

***Burnt by the Sun* (Nikita Mikhalkov, 1994)**

At the end of *Stalin and his Hangmen*, Donald Rayfield writes:

The Soviet Union and its successor states have never achieved what psychiatrists call closure ... Russian citizens are too preoccupied with making ends meet and surviving to old age to be interested in forcing the state to account for itself, or to insist on electing honest men and women to power. Much of the truth about the past is locked up in closed archives which with every month grow even less accessible. School history books, with few exceptions, pass over in silence the record of Stalinism. Until the story is told in full, and until the world community insists that the legacy of Stalin is fully accounted for and expiated, Russia will remain spiritually sick, haunted by the ghosts of Stalin and, worse, by nightmares of their resurrection (pp. 456-8).

Burnt by the Sun, one of the first Russian post-Soviet films, is the most upsetting movie I know. As with Dr Johnson and *King Lear*, it wasn't until I set myself the task of writing this essay on it that I was able to look at it for the second time.

It is summer, 1936. Colonel Sergei Petrovich Kotov is a hero of the 1917 revolution, well-known throughout Russia. He's strong and jovial. He's relaxing with his wife, his six-year-old daughter, and his family friends, at his dacha. This is his day off – 98% of the film's action takes place in a single day. We see him first thing in the morning, naked in his sauna with his wife Marousia and daughter Nadyezhda ("hope"). His daughter is hitting him on the back with birch-sticks; she gets tired of it and flops down on top of him as he lies there in his towel. The nudity is important in that it stresses relaxation and vulnerability, and although they know they're relaxed, they don't know how vulnerable they are. By the day's end, Kotov will be in the back of a KGB car, his hands handcuffed behind his head, and his face a bloody pulp.

His status and authority are shown to us when a column of tanks line up in an exercise, and threaten to drive through the wheatfields of the nearby collective farm, ruining the harvest. Kotov is sent for, and by sheer force of character and reputation, makes a call on their field apparatus and prevents the tanks from flattening the wheat. The wheat has the same power as the naked bodies of Kotov and his womenfolk in the sauna: it's alive, beautiful, and vulnerable to mechanised brutality. Kotov is able, at this point in the day, to save it.

In the pre-credit sequence, a man who speaks fluent French is seen in a Moscow apartment, playing a game of Russian roulette. His pistol misses the single chamber, and at once he phones someone and says, "I'll do it". Later in the film he quotes Hamlet in English.

On the morning of the day of the action, a column of Young Pioneers passes the colonel's dacha, with band playing. They carry a banner of Stalin, whose success they're celebrating: it's Stalin's Balloon and Airship Day. Tacked on the end of their column is a strange male figure, who looks like an old man but doesn't move like one. He leaves the column as it passes the dacha, and greets the colonel's daughter as she stands on the gate. He appears to know her and everything about her. She gasps: "Are you the Summer Santa?" He assures her that he is, and that all santas come from Russia.





Having won the child's trust, he enters the dacha, still in his disguise, and greets everyone with little details that prove he knows them. Having fuddled them all, up to and including the colonel, he sits down at the piano and accompanies himself in *Vesti la giubba*, tearing off his hat, wig, beard and moustache as he does so.

Vesti la giubba is an aria sung by a man who knows he must hide his misery behind a mask of clowning. Later a lady sitting at table in the dacha sings a fragment of *Un bel di ...* an aria of optimism, an optimism which we the audience know will never be answered.

All recognise the stranger with delight, including the colonel and his wife, although a guarded quality in their delight suggests that he's the wife's ex-lover. His name's Dmitri. Later we learn that once, when he deserted Marousia, she slashed her wrists; but didn't realise that you had to hold them under water.

We recognise him as the man who played Russian roulette in the pre-credit sequence.

It's clear that all trust him as much as the little girl does. In fact he's a KGB agent sent to facilitate the colonel's arrest.

