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“Do it like Chapaev!” A superstar Soviet Movie Character as a template for the “new” Republican Soldier during the Spanish Civil War

Edouard Sill

Introduction

Chapaev,¹ the movie which was first shown on Russian screens in 1934, directed by the famous “Vassiliev brothers”² was one of the greatest hits of Soviet cinema.³ It is an adaptation of a literary bestseller, the autobiographical novel published in 1923 by Dmitri Furmanov (1891-1926) about his encounter with a Bolshevik warlord called Chapaev in 1919, and with whom he was associated as a political commissar during the Russian Civil War. The novel *Chapaev* had given heroic standing to the historical character of Vassili Chapaev (1887-1919), a Red Army commander during the Russian Civil War. As it has been pointed out by numerous studies of this cultural phenomenon, the film gave Chapaev a legendary status and was quickly exploited by the Stalinist regime⁴. The film was on show in St. Petersburg for two years without interruption and was said to have attracted as many as 30 million Russians to movie theaters.⁵ This Soviet blockbuster also had a prolific international spread. It was praised abroad for both its aesthetic value (Best foreign film in the United States in

¹ Transcriptions from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet are not consistent: Chapaev, Chapayev, Chapayef, Tchapaiev, Tchapaïev, Tchapayef, Tchapieff. We shall keep here the Anglo-Saxon transcription Chapaev, except for original quotes.

² Actually two namesakes, Gueorgui Vassiliev (1899-1946) and Sergei Vassiliev (1900-1959).

³ *Чапаяев (Chapaev)*. Dir. Gueorgui Vassiliev and Sergei Vassiliev. Prod. LENFILM, USSR, 1934. Length: 96 min. Version viewed : DVD, Krupniy Plan, Russia, 2007.

⁴ Nenad Blagojevic, ““Chetyre zhizni” Vasiliya Ivanovicha Chapayeva (ob odnom mifotvorcheskom fenomene Grazhdanskoy voyny v Rossii 1917–1923rr) [The Four Lives of Vasily Ivanovich Chapaev (Upon a Myth-Creating Phenomenon of the Civil War in Russia 1917–1923)],” *Slavica Tergestina: European Slavic Studies Journal* 20:1 (2018), 196-212; Angela Britlinger, *Chapaev and His Comrades: War and the Russian Literary Hero across the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012); Justus Grant Hartzok, “Children of Chapaev: The Russian Civil War Cult and the Creation of Soviet Identity, 1918-1941” (PhD Diss., University of Iowa, 2009); Moisés Wagner Franciscón, “A construção do herói no cinema soviético: Chapayev (1934) e Aleksa Dundić (1958),” *Revista Historiar* 4:7 (2012), 363-380; Karen Petrone, “Masculinity and Heroism in Imperial and Soviet Military-Patriotic Cultures,” in *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture*, eds. Barbara Evans Clements, Rebecca Friedman and Dean Healey (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 172-193; Marc Ferro, “L'idéologie stalinienne au travers d'un film: Tchapaev,” in *Cinéma et histoire*, ed. Marc Ferro (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), 134 -157.

⁵ Grant Hartzok, “*Children of Chapaev*,” 103 sq.

1935, Bronze medal of the Venice Film Festival in 1946⁶), and its entertaining qualities, especially in France and in Spain between 1935 and 1938. Put into context, we can call it a blockbuster, a mass cultural phenomenon, according to the definition proposed by German Slavic culture scholar and Russian cinema historian Birgit Beumers.⁷

The film had a powerful cultural impact, especially through the course of its unexpected Spanish career. This took place in two stages: The film arrived in Spain in 1935, the year before the start of the *pronunciamiento* (the military takeover against the legitimate government), but its diffusion went through a tremendous new development during the ensuing Civil War, on the loyalist side, namely the anti-fascist Republican government faction. The enthusiasm was such that it was easily perceived as a topical, circumstantial film endowed with characteristics directly transferable to Spain and the source of authentic teachings. That popular success, however, was expertly prepared, and the film was used as one of the heavy artillery pieces of the Spanish communist movement's⁸ propaganda system to spread its watchwords and its influence. It was an exemplary success in every way while nothing seemed to predispose the film and its main fur-hat protagonist to be identified by the Spanish as one of their own and as a model. The character of Chapaev, his fame contained to the modest circle of the Communists in Spain, became an eminently popular figure among the Republican soldiers during the Civil War, who discovered at the same time the cinema and the narration of the war on the screen.⁹

The film reached the peak of its success in Spain in the fall of 1936. It was a particular period in the Spanish Civil War, corresponding to the process known as militarization, the building of a new army which came to replace, not without difficulty and conflict, the militias' paramilitary formations. Building on an aggregate of popular militias that depended on rival

⁶ Jeremy Hicks, "The international reception of early soviet sound cinema:Chapaev in Britain and America", *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 25:2, (2005) 273-289.

⁷ "The concept of the blockbuster may therefore not be relevant in the Soviet context in terms of profitability, but it is relevant on the level of a film's popularity, which can be measured with data on the number of spectators." Birgit Beumers, "Soviet and Russian Blockbusters: A Question of Genre?" *Slavic Review* 62:3 (2003), 441.

⁸ I.e. the *Partido Comunista de España* (PCE), the *Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya* (PSUC), the *Juventud Socialista Unificada* (JSU), but also all the structures entirely dominated by Communists in Spain, like the 5th Regiment or the International Brigades.

⁹ Carlos Fernández Cuenca, *La Guerra de España y el cine* (Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1972).

proletarian organizations, the so-called *Ejército Popular de la República* (EPR) meant to establish a traditional military nomenclature based on hierarchy, discipline and the use of compulsory conscription, while avoiding a return to the former military model, considered to be an “Ancien Regime” system. Beyond its new structuring into brigades and a few cosmetic changes (such as the replacement of the traditional military hand salute by the Germanic “*Rotfront*” with the fist to the side of the forehead), its main originality was the integration of a new role: the war commissar. That institution, inspired by the French Revolution and preserved by socialist military culture, had been reintroduced by the Bolsheviks in the Red Army as early as 1917. Unsurprisingly, the Spanish anti-fascists, involuntarily converted into soldiers, looked attentively to the Russian Civil War and the Bolshevik war culture to imagine their own war and their army in the making. This imagery pervaded the Spanish anti-fascist war culture, itself set by mythical literary representations. That war culture was widely shared and supported by the Soviet soft power through the use of illustrations, stories and above all, films, thus inspiring the educational model and values of the “new” governmental soldier.¹⁰ This short-lived revolution in military affairs in Spain, comparable to those undertaken by the French Revolution as studied in particular by military culture historian John A. Lynn,¹¹ drew its inspiration from the Red Army essentially by default, because the new Spanish Republican army could not but be modern, political and socialist.

Chapaev is not the only blockbuster that had a considerable influence on anti-fascist Republican military imagery and war culture, as two other films shared the billboards. The first one, *¡Viva Villa!* (*Viva Villa!*, MGM, 1934), a Hollywood Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film directed by the prolific filmmaker of the thirties - forties Jack Conway (1887-1952) and based on the biography of the Mexican warlord, had a Spanish career contemporary with that of *Chapaev* in 1935. The second one came slightly later but supplanted *Chapaev* in 1937. *Los marinos de Kronstadt* (*Мы из Кронштадта/We are from Kronstadt*, Mosfilm, 1936) was another Soviet blockbuster directed by a Soviet dramatist and prose writer, Vsevolod

¹⁰ SILL, “Du combattant volontaire international au soldat-militant transnational : le volontariat étranger antifasciste durant la guerre d’Espagne (1936-1938)” (PhD diss., Sorbonne University of Paris, 2019).

¹¹ John A. Lynn, *The Bayonets of the Republic: Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791-94* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1984); John A. Lynn, *Battle: A History Of Combat And Culture. From Ancient Greece to Modern America* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003).

