

Defending Moscow: A Screenshot of Patriotism in Russia Today

by Ray Finch

In mid-2013, the Russian movie director, Andrey Shaliopa, began production of a film which captures the exploits of the 28 Panfilovstev and the role they played in stopping the Nazi advance toward Moscow in November 1941. This brief essay will describe the history (some would say legend) of this exploit, a few of the interesting aspects regarding the creation of the film, a sample of the debate surrounding this event, and a handful of possible implications, especially as they relate to the question of Russian patriotism today.

Background

In the early morning hours of Sunday, 22 June 1941, Hitler unleashed Operation Barbarossa, where some four million Axis soldiers, along an 1,800 mile front, invaded the Soviet Union. At first, the Nazis made large territorial gains, but were ultimately stopped near Moscow in November/December 1941, when the USSR counterattacked. While the war would drag on for nearly four more years, stopping the Nazis on the outskirts of Moscow was a key turning point in the war.

Historians have thoroughly examined the events near Moscow in November-December 1941. One particular exploit that was enshrined in Soviet (and later, Russian) history dealt with the achievements of the 316th Rifle Division, under the command of General Ivan Panfilov. The division had been formed in Central Asia shortly before the war began and was staffed mostly with Kazakh and Kyrgyz soldiers. The 316th Division belonged to the 16th Army, which was under the command of Major-General Rokossovsky. By early November, it was part of the Soviet defensive belt to the west of Moscow.¹



General Ivan Panfilov.

<http://poselok-issa.ru/for/index.php?topic=1029.20>

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According to the popular narrative, on 16 November 1941, a group of some 28 soldiers from one of the front-line regiments in Panfilov's division, single-handedly managed to destroy 18 German tanks which were advancing toward Moscow, while fighting to the last man. Their exploits put a human face on Soviet sacrifice and determination in

stopping the Nazi juggernaut, and became part of the established lore surrounding the Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War.

Generations of young Soviet and later Russian school children were taught to revere the sacrifice and the great heroism of those who became known as the 28 Panfilovtsev.² Their exploit became a staple in educating children about the Great Patriotic War. The battle in and around Moscow in late 1941 has been memorialized in art, history, literature and cinema, (although there had never been a movie dedicated solely to the feat of the 28 Panfilovtsev). During the 30th anniversary of the Great Patriotic War (1975), Soviet officials commemorated the feat with the opening of the largest memorial dedicated to the 28 Panfilovtsev near the village of Dubosekovo, located some 50 miles west of Moscow.³ The memorial consists of six 30-foot tall granite statues, symbolizing the resilience and courage of Soviet soldiers facing toward the west, the direction from which the Nazi tanks advanced.

The Movie's Inception and Funding

In late 2008, Andrey Shaliopa, a Russian movie producer and screenwriter began writing the screenplay for his proposed movie titled "28 Panfilovtsev." He had first heard the story as a child and their sacrifice had filled him with pride and wonder. Once he became a movie producer, he became determined to create a film about their feat.⁴ By 2011, he had pretty much completed the screenplay and began to look for investors to fund his film. One might have presumed that such a popular topic would have attracted both government and private backing, but according to Shaliopa, he initially found little support for this movie among government or private officials.

By mid-2013, Shaliopa decided to try using crowdfunding to support the production of his movie and the response was overwhelming. In a matter of months, he had collected millions of rubles. Shaliopa and his team went on to harness social media platforms to increase buzz and support for the movie. They produced a series of movie trailers (or teasers) which highlighted the film's development and also created a professional website where visitors could follow the latest developments and support this project. Contributing to the film's production was a way for the average Russian to express his/her patriotism in a concrete way.⁵

Just about the time events in Ukraine began to escalate (Feb-Apr 2014), there was increased discussion on the Internet as to why the Russian government was not supporting such a patriotic endeavor. As public interest in the film grew and widened, so apparently did expenses. Where Shaliopa had initially suggested that the film could be made for about \$500,000, it soon became clear that this was not enough. Some of these

increased costs stemmed from greater concern for the overall quality of the film. Such a hallowed topic could not be filmed in a slipshod manner.



*Film about the heroic
28 Panfilovstev*

*If you want to see this
movie-
Help out! [Contribute]*

Poster to solicit funding. https://vk.com/album-54033089_176058562 CC BY SA 3.0

Not surprisingly, given the growing appeals to patriotism surrounding the situation in Ukraine, in December 2014, the Russian Minister of Culture, Vladimir Medinsky agreed to match the funds that had been collected by Shaliopa's team via crowdfunding (more than 30 million rubles). As General Panfilov's division had been constituted in Central Asia and contained many ethnic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, the respective ministries of culture from these countries contributed about another 20 million rubles.⁶

The primary source of funding, however, turned out to be a Russian computer game manufacturer, Ginjin Entertainment, which added another 70 million rubles. This company developed a computer war game which incorporated elements from the movie. Ginjin Entertainment also helped out with much of graphic design and special effects for the film.