The community whose trust he violates is set up in a casual way as eccentric, amusing, and loveable. Mikhalkov uses improvisation to flesh out his own script, and the result could not be further from the acting style of *Ivan the Terrible*. There, the actors are puppets. Here, the actors contribute. Mikhalkov plays the colonel himself, and his daughter Nadyezhda plays the colonel's daughter Nadya. The people at the dacha have an air of sub-Chekhov about them; their preoccupations are human but silly. In this movie, the world of Chekhov meets the world of Stalin, and it's obvious which will lose.

The whole party go for a swim. Mitya (Dmitri) tells Marousia that even though the colonel is so much older than her, he can see the appeal of those strong arms and all that power. "But," he adds, "it can all be destroyed with a single flick". Out on the river the colonel hugs little Nadyezhda and tells her that they're building a Soviet state where everybody will be free to follow their own paths. She must, above all, love the Russian motherland. The combination of the physical intimacy between father and daughter, the seeming freedom of the river, and the innocent optimism the colonel harbours, is dreadful when juxtaposed with what happens. Everything is filmed in deceptively blessed sunlight. We see a launching site for a balloon being constructed, and a large portrait being suspended, though all we see of the subject is the top of the subject's head.

A group of Civil Defence men come and insist on everyone practising the wearing of gas masks – in case of an imperialist attack. Marousia volunteers, largely to get away from Mitya, whose conversation is becoming personal. Mitya volunteers too. Back at the dacha the colonel finds Mitya accompanying the whole party in a can-can; he's still wearing his gas mask. It makes him look like an insect or an alien; but they all dance happily to his tune. After they've gone out to lunch, he continues playing the can-can, in dissonant keys and with crashing chords.

Throughout the day, he reveals his secrets, but to different members of the household. He tells one apparently sad gay man that he works for the KGB; the man thinks he's joking. To Nadyezhda he tells the entire story under the guise of a fairytale. This is a very strange sequence, punctuated by shots of ball lightning flying slowly through the house and exhausting itself in some neighbouring woods. Finally he tells the colonel that a car's coming for him in two hours. In fact we've just seen the car hiding around the corner, cut to after an

ecstatic scene of lovemaking between the colonel and Marousia. The colonel, who once worked for the KGB, and knows Mitya's history as an informer, is confident that the car can bring him to no harm, and suggests a game of football while they wait for it.

"Who will accuse me?" he asks, cornering Mitya during the football game. Mitya assures him that in six days he'll be crawling in his own shit and will confess to having spied for the Germans and the Japanese, and of having tried to kill Stalin. And if he doesn't, they'll remind him that he has a wife and daughter. The colonel answers by punching him in the mouth.

The KGB car arrives, and is greeted with delight by Nadyezhda. Everyone sees the colonel off, especially Nadyezhda, who is allowed to "drive" it to the end of the lane, sitting on the lap of one of the KGB men (little Nadyezhda Mikhalkov was only given the script one scene at a time).

They stop for a man who's been driving about all day looking for the place where he's to deliver some goods. The colonel tries to get out and help him, but the KGB men prevent him from leaving the car. He lashes out at one of them, and they beat him up – off camera.

A balloon rises over some hedges above them. A huge portrait of Stalin is suspended from it.

They shoot the unfortunate delivery man, and drive away. Mitya looks over his shoulder at the colonel in the back seat. We see for the first time the damage they've done to him, and the way they've handcuffed his hands behind his neck. We see Stalin's balloon portrait fluttering in the wind, and hear the colonel's wails of despair drifting back to us from the departing car.



There's one last scene back at Mitya's Moscow flat. He's lying fully dressed in the bath, looking pale, but humming. The camera pans down to the bathwater, which is mixed with his blood. This time, he has killed himself. Ball lightning flies slowly through the flat as he dies.

Burnt by the Sun makes it clear what Stalin's Russia destroyed, and puts the Soviet acts of cinematic mendacity and treachery chronicled in the previous pages into context. At last, it represents an act of truth and understanding for Russian cinema.

