

Moscow TV Round-Up: Propaganda and Patriotism

By [Mark H. Teeter](#)

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Benedict Cumberbatch appears alongside Gary Oldman in the 2011 adaptation of John le Carré's bestseller 'Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy.' **KinoPoisk**

It's propaganda, piracy and patriotism week on Moscow TV, as small-screen viewers are treated to fine documentary and feature films that offer everyone from concerned flag-wavers to potential buccaneers some new and enlightening perspectives on all three P's. Here's the where and when:

What was the last time you saw Russia-targeted American propaganda featured on Moscow TV? Same here. On **MONDAY**, however, Kultura's always-engaging "Telling Time" documentary series will rectify this lacuna with a new installment called "**An American March**" (2017). In it many Russians will get their first prime-time look at the nascent

American propaganda machine – a mere 100 years after the fact.

In 1917 President Woodrow Wilson established an organization called the Committee on Public Information (CPI) “to influence U.S. [public opinion](#) regarding American participation in [World War I](#)” through “techniques of propaganda.” After the overthrow of two successive Russian governments in 1917 and the subsequent arrival of an American expeditionary force in the Russian Far East, the CPI’s target audience was expanded to include the Russian citizenry. A number of films were produced “especially for the Russian viewer,” with the intention of countering “German and Bolshevik propaganda,” affirming Wilson’s war aims and extolling the American way of life.

How successful were features such as “Pershing's Crusaders” and “America's Answer”? Join historian Eduard Chukashev for a fascinating look at the CPI’s Russia-directed efforts – as one of the first modern “white propaganda” campaigns and as cinema proper. Just don’t tell anybody at work on Tuesday that you spent Monday evening enjoying American propaganda.

Telling Time: “An American March” / Запечатленное время: “Прощание американки.”
Kultura, Monday at 6:45 p.m.

TUESDAY brings viewers Alexei Denisov’s documentary **Igor Sikorsky: Knight of the Sky** (2012), a worthy contribution to the recent revival of local interest in the aviation pioneer. Sikorsky’s niche in the popular Western consciousness – as “the Russian-American immigrant who invented the helicopter” – is justifiable but a bit misleading.

A mechanical wunderkind of Russian-Polish descent from Kiev, Sikorsky (1889-1972) actually produced key innovations in both fixed-wing and vertical-ascent aircraft, and was acclaimed internationally for the former long before he became a U.S. citizen – before World War I, in fact. His early “Ilya Muromets” and its four-engine successor “Russian Knight” (“Русский Витязь”) stunned observers here and abroad and “made Russia the world leader in heavy bombers” before most of the world had even heard of heavy bombers.

But like Vladimir Zvorykin, the Russian-American “father of television,” Sikorsky achieved his greatest successes after leaving his Empire homeland in the wake of 1917: He worked his way through a hardscrabble immigrant period in the U.S., caught a few breaks (including a big check from Sergei Rachmaninoff that saved his company at one point) and, once stably Americanized, amazed the world with his helicopters – including a visiting Nikita Khrushchev, who was hugely impressed by a ride in one of Eisenhower’s presidential models in 1959.

Tune in for an instructive look at an authentic genius who made his homeland proud during two separate periods, in fact, the second of which was spent as, ahem, a “foreign agent.”

Igor Sikorsky: Knight of the Sky / Игорь Сикорский: Витязь неба. Istoria, Tuesday at 6:10 p.m.

On **WEDNESDAY** viewers learn that even if pirates don't make off with billions and a couple of

villas in Spain, they can still be enormously popular with the local population – and have a lot more fun, it would seem, than a barrel of Putins and Wall St. banksters. Boris Durov's "**Pirates of the Twentieth Century**" (1979) was the Soviet box office champ for 1980 by a huge margin, selling an incredible 90 million tickets as the USSR's first "action blockbuster." By 1990 it had been seen by 120 million viewers, making it the most watched Soviet/Russian film since, well, ever – which it still is, of course. What was all the fuss about, you might ask, over a pirate movie without Johnny Depp?

