

Writing history and identity from war: the Battle of Osowiec in the Russian music and cinema

Escrevendo história e identidade a partir da guerra: a Batalha de Osowiec na música e no cinema russo

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Abstract

The recent reappearance of a World War I battle in the media draws attention to the discourse employed in the development of Russian identity. The article analyzes two artistic works referring to the Battle of Osowiec Fortress, the song by the Russian band Aria - *Attack of the Dead*, and the short film *Attack of the Dead: Osowiec*, in addition to interviews and secondary bibliography. This study aims to verify how the song and the short film demonstrate the figure of strong characters, corroborating the doctrine of a Strong Russia; and also investigate whether these works were part of the current Russian government's strategy of appropriating culture and symbolic objects from Russian history for political purposes.

Keywords: Russia. World War I. Osowiec Battle. Ideology. Media.

Resumo

O atual ressurgimento, na mídia, de uma batalha da Primeira Guerra Mundial chama a atenção para o discurso empregado no desenvolvimento da identidade russa. O artigo analisa duas obras artísticas referentes à Batalha do Forte Osowiec: a canção da banda russa Aria, *Attack of the Dead*; e o curta-metragem *Attack of the Dead: Osowiec*, além de entrevistas e bibliografia secundária. Os objetivos são: verificar como a canção e o curta-metragem demonstram a figura de personagens fortes, corroborando com a doutrina de uma Rússia Forte; e verificar se as obras seriam parte da estratégia do governo russo

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atual de apropriação da cultura e objetos simbólicos da história russa, para fins políticos.

Palavras-chave: Rússia. Primeira Guerra Mundial. Batalha de Osowiec. Ideologia. Mídia.

Introduction

Power permeates all layers of society, even in spaces where it is not noticed and, therefore, the representation of historical facts is many times conditioned by the structure of the current group in power. In modern societies, there are many ways of conveying ideologies, and through those spaces, historical representations can be shaped according to the changes proposed by the hegemonic discourse. The theme of war is especially popular and recurrent in art and mass communication media, it gains attention in collective memories and is frequently used in the organization of nationalist discourses. The First and Second World Wars are no exception.

Russia went through moments of severe political and organizational rupture in the 20th century. The Bolshevik Revolution, the creation of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and, later on its dissolution, caused drastic changes in the power spheres and their interests. Thus, the Russian historical memory and identity suffered significant discontinuity. Therefore, World Wars impacted the Russian identity experience in a particular way.

The Osowiec Battle, along with other episodes of the First World War remained for some time as a forgotten moment in Russian history. However, it has reappeared in the contemporary imaginary. In 2014, the Russian power metal band *Aria* (Ария) – created in Moscow, in 1985, during the Soviet regime, and nicknamed the “Russian Iron Maiden” – launched the album *Through All Times* (Через все времена), which contains the song *Attack of the Dead* (Атака Мертвецов), referring to the Battle of Osowiec. Up to June 2022 the album reached over 415 thousand reproductions only on Spotify’s streaming platform, and the song *Attack of the Dead* was reproduced 120 thousand times on Youtube (Youtube, 2022a¹). These are expressive numbers, considering the specific musical niche (power metal) and the language used (Russian).

In 2017, the Boris Yeltsin Presidential Library Cinema Club announced the premiere of the film *An Assault of the Dead: the Legend of the Osowiec Fortress*, by Andrei Grachev,

¹ YOUTUBE. 2022a. Retrieved from: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I4O2sQPX2Hs>>. Accessed on: 13 Jun. 2022.

dedicated to one of the most striking and yet little-known exploits of Russian soldiers during the First World War. A small garrison of the fortress had to survive only 48 hours — instead, it acted in the defensive for more than six months — 190 days. It went through a deadly gas attack and won!” (Boris Yeltsin Presidential Library, 2017²).

In 2018, a company that develops digital games - *Wargaming*, which was founded in 1998 by Victor Kislyi and is well-known for games with war themes, launched the short film *Osowiec. Attack of the Dead Men: Wargaming Short Film* (Короткометражный фильм “Атака мертвецов: Осовец”) in several of their channels. On the Youtube platform, it reached over 230 thousand reproductions of its English dubbed version (Youtube, 2022b³) and approximately 814 thousand reproductions of its Russian version (Youtube, 2022c⁴), up to June 2022.

In 2019, the Swedish heavy metal band *Sabaton* launched a song about that battle into the album *Great War - The Attack of the Dead Men*. It reached over 270 million reproductions only on Spotify’s streaming platform; and 34 million views of the official videoclip on Youtube (Youtube, 2022d⁵), up to June 2022. The album *The Great War*, like previous albums of the band, narrate noteworthy battles, “of grueling campaigns and dazzling acts of bravery, of magnificent victories and touching personal struggles – true stories more fantastic than any fiction” (Sabaton, 2022⁶).

At the same time, during the president Vladimir Putin government, Russia goes through another moment of identity construction. This raises the argument that the Osowiec Battle became relevant for the discourse of legitimation of the current power due to its capability of keeping a symbolic material reserve, unlike the Soviet period. In such context, studying the particularities of the Russian experience and the ruptures in the articulation of historical discourses, as well as Russian national identities becomes relevant.

² BORIS YELTSIN PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY. News. *The “An Assault of the Dead”. The Legend of the Osowiec Fortress”* Movie by Andrey Grachev was Screened and Discussed in the Presidential Library”. 10 Oct. 2017. Retrieved from: <<https://www.prlib.ru/en/news/689507>>. Accessed on 21 Jan. 2022.

³ YOUTUBE. 2022b. Retrieved from: <<https://www.youtube.com/watchv=LNqeZVUkEKA>>. Accessed on: 13 Jun. 2022.

⁴ YOUTUBE. 2022c. Retrieved from: <<https://www.youtube.com/watchv=U518G8fUk6o&t=2s>>. Accessed on: 13 Jun. 2022.

⁵ YOUTUBE. 2022d. Retrieved from: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-AFdwoyNT24>>. Accessed on: 13 Jun. 2022.

⁶ SABATON. “Band” page. Retrieved from <<https://sabaton.net/band/>>. Accessed on: 20 Jan. 2022.

This article seeks to understand how the Osowiec Battle fits in the development of the contemporary Russian identity, by using the historical discourse. In this sense, it refers to the relations between the historical discourse and power functions, as well as the ways in which historical representations are used in Russia. For understanding both song and film as documents, we analyzed the song *The Attack of the Dead Men*, by the Russian band *Aria*; and the short film *Attack of the Dead Men: Osowiec*, to verify how this event of the First World War, which had been forgotten during the Soviet regime, was revived and is presented in history, identity, and memory, invoking the Russian heroism and conveying an image that strengthens the Russian nationalism. We also investigate whether these artistic works can be part of the ideological interests and the strategy of the current Russian government. The article starts from considerations about history, identity, and memory, and how they are noticed in contemporary Russia. In the sequence, we focus on the symbolism of the Osowiec Battle, and analyze the song and the short film. The last section concludes the article.

