

MIKOŁAJ KUNICKI

## 'OPTIMISM AGAINST ALL ODDS': POLISH NATIONAL IDENTITY IN JERZY PASSENDORFER'S WAR FILMS

### Abstract

Using archival sources, movie reviews, secondary sources and films, this article examines the cinema of Jerzy Passendorfer, the founding father of action movies genre in People's Poland, but also the staunch supporter of Władysław Gomułka's 'Polish road to Socialism' and General Mieczysław Moczar's ultranationalist faction of the Partisans in the Polish United Workers' Party. It demonstrates how Passendorfer's blend of mainstream cinema and propaganda legitimized the party state and contributed to the construction of a new ethos, identity, and politics of history that enforced historical amnesia and syncretized past and present. It also argues that Passendorfer's promotion of nationalist and authoritarian state ideology, militaristic patriotism and Polish-Soviet alliance, commissioned by the regime, sat well with mass audiences, precisely because of the use of popular genres adopted from the West and the quench for optimistic visions of nationhood. Although Passendorfer's patriotic actions flicks faded away with the fall of Gomułka's regime, they constitute a model, which can be still emulated.

**Key words:** People's Poland; Polish cinema; Jerzy Passendorfer; memory of World War Two; National Communism; popular culture; politics of history

MIKOŁAJ KUNICKI

University of Oxford, Oxford  
E-mail: mikolaj.kunicki@history.ox.ac.uk

CITATION: Kunicki, M. (2017).  
'Optimism against all odds': Polish National  
Identity in Jerzy Passendorfer's War Films.  
*Sprawy Narodowościowe. Seria nowa*, 2017(49).  
<https://doi.org/10.11649/sn.1343>

This work was supported  
by the author's own resources.  
No competing interests have been declared.

## "TRUDNY OPTYMIZM": POLSKA TOŻSAMOŚĆ NARODOWA W FILMACH WOJENNYCH JERZEGO PASSENDORFERA

Opierając się na źródłach archiwalnych, publikacjach naukowych i analizie filmów, niniejszy artykuł bada twórczość filmową Jerzego Passendorfera, ojca chrzestnego filmu akcji w PRL, zwolennika 'polskiej drogi do socjalizmu' Władysława Gomułki oraz sympatyka nacjonalistycznej frakcji generała Mieczysława Moczara w Polskiej Zjednoczonej Partii Robotniczej. Passendorfer łączył w swoich filmach popularne kino gatunkowe z propagandową legitymizacją władzy partii. Współtworzył nowy etos i świadomość narodową oraz uprawiał politykę historyczną, która zsynchronizowała przeszłość z teraźniejszością, doprowadzając do swoistego rodzaju amnezji. Artykuł stawia tezę, że zaproponowana przez Passendorfera synteza nacjonalizmu, autorytaryzmu i militarystyki cieszyła się sporą popularnością wśród masowego widza z powodu zapożyczeń z zachodniego kina gatunkowego oraz potrzeby optymistycznej wizji wspólnoty narodowej. Patriotyczne filmy akcji Passendorfera uległy zapomnieniu po upadku Gomułki, jednak w dalszym ciągu stanowią kulturowy model, który może być wykorzystywany na potrzeby polityki historycznej.

Słowa kluczowe: Polska Ludowa; kino polskie; Jerzy Passendorfer; pamięć drugiej wojny światowej; narodowy komunizm; kultura popularna; polityka historyczna

While assessing the cinema of Jerzy Passendorfer, Zbigniew Kłaczyński, a prominent film critic close to the communist party, claimed that what distinguished the director of *Barwy walki* (*Battle Colors*; Passendorfer, 1964) from other Polish filmmakers who depicted World War Two was his "optimism against all odds" (*trudny optymizm*). So pre-dominant was the vision of "tragic history" that Passendorfer's "optimistic historical dramas" made him a lonely figure. Interestingly, Kłaczyński did not blame for this condition the war trauma of Polish society; nor did he point a finger at the Polish School. The real culprit was the politics of Socialist Realism that excluded on movie screens "thousands of patriots, soldiers of the Home Army (Armia Krajowa, AK) and Peasant Battalions" from the struggle for national liberation, distorted the historical role of the Polish left, and, by extension, nurtured complexes and bitterness among AK veterans after the end of Stalinism. Historically realistic, unpretentious, and masterfully narrated, Passendorfer's films were an antidote to this malaise and, above all, uncovered such themes in the drama of history as life, hope, and heroic deeds. The format of action movies did not mean that the director gave up artistic ambitions. "Passendorfer is not interested in an artistic film in its current, fashionable meaning," wrote Kłaczyński. The director reached audiences of millions. Passendorfer's art was an interesting social phenomenon. (Kłaczyński, 1969, pp. 4–7)