Vishnevsky (1900-1951). Their itineraries during the Spanish Civil War are the subject of two seminal studies: the first by Hispanic cultures historians Bernd Hausberger and Isabel Galaor on the unexpected worldwide success of *Viva Villa!* and the second on the Spanish myth of Antonio Col, inspired by *We are from Kronstadt*.¹² Like the other, mainly Russian, foreign films shown in Spain during the Civil War, superstar Chapaev was put at the service of his new environment, taking advantage of the considerable success of the film. But was it really Chapaev himself who was the main protagonist at the forefront of the Spanish reception of the eponymous film? Based on extensive documentation, on one hand French, Spanish and Russian newspapers and propaganda press and brochures, on the other, the Soviet archives of the Russian State Archiv of Socio-Political History, we clearly see that Chapaev was meant as much more than mere entertainment when imported to Spain: he was meant to embody and physically represent a political function and a new military character – the political commissar.

Superstar Chapaev: The Unexpected Foreign Craze for a Soviet Blockbuster

Furmanov's¹³ novel tells the story of Vassili Chapaev, a Soviet commander at the head of the 25th Division of the Red Army; the son of peasants. He was mobilized in 1914 and then rose from among the ranks. After the October Revolution, he joined the Bolsheviks and demonstrated his talents, favoring methods of guerrilla warfare and enjoying great prestige. On 5 September 1919, he died during a Cossack cavalry raid which took his staff headquarters by surprise, perhaps as he was trying to swim across the river Ural in his flight.¹⁴ Furmanov goes over the few months when he was commissar of the 25th Division,

¹² Bernd Hausberger and Isabel Galaor, “‘¡Viva Villa!’ Cómo Hollywood se apoderó de un héroe y el mundo se lo quitó,” *Historia Mexicana* 62:4 (2013), 1497-1550; José Cabeza San Deogracias, “Buscando héroes: la historia de Antonio Col como ejemplo del uso de la narrativa como propaganda durante la Guerra Civil Española,” *Revista Historia y Comunicación Social* 10 (2005), 37-50.

¹³ Born in a peasant family but well educated, Dmitry Furmanov (1891-1926) was firstly attracted by anarchism before serving in the Red Army and being one of the most famous Soviet writer.

¹⁴ Vladimir Daynes, *Chapayev* (Moscow: Veche, 2010). According to Fernández Cuenca, the end of the film in Spain was suppressed so as not to discourage the soldiers. But this statement is not supported in any way. In addition, the tragic disappearance of the character in the waters fully contributes to the drama of the film and allows all speculation. In 1941, for the purpose of a short film

namely between March and August 1919, in the guise of a character named Klychkov. The work falls within the framework of socialist realism, initiated by Maxim Gorky (1868-1936) in 1906, where conflicts between characters must be treated as dialectics between the old and the new world, and the promotion of the common man over the heroes of the past.

The book was a huge success – a million copies were sold in the USSR. After the author's death in 1926, his wife Anna Furmanova (1897–1941) set out to adapt his work for the theatre and the cinema. This project was then taken up by the so-called Vassiliev brothers, both pupils of Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948), who began to work on a new scenario freely inspired by Furmanov's novel, giving back the name of Furmanov to the character called Klychkov.¹⁵ First shown at the end of 1934, the film instantly marked the history of the cinema and achieved considerable, indelible success with the Russian audience and beyond. The film is eminently modern and was the first talking movie made in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Even technically superior films like those of Eisenstein did not attract as much attention from the Soviet public, fascinated by the character of Chapaev as played by Boris Babochkin (1904-1975).¹⁶ The Stalinist regime immediately took full advantage of that success: in theatres, banners stated that “every worker should watch the film Chapaev” or encouraged people to “live like Chapaev.”¹⁷ This craze was due to the humanity of the character, which was favored by the simplicity of the language and the dialogues, although the line of the film is eminently Stalinist in establishing the superiority of the Party over the individual.¹⁸ Indeed, Bolshevik power was interested at an early stage in the propaganda potential of the “Seventh Art.”¹⁹ In the early 1930s, the Stalinist productivity campaign known as Stakhanovism relied on the *Chapaev* virtues, although it was not a State commissioned product.²⁰

of patriotic propaganda, Chapaev resurfaced and enjoined the Soviet people to fight against the German invader. Cuenca, “*La Guerra de España y el cine*”, 313.

¹⁵ Hartzok, “*Children of Chapaev*,” 107-109.

¹⁶ Blagojevic, “*Chetyre zhizni*,” 205. See also note 40 below.

¹⁷ Hartzok, “*Children of Chapaev*,” 103-104.

¹⁸ Blagojevic, “*Chetyre zhizni*,” 205; Bálint Demers, “La figure de Lénine dans le cinéma soviétique des années 1930: Analyse sociopolitique de deux œuvres canoniques” (Master Thesis, University of Quebec, 2018), 149; Petrone, “Masculinity and Heroism,” 187; Ferro, “L'idéologie stalinienne,” 134 sq.

¹⁹ Ferro, “L'idéologie stalinienne,” 82.

²⁰ Hartzok, “*Children of Chapaev*,” 124.

The foreign communist parties also perfectly identified the power and efficiency of Soviet cinema in their own propaganda systems.²¹ But *Chapaev* first had an international literary career, starting in Germany and France. Furmanov's novel was translated into French in 1932 and republished in 1937 with a preface by French communist and antifascist figure Paul Vaillant-Couturier (1892-1937).²² The book was presented as a historical piece about “the fighters of the Civil War” and its authenticity was emphasized.²³ In Spain the first edition of *Tchapaïef: El guerrillero rojo* came later (1936) but it was immediately reissued in 1937 and followed by a promotional work in 1938, in the wake of the success of its cinematographic version.²⁴ Whereas the novel's reception was at first limited to the communist networks abroad, it was totally different from the movie. The export was orchestrated through the VOKS (All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries) and the transnational mass organization Friends of the Soviet Union.²⁵ Although *Chapaev* was not licensed for distribution in France initially, which initially limited its showing in 1935 to only one Parisian movie theatre, *Le Pantheon*, it enjoyed excellent reception and was finally fully distributed the following year.²⁶ It was also very well received in Spain although it was not widely distributed.²⁷ In the spring of 1936, it got rave reviews in the press. This triumph was immediately highlighted by the communist movement as indisputable proof of its good faith in its own promotion of the film.²⁸ But in order not to make our analysis depend on the

²¹ *Rapport de Marcel Gitton in VIIIe Congrès national du parti communiste français (Lyon-Villeurbanne, 22-25 janvier 1936): Compte rendu sténographique* (Paris: Éditions du Comité populaire de propagande, 1937), 352-353; “Cómo utilizan los rusos la poderosa arma de difusión y propaganda política, social y educativa que es el séptimo arte,” *Crónica*, February 28, 1937, 10.

²² *L'Humanité*, December 20, 1932, 2.

²³ Promotions in *L'Humanité* of February 21, 1933, and April 4, and 8, 1933, 4.

²⁴ Furmanov D, *Tchapaïef. El guerrillero rojo. Prológo Arturo Perucho* (Barcelona: Ediciones Europa-América, 1937 ; Borghens V, *Chapaïef, un héroe de la guerra civil en Rusia* (Barcelona: Ediciones Europa-América, 1938).

²⁵ Jean-François Fayet, VOKS. *Le laboratoire helvétique, Histoire de la diplomatie culturelle soviétique dans l'entredeuxguerres* (Geneva: Georg Editeur, 2014) ; Enrique Fibla-Gutierrez and Masha Salazkina, “Seeing the World Anew: Soviet Cinema and the Reorganization of 1930s Spanish Film Culture,” in *Comintern Aesthetics*, ed. Amelia Glaser and Steven S. Lee (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2020); Sophie Coëuré, *La grande lueur à l'Est. Les Français et l'Union Soviétique 1917-1939* (Paris: Seuil, 1999).