History and identity

Analyzing history is essential for the construction of a group's identity and the definition of their principles and rules. Knowing certain people's past is an indispensable notion to understand their relationship within their own group and with other groups and have an insight into their internal issues and the international policy of certain nation or state. The development of individuals, states, and history as well as the national character is not static. The distinct collection of past occurrences is filtered in historical facts and made available to individuals, groups, and institutions. Due to the several changes that occurred during its construction as a discipline, and once the positivist project was overcome, critical history is the current trend, which considers historical facts as not immune from bias. This means that they are previously selected, which requires a critical analysis of their content, the historian's context, and their use in the identity field.

From the conception of ideology (a set of ideas, notions, and opinions) put forward by Marx and Engels (1947)⁷, we consider that ideas are socially conditioned, rather than mere reflexes of the world; they do not appear in the vacuum since they result from social interactions. Therefore, ideas present an inherent political force since they can transform the world view of individuals

⁷ MARX, K.; ENGELS, F. *A Ideologia Alemã I*. Lisboa: Martins Fontes, 1974.

or groups. The Marxist thought goes beyond that, defending the conception of ideas as instruments that contribute to the dominant classes' power legitimation. In his view, ideology is an instrument used by the dominant class to justify and keep their power. And, by keeping their influence at the level of ideas, the dominant classes exercise intellectual power to avoid that their authority model is challenged, opposed to, or overcome.

Ideology concepts might be confused with discourse as presented by Foucault. However, there is an important difference. While ideology is treated as instrumentalization of power, a translation or result of forms of power, the discourse is a modality that contains power, in such a way that power can also be managed through discourse (Hook, 2007⁸). In addition, Brown (2008)⁹, inspired by Foucault, understands that power affects all elements of the social tissue and permeates all areas of society, even places and situations where it is not noticed, which includes discourses and political rationalities. Therefore, different forms of power shape an individual's identity.

Discourse, according to Foucault, is responsible for two opposed effects, namely, restrictive, and productive. The former corresponds to taboos, the distinction between reasoning and madness, and the characterization of truth as opposed to falseness. The latter is the one able to shape the subject, a power responsible for creating the material and ideational structures of society. These are the structures from which individuals build themselves up and identify themselves as subjects and recognize themselves in groups such as a nation. For this reason, due to the formative characteristics of discourses, no representation is free from power (Brown, 2008).

Since written history is not free from bias, we understand that historians might also be affected by the current ideology and discourse, and that their work might reproduce, intentionally or not, the interests of the dominant intellectual power. Likewise, the dominant intellectual force can use history as a field that justifies their discourse and dominance. Therefore, it is not unusual for politicians, for example, to emphasize or omit historical aspects that either confirm or deny their ideas to validate their political agendas, which many times makes the nationalist history the only possible history (Southgate, 2005¹⁰).

⁸ HOOK, D. Foucault, *Psychology and the Analytics of Power*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2007.

⁹ BROWN, W. Power After Foucault. In: Dryzek, J. S.; Honig, B.; Phillips, A. (orgs). *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

¹⁰ SOUTHGATE, B. *What is History for?* Nova York: Routledge, 2005.

Inevitably, therefore, history works to an often hidden agenda: definitions of ‘professional’ and ‘amateur’, ‘evidence’ and ‘relevant’, ‘mythical’, ‘acceptable’, and ‘true’, perform a regulatory function. They serve to facilitate distinctions between a past that has been professionally sanctioned (cordoned off as ‘history’), and those bits of the past (including people) which are to be deemed marginal, ‘eccentric’, or off-centre. [...] In this way, then, histories can be seen, not as unearthing or revealing the past, but as actually defining its supposed ‘reality’ – a reality that impinges on, and helps to shape, the future. (Southgate, 2005, p. 99).

Considering this aspect, Foucault’s notion of truth is applied, which dismisses the idea that it is an invariable and undisputable authority. Instead, truth must be understood as a result of discourse, that is, it is through the discursive process that testimonies are rendered true or false (Hook, 2007). From Foucault’s point of view, it is possible to understand that discourses build up notions of reality in which the individuals are inserted and subjected. Identifying power conditions is then essential to analyze the history and identity of certain group of people or a nation.

Continuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject: the guarantee that everything that has eluded him may be restored to him [...] Making historical analysis the discourse of the continuous and making human consciousness the original subject of all historical development and all action are the two sides of the same system of thought. In this system, time is conceived in terms of totalization and revolutions are never more than moments of consciousness (Foucault, 2008¹¹, p. 14).

Likewise, Hilton & Liu (2005)¹² defended that a group’s representation of history conditions the construction of their identity. History might define functions and legitimate actions, due to the reference to their historical experience. History, therefore, connects the individual to the group as a temporal entity. The identity of a group, the national identity, is developed over time, in such a way that matches the historical experience, but such discourse – again – is not necessarily static. The meanings of historical

¹¹ FOUCAULT, M. *A Arqueologia do Saber*. 7 ed. Rio de Janeiro: Forense Universitária, 2008.

¹² HILTON, D. LIU, J. “How the past weighs on the present: Social representations of history and their role in identity politics”. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, v. 44, p. 537–556, 2005.

processes can be altered so that other social representations are shared, historical facts can be forgotten or discovered (intentionally or not) to legitimate new discourses of ideological identity within the fabric of symbolic materials. (Hilton & Liu, 2005).

Modern societies have several vehicles to direct public opinion regarding historical discourses – as well as the individuals' ideology and identity – these include public spaces, education centers, religious temples, and mass media. In each of these situations, it is possible to restrict or stretch historical representations according to the changes in the political horizon and the discursive power of the dominant group. In addition, it seems also relevant to emphasize the historical content to be addressed, observing that the topics related to wars and battles are quite popular (Hilton & Liu, 2005).

Together, politics and war accounted for about 70% of the events named as the most important in world history, and about 60% of the individuals named as the most influential. More specific, World War II was the most frequently named event in all four locations, and Hitler was the most frequently named individual in three of the four locations. Furthermore, the vast majority of events and people named were from the past 100 years, and for the most part, they hailed from Europe (Liu *et al.*, 2005¹³, p. 173).

Thus, from history, ideology, power, and discourse concepts, and understanding the role each one plays in relation to the others, we intend to look into the Osowiec Battle as an event in the Russian history and its possible use to strengthen their contemporary national identity.

The war memory and the particularity of the russian experience

The conflicts of the World War I occurred from 1914 to 1918, between two fronts of European powers: the Central Powers, formed by Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy (which changed its position soon after); and the Allied Powers, formed by the United Kingdom, France, and Russia. The war ended with the signature of an armistice, in November 1918, and the victory of the Entente Powers, at the time formed by the United Kingdom, France, and the United States. The Kaiser Wilhelm II, from Germany, abdicated the throne and was exiled soon after the end of the conflict. In Russia, Czar Nicolau II was dethroned by revolutionaries, in March 1917, and assassinated in July

¹³LIU, J. H. et al. Social representations of events and people in world history across twelve cultures. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, v. 36, no 2, 171-191. 2005.