Obviously Kłaczyński's diagnosis of factors that contributed to the prevalent bleak portrayal of Nazi occupation and resistance struggle in Polish cinema ignored the brutalization of Polish society subjected to genocide, ethnic cleansing, border shifts, Soviet control and communist takeover. Poland lost the war. But regime claimed the opposite: its founding myth was that of the all-embracing and victorious anti-Nazi struggle, assisted by the Soviet Union, and leading to the creation of People's Poland, the end result of nation-building processes. Władysław Gomułka's rule also brought the construct of the 'Polish road to Socialism', which blended Marxism and ethnocentric nationalism, magnified the role of the 'home communists' against that of the Muscovites brought by the Red Army,

and partly acknowledged the wartime contributions of non-communist combatants and their subsequent oppression under Stalinism.<sup>1</sup>

Cinema could combine didacticism with mass entertainment, syncretize past and present, memory and myth, and legitimize the party state. The problem was that the Polish School was more interested in providing therapy to the war generation and questioning the Polish romantic tradition and its glorification of military heroism than in legitimizing the party state. Gomułka's resentment of 'elitist' cinema reflected the crackdown on the Polish School, which was indirectly condemned as pessimistic and anti-heroic in the notorious 1960 resolution of the Central Committee Secretariat of the party (Haltof, 2008, p. 103). Perhaps more amiable, popular films dealing with the subject of the war and its aftermath could repair the damage caused by Andrzej Wajda, Andrzej Munk or Kazimierz Kutz. The Polish situation was not dissimilar to that in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. Partisan westerns and super-productions promoted the Titoist foundational myth of 'Brotherhood and Unity' in a society which had experienced a civil war, ethnic conflict and collaboration during World War II. The second wave of Partisan films of the 1960s and 1970s followed the official condemnation of the new Yugoslav cinema, labeled as the Black Wave. Soviet *isterny* came in the aftermath of the Thaw and reflected the Brezhnev regime's claims of prosperity, stability and modernity. In Poland, the push for popular cinema, which catered to the tastes of mass audiences, received the vehement support of Gomułka, who appealed for "cultural entertainment serving relaxation" and "meeting the cultural needs of millions of working people" (Gębicka, 1994, pp. 36, 38). According to Artur Starewicz, one of Gomułka's closest collaborators and chief of the press bureau of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers Party, the Polish leader lamented the overproduction of films addressed to the intelligentsia and the absence of such pictures as *High Noon* (1952) by Fred Zinnemann.<sup>2</sup>

Enter Jerzy Passendorfer (1923-2003), an exemplary filmmaker of Gomułka's period who fully conveyed the historical and cultural aspirations of the regime and its ultranationalist faction of General Mieczysław Moczar's Partisans.<sup>3</sup> When Klaczyński published his article in 1969, the director was in mid 40s and at the peak of his career. Passendorfer was the leading director of patriotic action films that targeted the generation born after World War II, raised in Communist Poland but increasingly exposed to Western-style popular culture after the end of Stalinism. He was rightly convinced that dynamic combat scenes attracted young audiences.<sup>4</sup>

Although Passendorfer's biography has much in common with the life stories of other Polish filmmakers of his generation, it makes him somehow exceptional. He was born in Wilno to the family of Władysław Passendorfer, a career army officer who had fought in the Polish-Bolshevik war and served in General Władysław Anders's Second Polish Corps during the Second World War.<sup>5</sup> He escaped Nazi slave labor service, went into hiding, and was part of the Cracow underground theatre scene from 1943 to 1945. After the liberation, he studied acting, trained as a cameraman, and transferred to the Łódź film school in 1947. However, in 1948, he went to study directing at the Prague Film School of Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU). Passendorfer was among the first students and

• • • • •

<sup>1</sup> On Polish road to socialism and its mnemonic operations of the official memory discourse see Zaremba (2001) and Wawrzyniak (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Filmoteka Narodowa, Komisja Kolaudacyjna, A-216 poz. 1 (15 May 1963), *Milczenie*.