Start with the obvious: Everybody everywhere likes pirate movies, always has, always will – the Depp "Caribbean" franchise can't count its money fast enough. But sure-fire genre aside, "Pirates" was also a breakthrough movie: the first film in which martial arts were demonstrated on the big screen in the USSR, sparking a tsunami of interest around the country.

Granted, there are a couple of large and curious holes in the plot: (1) the Soviet freighter that's attacked by the movie's swarth-enhanced buccaneers is supposed to be hauling pharmaceutical opium from the southern hemisphere (played by recently nicked Crimea) to Vladivostok; alas, the USSR was one of the world's leading opium *exporters* at the time. And (2) the movie's tacked-on love-interest subplot – focused on, as one viewer noted, "an island whose entire population consists solely of photogenic women of vaguely Uzbek appearance" – remains mysterious before and after the film's denouement. Eventually somebody's film school dissertation will identify the movie it was clipped from (or was going to become).

At all events, the pirates do their worst, there's a lot of exotic kung-fu-ing around and "Pirates" emerges as a "far superior groin-kicking film to 'Home Alone.'" Seriously, the whole thing forms a very large and intriguing piece of the sociological puzzle that made up "audience preferences" in the late USSR. And just to keep you interested if/when the karate chops don't, consider this: A Beatles song is featured prominently on the soundtrack – and it's not "Back in the USSR"! Tune this one in, chop-chop!

Pirates of the 20th Century / Пираты XX века. TV Tsentr, Wednesday at 8:40 a.m.

For those who like a good spy thriller, **THURSDAY** offers Tomas Alfredson's fine "**Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy**" (2011), the second screen version of long-retired spook John le Carré's bestseller. This is a fine piece of cinematic storytelling, as its BAFTA Best Picture win, three Oscar nominations and dozens of other awards attest. Gary Oldman is particularly good as the phlegmatic George Smiley and Colin Firth nearly his equal playing Bill Haydon. The time, place and mood of Cold War I are meticulously captured and woven together, making the whole thing a very good night at the movies indeed. So why does it score "only" 7.1/10 on the IMDb rating scale – well short of the 8.6 score for the original TTSS film, the late 1970s serial in which Alec Guinness played Smiley?

The Guinness film was and remains, in our view, the best spy production ever mounted for TV – and one of the best ever mounted for anything. In it you get both myriad detail that couldn't fit into a two-hour telescoping and, more critically, a (literally) prolonged sense of dread that builds up over the 290 minutes of multiple installments.

But tune in to this worthy runner-up and, if you've seen the original, compare for yourself; or see this one first and work backwards. Or best of all, read the novels, see what great espionage writing is all about, and then enjoy the film(s) for what they are – fine “accompaniments.”

Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy / Шпион, выйди вон! Kinokhit, Thursday at 11:50 p.m.

FRIDAY. A moving and revealing monologue of reminiscences by the Stalin Prize-winning actress Marina Kovalyova (1923–2007), “**A Real Soviet Girl**” (2010) explains how a boundless faith in the Soviet system led the talented Kovalyova to play roles better left unplayed – most notably Natasha Rumyantseva in the epic of Stalinist hagiography “The Fall of Berlin” (1949). Indeed, her willingness to disengage from critical thinking led her, Kovalyova recalls, not just to poor career decisions, but to lead a life wholly different from the one she might have led – and ought to have, as later became clear to the Honored Artist of the RSFSR.

Kultura calls Kovalyova's unsparing self-interview “a bitter epiphany from a member of the older generation, a belated confession and act of contrition.” While that's fair enough, it also bears noting that there is considerable food for thought here for millions of viewers outside Russia as well as in: Wherever “patriotism” is promoted in the guise of uncritical loyalty, the sobering experience of Marina Kovalyova needs to be read, marked, learned and inwardly digested – or our brave new millennium will spiral out of control even sooner than we feared.

A Real Soviet Girl / Настоящая советская девушка. Kultura, Friday at 12:25 p.m.

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