1918, in the Bolshevik Revolution, which made Russia leave the War before it ended (Neilberg¹⁴, 2005).

In that War, the Osowiec battle occurred, when the German army attacked the 13th Company of the 226th Infantry Regiment (called “Zemlyansky”) of the Russian Empire. Those soldiers were defending the Osowiec Fortress, a strategic location in the west of Bialystok, currently a Polish territory. The fortress had been built about 20 kilometers far from the East border with Prussia to defend the strategic route between the Neman and Vistula rivers, and it had been attacked three times by the Germans, in September 1914, February/March 1915 and, finally, in July that year.

In the third attack, commanded by field marshal Paul von Hindenburg, chemical weapons were used. After days waiting for favorable wind, thousands of chlorine and bromide gas cylinders were released against the Russian trenches. The German strategy was to occupy Russian positions after the gas effects had killed the opponents, but the plan did not have the expected outcome. The German army owned 14 infantry battalions, one engineering combat battalion, around 14 and 30 siege weapons, and 30 gas batteries, while the Russian had only five companies of the Zemlyansky Regiment and four reserve militia units (Cherkasov¹⁵ *et al.*, 2011).

The gas attack occurred at four in the dawn, a mixture of toxic gases spread for kilometers and killed everything that was within the “death zone” such as trees, grass, and Russian soldiers. Out of the five Russian companies, three were decimated and only 60 soldiers from the two remaining companies survived. Their combat power was compromised because the chloride oxidized the copper weaponry, ammunition, and other materials. After the gas attack, the German battalions moved forward to occupy the enemy positions. However, when they got closer to the Russian border, around 100 survivor combatants, who had been thought to be dead and described as victims of chemical burnt, coughing blood and parts of their own lungs, dressed in blooded rags, facing difficulty to walk, started to fight shouting, or better gasping, their war cries, and attacked the Germans with bayonets.

The Russian counterattack surprised the German troops, who retreated in panic; German soldiers were trampled to death, trapped in barbed wire, or for being hit by bullet fragments, leaving behind weapons and the trenches

¹⁴ NEILBERG, M. S. *Fighting the Great War: A Global History*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005.

¹⁵ CHERKASOV, A. A.; RYABTSEV, A. A.; MENJKOVSKY, V. I. Dead Men Attack (Osovets, 1915): Archive Sources Approach. *European Researcher*. v. 15, no 12. dez. 2011.

occupied. According to the Russian unit logbook, the gas attack caused 7 out of the 8 deaths of high ranked officers on that day and resulted in the evacuation of 20 officers and two medical doctors. Although the logbook did not record the number of deaths of lower ranked officer, the estimated number is from 200 to 400 casualties (Cherkasov *et al.* 2011).

The image of Russian combatants and their apparent “resurrection” gave the Osowiec Battle the nickname “Dead Men Attack”. The description of the soldiers’ appearance is justifiable, but there is no evidence to confirm their war cries, and it is rather difficult to shout with injured respiratory tract. There is a possibility of some soldiers that had been affected by the gas attacked the German troops, but it is not very likely to have been many. However, even if the German troops had the advantage of more combatants and weapons, they did not go forward, then, despite the Russian losses, it can be said as a well-succeeded counterattack.

As previously mentioned, wars are excellent receptacles of symbolic material, they are historical moments that draw great attention and present huge potential for the creation of a nationalist discourse, the development of ideological and identity content to subject a nation. The World War I is no exception, however, when we address its memory, the USSR was an exception. Even before the end of the Great War, the Russian Empire suffered drastic changes in its political organization. The Bolshevik Revolution interrupted the Russian participation in the War, and shortly after the USSR came to be. With this event, the idea that history is written by the winners gained a new facet.

While the remaining states taking part in World War I constructed War/Battle Memorials, cemeteries to pay homage to their combatants, and created holidays to celebrate the date of signature of the armistice, the USSR treated this subject in a particular way. The War was intentionally forgotten. Without monuments or celebrations, it lost its quality of “Great” and was considered a bourgeois war, which deserved no space in the communist Russia.

The Soviet press used watchwords to refer to World War I, but never to recall battles, specific soldiers, or the Russian Empire experience, but rather to denounce its imperialist character. The War memory was obscured for the general audience, and only found zeal in the immigrant Russian army members, who away from the Soviet government authority, could keep their patriotism and status, enjoy the credit of their skills in battle, and even

remember the czarist monarchy as a glorious moment in the Russian history (Cohen¹⁶, 2003).

Since history and its functions are used to legitimate the discourse of the dominant group and establish their truths and ideologies, in the USSR, the dominant intellectual force resided in the Communist Party, thus, the War as a historical moment suffered the influences of the ideas that benefited the Party.

The USSR was something new, better, and, above all, different in world history, and World War I, because it was part of the non-Soviet imperialist world, was a past that could not be memorialized. Yet the press needed an image of imperialist war to demonstrate the existence of a present danger to the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s, and it used the specter of the world war to focus readers on the need to defend socialism, fulfill official policies, and celebrate Soviet accomplishments (Cohen, 2003, p.79).

The Soviet government used World War I as a moment of rupture between the past that caused social revolts and the ideals shaped in the class struggle. The War was a reminder of the evil caused by the non-Soviet past. There was no reason for the “Soviet comrade” to be proud of the battles fought on behalf of a dead king, since pride and notions of social belonging wore due to the communism advancement and its achievements. The non-Soviet past represented the distress of going back to an imperialist reality, which had been marked by misery.

After the 1930s, with the attenuation of Stalinist transformations, there was certain welcoming of the Russian past, and the memory of World War I started to appear in some Russian celebrations. During the mobilization for World War II, the heroism of the Great War combatants was used by military newspapers, but, despite this sporadic use, it remained a symbolic event far from the Soviet experience, deserved little space in their memory and little to no recognition as a relevant modern history event. In a study carried out by the *Public Opinion Foundation* (Obshchestvennoe mnenie), in 2000, addressing important 20th century events, 1,500 Russians were interviewed, but no one mentioned the Great War (Cohen, 2003).

¹⁶ COHEN, A. J. “Oh, That! Myth, Memory, and World War I in the Russian Emigration and the Soviet Union”. *Slavic Review*, v. 62, no. 1, p. 69-86. 2003.

Obscuring World War I meant that all reserve of nationalist symbolic material of the event was not used in the conventional way. On the other hand, World War II received a different treatment, its memory was not erased because in addition to being in accordance with the dominant group interests, it did not represent a treat to the Soviet ideology and truths. Therefore, it was celebrated and provided a catalogue of symbolic material used in the construction of the Russian historical discourse and identities.

