

New Stalingrad Film Depicts IMAX War

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In the movie, a group of Soviet soldiers protect a young woman while hiding in a house in occupied Stalingrad.

The battle has been previously given film adaptations, most notably in the 1993 movie "Stalingrad," directed by German filmmaker Joseph Vilsmaier. However, a new effort from director Fyodor Bondarchuk tells the story of the battle from the perspective of the eventual victors, and the \$30 million film represents the first fully 3D Russian movie and the first non-American movie shot for IMAX 3D.

The Battle of Stalingrad lasted for months and the Russian victory in 1943 led the way for the Allied victory in World War II. Estimates of casualties on both sides are up to 2 million soldiers and civilians. Superlative descriptions like "the bloodiest battle ever fought" or "turning point in the war" would make the battle immediately cinematic if the historical reality was not so intensely brutal.

The film takes place when Soviet forces are looking to recapture the other side of the Volga River from occupying Nazi forces in the war-ravaged city of Stalingrad, modern-day

Volgograd. The initiative ultimately fails, and five soldiers end up trapped on the river's opposite bank, cut off from their compatriots. The comrades then end up in a house and find a young girl, played by Maria Smolnikova, who they then vow to protect to the death.

At an event Monday at the Multimedia Art Museum, Moscow, or MAMM, the director and stars of the movie supported the film's upcoming wide release Thursday and showed photographs of the shooting process that took place more than a year ago. Bondarchuk is seen crouching in rubble at the project's expansive set built outside St. Petersburg. Indeed, the production of the movie and an emphasis on its firsts for Russian cinema seem focused on the larger than life. At Monday's event, Andrei Smelyakov, one of the stars of the film, told The Moscow Times about the process of filming "3D does not tolerate small movements."

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Bondarchuk has said the film, which had its official premieres in St. Petersburg, Moscow and Volgograd last week, represents an important moment for Russian cinema, and it has already earned the nomination for the country's entry for Best Foreign Film at the Academy Awards.

While the mood around the film may be celebratory of the project's ambition and scale, those involved say the movie is not a triumphalist portrait of the heroics that led to a Soviet victory in 1942. The movie features a band of Russian heroes, a sinister Nazi officer and plenty of gunfire, but its director said it was not meant to fit into the standard action movie concept. In an interview with Komsomolskaya Pravda before the film's premiere, Bondarchuk said that "judging by the trailers, it has been said our film takes all the cliches from Hollywood movies" before adding that "I wanted in this picture to go into depth on what was happening in Stalingrad."

Indeed, films of actual events, whether it be the three-hour epic "Gandhi" or "Zero Dark Thirty's" retelling of the raid that killed Osama bin Laden, often end up becoming part of and shaping the history that they portray. On Monday, Bondarchuk, whose most well-known directorial effort to this point was the 2005 film "9th Company" about Soviet soldiers holding out against mujahedeen fighters in late 1980s Afghanistan, said his film was historical but by no means a documentary. "If it was in British culture, it might be called the saga of Stalingrad. In Russia, we can call it 'the tale of Stalingrad.'"

Olga Sviblova, the director of MAMM, curated the exhibition of photographs of film production, which she calls "meta-documents," said the movie could also serve an educational function. The photo leading into exhibition is Emmanuil Yevzerikhin's iconic shot of 1942 Stalingrad, showing a statue of children playing around a crocodile juxtaposed with burning buildings in the background. Sviblova has hopes that the attention given to the film will communicate the battle to a new generation — and to those abroad who do not know

about Russia's large part in the war — in a language they understand. MAMM, which hosted an exhibition of both Russian and German photographs from the battle earlier this year, has teamed up with the Moscow House of Photography and "Stalingrad" to show pictures of the actual battle from their archives at museums and theaters in the regions. "People will see the difference between the reality and the cinematic reality," Sviblova said.

While the film gives an artistic version of a crucially important event, whether "Stalingrad" is received as a flop or a critical moment for Russian filmmaking is still undecided. The film's budget, technological achievements and Oscar support have all given it unprecedented hype. The first reactions from the press have been mixed, so far garnering 68 percent positive reviews on the cinema website KinoPoisk. While some critics praised "Stalingrad's" grandiosity, others said it was very commercial and reminiscent of a video game.

Sviblova said of the film, "The tickets will tell us if it is a winner."

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