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Russian Movie Night: 7 Literary Works on Screen

Sit back while Russian literature plays out on the home theater.

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"Life and Fate" **Moskino**

One of the first complaints students and lovers of literature have about Russian novels: "They're so long!" That might be because they were written over long, long winters, or maybe just because the authors have a lot to say. In any case, that makes them perfect for long, multi-episode series that are great for holiday viewing.

“Life and Fate” (2012)

This 2012 Russian adaptation of Vasily Grossman’s Life and Fate is an understandably condensed version of the epic novel, which was not published until the 1980s, two decades after the author’s death. Grossman’s novel was dubbed the “Soviet War and Peace” and examines the lives of individual citizens caught up in the maelstrom of World War II. Toggling

between the Battle of Stalingrad and the home front life of evacuees from Moscow, this well-crafted twelve-part series will whet the viewer's appetite to read Grossman's complete works, including his heart-wrenching essays from Treblinka and occupied Ukraine. Sergei Makovetsky leads an all-star cast as Grossman's civilian hero, Viktor Shtrum, with stellar performances from Yevgeny Dyatlov, Andrei Kryzhny, and Anna Mikhalkova. Available on Amazon here.

"Within The Whirlwind" (2010)

This dramatization of Yevgenia Ginzburg's eponymous Gulag memoir does a magnificent job of evoking the pervading sense of fear and discomfort of the late 1930s in the Soviet Union, and the incredible cruelty of the prison camp system. Emily Watson is pitch perfect as Ginzburg, who falls from a position of privilege as a literature professor and wife of Kazan's mayor into the maw of a brutal Siberian logging camp, where she somehow finds the will to survive. Other notable cast members include Ben Miller, Benjamin Sadler, Ian Hart, and Pam Ferris. Available on Amazon here.

"The White Guard" (2012)

If you are looking to sink into a series, look no further than this excellent adaptation of Mikhail Bulgakov's magisterial novel of Civil War Kyiv. As Ukraine is engulfed in the violence of civil unrest, following the long years of war and revolution, the Turbin family face tough choices. This series is brilliantly shot and features stellar performances by Ksenia Rappaport, Nikolai Efremov, Konstantin Khabensky, and Mikhail Porechenkov. Available on Amazon here.

"The Admiral: Love and Fate in a Time of War" (2009)

Russia's recent fascination with and sympathy for the White Army in the Civil War is tangible in this sympathetic portrayal of Admiral Alexander Kolchak, who led a sizable force against the nascent Red Army in Siberia. There is something for everyone in this 10-part series: war, revolution, naval battles, political intrigue, and the tender love story of Kolchak and the beautiful poet Anna Timiryova, who risk everything to stay together. An expansive budget, solid research, and imaginative screenwriting make this a solid pick for those who enjoy historical drama. Available on Amazon here.

"And Quiet Flows the Don" (1958)

From the dawn of the Golden Age of Soviet cinema comes Sergei Gerasimov's epic adaptation of Nobel Prize winner Mikhail Sholokhov's novel of the Don Cossacks in the early twentieth century. The tragic love story of Grigory Melekhov and Aksinia is at the heart of this sweeping saga of the First World War, the Russian Revolution, and the Civil War that changed forever the social fabric of the Cossacks. With all the expansive budgets of the era, this film is beautifully shot with convincing performances by the two lead actors: Pyotr Glebov and Elina Bystritskaya. Available on Amazon here.

"The Romanovs: An Imperial Family" (2000)

This historical drama focuses on the imprisonment of the last Imperial Family and their

ultimate assassination in Yekaterinburg, and an entirely innocent romance between Grand Duchess Olga and a young guard. Romanov fans will welcome the sympathetic portrayal of the united family, though skeptics may consider it more of a panegyric. Alexander Galibin does a commendable job as Nicholas, paired with the British actress Lynda Bellingham as a suitably prickly Alexandra. Vladimir Grachyov as Tsarevich Alexei evokes the fear and growing understanding of the family's ultimate fate. Available on YouTube here.

"The Road to Calvary" (2017)

This epic NTV adaptation of Alexei Tolstoy's trilogy charts the upheaval brought about by the Russian revolutions and Civil War through the fates of two upper middle-class sisters, Darya and Yekaterina, and their various love interests. The series makes full use of the novel's various settings across the sprawling Russian empire, as the characters spread out and then come together again. This is a well-researched historical epic with excellent sets and costumes, and solid performances by the film's four principal actors: Anna Chipovskaya, Yuliya Snigir, Leonid Bichevin, and Pavel Trubiner. Available on YouTube here.

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