In 1991, with the end of the USSR, the need to blur the imperialist and non-Soviet past also ended, thus the ideological potential of those events and its battles could return to the intellectual power's agenda and be incorporated in the Russian historical experience again.

The history and identity of the contemporary Russia

With the end of the USSR, Russian institutions were weakened, and political leaders had to overcome instabilities to relocate Russia in an outstanding position in the international system. "While Russia was weak and troubled in the 1990s, afflicted with domestic unrest and engrossed in a search for itself, the inauguration of President Putin and the start of the new millennium [...] have broken this deadlock" (Müller¹⁷, 2009, p. 331).

A strategy was devised and implemented to regain the image of a global power – a strong Russia. President Vladimir Putin's military endeavor (in Syria, Georgia, and Ukraine, for example), even with doubtful results, were part of this strategy to reach prestige, improve the domestic and foreign public opinion about the Russian power and position the country, once more, as a great power and regional leader (Cecire¹⁸, 2017). Putin is prominent in the discussions about the contemporary Russian identity, taking active part in the development of a symbolic discourse. While Boris Yeltsin got rid of Soviet symbols, by changing the names of some cities and breaking monuments down, Putting took the position of appropriator of the Russian culture, making efforts to develop a national identity, not limiting the use of symbolic material from the Russian history (Kurilla¹⁹, 2009).

¹⁷ MÜLLER, M. Rethinking identification with the hegemonic discourse of a 'strong Russia' through Laclau and Mouffe. In: Casula, P.; Perović, J.(org.) *Identities and politics during the Putin presidency: the foundations of Russia's stability*. Stuttgart: Ibidem Press, p. 327-347, 2009.

¹⁸ CECIRE, M. "Russia's Art of War: state branding by other means". *Foreign Affairs*. 7 fev. 2017. Retrieved from: <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2017-02-07/russias-art-war>>.

¹⁹ KURILLA, I. "Symbols and the Past: the Symbolic Politics of the Putin Administration" In: CASULA, P; PEROVIĆ, J (Edts.). *Identities and politics during the Putin presidency: The foundations of Russia's stability*.

During the first two years of his presidency, Putin succeeded in creating the base for a new Russian identity in a new symbolic landscape. Some of the most important steps were: the exiling of former media magnates Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky (who controlled, respectively, the First Channel and NTV) and a drastic change of the political positions of these TV stations; the legislation to re-introduce the old Soviet anthem with slightly updated lyrics; and a return to tsarist state symbols such as the double-headed eagle. Those were the first visible signs of the Putin administration's efforts to appropriate previously floating signifiers and thereby to reshuffle the symbolic space (Kurilla, 2009, p. 271).

Putin's efforts to use symbolic instruments opens space to other ways of celebrating Russian identity and its history. There is a connection of his personality with the image, memories, and the celebrations of the World War II, despite the fact that he was born seven years after the end of that conflict and having served KGB²⁰ and FSB²¹, rather than the Soviet or post-Soviet army. His policy places World War II as the main event in the 20th century, transforming it in an event of mythological proportions, which grants it national coherence and legitimates his power (Wood²², 2011).

It is by evoking images of wars and significant personalities of the Russian history that Putin seeks to build up a space for the "Strong Russia" discourse, of a great power status. Since this ideal has no intrinsic shape or meaning, it shelters a great spectrum of demands for that project, working as a uniting force, which cancels political and strategic divergences, and can be articulated as a hegemonic discourse. Such discursive project is based on ambiguity, fear of a weak Russia, and the identification of a Russia that is not strong enough yet. There is some understanding that western actors prevent a glorious return of Russia, and that the Colored Revolutions in post-Soviet states are associated with the western interest in reducing Russia's influence area and prevent its ascension. Therefore, it is possible to identify a strategy based on a Russian identity, which could only be achieved with the overcome of the western antagonism. However, while this antagonism prevents the

Stuttgart: Ibidem Press, p. 269-283, 2009.

²⁰ KGB is the acronym for *Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti*, or State Safety Committee.

²¹ FSB, *Federal'naya sluzhba bezopasnosti Rossiyskoi Federatsii*, or Federal Service for the Russian Federation Safety is an intelligence agency that substituted KGB

²² WOOD, E. "Performing Memory: Vladimir Putin and the Celebration of World War II in Russia". *Soviet and Post Soviet Review*. 2011 v. 38, no. 2, p. 172-200. 2011.

concretization of the strong Russian identity, it is also the condition of this possibility, that is, in a paradox manner, it is the force that disturbs and forms Russia's geopolitical identity, and in this ambiguous condition that the ideal of a strong Russia can be conceived (Müller, 2009).

In this context, there was a great movement promoting historical falsification, which was called "anti-Russia provocation offensive" and "violence against history" (Torbakov²³, 2011, p. 212). The disputes against Russian history seem to occur for two reasons: (i) a common phenomenon regarding national identities in multinational empires (such as the USSR), in which negative images of the *other* are developed; and (ii) due to the geopolitical context, where the European Union (EU) was in an expansion moment (in the last decade), and NATO's current expansionist posture towards Eastern Europe, with that, EU and NATO increased their rivalry attitude against Russia and opened their influence area to former Soviet states, which were previously Russia's partners (Torbakov, 2011).

Discourses against Russia became more frequent after the start of armed conflicts with Ukraine. Soviet historical moments (shared by Ukraine and Russia) appear in mass media, with inconstant and intense reproduction. In such context, the Osowiec Fortress battle appears in their culture (music and cinema), between the Annexation of Crimea, in 2014, and the celebrations of the 100 years of the end of the Great War, in 2018. Thus, one might suppose that this represents an episode of heroism that fits the strong Russia ideology and Putin's posture of Russian history appropriator.

The Osowiec Battle symbolism in music and cinema

We dare say that the current Russian discourse also manifests itself in artistic productions, since artistic expressions are a reflection of the social, historical and cultural context in which they were produced, that national identities are constantly constructed and reconstructed by the dominant group in the form of discourse, in a process in which events are used as national symbolic material and transformed into "historical truths", affecting the views that individuals have of themselves, and of themselves in relation to the world in which they are inserted..

²³TORBAKOV, I. "History, Memory and National Identity Understanding the Politics of History and Memory Wars in Post-Soviet Lands". *Demokratizatsiya* v. 19, no 3, p. 209-231, 2011.

We argue that recent artistic productions relating to the Osowiec Battle are part of the ideological strategy of showing Russia and its people as strong and destined to become (or return to be) a great power in the international context. We then looked for evidence to confirm this argument in two Russian artistic manifestations, namely, the song *Attack of the Dead*, by the band *Aria*, and the short film *Attack of the Dead: Osowiec*.