²⁶ “Le célèbre film soviétique “Tchapaïev” est interdit par la censure,” *L'Humanité*, September 6, 1935, 4.

²⁷ *Cinegramas (Madrid)*, March 31, 1935, 27 ; *Cinema Sparta*, September 21, 1935, 9.

²⁸ “Toujours Tchapaïev,” *L'Humanité*, March 14, 1936, 3.

perception of the film by a favorable anti-fascist Republican Spanish press in Spain in 1936, let us step aside and consider how the film was regarded by the French press.

Beyond its dramatic qualities, critics in France agreed on the documentary nature of the film, presented as a “historical document” on the subject of the Russian Civil War.²⁹ For a French sports newspaper it is a work “that one feels to be truthful,” while a society newspaper insists on its “authenticity” and its “impartiality, in a word its historical truthfulness.”³⁰ In the same way, the French daily *Le Matin* writes: “This Russian film, whose action takes place in 1919, seems to be much more of a historical documentary than fictionalized history.”³¹ The far-right press was also convinced and carried away by the veracity of the combats, while a widely read royalist daily, *L’Action Française*, which was hardly likely to sympathize with Soviet propaganda, highlights its “epic vein” and – again – its realism, an opinion which is also shared by the anti-Stalinist left-wing press.³² The communist press was naturally the most enthusiastic and also insisted on the film's “objective” character – “without any bias: heroism in both camps, horror everywhere,” described *Midi Rouge* “the content carefully underlines the humanity of the hero: “His moments of bad humor or weakness make us love him, not as a freshly repainted idol, but as a man.”³³ But the praise carried a number of erroneous claims that reveal the cultural prisms through which the film was seen outside the USSR, such as identifying Chapaev as a Cossack leader, or as an anarchist, or believing him to be still alive. This review of the French press allows us to consider how this Soviet film was received before being presented and used in Spain during the Civil War as a powerful propaganda artefact at the disposal of the Spanish communist movement.

Before the war, Soviet cinema only existed in the programming of certain clubs in Madrid. As of July 1936, when the movie theaters were socialized, Soviet films simultaneously spread along two paths: one in the cinemas of the home front and another at the front itself, during

²⁹ “*Sur les écrans d’Alger*,” *L’Écho d’Alger*, November 19, 1936, 5.

³⁰ “L’écran et ses vedettes : Tchapaïev : 16/20,” *La Vie Parisienne*, July 6, 1935, 1425. Translation from French.

³¹ “Nouveaux films. Tchapaïev,” *Le Matin*, December 6, 1935, 4. Translation from French.

³² “Culture soviétique,” *L’Étudiant français*, June 8, 1936, 3; “Tchapaïev,” *L’Action française*, January 3, 1936, 4; “Cinéma,” *La Révolution prolétarienne: Revue mensuelle syndicaliste communiste*, January 25, 1936, 14.

³³ Promotion in *Rouge Midi*, January 29, 1937, 4; “Enfin Tchapaïev,” *L’Humanité*, December 7, 1935, 7.

improvised sessions by the cultural teams of the *Quinto Regimiento* (5th Regiment), the politico-military structure set up by the Communists in Madrid. Accompanied by explanatory lectures, its diffusion at the front was then taken over by the *Comisariado General de Guerra*, the institution of political commissars largely dominated by Communists which was created in October 1936.³⁴ It amounted to a massive and unparalleled cultural overkill without equivalent in any other sector of Spanish anti-fascism. From 12 to 17 October 1936, *Chapaev* was screened every day back to back, sometimes twice to different battalions of the Madrid front – three times more than any other Soviet film.³⁵ Over ten days in December, besides the broadcast in barracks, hospitals or city cinemas, at least twenty military units attended the screening of eight films, seven of which were Soviet productions: 15 of *Los Marineros* by Cronstadt, 8 of *Tchapaev*, *El guerrillero Rojo* and 7 of *¡Viva Villa!*.³⁶ That is but a conservative count: In the immediate rear of the Andalusian and Levantine fronts, the film was projected 47 times in 44 days by the cultural teams of the 5th Regiment, thus reaching an audience of nearly 100,000 spectators.³⁷ Testimonies abound on those outdoor “talking movie theaters” as the screenings were also an opportunity to reach the population.³⁸ When the International Brigades were created, the Soviet reels were part of the first equipment requested.³⁹ In one of the many promotional books published about each one of the international brigades, the one intended for the French-speaking public, entitled *La Quatorzième*, draws considerably from the movie *Chapaev*. Among the chapters

³⁴ Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica FA-01331. *Propaganda y cultura en los frentes de guerra: Resumen de la obra realizada por el Subcomisariado de propaganda* del Comisariado General de Guerra (Valencia: Ministerio de la Guerra, Comisaría General de Guerra, 1937), 17.

³⁵ “Actos organizados por la comisión de trabajo social en la semana última,” *Milicia popular* 73, October 18, 1936, 4.

³⁶ “Resumen de actos celebrados por la Comisión de Trabajo Social durante los últimos nueve días,” *Milicia popular* 146, December 31, 1936, 4.

³⁷ The International Association of Writers and the House of Culture, a PCF satellite organization, sends a Renault truck to Spain equipped with an itinerant cinematographic projection device, which travels up and down the front and rear accompanied by leaflets and posters published by the 5th Rgt. “Actividad de la comisión del trabajo social del 5º regimiento,” *Milicia popular* 129, December 14, 1936, 2; “Chapaiev en el frente,” *Venceremos! Órgano del Regimiento de milicias populares de Jaén* 29, November 10, 1936, 4; Aragon, “Madrid passe à l’offensive,” *Regards* 147, November 5, 1936, 3.

³⁸ “En el Puesto Grozeff, tras la luz, el cine sonoro,” *La voz de la sanidad XV División*, November 27 1937, 15; Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (henceforth RGASPI) 545.3.477: *The Lincoln Battalion - American Anti-fascist Fighters in Spain*, 12.

³⁹ RGASPI 517.3.11: *Question espagnole: Les Brigades Internationales en Espagne (au 20 février 1937)*. Report of André Marty to the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI), March 4, 1937. Annex 58. Letter from Marty and Nicoletti to the PCF, October 27, 1936.

relating the constitution and memorable episodes of the 14th Brigade "*La Marseillaise*," a chapter entitled "Tchapaiev, film and reality" stands out from the rest. Through a striking effect, by juxtaposing the subtitles "Film / Reality," the author describes the French and Belgian volunteers assembled during a projection where the screen images and the soldiers' daily life blend together:

We turn off the lights, and slowly the murmur of conversation subsides. On the screen there appears a title: "Tchapaiev." Everyone has already seen it [...]: in Paris, London, Prague or Amsterdam. But today it is with new eyes that they see it. Those that boo when the Guards' regiment advances, and stamp their feet and applaud when Tchapaiev runs up on his horse with his sword drawn, are not ordinary spectators. Those are men who experienced the same thing yesterday and will experience the same thing tomorrow. They are those of Montoro, Lopera, Las Rozas and Jarama. They are experts.⁴⁰

Indeed, under the title of *Tchapayev: El guerrillero Rojo*, *Chapaev*, the movie gained an entirely new momentum in Spain, unforeseen by its directors. In addition to its inspirational capacities, it became a topical movie and a documentary on the Spanish Civil War.

"We Saw Ourselves in the Movie": The Hispanization of a Soviet Film

Like the novel from which it took inspiration from, the film tackles prosaic and relatively new themes: mutiny, looting, panic, indiscipline etc. In fact, the documentary and "historical" dimensions of the film were implied from the beginning. They were the focus of the directors' attention, and they supplanted the faithful transcription of the original work by Furmanov, as pointed out by Boris Babochkin, the actor embodying Chapaev, who claimed that he was inspired by his experience as a Red Army soldier in the same sector – though he was only 15 years old at the time and had been assigned to a political unit.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the film unexpectedly lent itself very well to its Spanish acclimatization through its ability to blend into the field of representations of the Civil War. That capacity was naturally

⁴⁰ Theodor Balk [alias of Karl Fodor], *La Quatorzième: D'après des rapports, des conversations, des carnets de notes* (Madrid: Éditions du commissariat des Brigades internationales, 1937). Translation from French.

