks or recommendations for improving the text.

One of my main objections is related to the repeated presentation of the films and their synopsis: they are presented several times, first generally and then specifically more than once. This concept has led to repetitions, which are also complemented by the structure of each chapter, which begins with an introduction and ends with a conclusion, the content of which precedes and follows what is written in the chapter.

My other observations concern the complex and therefore unclear statement. For example: *"Hollywood used the premise of the US-USSR signing a treaty or agreement as a trigger to overthrow the legitimate government in the United States in the movie Seven Days in May."* (p. 55); *"Exposure on the basis of which beliefs decisions are made is the focus of the document, at the expense of any kind of restrictions on the activities of agents"* (p. 53); *"one of the most successful strategies of the West in the struggle for the hearts and minds of Berliners - economic stimulus through profit"*, *"the abundance of capitalistic-style household goods in contrast to the advantage for the development of industry in the countries of the Eastern Bloc"* (p. 81); *"The Vietnam War is perceived as a situation that highlights the different perception of cordial relations"* (p. 110); *"women are abandoning their role as part of the workforce"* (p. 111); *"suddenly knocking down the bricks, expecting this transformation to go smoothly"* (p. 176); *"The film relies on the original premise of the difference between "Russians" and "communists" and of the imposition of ideology on a vulnerable nation, which prevents its original realization."* (p. 191); *"does not inspire the necessary dose of confidence in the production companies MGM and Columbia, because the plot of the film strongly corresponds to the confrontation between East and West during the Cold War period, and the insertion of pro-communist ideas is possible"* (p. 194).

I also have specific disagreements: it is hard to believe in the statement of s. 56 *"The return of American soldiers after the end of World War II and their entry into peacetime life*



*marks the birth of 75 million. babies who become 40% of the country's population', since the US population was 140 million during this period; nor does it seem convincing that "the Soviets appreciated the power of public victory to deal with domestic problems and preserve international image" (p. 49) in relation to the Berlin and Caribbean crises, both of which were defeats rather than victories for the Soviet Union.*

There are numerous linguistic and historical inaccuracies in the dissertation.

My next remarks are also purely linguistic.

As a recommendation, I would suggest that Magdalena Vlastanova consider whether she could not in the future expand her research on the mirror image of propaganda, by examining the Soviet propaganda films from the Cold War. Thus, she could assess to what extent the clichéd images of the "enemies" are independently constructed on both sides of the "Iron Curtain" or they mutually influence each other.

## **7. Conclusion**

Magdalena Vlastanova's dissertation work "American and British Anti-Soviet Cinema Propaganda (1961-1968)" shows the skills of the doctoral student to search for primary and secondary documentary material, to effectively use historiography on the subject, to independently develop problems from the historical development of important for the development of the Cold War countries such as the United States and Great Britain and their film propaganda, to draw historical conclusions and thus contribute to the development of Bulgarian historiography.

All this gives me grounds, in spite of the remarks I have formulated, to state my conviction that Magdalena Danielova Vlastanova has fulfilled all the academic requirements for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor", for which I will vote.

November 26, 2024.

Reviewer: prof. Iskra Baeva PhD