<sup>3</sup> On the 'Partisans' see Lesiakowski (1998).

<sup>4</sup> Filmoteka Narodowa, Komisja Kolaudacyjna, A-216 poz. 8 (27 September 1963), *Skapani w ogniu*.

<sup>5</sup> Passendorfer (1993). Władysław Passendorfer returned to Poland in 1947.

graduates of the legendary school. We may wonder to what extent his film studies abroad set him apart from his Polish colleagues. While most of his contemporaries were part of the Polish School, Passendorfer showed appetite for mainstream and genre cinema from the very beginning of his career. Following his graduation in 1951, he returned to Poland where he began directing feature films independently in 1957.<sup>6</sup> By 1969, he had directed twelve feature films, including eight on the subject of World War II, received numerous domestic and international awards, and dominated the cinema and television screens of Gomułka's Poland.

This paper examines the projections of Polish national identity on collective and individual planes in Passendorfer's war dramas made in Gomułka's period. I argue that not only did Passendorfer offer counter-narrative to the Polish School and convey the official propaganda of the party state, but he also fathered and advanced the genre of action flicks in Polish cinematography by importing and domesticating heist movies, westerns, combat epics, and thrillers. The result was a genuinely popular cinema, which did not shy away from tackling controversial subjects and themes, precisely because it used the format of genre filmmaking. To that end, Klaczyński was correct: Passendorfer owned his success to the end of Socialist Realism and appetites of mass audiences for patriotic, 'feel good' action flicks.

The films I have selected mark two parts in the evolution of Passendorfer's cinema: part one consists of *Zamach (Answer to Violence)* (Passendorfer, 1958) and *Powrót (Return)* (Passendorfer, 1960), movies that thematically and stylistically stemmed from the Polish School; part two documents the director's mature period and his attempt to instill a national identity, which as Piotr Zwierzchowski argues, was based on pride and dignity (Zwierzchowski, 2013, p. 32). Here relevant titles include *Skąpani w ogniu (Fire Bath)* (Passendorfer, 1963), *Barwy walki (Battle Colors)* (Passendorfer, 1964), *Kierunek Berlin (Heading for Berlin)* (Passendorfer, 1968), and *Ostatnie dni (The Last Days)* (Passendorfer, 1969b).

## ON THE WAR GENERATION: PASSENDORFER'S TIES WITH THE POLISH SCHOOL

The Polish October '56 and Gomułka's return to power brought not only the liberalization of the system in Poland and the country's partial opening to the West, but also the return of the repressed, members of the AK. Just as they were leaving communist jails, regaining professional prestige and personal dignity, Home Army soldiers were appearing on movie screens. Andrzej Wajda's *Kanał (Kanal)* (Wajda, 1957) and *Popiół i diament (Ashes and Diamonds)* (Wajda, 1958) captured the tragedy of the AK generation trapped in the hecatomb of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising and caught in the web of history during the communist takeover. Other filmmakers associated with the Polish School offered equally chilling and pessimistic takes on the Nazi occupation and resistance struggle.

Passendorfer's second independent movie, *Answer to Violence*, covered one of the most daring actions of the Polish resistance movement, the assassination of Frantz Kutschera, the commander of SS and police in Warsaw, by the AK in 1944. The story was so galvanizing that when the Script Assessment Commission met to discuss the screenplay of the movie, it had to choose between two different texts dealing with the same

• • • • •

<sup>6</sup> Archiwum Akt Nowych, Naczelny Zarząd Kinematografii, Sygn. 19/12, Jerzy Passendorfer, k. 3-4.

event.<sup>7</sup> The commission approved the script of Jerzy Stefan Stawiński who was part of Passendorfer's team.