Symbolism in the Attack of the Dead song

One way of analyzing songs is using discourse analysis, as a language study, placing the subject historically in time and space. The discourse analysis works with “ways of signifying, with individuals talking, considering the production of meanings as part of their lives, either as subjects or as members of a certain form of society” (Orlandi²⁴, 1999, p.16). Actually, “what makes the word a word is its meaning” (Bakhtin²⁵, 1997, p.49, 35), then, song lyrics explicitly or implicitly reveal social meanings, and reflect a certain view of world linked to that of the author’s and the one existing in society where he is inserted.

Thus, the analysis of the lyrics of *Aria*’s song aims to visualize how discourse and language interact and influence the individuals. We sought to verify representations, images, and meanings, which are manifested or hidden in the song, and verify the meaning of the discourse in its dimension, that is, whether and how the text influences individuals. Song lyrics are made up of a set of utterances that build up their meanings (Koch²⁶, 2006), which creates the need to observe the language found in the song in terms of production and reception. Although performance and melody play a fundamental role in the construction of meanings (Valente²⁷, 2003), for the purpose of this article, we focused on the exclusive analysis of the verbal component (lyrics), even understanding that the song is neither “only text, nor only music”, a purely literary or strictly musical analysis ends up not considering the song “in its entirety and richness of meanings” (Falbo²⁸ 2010, p. 224).

²⁴ ORLANDI, E. P. *Análise de discurso: princípios & procedimentos*. Campinas: Editora Pontes, 1999.

²⁵ BAKHTIN, M. *Marxismo e Filosofia da Linguagem*. Problemas fundamentais do Método Sociológico na ciência da Linguagem. 3 ed. São Paulo: Hucitec, 1986.

²⁶ KOCH, I. G. V. *Desvendando os Segredos do Texto*. 5. ed. São Paulo: Cortez; 2006.

²⁷ VALENTE, H. A. D. *As Vozes da Canção na Mídia*. São Paulo: Via Lettera/FAPESP, 2003.

²⁸ FALBO, C. V. R. “A palavra em movimento: algumas perspectivas teóricas para a análise de canções no âmbito da música popular”. *PER MUSI - Revista Acadêmica de Música* - Belo Horizonte, no. 22, p. 218-231, jul. - dez. 2010. Retrieved from: <<https://www.scielo.br/j/pm/a/f4RMVbcTmbhZ8GDNwQ7GZvx/?lang=pt&format=pdf->

The world of music has poems that were later turned into songs, and melodies composed as strictly instrumental – which later on also gained lyrics. Therefore, these are considered different from those songs in which lyrics and music were born from the same creation process, even if, in all cases, these elements affect each other mutually and have their original meaning changed with the appearance of a new form of language. This leads the author of the lyrics to work in completely different conditions, “Musicians give the full track with precise rhythmic pattern, strict structure for me to write the lyrics for. There are no extra syllables, no rhyming ad libitum. This kind of writing is similar to solving a crossword” (Margarita Pushkina²⁹, 2022 interview).

The song *Attack of the Dead*, by *Aria*, was firstly composed without thinking about the lyrics, only afterwards the authors Vitaly and Margarita started to think about possible themes. Initially, they thought about writing something related to the inhabitants of an abstract castle under siege, which seemed to be inappropriate. When they decided to write about a real event, Margarita proposed the Osowiec Battle. “I’m still surprised at how much the words are in tune with the music in this song” (Vitaly Dubinin³⁰, 2021 interview).

To analyze the song lyrics, we used the one provided by the authors in Russian, and asked a qualified person to translate it into Portuguese, and later from Portuguese to English. The original lyrics and the translation in to English are seen below:

²⁹ Margarita Pushkina. E.mail interview on 22nd July 2022.

³⁰ Vitaly Dubinin. E.mail interview on 05th February 2022.

Chart 1 – Lyrics of the song *Attack of the Dead (Aria)*

Атака Мертвецов	Attack of the Dead
<p>Это было сотню лет назад – Перечёркнут мир войной За снарядом враг нам слал снаряд Крепость принимала бой Рёв железа, языки огня Раскалённый ураган Мы теряли счет ночам и дням Корчась на земле от ран.</p>	<p>A thousand years ago A world torn by the War Behind their shields, the enemy attacked us The fortress received the battle Sound of iron, tongues of fire Flaming hurricane We lost track of the and nights Writhing for the injuries on the ground.</p>
<p>Крепость на заре окутал газ – Враг смертельный, без лица – Заставляя выть от боли нас Выжигая нам глаза Задыхаясь, поднимались мы Сплюнув лёгочную кровь Сокрушая правила войны В час Атаки мертвецов.</p>	<p>The fortress surrounded by gas at dawn – The faceless mortal enemy – Making us howl in pain Burning our eyes Gasping, we stood up Expelling blood from our lungs Breaking the war laws At the time of the attack of the dead.</p>
<p>Будем стоять до конца Некуда нам отступать Свет и покой в небесах Могут нас подождать!</p>	<p>We shall stand to the end They cannot expel us The light and calm of heaven Can wait for us!</p>
<p>Шестьдесят истерзанных солдат В штыковую, во весь рост Никаких приказов и команд Только ненависть и злость! Кровью харкали врагу в лицо Дьявол вёл нас или Бог? Враг бежал от нас, от мертвецов К Смерти, за её порог.</p>	<p>Sixty tormented soldiers With bayonets of all sizes No order or command Only hatred and evil We spat blood on the enemy’s face Was it God or the devil that brought us here? The enemy ran away, from the dead Towards death, beyond its limits.</p>
<p>Нас отпели рассветы И закаты отпели нас Нас отпели рассветы...</p>	<p>The dawn buries us And the twilight buries us The dawn buries us...</p>
<p>Translated by into Portuguese by Caio César Albuquerque Pacheco and from Portuguese into English by Silvana Aparecida Carvalho do Prado.</p>	

Source: the authors (2023).

We observed that the lyrics were composed in the first-person plural – “we/us” – and, with that, one can infer the connection of the combatants’ experience with that of the band and the audience, and the intention of reinforcing the feeling of belonging to a group, in this case, the Russian nationality. It is possible to understand that this connection overcomes the borders of both time and the individual, evidencing the process of subjecting the Russian identity to the heroic acts in battle.

The phrases “faceless enemy” – referring to the gas masks – and “making us howl in pain; burning our eyes” portrait the dimension of the suffering and indicate heroism, since, even if in pain, the soldiers fought “breaking the war rules”. Bravery is identified when the Russians “stood up” even if “gasping” and “expelling blood from their lungs” and this is reinforced when, even in adverse conditions, “we shall stand to the end”. The phrase “no order or command, only hatred and evil” also implies that the heroic act was an action that originated in the soldiers’ (and the Russian people) nature, an organic deed, rather than the result of hierarchical command, by those in charge, highlighting bravery and strength as characteristics of the Russian people.

Some divine elements are also recognized (God, heaven, devil), they are used to explain the heroic deed. Such connection between the combatants and the divine elements indicates a mystic force, which separates Russian combatants from others, making them extraordinary.

