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Solovki Power: Creating Propaganda to Portray an Anti-Stalin Perspective

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Abstract

Changes to the political and social systems within the Soviet Union during Mikhail Gorbachev's leadership allowed for an unprecedented level of freedom for filmmaker Marina Goldovskaya as she sought to unveil the realities of Soviet life. Goldovskaya's film *Solovki Power* (1988) exemplified these changes by documenting the history of Stalin's labor camp on the Solovki Islands that would serve as a model for widespread Gulag camps. State imposed restrictions still dictated some creative freedoms, with Goldovskaya's autobiography *Woman with a Movie Camera* providing deeper insight into the personal, historical, and creative aspects depicted. As a member of the creative intelligentsia that held prevalent anti-Stalin beliefs, this research explores the underlying themes Goldovskaya promoted in her film regarding the Soviet system.

Introduction

Incorporating decades of Soviet leadership and made viable by Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, Marina Goldovskaya's work as a documentary filmmaker in producing *Solovki Power* in 1988 encapsulated many of the circumstances that foretold the disruption of a previous way of life. The film depicts Solovki Islands' story and the spread of forced labor camps known as *Gulags*, started by Lenin and replicated at a large scale by Stalin to 're-educate' political enemies and suppress dissent against Soviet power. This paper aims to analyze and contrast the film's depiction of the Solovki labor camp with personal accounts described within her autobiography to promote a wider theme about the reality of the Soviet system. An analysis of personal, historical, and creative perspectives reveals that Goldovskaya sought to promote the central idea that totalitarianism dominated all systems and spheres within the Soviet Union through messaging that conformed to remaining State-sanctioned ideological restrictions. This documentary serves as an anti-Stalin propaganda piece that exemplified the entire Soviet system, a counter to a central socialist belief that labor would lead to freedom. A more accurate account exposes the forced labor of those imprisoned on the Solovki Islands and the senseless crimes committed during its operation. While unable to explicitly criticize the Soviet regime, the emotional and creative elements of the film managed to expose the pervasive fear imposed and highlighted the totalitarian system's far-reaching impacts on many that lived under this regime.

Historical and personal context of *Solovki Power*

Born in 1941 during World War II to a tumultuous childhood, Marina Goldovskaya would spend her later years as a youth surrounded by the influence of members of the creative *intelligentsia* within the House of Filmmakers, due to her father's position at the State Institute of

Cinematography, or VGIK. The creative *intelligentsia* comprised an educated class that were aware of the government's failures to protect or serve the people. Within this setting, she had exposure to many of the prevalent feelings amongst the *intelligentsia*, which countered the strong influence of the Soviet regime instilled in her. The shock Goldovskaya experienced at Stalin's death in 1953 was met by her father's reply, "One bastard less!" (p. 35), a remark that revealed the anti-Stalin feelings of the creative *intelligentsia* at the time. Her access and experiences in youth inspired and allowed her to pursue her creative passions. Marina Goldovskaya attended VGIK for four years and pursued a career at the State Committee for Television and Radio, where she would be taught to conform to the role of media prescribed by the Party. The use of media as a tool for propaganda within the Soviet regime defined the early years of her career, as her job as a filmmaker required creating films that adhered to common socialist themes. The State strictly forbade the portrayal of famine, low production, peasant unrest, and general despair that afflicted a majority of the country due to Stalin's economic policies and collectivization. This process of forced consolidation of peasants into collective farms had little success in reducing the nation's agricultural crisis. The Soviet regime typically would meet any act that appeared to defy the approved ideology with swift and harsh punishment.

Stalin's successor Georgy Malenkov was quickly succeeded by Nikita Khrushchev, who presented a new political message that began to denounce Stalin's oppressive rule and abuse of power. This transition of power set the stage for a period known as the Khrushchev Thaw, which introduced de-Stalinization and a loosening of political and creative restrictions. Over approximately the next ten years, as a continual back-and-forth of loosening and tightening of these restrictions persisted, Goldovskaya traveled to remote parts of the Soviet Union for work and witnessed firsthand the bleak and harsh conditions in which many were living. While

Goldovskaya aimed to promote a message of resiliency and determination in the face of hardship through her films, the State's ideological censorship still restricted any images of death or dying, sadness, despair, or famine. Instead, the State promoted themes of socialism and labor as an individual's duty to support the Soviet Union.