Although the subject of the Home Army stemmed from the Polish School, Passendorfer's execution set him apart from works of Wajda and Munk. It was the meticulous reconstruction of preparations for the assassination, the action itself, and its aftermath. Years after the shooting of the movie, Passendorfer claimed that he intended to make a docudrama based on Michał Issajewicz's testimony (Passendorfer, 1995a, pp. 96–97). However, this was not exactly the case. The faithful reconstruction would require listing the names of participants, their superiors, units and organization. But revealing the very name of the AK on Polish movie screens was not approved and practiced in the 1950s (Zwierzchowski, 2013, p. 180).

Instead Passendorfer ventured into the genre of thrillers and gangster movies partly sacrificing historical facts. The 2 minute-long, dynamic scene of the assault on Kutschera and SS headquarters did not constitute the film's climax. Much of the movie was shot in the manner of heist movies showing the recruitment and training of assassins, scouting locations and measuring needed time, acquiring cars, and taking care of the wounded after the assassination. The film has a collective protagonist, young men and women of the killing commando, other members of the underground, and inhabitants of Warsaw. The absence of individual heroes projected the feeling of united struggle, but also pointed to the selfless heroism and ethos of young conspirators. Above all, unlike Wajda's or Munk's pessimistic or ambiguous endings, the epilogue of the movie projected optimism: the surviving members of the commando unit went on fighting. Thus, Passendorfer steered away from the controversial subject of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, and ignored the tragedy of AK soldiers during the communist takeover. This optimism conveyed the regime's message—the struggle against the Nazis was victorious.

*Answer to Violence* was a commercial and critical success. The movie played to packed cinemas, won the FIPRESCI Prize at the San Sebastian International Film Festival in 1959 and the Golden Medal at the First International Resistance Movies Festival in Cuneo, Italy, in 1963. For 35-year old Passendorfer, it was a breakthrough. His subsequent project, *Return*, looked at the AK generation some fifteen years after the end of the Second World War and focused on their coming to terms with the past. Jurek "Siwy" (Andrzej Łapicki) is a veteran of the Warsaw Uprising who remained in the West after the war. Immaculately dressed and driving the shining Citroen DS19, he comes to Warsaw in search of comrades of wartime struggle, long-lost love, echoes of heroic deeds, and Warsaw he left in 1944. He revisits his youth, loyalty to the cause, and the spirit of solidarity, which during the war meant the difference between life and death. But the trip is a disappointment, mostly because "Siwy" is looking for the world that no longer exists. Captain Dobek (Kazimierz Opaliński) divides his time between a home vegetable plot and a sewing machine, which repairs stockings. Wolski (Saturnin Żóławski) confabulates about his wartime heroic exploits. And Ina (Alina Janowska), "Siwy's" ex-girlfriend, is an exhausted and burnt-out physician. "We are no longer here" (*Nas już nie ma*), she tells "Siwy". In the epilogue, we also learn that "Siwy" did not succeed in the West. His luxurious car and elegant suit are a façade behind which hides a chauffeur of a French industrialist, nobody, a lackey. He returns to France with his boss.

As Bolesław Michałek aptly noted in his review of the film, the hero is mentally and emotionally locked in 1944, whereas his former comrades compromised their wartime

• • • • •

<sup>7</sup> FN, Komisja Ocen Scenariuszy, A-214, poz. 83 (6 December 1957), *Zamach*.