Actual filming began in October 2013 at Lenfilm studios in St. Petersburg. Progress was slow at first. Even with the extra funding, final production of the film continued to be

delayed. More than once, Shaliopa announced the film would be completed by such and such a date, only to have the deadline moved back again. Some of those who had contributed via crowdfunding even began to question if this wasn't an elaborate scam to defraud contributors.

The Historical Challenge

But a much bigger problem for Shaliopa and his team was the renewed historical argument as to whether the exploits of the 28 Panfilovstev had ever really occurred. While there's no questioning the courage and heroism of the soldiers in General Panfilov's division in stopping the Nazi advance toward Moscow, some of the specific "facts" in the story turned out to be fabrications.

In late November 1941, a reporter for *Krasnaya Zvezda* (Red Star military newspaper) was at the front outside of Moscow and reported a story where a group of some 30 soldiers in General Panfilov's division heroically stopped a Nazi tank advance by literally fighting and dying to the last man. The story was embellished a bit the next day by a *Krasnaya Zvezda* editor, and published under the headline "завещание 28 павших repoeв" [The Last Will and Testament of the 28 Fallen Heroes].

The story was further elaborated upon in a January 1942 *Krasnaya Zvezda* article where the names of those who supposedly died were added and the famous phrase of the unit's political officer were recounted: "Велика Россия, а отступать некуда. Позади Москва!" [Russia is a vast land, yet there is nowhere to retreat – Moscow is behind us!] As the Nazis had been stopped on the outskirts of the country's capital, the story was great propaganda and a powerful motivator throughout the remainder of the war and afterwards.

However, once the war ended, it was revealed that not all of those listed as the 28 Panfilovstev had actually died. For instance, later in the war, one of the "heroes" had gone on to work with a Nazi affiliated militia. In 1947-48, the military conducted an investigation to sort things out and it was uncovered that other details in the original story had mostly been made-up by the *Krasnaya Zvezda* reporter and editor. However, this being Stalin's Soviet Union, the report was classified secret and appropriately filed. In the 1965 Soviet official history of World War II, it claimed that the 28 Panfilovstev had indeed knocked out 18 tanks and killed 70 enemy soldiers. The myth lived on.

While articles and rumors continued to circulate among historians surrounding the veracity of the story, it wasn't until mid-2011, just about the time that Shaliopa was looking for support and investors for his film, that an article appeared in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, with the title: "Secrets of the State Archives: How they invented the Panfilovstev feat and collapse of the USSR."⁷ In this article, the Director of the Russian archives, Sergei Mironenko, referred to the investigation of 1947-48 (that had been classified 'secret'), and which described how many of the details in this story were fabricated. The article received considerable attention, much of it unfavorable.

The Soviet Union's last Defense Minister, General Dmitry Yazov wrote a rebuttal to the comments made by Mironenko.⁸ The gist of Yazov's argument is apparent from the article's title; *The exploits of the 28 Panfilovstev are alive and well*. In his response, Yazov questioned the qualifications of Russia's chief archivist, writing "*For one who has never smelled gunpowder, how dare this 'historian' Mironenko call this exploit a myth.... I purposely put the word historian in quotes when referring to Mr. Mironenko, because I believe that a man who hates the past of their homeland, and judging by this publication in 'Komsomolskaya Pravda,' this is true. He hardly has the right to call himself a historian.*"

While the battle of the historians was heating up, Shaliopa focused on getting his movie produced. At first he regarded this debate as a distraction, but he soon began to voice a more critical view toward those who dared to question the traditional story. Some of this criticism might have been due to concerns expressed on social media that this movie was not a worthwhile project, asking why Russians should contribute money to a movie based on questionable facts.

The debate heated up again, when in July 2015, Russia's chief archivist decided to publish on the Russian State Archive website the formerly classified investigation from 1947-48.⁹ Such a move did not sit well with Russia's Minister of Culture, Vladimir Medinsky, who pointed out that a state archivist had no right to offer his personal views on the veracity of historical documents. Medinsky went on to suggest that Mironenko might want to consider changing professions. While Mironenko didn't immediately take the hint, he was removed from his position about eight months later.

Not surprisingly, Shaliopa also denounced the state archives' publication of the investigation as undermining the "moral potential" of the nation. He was quoted as saying "This is something that is part of our national self-awareness. These are simple examples that help us raise new generations." Shaliopa went on to say, "trying to debunk instances of national heroism can only be done to weaken the people's moral foundation. One can hardly think of a noble motive for that."¹⁰

As the movie approached its release date, the debate over the veracity of the Panfilovstev story again made headlines. In October 2016, Russia's Culture Minister V. Medinsky went on the attack by calling any of those who dared to question the exploit as "washed up filth."¹¹ Medinsky may have been trying to curry favor with President Putin who was scheduled the next day to watch an advanced screening of the film while visiting the Kazakh leader.