When Khrushchev died, he was succeeded by Leonid Brezhnev, whose leadership was marked by a refusal to make political reforms, a failing economy, corruption, and stagnation. Despite continued economic and political struggles and promises from leadership for growth and reform, improvements to the financial standing of most were minuscule, civil unrest was growing, and the infiltration of information past government censors was increasing. During these years the genre of television cinema became increasingly more significant despite Brezhnev maintaining tight control over political and ideological freedom. A shift in Goldovskaya's perceived role stemmed from Brezhnev's refusal to make reforms, which encouraged journalists to begin defying imposed restrictions. The role of the creative *intelligentsia* within this political system was described by Goldovskaya in that "When a second party was still impossible but was needed to move the nation forward, journalists performed the role" (p. 107). Goldovskaya would adopt this goal in her creative pursuits, and would continue to confront topics not within the approved ideological narrative throughout her career.

It was not until the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev in the mid-1980s that policy would begin to create significant changes to the political and creative freedoms experienced throughout the Soviet Union. Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, a movement that sought to reform economic and political systems to reduce instability, allowed for Marina to explore documenting a previously restricted topic. Having worked for a State-ran institution she described as a "microcosm of the totalitarian system, with an exact copy of its hierarchy" (p. 48),

she sought to expose similar lived truths that dominated many aspects of life through the filming of *Solovki Power*. While still operating within the loosened restraints of State control over the media, she used the horrors of the Solovki prison camp to weave a compelling narrative about the oppression that had been perfected in this prison camp and used as a model for the rest of the country. By showing these horrors and how the fears imposed there persisted in the nation's minds many years later, Goldovskaya managed to denounce the foundation of the entire Soviet regime.

Goldovskaya's use of individual narratives and experiences in *Solovki Power* depicted the abuse of power that previous ideological restrictions forbade, a process emphasized in the film through the lasting effects of decades of brutal oppression. The documentary intended to expose the Soviet Union's totalitarian regime while documenting uncovered history in a way that aligned with her goals as a member of the creative *intelligentsia*.

Solovki Power (1988)

Golovskaya's film focused on the brutality and abuse within the Solovki labor camp that aimed to 're-educate' political enemies, or those belonging to the Russian *intelligentsia* who disapproved of the Soviet regime and Stalin's leadership. The story told both prisoners' emotional perspectives and their loved ones' experience, accompanied by a description of the island's history. Notable to the camp entrance was the sign with Stalin's slogan that read "Labor is the work of honor, glory, courage, and heroism" (p. 143), a theme central to socialism and Stalin's promotion of forced labor. Within the internal hierarchy of the camp, criminals set the status quo and maintained the highest class status, while political enemies occupied the power structure's lowest level. Cheka guards, who were members of the Bolshevik secret police that were exiled to

the Solovki Islands to serve their sentence at the camp, also enforced rules and carried out punishments. Andrei Roshchin was a former Chekist featured in the documentary, and when asked about his role, he said “You see, Chekists were exiled there too. But we worked while we were there. We worked as guards, kept an eye on the inmates, and maintained order” (p. 138). This shows how even when interviewed many years later in the film, Roshchin still believed that he had experienced freedom to make personal choices in how he carried out the State’s demands, because he belonged to a class that occupied a higher social and political status than other prisoners. The Soviet regime’s successful indoctrination regarding the role of the individual within the political structure would allow Cheka guards to have the ‘freedom’ of consciousness to decide how they would carry out the will of the State. The Solovki prisoners were victims of senseless violence and cruel punishments, with those responsible never facing repercussions. The film explicitly mentioned the widespread replication of Solovki-style labor camps throughout the Soviet Union, which provided labor to expand infrastructure. The film also emphasized that since the nation's progress relied on labor overseen by camp bosses, these same prison bosses were responsible for constructing and expanding the entire country.

Marina Goldovskaya’s autobiography *Woman with a Movie Camera* provides the context for the personal message she hoped to portray through *Solovki Power*. Goldovskaya filmed the documentary as slow changes caused by *glasnost* and *perestroika* were met with her lingering apprehension. Many had an ingrained fear of criticizing the State reinforced by the brutal regime. The message portrayed that is less upfront but apparent to those that reflected her beliefs towards oppression was that the structure that started within the Solovki prison camp was also a reflection of the entire totalitarian system. The well-known saying of prisoners in the camp that “we don’t live under the Soviet regime, we live under the Solovki regime” (*Solovki Power*,

1988) provided literary irony for her message, the reality being that these camps *were* the entire essence of the Soviet regime. By exposing the history of Gulag camps started by Lenin through his New Economic Policy, the blame and responsibility were shifted away from Stalin and towards the entire foundations of the Soviet Union. Her process of finding prisoners to interview placed a heavy focus on featuring members of the *intelligentsia*, with personalities and beliefs most similar to her own, and with stories that focused on the repression of free thought and anti-Soviet dissent. She also revealed that the class structure in the Solovki camps occurred between intellectuals and peasants, with Goldovskaya relating to the persecution of the *intelligentsia*.