values under the pressure of everyday life. But what "Siwy" interprets as a failure constitutes the triumph of normal life and carries optimistic meaning. "'Siwy" is looking for heroic ruins, but what he finds is a non-heroic (...), reconstructed city with its regulated rhythm of life" (Michalek, 1960, p. 10). Michalek's positive review of Passendorfer's movie was in minority. The twofold message of *Return*, that life in exile did not bring fulfillment, but only loneliness and alienation from one's natural community, and that banal, everyday life, was much healthier than heroism in a mortal combat could hardly move anyone. Nobody seemed to like this movie. Waclaw Sadkowski, a cultural columnist in *Trybuna Ludu*, appreciated the initial impulse of attacking external exile and internal emigration, but viewed "Siwy's" friends as cartoons and felt deceived by the final truth about the protagonist (Sadkowski, 1960, p. 6). Klaczyński, whose assessment of Passendorfer has opened this chapter, vehemently refuted Ina's cardinal statement. "We are no longer here? It is not true. We are here", he wrote. "Those who were 16 (in 1944) and those older; those who fought in burning Warsaw and those who came from the faraway Oka and Kama to liberate it (...). You can find us on every normal day and in every situation, which conveys present day" (Klaczyński, 1960, p. 3). After 1989 *Return* has universally deemed as an "anti-AK movie" (Madej, 1994, p. 17).

While reviewing Passendorfer's film, several critics brought Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) as a point of departure and comparison. This reference to the celebrated French film on the impossible love between two individuals traumatized by a war demonstrated not only the dialogue with the modern-day cinema, but willingness to step outside the local Polish context. But "Siwy" and "Ina" were not the Polish incarnations of a Japanese architect and a French actress from *Hiroshima mon amour*. Viewed from contemporary perspective, *Return* seems to have more in common with another movie of Resnais, *La guerre c'est finie* (*The War is Over*; Resnais, 1966). But what mattered at the end of the day was that Passendorfer did not feel comfortable with present-day, psychological dramas. The rest of the 1960s saw the director's decisive move to war action flicks that combined the regime's propaganda with mass entertainment.

## NATIONAL COMMUNIST CRYSTALLIZATION: COMBAT DRAMAS OF THE 1960s

As Passendorfer tried to find his own style, Gomułka's Poland was evolving into a more nationalist, authoritarian, and populist regime. With Moczar's promotion to the posts of minister of internal affairs and chairman of the Union of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy (Związek Bojowników o Wolność i Demokrację, ZBoWiD) veterans' union in 1964, the position of Partisans' dramatically increased. At the helm of the faction were high-ranking military and security officers who served in the People's Army (Armia Ludowa, AL), a communist resistance organization during the war. They were joined by numerous power-hungry apparatchiks whose careers stagnated under Gomułka. But Partisans also made forays to non-communist veterans and members of artistic and intellectual elite, including writers Wojciech Żukrowski and Roman Bratny (both AK veterans), filmmakers Bohdan Poręba, Czesław Petelski, and Passendorfer, journalists and educators. By the late 1960s the ZBoWiD had gained some 300,000 members, including 60,000 AK veterans (Wawrzyniak, 2009, pp. 275–76). Partisans' informal ideologue was Colonel Zbigniew Żaluski, a historian and essayist who promoted military patriotism, reconciled parts of nationalist canon with

state socialism, and attacked those who dared to mock the insurrectionary tradition, heroism and martyrdom.<sup>8</sup> During the 1960s Passendorfer worked closely with both Żukrowski and Żałuski. While the former authored scripts for Passendorfer's movies, the latter took the role of a military consultant on a production plan.

The adaptation of Żukrowski's autobiographical novel *Fire Bath* in 1963 marked not only the beginning of the long collaboration between the two artists, but also the first component of Passendorfer's tetralogy on the communist military and partisans during World War Two.<sup>9</sup> The movie follows the adventures of Captain Sowiński (Stanisław Mikulski), commander of an army unit stationed in the Silesian region of Opole annexed from Germany after the war. I deliberately used the term 'adventures' rather than 'story' because the film contains numerous subplots: Sowiński's love affair with Rutka (Beata Tyszkiewicz), a local Silesian girl; the struggle against anti-communist partisans, the Nazi underground, and looters; and the treatment of the 'indigenous' population by the new authorities and settlers. To complicate matters even further, Sowiński meets his former comrade from the AK, recently rehabilitated, but disillusioned "Sprężyna" (Józef Maklakiewicz), and has to patch up a conflict with his faithful sidekick, Corporal Naróg (Wojciech Siemion).<sup>10</sup> What makes this complicated narrative work was Passendorfer's use of the convention of westerns, with shootouts, skirmishes, and hot pursuits. However, the movie lacks a romantic happy end: although Sowiński and his company repel Nazi saboteurs and anti-communist rebels (notably, the two groups form an alliance), he is unable to protect Rutka who is deported to Germany with her family. He also loses "Sprężyna" who is killed by the anti-communist underground. Several members of the Film Assessment Commission thought that this western-like manner compromised important political subtexts, mainly the harsh fate of Silesians, often mistaken for Germans, distrusted, and disillusioned with the Polish authorities. But Passendorfer found a powerful ally in Wincenty Kraśko, the party's cultural watchdog. "I agree that we could have a picture with stronger political undertones, but this is a different movie genre," he observed. "What we have seen here is an interesting and gripping story."<sup>11</sup>