⁴¹ "Como se forma un verdadero artista revolucionario: Babotchkin, el intérprete de 'Tchapaiev' explica su trabajo en un film inmortal," *Frente Rojo*, February 5, 1938, 10.

facilitated by the narration and the apparent proximity of contexts: “Whites” versus “Reds,” the revolution, popular enthusiasm versus military inflexibility, peasantry versus the aristocracy etc. But the identification was further favored by the correspondence between the characters and the functional trinity at play in the first months of the Spanish Civil War: the militia warlord, the “miliciana” and the political delegate or commissar. More generally, the Spaniards marvelled at the parallels that Soviet films presented with their own situation, and they highlighted with relish all the analogies that could be found.⁴² Testimonies are unanimous: The pseudo historical background was quickly set aside in order to highlight the similarities and parallels between Russian fiction and Spanish reality, an incidence naturally singled out by the communist press such as the newspaper *Milicia Popular*:

A film can always develop all its educational power on condition that it knows how to choose its setting. In that sense, for “Chapaev” none was more appropriate than the very combat front, where the episodes of the film are lived through daily with the same emotions, with such realism that it invites us to reflect on events personally experienced and deeply printed in our memory, due to the proximity of their development before our own eyes: they call us “Reds,” a name that honours us; we have other “Whites” before us, perhaps more cruel and wilder than the Russian “Whites”; we have female comrades who handle machine guns with the same heroism as the one presented last night, and who grease and clean them with the same loving care. [...] Because “we saw ourselves in the movie,” the film we are commenting upon fulfilled its high mission.⁴³

A precious indication of the great popularity of the central character of the film, and of his ability to be invoked as a guardian figure in Spain in the summer of 1936, is the high number of militiamen who chose Chapaev’s patronymic as a war name, or were so nicknamed by others. This document Spanish fad of drawing war names from the cinema, which was noted by many witnesses, is not surprising in a country that has relished picaresque nicknames since the War of Independence.⁴⁴ Another sign of its strong rooting in communist culture is the fact that many foreign volunteers also chose or received that pseudo, such as British

⁴² “Los marinos del Báltico y los marinos de España,” *Solidaridad Obrera*, November 6, 1938, 4; Apollo M. Ferry, “El cine y la Guerra,” *Mi revista*, January 1, 1937, 25.

⁴³ Amador Carrasco, “Chapaiev en el frente,” *Milicia popular* 94, November 9, 1936, 4. Translation from Spanish.

⁴⁴ Hausberger and Galaor, “¡Viva Villa!,” 1537-1538; Enrique Santiago Piqueros Cuadros, “Las crónicas de los corresponsales soviéticos durante la guerra civil española (1936-1939) como fuente para el estudio histórico – literario del conflicto” (PhD diss., University Complutense of Madrid, 2014), 240; Alexander Szurek, *The Shattered Dream* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 179-180.

officer Joseph Wallace “Jock” Cunningham (1902-1969).⁴⁵ Lastly, one of the first Catalan militiamen’s columns was sometimes nicknamed *Chapaev* (renamed “Carlos Marx Column” thereafter).⁴⁶

In the “Spanish Chronicles” that he sent to the newspaper *Izvestia* in 1936, Soviet press correspondent Ilya Ehrenburg (1891-1967) underlines the craze of the Spanish for the character. They were enraged by *Chapaev*’s death and asked Ehrenburg to convey their congratulations to Commissar Furmanov: “They were convinced that Chapaev and Furmanov still lived in Moscow,” he writes.⁴⁷ Indeed, through its apparent realism and authenticity, the movie performed as an illustration for news commentaries:

That is how the Teutonic soldiers – or rather here “the blond Moors” – attack. They have thrown large human masses against the iron wall of the defenders of the city. And after watching the Russian film, the people of Madrid realize what has happened when they read that the “advance of the enemy has been contained,” after it suffered a very high number of casualties. The Teutonic tactic is now old and discredited. It failed in Verdun. And it is failing in Madrid. Because there is nothing else to do but settle firmly in the trenches and bring the machine guns into play. It says in the film: when they are sixty metres away.⁴⁸

The transposition had a reassuring effect and the film also highlighted the enemy’s weaknesses. Though it was technically superior and had powerful allies, it was not invincible; the alliance between the commander from the people and the commissar from the Party would stem its offensives through the “will to win.”⁴⁹ As a result, lessons and daily examples were drawn from the narration or the interrelations between the characters. The film was shown, read and used as a collection of “exempla,” integrated in a self-training process

⁴⁵ University of Warwick Library Digital Collection (UWLDC) Henry, Sara and Frank Maitland Archives, Pamphlets and Leaflets 15X/2/103/186: *It Can Be Done: Report of the Fourteenth Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Battersea, May 29-31, 1937*; RGASPI 545.6.837: Entry on Rumanian volunteer Gruber, alias Tchapaiev Bernhard, alias L. Clarans; 545.6.333.63 à 67: Entry on Mihaly “Tchapaieff” Salvay, by André Marty. Moscow, December 30, 1940.

⁴⁶ “Un peuple en lutte pour la liberté: 24 heures en colonne sur le front de Saragosse,” *Regards* 135, August 13, 1936, 4.

⁴⁷ Ehrenburg, Ilya, *Gentes, años, vida* (Barcelona: Planeta, 2003), cited in Inmaculada Colomina Limonero, “La influencia de la iconografía soviética en el imaginario colectivo de la izquierda española de los años 30,” *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma, Serie V, Historia Contemporánea* 21 (2009), 113.

⁴⁸ “Perfiles de la ciudad en guerra,” *La Libertad*, January 12, 1937, 5. Translation from Spanish.

⁴⁹ “Las épicas jornadas de Volotchaevsk,” *Ahora*, January 11, 1938, 8; Carrasco, “Chapaief.”

based on the use of parables, thus participating in the subconscious import of a Bolshevik liturgy in Spain: “No soldier in our young People’s Army should miss this film, in which he will find magnificent lessons in military and revolutionary strategy, and in which the role of the political commissar reaches its suitable height and prominence.”⁵⁰ The War Commissariat of the International Brigades relied heavily on the film. In the previously mentioned promotional book *La Quatorzième*, the narrator draws from Chapaev a number of episodes, practically all of them related to discipline: the pig stolen from civilians, the sentry who fell asleep, the soldier who got drunk: “Tchapaiev wants to humiliate the commissar. He has not yet understood the Commissar’s role. He will understand it later. Our company commander was like that, many think. [...] Here’s one that hasn’t cleaned his gun. The spectator identifies the faces on the screen with his comrades who also neglected to do so.”⁵¹

It is also in *Chapaev*'s fiction that we can find the justification for the – very real – execution by a fire squad of the French commander of the 12th International Battalion, by juxtaposing a scene from the film in which Chapaev shoots a traitor arousing panic, with the summary sentencing of Commandant Delesalle.⁵²

Undeniably, the understanding of the movie which prevailed abroad before the Spanish Civil War – that is to say, in the words of famous communist critic Léon Moussinac (1890-1964), a film “animated by the spirit of October, by that of class struggle, that of the Bolshevik party, that of Lenin” – was relegated to the background, in favor of a detailed, utilitarian – in a word, documentary – rereading.⁵³ Soviet cinema was therefore used in Spain as fully specialized educational vector, where each film dealt with a different category or military subject:

Contemplating that reflected on the screen, our fighters reinforced their morale, assimilated teachings and strengthened their faith in victory. *Los marinos de Cronstadt*, a hero movie, enlightened heroes. And once its scenes were fixed on their retinas, they made them true again on the battlefields. Thus arose,

⁵⁰ “¡Jóvenes, ved « Tchapaiev »!,” *Ahora*, January 16, 1937, 5. Translation from Spanish.