The film and the autobiography's accompanying chapter draw strong parallels between Goldovskaya's role as a member of the creative *intelligentsia* and the intellectuals featured in her film. Individuals such as Oleg Volkov, Samuil Epshtein, and Dmitry Likhachev expressed disdain and disapproval towards Stalin's ideas. Goldovskaya shared these feelings and sought to promote them, a goal that drove both the prior prisoners' and Marina's resolve to defy the State's attempts to suppress the history of the Solovki Islands. While she could not show the fear she experienced from this defiance, the film does hint at the fear of those recounting the labor camps' horrors. The trepidation towards the regime was a running theme in both her own life and the lives of all that had experienced Stalin's terror, driven by the State's ruthless control of information and punishment of political enemies as told in her autobiography. Those imprisoned on Solovki were perceived as attempting to resist the system's oppression and imposed norms; a resistance Goldovskaya wanted to expose through creating a film about these prisoners. The individuals featured in the film demonstrated her goal to depict the ability to persevere despite enduring suffering, a trait that she seemed to relate with when the risks of creating the film were high. When she began documenting the story, she had hidden Likhachev's interview tape in her

closet after showing only her mother, who “Got scared and asked that I promise neither to show nor to tell anyone about it” (p. 126). Despite being encouraged to produce the film, she recounted her initial apprehension by describing “Now anxious to make the film, I couldn’t figure out a single studio that would dare to put it into production, even though life had become a little bit more free and political changes were in the air” (p. 126), a sentiment which highlighted the State’s continued ability to use ingrained fear to maintain control over the public.

Goldovskaya employs a multitude of creative elements to portray meaning and emphasize the themes presented in her documentary. These elements included dramatic and dark music to accompany the film's imagery of a haunting yet picturesque island where gruesomeness had occurred. The narration of a man whose voice she described as "dry, without tears, but on the verge of emotion" (p. 153) set the documentary's somber tone and mournful mood. One element crucial to the development of the story was filming during both the warm summers and frigid winters. This contrast provided powerful representation for the histories provided, highlighting patterns of brutality and beauty in the most horrible circumstances. Her selection of stories and previous prisoners helped legitimize and demonstrate her claims about the camps' nature and the entire regime. The creative element most important in conveying the film's central meaning was the contrast drawn between the experiences of those imprisoned on the island and clips from the 1928 propaganda film *Solovki*. The film was created on behalf of the Soviet government to calm outrage directed at the spreading news of forced labor camps in Russia from other countries. The situation portrayed in this propaganda film was far from the gruesome reality of the labor camp described by former prisoners. This provided evidence of the Soviet regime's use of indoctrination and propaganda to disguise the reality of forced labor and torture committed. During her documentary, Goldovskaya had the film's most innocent and tragic

feature, Efim Lagutin, retrace and relive the exact moment he appears in *Solovki* as a 16-year-old prisoner of the Solovki Islands' Gulag. To witness the older man see himself as a child and recount his memories of the event serves as an emotional evocation of the cruelty of the Soviet regime and effectively suggests to the audience that the impacts were still prevalent in Soviet society.

The first film about the Solovki labor camps, *Solovki*, had conformed to the approved ideological messaging of the State at the time. The goal of this messaging served to promote collective labor and socialism as means to attain freedom, a reflection of the use of film as political propaganda. According to those imprisoned during the filming of *Solovki*, representation of the camp was entirely staged and not reflective of the squalid and impoverished conditions experienced in reality. At the time, the film remained unreleased within the Soviet Union in fear it would spark outrage that prisoners were living in better conditions than the general population. Goldovskaya's film, in contrast, served to counter these falsifications by revealing the atrocities experienced by those imprisoned and the brutality of Stalin's regime. The resulting documentary can be viewed as a form of anti-Stalin propaganda that uses emotional recollections to suggest the film is also denouncing the foundation of the Soviet system. This idea had already been prevalent in the minds of members of the creative *intelligentsia*, who had long recognized the government's shortcomings. The access and ability to create the film granted by her colleagues' position at Mosfilm, the country's main film studio, also meant the film had to abide by the remaining restrictions of the State's approved ideological messaging. The obscured depiction that emerged from these remaining ideological restraints limited upfront discussion about the intended theme; that what happened on the Solovki Islands was only a microcosm of the entire Soviet regime.