Actors and Directors of "28 Panfilovstev." Shaliopa is 2d from left. By Lybian Palette Studios - <http://28panfilovcev.com/en/photos/28.jpg>, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=31904556>

Movie production continued while debate over the story's veracity raged on. The debate has yet to be resolved and doesn't look to be settled anytime soon. The movie was released in late November 2016, almost coinciding exactly with the 75th anniversary of the purported exploits of the 28 Panfilovstev.¹²

Implications

There are a number of possible implications from this film-making episode, particularly with regard to the topic of Russian patriotism today. First, the Great Patriotic War is alive and well in Russia today. The tremendous losses and their ultimate victory continue to play an integral role within Russian public consciousness. This was evident by the massive crowd-funding and heated debate over the production of this film. Second, the actual production of this film questions the notion that the Kremlin has created a huge media propaganda machine (at least with regard to film production). Initially, the Russian government did little to support this film, and had it not been for the devotion of people like Andrey Shaliopa and those who contributed to the crowd-funding for this film, it likely never would have been produced. This might illustrate the organic nature of Russian patriotism and the development of a stronger civil society.

In one of the interviews he gave during the movie's production, Shaliopa was asked "why make yet another movie about WW II?" He replied that while the movies made during the Soviet period about WW II often recognized the heroism of Russian/Soviet soldiers, the same was not necessarily true for the post-Soviet period. He went on to say that Russia today needed some unambiguous, positive military role models or heroes to look up to, and that the 28 Panfilovstev filled this niche.¹³

In this regard, one must consider the overall context in which this film was made. Actual production of the movie largely took place against the backdrop of the ongoing violence in Ukraine and Russia's partial isolation from the West. Since the Kremlin has denied any sort of military involvement in the Ukrainian conflict, those Russians who have fought and were wounded or killed have done so with little or no recognition. Perhaps this movie vicariously helps.

On another level, the Kremlin-supported media have portrayed the events in Ukraine using a paradigm similar to that of their victory over Nazi Germany. In this narrative, Western (fascist) powers have "invaded" Ukraine, removing the legitimate (pro-Russian) leader in an illegal coup. Russian volunteers (and the Kremlin) have been aiding those pro-Russian regions which have rebelled against this new fascist government. And just as the 28 Panfilovstev were able to heroically stop the Nazi advance toward Moscow, so today, similar patriots in Donetsk and Luhansk (or what some term as 'Novorossiia') are also fighting and suffering to defend against this Ukrainian, fascist junta.

Finally, the production, support and warm reception of this film may indicate a change in the average Russian's perspective toward the subject of war. Alongside the rhetoric for greater military preparedness, over the past few years, Russian society has become tempered to the likelihood of future conflict. Indeed, as the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Syria have illustrated, many Russians appear to be increasingly mentally prepared for war. The old Soviet perspective of "as long as there is no war" [лишь бы, нет войны] has been replaced by a belief that war is now a viable, and perhaps even an attractive option. One can only hope that the new movie "28 Panfilovstev" helps to dispel this belief.

¹ For a brief history of the 316th division, see the Wikipedia entry at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/316th_Rifle_Division_\(Soviet_Union\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/316th_Rifle_Division_(Soviet_Union))

² For background on the 28 Panfilovstev, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panfilov%27s_28_Men

³ For a 360-degree panorama of the memorial, see: <https://www.360cities.net/image/dubosekovo-moscow-the-memorial-to-the-28-panfilov-heroes>

⁴ Much of the biographical information on Shaliopa was taken from his VK page: <https://new.vk.com/shalyopa>. Also see the long interview he gave surrounding the creation of the movie: <https://youtu.be/beeZfAnFsbg>

⁵ Here's a typical example of some of the promotional material associated with the film's funding and production:
<https://youtu.be/kb2Nz825t-0>

⁶ See: Anna Panfilova, "Тоска по героизму: как на фильм "28 панфиловцев" собрали 150 миллионов рублей" [Desire for heroism; how the film 28 Panfilovstev collected 150 million rubles] *Life News*, 16 November 2016.
https://life.ru/t/%D0%B7%D0%B2%D1%83%D0%BA/932584/toska_po_ghieroizmu_kak_na_film_28_panfilovtsiev_sobrali_150_millionov_rublei

⁷ Larisa Kaftan, "Тайны Государственного архива: Как выдумали подвиг панфиловцев и развалили СССР," [Secrets of the State Archives: How they invented the Panfilovstev feat and collapse of the USSR] *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 7 July 2011.
<http://www.kp.ru/daily/25716.3/914287/>

⁸ Dmitry Yazov, "Подвигу 28 панфиловцев быть и жить" [The exploits of the 28 Panfilovstev are alive and well] *Voyenno-Promyshlenny Kurier*, 28 September 2011. <http://vpk-news.ru/articles/8194>

⁹ The Russian Ministry of Archives posted the actual results of the 1948 investigation on their website.
<http://www.statearchive.ru/607>

¹⁰ See interview with Andrei Shaliopa, 21 November 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmbZ-VqntVM>

¹¹ Vladimir Medinsky, "28!" *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, 5 October 2016. <https://rg.ru/2016/10/05/medinskij-im-28-panfilovcam-my-segodnia-obiazany-nashej-zhizniu.html>

¹² Here is the official trailer for the film: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXTFeG6ques>

¹³ See interview with Andrei Shaliopa,, 13 February 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1n4E1BFny9Y>