



## **ALL THOSE UNFORTUNATE REMINISCENCES OF 1953...**

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In Lithuania, as in other post-Soviet countries, 1953 is primarily associated with the end of the era of the Soviet Union's dictator Joseph Djugashvili, who named himself Stalin. Contemporary people's view of the era is often shaped not by the memoirs of contemporaries or the writings of historians, but by various forms of popular culture, especially cinema. Incidentally, even the first Russia's Bolshevik, Vladimir Ulyanov, better known as Lenin, claimed that of all the arts, cinema was the most important for the "Soviet government." Stalin and the people from his circle were also fond of watching films, not only Russian propaganda, but also American ones, especially westerns. Cinema is loved by all dictators who consider themselves to be great historians as well as ordinary enthusiasts of digging into the past. Therefore, one can familiarize with various interpretations of the realities of 1953 in the Soviet Union by watching at least a few films. For the younger generation of Lithuanians who are more involved in the global culture, the best known seems to be Armando Iannucci's black comedy "The Death of Stalin" (2017). Although this political satire, which is very close to farce, has a number of factual inaccuracies, it conceptually reveals a number of important broader points. The film shows the brutal and gangster-like essence of the entire Bolshevik state (and thus of its "successor" today) in an attractive and entertaining form. This is why it provoked great indignation among the leaders of the undemocratic regime ruling Russia and this is why it was banned from cinemas.

The older generation of Lithuanians probably remembers more the Soviet film "Cold Summer of 1953..." from the "Perestroika" times (1987) by director Aleksandr Proshkin. It possibly shows from a freer and more critical perspective for the first time how dictatorship ruined and broke the lives of many ordinary, often innocent people. It is a historical drama with a plot similar to a Western. It is set in the remote northern part of the Soviet Union, where a number of forced labour camps of the Gulag system operated amidst the river-scarred and trackless taiga. On March 27, 1953, not even a month after Stalin's death, the collective government of the Soviet Union, in which the head of the security and intelligence structures, Lavrentiy Beria, was showing increasing ambition to dominate, declared an amnesty for certain categories of criminals. The situation of those convicted of political "crimes" did not change at the time: the authorities did not trust them and were unwilling to rehabilitate them. It took several more years and several serious prisoner uprisings in various parts of the "Gulag archipelago" to begin the dismantling of this repressive system and the extensive and targeted review of the criminal cases of the so-called "enemies of the people."

By the time the unusually cool summer of 1953 began, approximately 1.2 million of various criminals, known in the jargon as "urkas", had already been released from the Gulag labour camps. Some of them immediately formed gangs and went on the rampage. The above-mentioned Soviet 'western' from 1987 tells the story of how a group of six amnestied criminals invaded a small, isolated settlement located at one of the many inland waterway transport points (marinas). They killed a local militiaman (the equivalent of a sheriff in American westerns) and took weapons found in his house. They intended to hijack a boat that was due to arrive at the marina a few days later and continue their journey. While waiting for the boat, the bandits started terrorising the village inhabitants, most of whom were elderly women. However, there was a hero who managed to resist the gang successfully. This was Sergei Basarygin, a former Gulag prisoner who had been forcibly settled in the village as an exile. During the war against the Nazis, he was

a front-line intelligence officer (the American equivalent of a ranger). Sergei was sent to prison and to a Gulag labour camp for spending just one day encircled by the enemy, and, therefore, being considered a traitor by the authorities. The security system set up by Stalin and Beria was drastic. It rarely exonerated the arrested ones. It even often punished the innocent, just to maintain an atmosphere of fear. Sergei was psychologically broken by his long years of imprisonment. Released but forcibly settled in a remote village, he existed as a ragged vagabond who had lost his humanity. It was only a confrontation with a gang of six armed prisoners that helped him regain the self-respect and determination he had earlier. The former intelligence officer successfully killed one after another of the criminals who attacked the village, but still failed to protect several people dear to him as they were killed. The film about the realities of the summer of 1953 in a remote part of the Soviet Union showed the phenomena that had been largely unpublicised until then, but still retained many of the "traditional ideological canons." One can see the cult of the intelligence officer, i.e. the special forces officer, and the hypertrophied exaltation of victory in the so-called Great Patriotic War, which has existed in Russian cinema until now, both in feature films and in popular TV series. Only some of the carefully chosen Stalinism "exaggerations" are critically assessed. Responsibility for this is often delegated to Beria and other malignant functionaries of the security structures. In other words, it was not dared to openly admit that the Soviet Union as a state and its totalitarian system was primarily to blame for the millions of innocent lives that were innocently killed and destroyed. In addition, it should be noted that even during the "Perestroika" period, Soviet cinema largely avoided the theme of "red imperialism." Stalin was criticised more for his morbidly paranoid terror in the country than for his foreign policy of "territorial gains." Their illegality and immorality are almost unquestioned. It is acknowledged that the state system needs to be restructured and humanised, but the borders of the country cannot change. This attitude is also quite common in the memoirs of Russians, former political prisoners, about their years in the Gulag. This contrasts significantly to the testimonies of the Baltic States and other captive peoples who suffered a

similar fate. The Lithuanians did not consider the Soviet Union as their homeland: they felt occupied and hoped that one day they would be able to escape its "embrace," regain their statehood and manage their own lives independently, without any external dictatorship. For them, 1953, Stalin's death and Beria's ouster, was only the end of the first horrible period and a new light of hope on the long and dark tunnel to freedom. The journey took fifty years. Approximately, this number of years was necessary for the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (August 23, 1939) and in particular its secret protocols, concluded by two totalitarian dictatorships, to become the subject of public debate and be officially recognised and condemned by the Kremlin. This did not happen until 1989. Nevertheless, even then it was clear that the condemnation was artificial, not sincere, and was made only to "deceive" the West with the props of the democratisation of the Soviet Union and fuel pacifist illusions. The Russian Communists and other sections of society, overcome by nostalgia for imperial grandeur, have never been willing to abandon the principles of Stalinism. These attitudes have only grown stronger and stronger over time. This is why the war in Ukraine today, which is inconceivable to the common sense, has become possible, and this is why it is characterised by the persistence and genocidal ferocity of the aggressor country. The film "The Cold Summer of 1953" is only relevant today because it reminds us of the arbitrariness of the bandits, and makes us realise that they can seize not only a small village with a riverside dock, but also an entire country. Then it is the citizens of that country, as well as those of neighbouring countries, who suffer from their aggression. Unfortunately, so far, there has not yet emerged a brave, determined and selfless hero (not to mention the 'Magnificent Seven') who would put an end to all this rampage by standing up for the oppressed.



Lithuanian Communist Party activists pose in front of Stalin's portrait. The second half of the 1940s. The atmosphere of the period is well reflected in the faces: there are hardly any smiles (or they are obviously artificial), and a marked inner tension dominates, created by the constant sense of danger usually felt by accomplices in heinous crimes. They feared both retaliation from their victims and the anger of the higher authorities. Both could have ended equally badly.

Everyone was a hostage to the paranoid will of the "Father of Nations".

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