Further, the documentary and accompanying chapter that describes it in *Woman with a Movie Camera* revealed the power and class dynamics that often coincided with varying political views held throughout the country. In the film, this manifested with the prison's elite consisting of Cheka guards and criminals, who ruled over the political enemies and intellectuals comprising the lowest group. In Goldovskaya's own life, a similar dynamic materialized; Soviet leaders and elite dictated intellectuals' lives and careers, including her own, prompting her to seek freedom from this oppression. Unlike those that had been subject to long sentences in these camps for their actions, Goldovskaya faced minimal criticism during the approval process and no repercussions for exposing the history of the Solovki labor camp.

The State's support of the film demonstrated the changes resulting from recent reforms within the Soviet Union from Gorbachev's leadership. The film's approval and subsequent showings sparked a national debate between the anti-Stalin or anti-Soviet individuals and those that were vehement supporters of the system, further exemplifying the widespread impacts of the regime. The reactions prompted Goldovskaya to conclude that “Two parts of a single nation were struggling to the death. What had happened to us, to our country? Where were we heading? Every screening turned into a public demonstration going far beyond the film—an unforgettable experience!” (p. 155). While the film does manage to depict that many had been impacted personally by the regime's brutality and still lived in fear, it had a limited depiction of the many others that defended the system. Through the use of personal narratives compounded with the creative elements that emphasize these stories, Goldovskaya created a convincing argument against the Soviet regime through the depiction of the Solovki Islands' Gulag as a microcosm of the entire totalitarian system. The film results as a form of propaganda that opposed the

ideological goals of previous State-approved productions and promoted the creative *intelligentsia's* stance against the Soviet Union's oppressive regime.

Following the Film

Documented in 1988, almost 50 years following the camp's closure on the Solovki Islands, *Solovki Power* was able to capture and unveil the truth behind the country's history of forced labor and use of fear to control people, before political reforms erased its impact from society. Unbeknownst at the time, the film also marked a significant change to the way of life that had dominated the Soviet Union for over 60 years due to increased creative and political freedoms from Gorbachev's policies. The debate that the film sparked reflected the growing instability of the entire political system that would eventually result in the USSR's dissolution, as decades of socialist policies and oppressive leadership came to an end. *Solovki Power* served as one of the first publicly promoted propaganda pieces that historically recounted the dialogue and portrayal of the Soviet regime. Previously, the State strictly forbade honest depictions of suffering and themes relating to death and dissent, including the Solovki prison camp. While the film explicitly describes the spread of the atrocious Gulag labor camps, the message that this system was a microcosm for the entire totalitarian regime would only be evident to those critical of the role of Soviet leadership in instilling fear and imposing senseless brutality upon people. The limits to the expression of these viewpoints appear when contrasting Goldovskaya's autobiographical descriptions and what seems evident throughout the film *Solovki Power*. This reflected the remaining constraints on freedom that prevented conspicuous anti-Soviet propaganda. To reflect her perspective as a member of the creative *intelligentsia*, Goldovskaya documented a piece of history that influenced the entire Soviet regime. Until this point, the story

of the Solovki prison camp had remained concealed due to its perceived tone of dissent against the approved public image of the State.

Conclusion

While a modern American may initially perceive this historical documentary as far from extraordinary, Goldovskaya's blatant anti-Stalin messaging and depiction of the regime's horrors resulted in a groundbreaking film made possible by the slow genesis of *perestroika* and *glasnost* that would incite permanent change. While the film's theme focused on the Solovki Islands' Gulag and the spread of labor camps replicated after it, to viewers living in the USSR and under this oppression, it had a deeper meaning. It represented that the totalitarian regime that ruled these camps had *also* ruled almost all citizens' lives for the past 60 years, and for the first time, it was allowed to be publicly exposed. Starting from Lenin's leadership until the filming of *Solovki Power* in 1988, the oppressive Soviet regime had left a lasting imprint of fear in the lives of people in the Soviet Union. This fear was slowly being chipped away with new policies that encouraged political freedoms. Goldovskaya's autobiography provided insight into the meaning and intended message portrayed through the film's narration and use of creative elements. Her anxiety and drive to portray a formerly forbidden topic resulted in a cinematic piece that highlighted the system's brutality and connected all who had lived under this system into the understanding that times had changed. By permitting *Solovki Power* to be shown, the film symbolized the diminution of previously enforced oppression and captured the history of changing times.

References

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