



Bondarchuk's War and Peace: Literary Classic to Soviet Cinematic Epic

By Denise J. Youngblood

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Sergei Bondarchuk's *War and Peace*, one of the world's greatest film epics, originated as a consequence of the Cold War. Conceived as a response to King Vidor's *War and Peace*, Bondarchuk's surpassed that film in every way, giving the USSR one small victory in the cultural Cold War for hearts and minds. This book, taking up Bondarchuk's masterpiece as a Cold War film, an epic, a literary adaptation, a historical drama, and a rival to Vidor's Hollywood version, recovers—and expands—a lost chapter in the cultural and political history of the twentieth century.

Like many great works of literature, Tolstoy's epic tale proved a major challenge to filmmakers. After several early efforts to capture the story's grandeur, it was not until 1956 that King Vidor dared to bring *War and Peace* to the big screen. American critics were lukewarm about the film, but it was shown in the Soviet Union to popular acclaim. This book tells the story of how the Soviet government, military, and culture ministry—all eager to reclaim this Russian masterpiece from their Cold War enemies—pulled together to make Bondarchuk's *War and Peace* possible. Bondarchuk, an actor who had directed only one film, was an unlikely choice for director, and yet he produced one of the great works of Soviet cinema, a worthy homage to Tolstoy's masterpiece—an achievement only sweetened when Russia's Cold War adversary recognized it with the Academy Award's Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film of 1968.

Denise Youngblood examines the film as an epic (and at seven hours long, released in four parts, at a cost of nearly \$700,000,000 in today's dollars, it was certainly that), a literary adaptation, a complex reflection on history, and a significant artifact of the cultural Cold War between the US and the USSR. From its various angles, the book shows us Bondarchuk's extraordinary film in its many dimensions—esthetic, political, and historical—even as it reveals what the film tells us about how Soviet patriotism and historical memory were constructed during the Cold War.

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Review

"As Youngblood argues in her engrossing book, Sergei Bondarchuk's film adaptation should be considered an epic, one that captures many important aspects of Soviet culture in the 1960s."—**Stephen M. Norris**, author of *Blockbuster History in the New Russia: Movies, Memory, and Patriotism* "A tour de force . . . Every class in film studies, Russian literature, and Cold War history will greatly benefit from this book."—**Anna Lawton**, author of *Before the Fall: Soviet Cinema in the Gorbachev Years* "A highly informative and engaging book that will appeal to film buffs, Tolstoy aficionados, and scholars alike."—**Andrew D. Kaufman**, author of *Give War and Peace a Chance: Tolstoyan Wisdom for Troubled Times*

"Youngblood shows how a careful, scholarly comprehensive treatment of a film subject can be presented in a short, accessible format."—**Cineaste**

"A tour de force . . . Every class in film studies, Russian literature, and Cold War history will greatly benefit from this book."—

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About the Author

Denise J. Youngblood is professor of history and former vice provost for faculty and academic affairs at the University of Vermont. Her books include *Movies for the Masses: Popular Cinema and Soviet Society in the 1920s* and *The Magic Mirror: Moviemaking in Russia 1908-1918*.

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