*Fire Bath* offered a blueprint for Passendorfer's subsequent films. Notwithstanding the centrality of the subject of Silesians and their treatment by the government and settlers, the film focused, foremost, on the Polish army. Sowiński's soldiers guarded peace, organized life in new territories, and settled disputes between diverse groups of population. The archetypical slogan of peasant soldiers of the Kościuszko Insurrection, "they feed and defend/ żywią i bronią" fully matches the qualities and duties of Sowiński's soldiers. The opening and closing shots fully depict these roles. When we see soldiers for the first time they are transporting settlers to their new homes and helping them in the harvest. When we watch them in the movie's epilogue they are proudly guarding a dam they have just defended against Wehrwolf saboteurs. The military is not the only state force operating on the ground. But it does not take much time for viewers to see that there is no love lost between the army and security police.

• • • • •

<sup>8</sup> See Żałuski (1973).

<sup>9</sup> Passendorfer's tetralogy did not have a linear structure. It starts after the war in *Fire Bath*, then moves back to 1944 in *Battle Colors*, and has its epilogue in April and May 1945, during the battle for Berlin.

<sup>10</sup> The multitude of subplots and central did not escape members of the Script Assessment Commission, which examined Żukrowski's screenplay in February 1962. Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz wanted to know what constituted a central plot and what was a background. Wincenty Kraśko, head of the Cultural Department in the Central Committee of the PUWP, saw the subject of the indigenous Silesian population as central to the story. Initially the movie was to be directed by Bohdan Poręba (FN, Komisja Oceny Scenariuszy, A-214, poz. 247 (6 February 1962), *Skąpani w ogniu*).

<sup>11</sup> FN, Komisja Kolaudacyjna, A-216, poz. 8 (27 September 1963), *Skąpani w ogniu*.



The unit also represents Poles-All, peasants, workers, members of the intelligentsia, inhabitants of different regions. There is a place for veterans of the People's Army and Home Army, Sowiński, Naróg and Jew Józef Goldfinger.<sup>12</sup> Finally, the company's deputy commander is a Russian, lieutenant Milutin (Aleksander Fogiel), a fatherly figure adored by all soldiers and the remainder of Polish-Soviet front comradeship. This diverse collective demonstrates striking cohesion and effectiveness. And it cannot be otherwise because Sowiński's soldiers, ordinary and modest people as they are, are guided by patriotism and the sense of duty. This apotheosis of the Polish military fully complied with the dominant ethos in Gomułka's Poland, that of a veteran of World War II, and evoked the message of Moczar's Partisans.

On the individual level, *Fire Bath* also contains character types that populate Passendorfer's mature works. Corporal Naróg embodies a plebeian hero, shrewd and down-to-earth, brave, but without bravado, harsh, but also good-hearted (Zwierzchowski, 2013, p. 110). Wojciech Siemion, who portrayed him in *Fire Bath*, would make three more appearances as an archetypical peasant soldier in Passendorfer's war flicks, twice as Naróg in *Heading for Berlin* and *The Last Days*, and as "Elegant", an AL partisan in *Battle Colors*. Not only he offered a comic relief, but also acted as a sidekick of officer protagonists. Stanisław Mikulski who played Sowiński would also find his way to *Battle Colors* in the role of Lieutenant "Klinga", an AK officer. He represents a figure of authority, someone who reflects on history and politics, providing historical commentary to audiences and syncretizing past (World War Two) and present (People's Poland in the 1960s). But there is also the third category of individual characters in Passendorfer's films, those who feel lost in the web of history, waver between different solutions or have the sense of abandonment if not betrayal. It is "Siwy" and Ina in *Return*, "Sprężyna", Rutka and her sister-in-law, Marta, in *Fire Bath*. Apparently, we will not find any outsiders in the two films glorifying the final assault on the capital of the Third Reich.