Vitaly Dubinin thinks that when a song is written, “the theme of a song is already there, subconsciously [...] even if there is no theme for a song, try to recognize it before writing the lyrics” (Vitaly Dubinin, 2022, interview). Margarita Pushkina had this idea of writing about the Osowiec Fortress events, until she had the opportunity of fitting it to the music quite successfully. Therefore, “the theme of the ‘Attack of the Dead Men’ was not unexpected: it is an episode from the history of our country, our nation. I am sure that you have bands who make songs about battles in the history as well”. In addition, “working in the musical field for over 35 years, I can firmly say that the audience likes such ‘heroic’ songs like our ‘Attack of the Dead Men’. They like stories about heroism, strength and loyalty”. Fans “often ask if there would be something like “The ballad of an ancient Russian warrior”, and now if there would be something like “Attack of the Dead Men” (Margarita Pushkina, entrevista de 2022).

When the song *Attack of the Dead* was ready, its authors realised that the lyrics perfectly fit the music, then, they could “convey to the fans this feat of Russian soldiers! Especially since it had been so long and undeservedly forgotten” (Vitaly Dubinin, 2022 interview). Although she comes from a military family, the author insists that this fact did not influence her desire to write songs with historical themes, the taste for history runs in the family (Margarita Pushkina, 2022 interview).

Vitaly agrees that at the time of the USSR, the Great War was imprinted in the Russian memory as an imperialist war fought by the Czarist Russia. The Civil War that followed, in which many of those who took part in the Great War fought the Soviets, led to a trend to forget it. However, everything was recorded in military files and other historical works. During the Soviet regime “in school, we were not taught the history of the MB1 (МВ or Мировая война means World War) in sufficient detail, but we did not ignore it either. We knew quite a lot about it, but of course not in detail” (Vitaly Dubinin, 2021 interview). “The theme of this heroic act was not closed or unknown – a lot of people read about it on the Internet, but there are no descriptions of the battle in the schoolbooks” (Margarita Pushkina, 2022 interview). “After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many closed archives were opened and the truth about that war became available in all the details” (Vitaly Dubinin, 2021 interview).

Vitaly informed that he learned about the ‘attack of the dead’ “from a television program about 20 years ago, then I read many articles on the Internet about it” (Vitaly Dubinin, 2022 interview). Margarita found out about the Battle on the internet: “I came across the notes of one of our military officers, or, parts of his memories. I immediately imagined everything that had happened as a movie: I like to film imaginary movies using the plots of our songs. I started to look for more information and, finally, I had a clearer picture of what had happened on August 6th, 1915” (Margarita Pushkina, 2022 interview). Vitaly reinforced that “in Russia, the memory of the two World Wars is cherished, especially by the older generation”. For having been born only 13 years after the end of the World War II, “or as we call it the Great Patriotic War”, he heard many stories from those who took part in it, which made his ideas about the War different from those of the younger generation (Vitaly Dubinin, 2022 interview).

Margarita agreed that “there was little attention towards the events of World War I during the Soviet period, although there were books about a general Skobelev and the Brusilov offensive. The theme mostly came down to

the murder of Archduke Ferdinand and the poor condition of Russian soldiers on the fronts”. However, her father belonged to the army, he took part in the Winter War (against Finland), the Chinese War, in 1938, and the whole Patriotic War, having received the title of “USSR hero for the Stalingrado Battle”, but he never talked to the family about the War. “This means that he knew, saw and understood a lot, but did not talk about orders, opting for silence. [...] My mother was a wise woman, a wife of an officer, she was on the frontline, and in the evacuation, lost two brothers. And, like many, she believed Stalin” (Margarita Pushkina, 2022 interview).

After deciding the theme of the lyrics, “Margarita tried to put into words both the exact facts of this episode of World War I, and to describe the tragic situation in which the defenders of the fortress found themselves”. In fact, we only thought about “just a demonstration of the soldiers’ fortitude in this deadly situation”, so that the event was remembered, “so that many people who didn’t know about this heroic deed would know about it and be proud of their ancestors”. Vitaly concluded: “these words may seem too grandiose, but it’s true!” (Vitaly Dubinin, 2021 interview). “In the comments, which appeared after the release of the song, a lot of people asked to continue this storyline – ‘give us more Russian history’. So Vitaly Dubinin and I have something to be proud of” (Margarita Pushkina, 2022 interview).

Regarding the reappearance of the World War I theme as a way to support the strong Russia image, Margarita emphasizes “a lot of countries started to rewrite their own history”, that author affirms that “nobody in Russia goes to the point of absurdity – we try to correct those serious mistakes in the upbringing and education that were made during 1980-1990s. One of those mistakes was silencing the siege of the Osowiec Fortress”. “Historians, of course, continue to study those events, but their research has not reached the wide audience yet”. For that author, “Plato once said a perfect phrase: ‘people who forget their past do not have the right for the future’ [indicating that] And if whole countries forget about their past, that means that they have to disappear”. She pointed out that “A lot of former Soviet republics do not understand this, suffering from the ‘Napoleon complex’”, and that “the only thing left to do is to welcome Russia’s desire to fill the gaps in its history. The main thing is, it should be without maximalism and patriotic dramatics” (Margarita Pushkina, 2022 interview).

Although Vitaly does not see the use of the Great War events as “a whim of today’s authorities, it’s just the truth, which sooner or later is revealed

to everyone!”), he thinks that the memory of that War “is necessary for the awareness of one’s own identity” and understands that the current Russian military efforts “are necessary in order not to lose this identity! [...] I’m sure it’s in our genes - Russians don’t give up!” (Vitaly Dubinin, 2021 interview). Therefore, ideology is noticed in his words.

Symbolism in the Attack of the Dead: Osowiec short-film

The shooting of events and its relationship with political power (that is, the use of images as documents or manipulation instruments) appeared simultaneously, but developed at different pace. The great boost of those shootings occurred during the World War I, when recording war moments was used in the news reporting³¹, but only as the capture of real scenes that were politically neutral. The Soviet and the Nazis were the first groups to ascribe the cinema a relevant role in the culture, knowledge, and propaganda areas, realizing the value of images and their ability to convey points of view, through the different angles given to those images (Ferro³², 1992).

Cinema changed over history and also interfered with it, either as a technical instrument – means of reproduction – or, as an agent of history or a source for its study (Barros³³, 2007). While historians hesitated to consider films or shootings as documents and historical sources, this posture was only questioned from the start of the Nouvelle Histoire (New History) movement, which broadened the historiography traditional domains, also broadening the meaning of the word “document”, and incorporated unwritten evidence as possible of being studied as sources (Kornis³⁴, 1992).

Document “is a product of society where it occurred according to the relation of forces who held power”, only its analysis as a monument allows the collective memory to recover it and the historian to use it scientifically (Le Goff³⁵, 1996) Therefore, film as document and history as narrative are both discourses about a fact, that is, a representation of a moment in the reality. Every film is about something and about itself, its message is received by the

³¹ FERRO, M. *Interview given to Nicolau Seveenko for the newspaper Folha de São Paulo, 04/06/1988*

³² FERRO, M. *Cinema e História*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1992.