⁵¹ Balk, “*La Quatorzième*”, 154. Translation from French.

⁵² *Ibid*, 158. This explicit acknowledgement of a French volunteer’s execution had long-term consequences. In France, the book *La Quatorzième* was used as evidence against MP André Marty in the French Parliament in 1939.

⁵³ Hausberger and Galaor, “*¡Viva Villa!*,” 1540-1541.

to the amazement of the world, the children of the Soviet soldiers: Coll, Carrasco, Cornejo, Grao and Molina. And just like this one, the other films did their work. "*Tchapaiev*" produced smart and effective political commissars; "*¡La patria os llama!*," aviators, the glory of anti-fascist Spain; "*Las tres amigas*," self-sacrificing nurses, full of tenderness for the wounded companions.⁵⁴

All these films took part in the shaping of a military model, a war imagery in which the Soviet soldier asset an exemplary goal to be reached: "Movies that teach us, that boost our morale, that impel us to imitate our Russian comrades."⁵⁵ This paramilitary imagery was fixed by mythical representations of the Russian Civil War: the superiority of willpower over technology, the victorious intervention of "shock troops," the pre-eminence of the political fighter over the traditional soldier etc. Taken in the context of its Spanish immersion, *Chapaev* gained a new meaning and delivered an additional message where the main character embodied the archetype of the militia leader that Furmanov/Klychkov endeavored to transmute into a more effective, more disciplined officer, a true soldier. Consequently, the movie supported the reformulation of the Republican military and participated in the shaping of the new Spanish soldier's identity in accordance with the conventions suggested by the communist movement in Spain.

***Chapaev*, a Providential Metaphor for the Militarization process?**

The period from the fall of 1936 to the spring of 1937 corresponds to a period of assertion of the authority of the Republican government, which relied resolutely on the recovery of its monopoly of the control of the armed forces. It involved replacing the various paramilitary militias with a regular army under a single command, and partially returning to a traditional military nomenclature, a process immediately referred to as "militarization." That was the objective of the decree issued by the President of the Council of Ministers and Minister of War Largo Caballero (1869-1946) on 28 September 1936, restoring a single military institution, the *Ejército Popular de la República*, an initiative considered to be counter-revolutionary by proletarian organizations such as the Anarchists or the non-Stalinist

⁵⁴ "El cine ; Arma de defensa," *Estampa*, January 23, 1937, 15. Translation from Spanish.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Leninists of the *Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista* (POUM).⁵⁶ On 16 October the *Estado Mayor Central*, the sole executive organ of command, theoretically directed the Republican armed forces, but in reality the proletarian organizations still retained broad prerogatives, and certain sectors, such as the Aragon front, completely eluded its control. The militarization decree was not really applied in Catalonia until 6 December and only was so with room for a broad autonomy. At that date, many militias still refused to be fully integrated into the regular army, a proof of the resistance of an asserted alternative military culture. This militia counterculture also had its own cinema heroes. With its vivid pace and good humor, the American film *Viva Villa!* was also such a success in Spain that it came to represent a certain militiaman spirit, that of the peasant enlisted in one of the militia's columns. "*Viva Villa!*" became a real battle cry, and the film's war scenes were particularly appreciated – the barracks in which the militiamen were trained even claimed the right to show the adventures of the Mexican hero.⁵⁷ However, in spite of its great success in Spain, even before the outbreak of the Civil War, the film was not shown anymore in most movie theaters by the end of 1936.⁵⁸ Acclimatized to a Spanish context, *Chapaev* had proved to be much more useful for its unexpected pedagogical capacity, in addition to its entertaining as well as ideological qualities.

In Spain like everywhere else, the character of Chapaev was perceived as a hero, a kind of Bolshevik saint with superior, extraordinary qualities, as summed up by German communist writer and volunteer Alfred Kantorowicz (1899-1979): "Audacity, fearlessness, lightning decision-making, eagerness to learn, devotion to the cause of the people."⁵⁹ Better than any other, he personified by nature the popular and revolutionary values that were precisely embodied in the external representations of the Spanish Republicans' fight:

Incidentally, it is under his name that a body of Republican militiamen has now been formed in Spain. Tchapaiev is the brother of all the prodigious soldiers born of the fertile revolutions where the energy

⁵⁶ Michael Alpert, *El Ejército Popular de la República, 1936-1939* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2007), 40.

⁵⁷ Bernd Hausberger and Isabel Galaor, "*¡Viva Villa!*," 1532.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1519.

⁵⁹ Alfred Kantorowicz, "*Tschapaiew*": *Das Bataillon der 21 Nationen* (Madrid: Imprenta Colectiva Torrent, 1938), 23.

and the enthusiasm of an oppressed people prevail over the strategy and the armament of the professional soldiers whose historic mission it is to serve the oppression. He is the brother of the soldiers of Valmy and the soldiers of Guadarrama.⁶⁰

Chapaev is, however, an ambiguous character, being at the same time the incarnation of the communist fighter and the representation of the confused militiaman, not apolitical but uncertain, anarchistic, fiery but rough, imperfect, and therefore perfectible. The qualifier “partisan,” which is commonly associated with him, rings like “irregular,” whose meaning is practically similar to “militiaman” in Spain. In the film, Chapaev manifests his political ignorance but also his attachment to Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924) in a sequence intended to tie the hero to the Bolsheviks despite his anarchistic idiosyncrasies.⁶¹ Thus, in the *Quinto Regimiento* press, Chapaev is indeed presented as a first-class fighter, but also as an unruly antimilitarist, contemptuous of military science at his own expense: “In his eyes, only rifle-armed fighters made war and got victories. If he did not like staff officers, it is also because he did not understand much and had never known how to organize them properly.”⁶²

Thus, the patronym quickly became an epithet designating both qualities and defects, the very characteristics exemplified by the character. Originally granted as a mark of respect and admiration, the nickname “Tchapaieff” given to Major General Mihály Szalvai (1899-1955) of the International Brigades is indicative of the qualities denoted by that pseudonym. This Hungarian communist activist had been one of the first international volunteers in Spain, participating in the defense of Talavera on 8 September 1936 with the Polish section *Dombrowski* – one of the first international units in Spain to be incorporated in the Catalan column *Lliberta*. On 10 November he commanded the Hungarian company *Rakozy*, then was successively appointed commander of several international battalions and celebrated for his courage. But the profile of Mihály Szalvai established by André Marty, who was in charge of ruling on each of the foreign communist officials in Spain, speaks for the ambivalence of the pseudonym:

⁶⁰ “Cinéma,” *Rouge-Midi*, September 29, 1936, 3.

⁶¹ Petrone, “Masculinity and Heroism,” 187; Ferro, “L’idéologie stalinienne,” 132; Franciscón, “A construção do herói,” 73; Haynes John, “Brothers in Arms: The Changing Face of the Soviet Soldier in Stalinist Cinema,” *The Modern Language Review* 95:1 (2000), 159.

⁶² “Tchapaieff; El trabajo político en el ejército de Tchapaieff,” *Milicia popular* 55, September 27, 1936, 6. Translation from Spanish.