Shot within a year and based on Moczar's memoirs, *Battle Colors* used the same technique and scriptwriter (rumored to be the ghost writer of Moczar's book) as *Fire Bath*. But the stakes were higher. 1964, the year of the movie's production, saw Moczar's promotion to the leadership positions in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and ZBoWiD. When the Script Assessment Commission met in April to decide whether the film should go into production the discussion was long tense. Moczar's book was simply hard to adapt to the screen. At the certain point, controversies about dialogues, historical realism and political undertones hardly advance any solution. Jan Rybkowski began discussing the validity of employing the Yugoslav model of partisan films. The Poles simply did not master or even experiment with this genre. The stalemate was broken by Stefan Olszowski from the Press Bureau of the Central Committee of the party. He cautioned against making a film, which would follow a 'format of history lecture'. Instead he advocated 'a partisan-action movie', a significant suggestion considering the fact that he talked about the adaptation of wartime memoirs of the minister of internal affairs. Passendorfer was quick to jump in and second to Olszowski's remarks. "I want to make an adventure movie, which conveys specific political message and I have plenty of material to choose from."<sup>13</sup> At the end of the day, he was free to do it.

• • • • •

<sup>12</sup> The character of Goldfinger is an exceptional reference to Jews in Passendorfer's films. Even though most of his movies cover World War Two, Jewish characters and the Holocaust do not appear on a screen.

<sup>13</sup> FN, Komisja Ocen Scenariuszy, A-214 poz. 300 (5 May 1964), *Barwy walki*.



Fast-paced, action packed, and populated by hundreds of extras, *Battle Colors* focused in the partisans' struggle against the Nazis in the summer of 1944. Lieutenant "Kołacz's" (Tadeusz Szmidt) AL unit faces a double challenge: it must rescue a delegate of the Central Committee of the Polish Workers' Party from the hands of Gestapo and battle the massive anti-partisan offensive. Suspending mutual distrust and hostility, "Kołacz" enters a temporary alliance with an AK company. With the help of the Soviets, the Polish partisans break through the German lines, but separate after the battle. "These boys are really swell", says Lieutenant "Kruk" (Krzysztof Chamiec), "Kołacz's" deputy, as he watches departing Home Army soldiers, "too bad they are not going with us".

The most central theme of Passendorfer's movie is the common and successful struggle against the Nazis. We do not see any differences between common soldiers of the two units—they are patriotic "boys from the forest" (*leśni*), the myth eagerly promoted by the Partisans, ZBoWiD and Moczar. But the Home Army officers are hostile towards "Kołacz", view the Soviets as invaders, and show little appetite for cooperation. It is the danger of being wiped out that brings the AK unit to the positions held by the AL. On the battlefield, members of both organizations fight shoulder to shoulder. The true villains in this film are the nationalist guerillas from the National Armed Forces (Narodowe Siły Zbrojne, NSZ) who nearly murder several AL-men and deliver the communist delegate to the Nazis.

*Battle Colors* promoted the founding myth of People's Poland and reconciliation between former members of communist and non-communist resistance groups under the tutelage of the state.<sup>14</sup> It also popularized two legends: the legend of the community of "boys from the forest" with their rituals, routines, and links to the population, and the legend of Moczar, the advocate and unifier of Polish war veterans. While participating in the assessment of *Battle Colors* in 1964, Stanisław Trepczyński, a senior party official associated with both Gomułka and Moczar, openly praised the movie as an example of a positive legend created by filmmakers about the war and aimed at youth audiences.<sup>15</sup> Writing about the same movie almost 30 years later, Ireneusz Siwiński claimed that the film projected two, and possibly three "Moczars": "Kołacz", "Kruk" and "Klinga". The first is a cool headed, responsible military commander and party member; the second likes to act independently, without instructions, at times recklessly, but always patriotically; the third crosses the line dividing the AK from AL (Siwiński, 1994, p. 140). If I may differ I think that "Klinga" really stands for a Home Army veteran who 20 years after the war may be member of the ZBoWiD or the porta-parole of Wojciech Żukrowski. In fact, "Klinga" is the earlier incarnation of Sowiński from *Fire Bath*.