³³ BARROS, J. D. “Cinema e História: as funções do Cinema como agente, fonte e representação da História”. *Ler História*, Lisboa, v. 52, p. 127-159, 2007.

³⁴ KORNIS, M. A. “História e Cinema: um Debate Metodológico”. *Estudos históricos*, Rio de Janeiro, v.5, n.10, p.237-250, 1992.

³⁵ LE GOFF, J. *História e Memória*. 4.ed. Campinas: Editora da Unicamp, 1996.

audience, according to the individual baggage of each spectator. With cinema documents being inserted in Nouvelle Histoire's field of concerns, and the assumption that each film is object of analysis to the historian, the debate presented some possible methodologies for the analysis of films to cover a set of variables found in the production, exhibition, and reception processes of a film (Kornis, 1992). There are countless possibilities for the reading of a film (Kornis, 1992; Nova³⁶, 1996; Langer³⁷, 2004). The issue is then to define, among them, the analysis criteria.

Penafria³⁸ (2009) suggested decomposing the film, clarifying its functioning (scenes, framework and composition, sound effects, etc.), to notice the articulation between those elements and how they were associated. His proposal also divided the analysis into internal, which centers the film as an individual work and with inherent singularities; and external, considering the social, political, economic, esthetic, or technological features. His proposal included: a) search for technical information such as the film title, year, country, genre, duration, technical card, synopsis, and theme(s); b) decomposition of the film into sequences and/or scenes, to understand the dynamics of its narrative; c) identification of points of view, in the visuals, sounds, in the narrative sense (who tells the story, in which person, what happens regardless of the characters' actions, and what happens as a result of their actions, etc...), and in the ideological sense (what the film/its producers position is, or what message it tries to convey regarding the film theme(s)); d) decomposition of each take of the film main scene; and, finally, e) elaboration of a text with the conclusion about the film (Penafria, 2009).

Considering the purpose of this article, we defined the following points for the analysis of the film: original title and its translation into English; year; production country; genre; duration; direction; script; production; setting; synopsis; screenwriter's and producers' data that could be found, and description of relevant scenes, seeking to identify ways of representing the agents involved in the conflict.

The original title is *Атака мертвецов: Осовец* and this is how it appears on the Youtube channel. The free translation into English is *Attack of the Dead*:

³⁶NOVA, C. O Cinema e o Conhecimento da História. *O Olho da História*, v.2, n. 3, p.217-234, dez. 1996. Retrieved from: <<http://www.oohodahistoria.ufba.br/o3cris.html#topo>> . Accessed on: 25 jun. 2022.

³⁷LANGER, J. "Metodologia para Análise de estereótipos em filmes históricos". *Revista História Hoje*, São Paulo vol.5, no 2, 2004

³⁸PENAFRIA, M. Análise de Filmes - conceitos e metodologia(s). VI Congresso SOPCOM, abr. de 2009. Retrieved from: <<http://www.bocc.ubi.pt/pag/bocc-penafria-analise.pdf>>. Accessed on: 25 jun. 2022.

Osowiec. This is a short film, which lasts 23:05 minutes, produced in 2018, as a historical/war drama, by the *SerB Production* for *Wargaming*, a Belarusian videogame company. The script was written by Dmitry Grunyuushkin, with the participation of Petr Stupin and Vasily Chiginsky (Ruskino³⁹, 2022a). Dmitry served the Russian army, majored in journalism at the State University of Moscow, was director of a marketing agency and chief-editor of a large publishing company in Moscow (Wikipedia⁴⁰, 2022). Petr Stupin and Vasily Chiginsky graduated in film direction and work in the film industry (Ruskino, 2022b⁴¹, 2022c⁴²), and Vasily was also one of the producers. The synopsis, originally in Russian, which was translated into Portuguese and from that into English, indicates:

On 11th November, the date of the 100 anniversary of the end of the World War I, Wargaming launches the film based on real facts, *Attack of the Dead: Osowiec*. This film tells the history of the defense of the Osowiec Fortress – not the most famous, but a significant episode of the World War I. Employing all the experience accumulated in the creation of video material and respecting history, the Wargaming team sought to recreate those tragic events in detail. ‘After 100 years, schoolbook texts, black and white photos, and videoed chronicles cannot convey in a convincing way all of the war horrors to our current audience. I do hope that the film accomplishes its task – by using modern artistic language, leading the spectator to think and share our conviction that there is no place for wars in real world’, said Andrey Muravyov, head of the marketing division of the Wargaming at CEI (Youtube, 2022c, our translation).

The events in the film are sufficiently faithful to those described in the historiography. The possibly discrepant parts (such as the Russian discovery of the German chemical weapon) did not interfere in the general course of events. The material was produced in the period of the celebrations of the 110th anniversary of World War I, which could also be identified in a context of growing political and military unrest in Russia regarding the international system, and of intensification of the Putin’s government propaganda and identity.

³⁹ RUSKINO. 2022a. Retrieved from: <<https://ruskino.ru/mov/20553>>. Accessed on: 07 jul. 2022.

⁴⁰ WIKIPEDIA. 2022. Retrieved from: <https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Грунюшкін,_Дмитри_й_Сергеевич>. Accessed on: 25 jun. 2022.

⁴¹ RUSKINO. 2022b. Retrieved from: <<https://ruskino.ru/art/3119>>. Accessed on: 07 jul. 2022.

⁴² RUSKINO. 2022c. Retrieved from: <<https://ruskino.ru/art/7665>>. Accessed on: 07 jul. 2022.

To understand the narrative dynamics, the film was decomposed into sequences and/or scenes. The short film lasts 23 minutes and the combat scenes appear at the beginning and at the end of the film (totaling 5 minutes), which represents approximately 20% of its duration, and aims to demonstrate Russian's resistance to the German attempts to invade the fortress. The film starts with an open field battle, showing Russian soldiers defending themselves from the German attack. It indicates that the defense is successful by showing the German soldiers' retreat, followed by a German bombing, which makes the Russians go back into their trenches. The narrator clarifies that the battle involved assaults followed by bombings and these followed by new assaults. Such a physical proximity during the battle, in a confusing and disorganized way, which provokes a feeling of chaos and despair.

The following segment focuses on the German chemical weapon and how lethal it is. It shows the visit of a Red Cross representative to the German rearward, refers to the chemical weapons and shows German soldiers having fun with the gas masks. A scene shot showing a German Soldier struck by the chlorine gas is followed by the conversation between the Red Cross representative and the German major, who is the local commander. When the former makes clear that the Chemical weapons can cause serious damage, including to those who use them, this possibility is underestimated by the major based on the fact that for being at war, somebody would die anyway, and it would be better if those were the Russians.