From a military point of view, the main characteristic of Comrade Tchapaieff is illustrated by the pseudonym that the volunteers of his battalion gave him. He was indeed, especially at the beginning, a partisan and a leader of partisans. His military knowledge, moreover, was not great. [...] He had never attended a military academy before coming to Spain, nor did he in Spain. Everything he knows and everything he has been able to do, he draws from his practical experience and his fighting spirit, which is truly remarkable. During the first combats, he distinguished himself by always placing himself on the front line and at the head of a few groups of soldiers; obviously, that attitude was not always adequate. [...] According to all those who followed Tchapaieff during his stay in Spain, he largely corrected that misconception of command. Tchapaieff also greatly developed as an officer; however, it must be recognized that his defective military training and his partisan character did not completely disappear. It is those flaws that repeatedly prevented him from leading his battalion properly.⁶³

The other portraits that we have of officers who received or claimed the patronym, such as the (Mexican) leader of the 86th so-called “international” brigade, or Otto Brunner (1896-1973, aka *Tschapaiew*, the Swiss commander of the 8th International Battalion, perfectly coincide with that profile.⁶⁴ Chapaev is the embodiment of the “partisan,” the irregular fighter who must be reformatted to become an elite soldier, or else be confined to guerrilla activities.⁶⁵

Chapaev the partisan-militiaman is a truly useful character only when he amends and accepts the teaching he is given by his commissar. Consequently, the central character is in fact Klychkov/Furmanov, a paragon of the political commissar whom the film was meant to promote in its Spanish career, beyond his incarnation of the Communist party at war.

The Chapaev-Furmanov Relationship and the Explanation of the Commissar

Like the novel, the film follows the narrative thread of the meeting and subsequent ideological growth of Chapaev under the leadership of the political commissar, Fiodor Klychkov, alias Furmanov. It therefore deals with the metamorphosis of a “peasant-captain”

⁶³ RGASPI 545.6.333.63 to 67: entry on SZALVAY Mihaly (Tchapaieff), by André Marty. Moscow, December 30, 1940.

⁶⁴ RGASPI 545.3.550: *El jefe de la 86 Brigada, sus actos y sus sentimientos*, by José Sanchez. Undated. [Summer of 1937]; Kantorowicz, “*Tschapaiew*,” 23-24.

⁶⁵ It is therefore hardly surprising that later on, in 1938, the name of Tchapaieff was chosen to be given to the journal of the Republican guerrilla commandos. *Tchapaieff: Periódico editado por el XIV Cuerpo de Ejército*.

into a seemingly true Soviet army officer, “tactfully” instructed by the commissar by whom he is constantly flanked against his will.⁶⁶ Far from hampering his qualities as a combatant, the action of the commissar transcends and subjugates his value, a mechanism perceptible to the spectator: “The commissar’s cold determination dulls Tchapaïev’s wild outburst.”⁶⁷ The former, previously rejected and perceived as hostile, earns the Chapaev’s respect, who then accepts to receive advice which, for the spectator, is delivered through particularly meaningful symbols such as his appearance. As Brazilian scholar Moisés Wagner Franciscón shows, the Party, embodied by the character of Furmanov, exercises a real civilizing process by setting an example⁶⁸. That perspective was perfectly understood in 1936. For French writer and art critic Léon Werth (1878-1955), Chapaev was indeed a “hero of the revolution”, but for the sake of the cause it was a matter of “transforming a ringleader into an army chief”:

The people’s commissar Fourmanov was delegated to him. You realize that Tchapaïev hardly welcomes the bespectacled intellectual who dares to advise him to wear a less scruffy outfit and forbids the red soldiers looting. But intelligence prevails, together with “organization.” Tchapaïev gives in to Fourmanov. He is not only dominated by “the educated man”: through Fourmanov, he discovers a mysterious truth. Fourmanov is as brave as he is, but his bravery is of another kind. Between Tchapaïev and Fourmanov, a symbiosis establishes itself [...].⁶⁹

That is exactly the reading of the film which was proposed by the PCE in Spain: It was centered on Furmanov as a true “organizer of the Red Army” thanks to his incarnation of the Party at war and his decisive intervention in the army.⁷⁰ Beyond the dramatic thread of the relationship between the two protagonists, it is the teaching provided by the character Klychkov/Furmanov that contains the material which sheds light on the function and justifies his presence. Without the Commissar, the officer is incomplete, fallible. The “innate,” though undeniable, qualities of the character Chapaev are insufficient or even dangerous

⁶⁶ “Dans dix-sept cinémas de Moscou. Un million deux cent mille spectateurs ont vu en dix jours ‘Tchapaïev’ le chef-d’œuvre du cinéma soviétique,” *L’Humanité*, November 30, 1934, 4.

⁶⁷ “Cinéma,” *Rouge-Midi*, November 10, 1936, 3.

⁶⁸ Franciscón, “A construção do herói,” 74.

⁶⁹ Léon Werth, “Le Cinéma,” *Europe*, January 15, 1936, 129-135.

⁷⁰ “Como se forma un verdadero artista revolucionario: Babotchkin, el intérprete de ‘Tchapaïev’, explica su trabajo en un film inmortal,” *Frente Rojo*, February 5, 1938, 10. Translation from Spanish.

without political control and support – an understanding shared far beyond communist circles, including by Trotskyist currents.⁷¹

Precisely, the fall of 1936 corresponds to the creation of the corps of war commissars, an anti-militarist concession granted so that the military reform undertaken by the central government would not appear as a rehabilitation of the hated, and so dissolved, military institution. On the other hand, the creation of the corps of commissars could present a number of advantages, including one particularly paradoxical at first sight: the depoliticization of the armed forces and the introduction of theoretical precepts previously validated by the government. The commissar took over from the so-called political “delegates” associated with the command of the militia columns. The decrees signed by Largo Caballero on 16/17 October and 25 November 1936 instituted the presence of official “war commissars,” in reference to their predecessors in the armies of the First French Republic.⁷² Naturally, everyone saw in the new function the shadow of their Soviet counterparts, although Spanish Republican Army historian Michael Alpert has shown that the Soviets did not participate at all in that introduction.⁷³ In fact, not only did the function pre-exist and was it commonly accepted among proletarian organizations, but it was also considered essential in the paramilitary militia culture. It was therefore the mere institutionalization of a function, taking after the common term “commissar.”

Now required and subjected to a single nomenclature, the function was, however, difficult to define despite the decrees’ contents. What does a commissar do? What purpose does he serve? In 1936 the Spanish soldiers and foreign volunteers hardly received precise answers and the instruction manuals did not exist yet. Apart from the French historical reference – a mere legitimist front –, everyone only thought of the Red Army. The first source was too old, imprecise and without any direct heritage, and it only served to give a putative filiation to the second, which registers the Russian Revolution and the function of political commissar within a historical tradition and the common crucible of anti-fascism.

⁷¹ “Cinéma,” *La Révolution prolétarienne: Revue mensuelle syndicaliste communiste*, January 25, 1936, 14.

⁷² *Gaceta de Madrid* 290 and 291, October 16-17, 1936; *Gaceta de la República* 331, November 26, 1936.

⁷³ Alpert, *El Ejército*, 97 sq.

There were several attempts to define the mission and the role of the war commissar, until the reforms of May 1937 definitely set the framework for the function. In his Spanish Republican form, the political commissar was the ferment of “conscious discipline” – the main precept of the new army and a motto constantly repeated by all the proletarian organizations associated with the central government and the local autonomous authorities. To that purpose, the war commissar had three fields of intervention among the troops that he was in charge of: that of morale (“raising the combative morale of our forces, and in case of a setback, studying its causes with full composure and being the organizer who mitigates the effects on our combatants while by all means avoiding dispersion and panic through methods of persuasion and energy”); that of assistance to both command and supply corps (“the first and best aide to the commander, his right-hand man, the man who helps him to forge and organize the militias and the armed forces”; assisting in “all questions related to the life of the troops – supplies, housing, weapons, ammunition, training, cultural work etc.”); and that of political action within the unit’s boundaries (“agitation and propaganda within the units as well as among the most immediate masses of the civilian population [...], among the prisoners and enemy troops”; “being alert and keeping a watchful eye on all the actions of the enemy in our own ranks”).⁷⁴ The commissar was supposed to answer personally for the success of his missions and to set an example in all circumstances, up to sacrificing his own life. He was not only responsible for maintaining morale afloat, but also for instilling hatred against the enemy, a guarantee of “the fighting spirit of our comrades.”⁷⁵

Hence those texts remained theoretical; a more efficient, more human vector was needed. Through fiction, *Chapaev* provided a practical illustration of the role of the “politico” as the PCE wished it for the EPR. In the official memorial book dedicated to the French volunteers of the International Brigades, *Épopée d’Espagne*, the three sources of inspiration of the new function are clearly identified: “They considered themselves to be the modest heirs of Saint-Just and of the commissars in the armies of 1790; they were also inspired by what they knew from the experience of the political commissars of the Red Army in the Russian Revolution. [...] What they did know about them was mostly what they had read either in the book or the film entitled *Tchapaiev*.”⁷⁶

⁷⁴ “La misión de los comisarios políticos,” *Milicia popular* 58, October 1, 1936, 2; RGASPI 545.1.1b: *Le travail du Commissaire (sic) politique dans l’armée*. Undated. [End of 1936]

⁷⁵ “Tareas de los comisarios: el odio al invasor?” *La voz del Combatiente* 21, January 21, 1937, 2.

⁷⁶ *Épopée d’Espagne. Brigades internationales 1936-1939: Recueil de récits vécus et de documents historiques* (Paris: Amicale des Anciens Volontaires Français en Espagne Républicaine. Paris, 1957), 55.

This representation is given through the interpretation that is offered for the relationship between Chapaev and Klychkov/Furmanov. The identification transfer is facilitated by a factor intentionally put there by the two directors: through his costume and his style, Commissar Furmanov seems more of a contemporary character cast twenty years back than the opposite. Unlike the Muzhiks' fur hats, Russian jackets and beards, or the shiny uniforms of the White Guards, the Commissar's plain dress is in no way exotic in Spain. His flat cap, khaki fitted jacket and boots set him totally apart from the rest of the characters in the film, but he would not be out of place in Spain. We can see this very well in the interview of a Catalan PSUC commissar carried out by the Spanish illustrated magazine *Estampa*:

Before us, a political commissar of the United Socialist Youth. Leggings, sturdy boots, a sheepskin coat, a cloth cap and a gun in a shoulder strap resting on his side. An energetic face that radiates self-confidence. His beard and unkempt hair give him the look of an old guerrilla.

- Tell me, comrade, what impact did the projection of *Tchapaief* have on you?
- Unforgettable. It gave me a model of what a political commissar should be. The forger of revolutionary fighters, the leader who gives them faith in victory, the tireless caretaker of holding high their morale.
- Do you think *Tchapaief* has influenced the training of your comrades?
- Yes, *Tchapaief* has been a vivid lesson of rapid assimilation for all.⁷⁷

The PCE now had in its possession an animated representation of the commissar, of undisputed authenticity, and which was moreover very easy to present to the soldiers by means of an entertaining film. In the absence of another available example, it was therefore the fictional character that was summoned. While the film *Chapaev* captivated the spectators, it was in reality Furmanov who was shown as the Iberian patron saint of commissars. Communist poet and playwright José Herrera Petere, a member of the *Quinto Regimiento*, thus composed an ode to the commissars, regularly reproduced in the press. Right from the first stanzas, the qualities celebrated are those of the Vassiliev brothers' character:

The Commissar

A steady hand, or restraint;
strong and helpful commissar,
your weapons are not bullets,
they are words and tact,
reason and experience,

⁷⁷ "El cine; Arma de defensa," *Estampa*, January 23, 1937, 15. Translation from Spanish.

the model of brave men.
The strong Furmanovs of Spain
forged many Tchapaievs;
on the fronts go the commissars,
serene and upright;
they are intelligence,
the reason why we fight,
our sure policy
that is conquering the world,
conscious discipline,
something fascism will never have,
because although it has guns
it will never have commissars,
[....]⁷⁸

Introduced in the context of the fall of 1936 and acculturated in Spain, *Chapaev* deals with a salutary symbiosis, namely the corps of commissars grafted onto the corps of officers. The attention of the Spanish communist movement immediately and enthusiastically moved towards that new function, powerfully supported by a cultural material which it had itself produced. But was it a Spanish import or a Soviet export?

The Sons of Furmanov: The 5th *Regiment* and the Modelling of the Commissar

The structuring of the Madrid militias had its roots in the communist paramilitary thinking of the 1920s, which foreshadowed the creation in Spain in 1933-34 of the *Milicias Antifascistas Obreras y Campesinas* (MAOC).⁷⁹ That self-defense group was envisioned as the basis of the future proletarian army which the Communists then called for. Most of the military cadres of the Spanish communist movement were to be found there: Juan Guilloto León aka “Modesto” (1906 -1969), Francisco Galán Rodríguez (1902 – 1971) and Enrique Lister (1907 - 1994), but also an Italian named Vittorio Vidali aka “Carlos Contreras” (1900 – 1983) as early as May 1936.⁸⁰ With the exception of Galán, all had received military training at the Frunze Academy in Moscow. It is therefore not surprising that the function and mission of the commissar were developed within Madrid’s circumstantial extension of the MAOC, the

⁷⁸ “*El comisario, ¡siempre en su puesto!*,” *La Armada*, February 27, 1937, 3. Translation from Spanish.

⁷⁹ Blanco Rodríguez Juan Andrés, *El quinto regimiento en la política militar del PCE en la guerra civil* (Madrid: UNED, 1993).

⁸⁰ As a delegate of the Communist International in Spain, Vidali participated in the setting up of the *Quinto Regimiento* until he was officially appointed its political commissar.

Quinto Regimiento (5th Regiment). It was not a military unit *per se*, but a unique, self-governing repository: an ersatz organic division as well as an ideological crucible. It first trained units under the supervision of communist cadres, the *Milicias de Aceros*, and then four “shock” battalions before it was reduced to its sole cultural and political dimensions.⁸¹ Above all, it was an incubator of home-trained cadres and a powerful multiplier of communist slogans. Undoubtedly, the Soviet references deeply permeated the spirit of the *Quinto Regimiento*, which in no way concealed the origin of its references.⁸² For all that, was that Soviet cultural field a deliberate Moscow export, carried out by Soviet technical “advisers” or cadres of the Communist International? If so, it would seem logical to find in Spain a political commissar directly sent from the Soviet Union with precise instructions, but it was actually more of an import than an export, borrowed out of necessity but thoroughly influenced by the force of suggestion of the Soviet, rather than communist, culture.

In fact, the *Quinto Regimiento* owed nothing to the Soviets, who were very surprised at this paramilitary oddity, created by the PCE in Madrid, or to the few foreign Communist cadres with military experience dispatched to Spain by the Comintern.⁸³ In reality, one should rather look at the role played by a civilian – Soviet journalist Mikhail Koltsov (1898-1940), a correspondent in Spain for the newspaper *Pravda*. Like his counterpart Ilya Ehrenburg, he regularly reported on the projections of the film *Chapaev* in Spain and on their effect on the “Aragonese peasants.”⁸⁴ Likewise, he observed and emphasized the fact that the Spanish Communists relied heavily on the film to train their military cadres.⁸⁵ And for a good reason – he himself made the characters of *Chapaev* appear regularly in his “military” articles published in *Milicia Popular*, the organ of the 5^o *Regimiento*.⁸⁶ Koltsov arrived in Spain on 8

⁸¹ Comin Colomer Eduardo, *El 5^o Regimiento de milicias populares: Historia de la unidad político-militar que fue la Oficina del Ejército Popular y del Comisariado político* (Madrid: Librería Editorial San Martín, 1973), 199 and 205.

⁸² “A los trabajadores de la Unión Soviética,” Poster of the 5th Regiment published in *Milicia Popular* 10, August 6, 1936, 2.

⁸³ Like German Wilhelm Zaisser, aka “José Gomez,” or French Vital Gayman, aka “Vidal,” and Jules Dumont.

⁸⁴ Mijail Koltsov, *Diario de la guerra de España* (Barcelona: Editorial Planeta, 2009), 16 and 205; Ehrenburg Ilya, *Corresponsal en España* (Buenos Aires: Tiempo Contemporáneo, 1978), 76.