The next sequence indicates the cease-fire moment when they collect their wounded soldiers and bury the dead. After that, the scenes show the Russian trenches, but the focus is on the discovery by the local Russian commander that the Germans were wearing gas masks, which indicates their intention to use this type of weapon. The commander informs his soldiers that they will probably die the following day, due to the gas used by the Germans. The conversation is about death and the fact that the Russians have no protection against chemical weapons. The scenes then show soldiers preparing bandages to put over their faces, since that was the only way they could try to be protected from the gas. The improvised preparation of materials is followed by the Russian's emotional preparation. There is a clear intention of showing the combatants' concern, suggested by the soundtrack and a scene showing a soldier lighting a candle and praying.

The next scenes shows the Germans verifying the wind favorable conditions, putting on their masks and opening the chlorine gas cylinders

towards the Russian positions. An aerial take shows the great amount and density of the gas launched (in green), from the German trenches towards the Russian positions. Next, the scenes seek to demonstrate the large number of German soldiers leaving the trench towards the Russian positions, holding their rifles and wearing their gas masks. While advancing, they observe a number of Russian soldiers on the ground. The open field scenes, and not in the trenches, reveal the intention of showing the devastation caused by the gas, with birds falling dead on the ground, and Russians with the faces covered with the bandages, which did not work. Next, the scenes focus on the German's surprise, when the Russian soldiers stand up and start the counterattack.

While the Germans escape, in both the more open takes and the closed-up ones on Russian soldiers, they are shown with blood coming out of their mouths. During the closes on the Russian soldiers, the narrator informs that "the fortress was never taken by an assault", and that "the Russian forces withdrew several weeks later when the conditions of the war theater changed, and turned the defense purposeless", as well as that "Liutenant Kotlinskyi [the local Russian commander] was seriously wounded during the battle". The final scenes show a dialogue at night, between the commander and a soldier, about death. When the commander asks whether death is scary, the soldier, using a metaphor of a binocular position, says it depends on the angle, it can be close and terrifying, or far, tiny, and not so scary.

Although Osowiec was in fact a fortress built in the 19th century by Russia, it does not appear in the film. The scenes occur in trenches or open field and are divided between the Russian and German appearances. The sceneries show a faded color, and the plants that appear are dead and dry. Throughout the film, the images of open fields show trees with only trunks and branches, without any leaves, highlighting the devastation provoked by the combats. On the Russian side, the sceneries and costumes indicate desolation, the Russian combatants are presented with faded uniforms, and their hands, faces, and even their bandages are dirty. Aiming to draw attention, the faded colors of the scenery contrast with the blood representation, produced in saturated red color.

Other contrasts observed were the plants on the German side, which were greener and alive, the camping was more organized, the uniforms cleaner, and the soldiers looked healthier, which indicates the visualization of the German advantage in the battle against Russians. At the same time,

it strengthens the heroism of those presented in worse conditions, who managed to win.

The scenes with Russian soldiers show individuals of different ages; however, it is noticeable that they are mostly older while the commander is much younger. The Russian soldiers are represented by ill young or older men, which indicated a condition of common citizens turned into combatants. The dialogues of Russian combatants, mainly the character Osipov (elderly) with Kotlinsky (much younger), indicate the humbleness of the characters and the difficulties they face in the war situation. On the other hand, on the German side, the soldiers are younger and healthier, while the commander looks older. The German major is presented as cruel – the characterization of a villain – opposing humanitarian views and neglecting possible danger to his soldiers. The Red Cross representative seems to be afraid of the German major. Conversely, Kotlinsky shows concern with the wellbeing of his comrades, and a relationship of apparent mutual respect – the characterization of a hero.

In the content analysis of the message conveyed between the lines (semiotics, points of view, sight and hearing senses), throughout the film, it is possible to identify the dirty and improvised environment of the trenches, the constant noise of bullets, and the blasts followed by a buzz in the ears. The part considered as the most interesting is the use of birds in the film semiotics. The constant use of birds crossing the skies might indicate the wish of the Russian combatants to leave that situation; birds falling dead after the German attack, as gas victims, might evidence the attack as cruel; and, finally, the image of a bird against the sun light (similar to the Christian symbol of the Holy Spirit) is used to indicate the divine presence in the Russian counterattack. There is a narrator who does not appear, but has a higher awareness of the occurrences, which can be identified with God, or the historian. In addition, while the film reports that the Russian knew about the German gas attack, the lack of equipment prevents this detail from interfering in the development of the events, thus it becomes an emotional touch without repercussions in the general history.

Finally, it is possible to infer that the short film conveys the idea of the heroism of the Russian combatants in relation to the German attack. The Russians are represented as underdogs, in technical and material disadvantage, but holders of higher kindness and religious spirituality, thus becoming the moral deservers of the victory.

Final considerations

The USSR construction was a particular moment in the Russian history as well in the history of other republics that took part in that institution, and both its implementation and dismantling were moments of drastic organizational, political, economic and identity rupture in Russia. The government that took office in Russia, after years of a painful post-Soviet transition, under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, rescued the identity of Great Power to Russia. With the main function of contributing to the national political stability, after moments of radical rupture, Putin recycled symbolic material of the Great War that had been neglected and appropriated the memory of the World War II to build up a discourse based on Russia's significant role in the world. The strong Russia reached consensus as an empty signifier that guarantees the overcoming of divergences, and the mythical character of the War works as a shield protecting him against criticism.

The current events, mainly in relation to Ukraine, expose the Russian posture against the movement of countries that once belonged in the USSR towards the European Union and/or NATO, or other mechanisms of western influence. In such context, the guarantee of their identity ideals is a constant concern and an end for several actions. Russia seeks the identity of a great power, aspiration that is anchored in its historical baggage. For this reason, president Putin seems to have been using efficiently the symbolic materials and signifiers of the Russian history to build and strengthen the Russian national identity.

We did not notice a link between the works analyzed and the Russian government strategic discourse. The authors of the song – Attack of the Dead – by Aria, explained how it was conceived. The search for evidence linking the short film Attack of the Dead: Osowiec with a possible strategy by the Russian government such as state funding, or the relationship of artists and producers with the group in power also resulted negative. However, in the same way that the historian is not immune to propaganda and ideology, artists live and work within and from political and social contexts, and, before all, within and from their own identities. Thus, we could infer that the artistic works are coherent with the ideological policy confirmed by Putin and its contents, as demonstrated by the analysis. They might indicate the success of the implementation of the ideology of a strong Russia in Russian minds. The works of art might also mean that Putin reinforces the values of a strong Russia, because this is a thought already rooted in the Russian's

minds, becoming another symbolic judgment appropriated by the elite to guarantee stability, growth, and the way to go to the Russian State to achieve their objectives.

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FSB, Federal'naya sluzhba bezopasnosti Rossiyskoi Federatsii, or Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation. This is an intelligence agency that superseded KGB

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KGB is the acronym to Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti, or State Security Committee.

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