⁸⁵ Koltsov, *Diario*, 141.

⁸⁶ “Tchapaief: El trabajo político en el ejército de Tchapaief,” *Milicia popular* 57, September 30, 1936, 6 and October 1, 1936, 6; followed by “Hombres del Ejército rojo” published in 1937 in *La voz del combatiente*, the organ of the Army of the Centre’s War Commissariat.

August 1936 and stayed on as a press correspondent until November 1937. Until today, his stay has sparked many historiographical rumors, provoked by Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961), who made him “one of the three most important men in Spain,” under the name of Karkov, in his famous novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.⁸⁷ However, it is difficult to assess his influence in the conflict, except for the impression he made on his interlocutors and through propaganda, on which he imposed his mark. His role as a Stalinist agent was overvalued, and he was actually denounced to Stalin by Marty. But Koltsov’s cultural influence on the 5th Regiment was considerable, long before Soviet advisers such as Vladimir Efimovich Gorev (1900-1938) appeared in the Republican military nomenclature and the Corps of Commissars was created. His action and influence have been thoroughly studied by Spanish Civil War historian Paul Preston in a remarkable analysis.⁸⁸ As Preston points out, Koltsov regularly mentions in his diary an unidentified figure named “Miguel Martínez,” very close to Alvarez del Vayo who was appointed head of the *Comisario General del Ejército* on 23 October 1936. This character, present at the commissar’s nomination meeting, could very well be Koltsov himself.⁸⁹ Chapaev fascinated Koltsov, who dreamt of being another Furmanov, the evidence of which being found in particular in the dialogue that he claimed to have had with the charismatic anarchist leader Buenaventura Durruti (1896-1936) on 14 August 1936 – an exchange worthy of those between Chapaev and Furmanov.⁹⁰ Koltsov shows himself to be very attentive to the Spanish anarchist movement, perhaps hoping for the “evangelization” of Spanish libertarians, in the image of the recurrent reading of Chapaev’s “conversion” to Bolshevism by Furmanov.⁹¹ Be it as it may, Koltsov’s articles form a literary panegyric to the Soviet soldier as a militant-soldier who no longer has anything in common with his predecessor, the Tsarist soldier.⁹² As described by Koltsov, this new soldier, of “the Workers’ Army,” corresponds closely to the representations shared by all sectors of Spanish anti-fascism – the counter-model of an unconventional warrior distinct from the “Ancien

⁸⁷ Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1941), 397.

⁸⁸ Preston, “Prologue,” in Koltsov, *Diario*, IX-XI.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, XII-XIII.

⁹⁰ Koltsov, *Diario*, 18.

⁹¹ “Tres escritores soviéticos,” *Nosotros: Portavoz de la Federación anarquista ibérica*, July 13, 1937. Also see Paul Vaillant-Couturier’s preface to the first French edition: Dmitri Fourmanov, *Tchapaiev* (Paris: Editions Sociales Internationales, 1933).

⁹² “Hombres del Ejército rojo,” *La voz del combatiente* 16, January 16, 1937, 4.

Regime” soldier. Breaking with an army that oppresses and stupefies, the new army must emancipate and educate. Koltsov’s chimerical and fallacious descriptions of the quintessential “new army,” the Red Army, confirm the Spanish proletarian organizations’ belief in an army that is both emancipatory and adapted to the Spanish context:

Serving in the military was worse than living in the poorest condition or than being unemployed in the city. In the Soviet country, where the masters of the Workers' Army are the workers themselves, the grey coat has a completely different meaning. Here, the Army is the most popular, most accessible University, and therefore most beloved by the peasant masses, almost as much as it is by the working class. In the Red Army the young soldier enters somewhat wild, and he comes out a brave, active man, with a stock of all kinds of political knowledge, about veterinary matters, chemical fertilizers, oppressed colored people, the peasant’s loan, the claims office and General Franco, with his mercenaries.⁹³

The mass of the people in arms must be supervised and counselled by political commissars, and the Spanish Chapaevs from the militias’ ranks must encounter their Furmanovs, trained and supplied by the communist movement.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the movie *Chapaev* was one of the vectors of Soviet soft power in Spain during the Civil War. However, the Spanish reading of that Russian, Soviet and Stalinist film was different and very circumstantial. It was the Spanish communist movement that, with Koltsov’s zealous help, imported a cultural product – it was not a deliberate Soviet export. If the film supported the politico-military recommendations of the PCE, as it justified them, it was because the Spanish Communists found appropriate material in them, and because it was met with great success. Consequently, its apparent authenticity found its roots in the outline of the Spanish Civil War in spite of the movie’s exotism. This self-persuasion was visible even in the highest communist spheres: In 1939, when André Marty, a leader of the International Brigades, presented his final report to the Presidium of the Communist Party of

⁹³ Ibid. Translation from Spanish.

the Soviet Union, drawing on Soviet cinema to illustrate a Spanish feat of arms.⁹⁴ By the end of 1936 *Chapaev* was replaced by *We are from Kronstadt* because the latter film spoke more of the war and shifted the perspective away from the necessary discipline and the role of the commissar – two notions that were now unanimously accepted and integrated in the DNA of the Republican army –, towards the soldier, the courage of the combatant and the guarantee of victory through self-denial. But its influence remained profound, and *Chapaev* was still a source of inspiration in 1938.⁹⁵ As Spanish scholar José Cabeza San Deogracias has shown, the cinema served more as transposition and emulation, as an illustration of the watchwords, than as a source of actual instruction for the combatants.⁹⁶ Chapaev, the semi-historical character, is not a definitive model but a mutating intermediate prototype. He is the militarized militiaman accompanied by the commissar, by the Party. The objective is the “new model” infantryman, inspired by the Soviet soldier. Like Chapaev, the Republican army can only triumph if it agrees to reform and integrate the presence of the commissars. Without them, the officer is defective and the army helpless. The character of Furmanov, much more than that of Chapaev, left a deep impression on the young communist cadres who were appointed commissars in Spain. Beyond creating the mental image of the function embodied by the character on the screen, the use of the novel and, above all, the film turned out to be a training document and an inspiration, as pointed out in the veterans’ testimonies.⁹⁷ Besides, in the preface to the second French edition of the book, the hero was indeed Commissar Furmanov, while Chapaev became his legendary instrument, and it was a former political commissar of the International Brigades that provided the preface to the third edition.⁹⁸ Ilya Erhenburg had perfectly perceived the unexpected but decisive Spanish dimension of *Chapaev*, the Vassiliev brothers’ film, when he wrote: “In his mistakes, they

⁹⁴ RGASPI 495.2.266: *Rapport sur les Brigades Internationales, discours du Camarade André Marty*, Moscow, August 26, 1939, 58.

⁹⁵ “Los hijos de Chapaev,” *¡Venceremos! Diario de la XIIIª*, July-August 1938, 2 ; Clemente Cimirra, “El cine y la guerra. Rectángulo en la noche, enseñanza en el film,” *Nuevo Cinema: Revista cinematográfica* 3 (1938), 4.

⁹⁶ Cabeza San Deogracias, “Buscando héroes.”

⁹⁷ Roger Bourderon, “Des Brigades aux FFI. Entretien avec Henri Rol-Tanguy,” *Cahiers d’Histoire* 29 (1987), 77.

⁹⁸ See Henri Rol-Tanguy’s preface to the second French edition. Dimitri Fourmanov, *Tchapaiev* (Paris: Editions Hier et Aujourd’hui, 1946)

recognized their own. It can be said that during the first winter of war, one of the most influential commissars in the Republican army was Furmanov.”⁹⁹

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⁹⁹ Ilya Ehrenburg, *Ispanskije reportazhi 1931-1939* (Moscow: Aguenstvo Pechati Novosti, 1986), 328, cited in: Piqueros Cuadros, “Las crónicas”, 142.

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