The exact wording of the epilogue scene proved to be the only bone of contention in the Film Assessment Commission, which met in December 1964. In the film's uncensored version, "Kołacz" watches the departing AK unit and says: "Our paths will cross again". Several participants including Tadeusz Zaorski, the boss of Polish cinematography, and Trepczyński objected to this wording claiming that it was too far-reaching, prophetic statement reflecting present-day Poland rather than the context of 1944. It trivialized differences between the AK and AL, and the fate of Home Army soldiers after the war. "We should put it in pedagogical perspective," retorted Passendorfer. "I think that this scene constitutes the film's main conclusion... These people shared the experience of

• • • • •

<sup>14</sup> In the same year *Battle Colors* premiered, Zenon Kliszko, number two in the party and the state, went as far in 1964 to claim that twenty years after the 1944 Warsaw Uprising there were no divisions among former resisters. See Kliszko (1964, p. 3).

<sup>15</sup> FN, Komisja Kolaudacyjna, A-216, poz. 39 (3 December 1964), *Barwy walki*.

common struggle... and realized that they are patriotic Poles". But Zaorski sustained his objection. The final, approved wording, followed Czesław Petelski's advice.<sup>16</sup>

The film attracted mass audiences and received only positive reviews and numerous state awards. Passendorfer stayed away from the subject of World War Two for 4 years during which he directed two contemporary films, including the first Polish Rock 'n' Roll musical, *Mocne uderzenie* (*Big Beat*; Passendorfer, 1966). In 1968, he returned to his cycle initiated by *Fire Bath* with a combat epic *Heading for Berlin*.

In the meantime, People's Poland conducted "anti-Zionist" campaign, launched anti-Semitic purges of the military, party, academia, and mass media, brutally crashed student protests in March 1968, and took part in the Warsaw Treaty Organization invasion of Czechoslovakia. *Heading for Berlin* and its second part, *The Last Days* from 1969, were produced with the significant help of the Polish army, which provided hundreds of extras, military equipment and consultants, among them Colonel Żaluski. Both films depicted the Polish army units in the Berlin offensive, offering unconditional affirmation of Polish soldiers and glorifying their effort in the conquest of the German capital.

Passendorfer delivered a huge propaganda spectacle, but avoided staff meetings populated by generals. Instead he focused on common and ordinary soldiers epitomized by the main protagonist, none other than Corporal Naróg played by Siemion. The plot followed him and his unit from the crossing of the Oder to the capture of the Brandenburg Gate. To enhance the feeling of authenticity, the movies contained off-camera commentary on the order of the battle, images of maps showing the movement of Polish and Soviet armies, and fragments of documentaries. Like in earlier parts of the tetralogy, characters made swiping and prophetic statements, for example on the Western Territories, here referred to as "ancient Piast lands" returning to fatherland (Zwierzchowski, 2013, pp. 166–167). It did not matter that the final shape of Poland's western borders was finally determined during the Potsdam conference after the defeat of Nazi Germany. This is how new memory of the war was born – through the imposition of amnesia. As Piotr Zwierzchowski argues, "collective amnesia also enables the creation of national identity, which has no place for elements that disrupt the perception of oneself" (Zwierzchowski, 2013, p. 168).

To similar end, *Heading for Berlin* and *The Last Days* were to instill national pride, a delicate task considering Poland's dependence on the Soviet Union or to be precise, loss of sovereignty in the end of the war. Both films worshipped the Polish-Soviet comradeship and military alliance. The year 1945 and the participation of Polish soldiers in the battle of Berlin was, to quote the off-camera commentary, "the act of historical justice." The voice-over declared: "The war reached the German capital. It was the hour of reckoning—Polish military commands were heard on the streets of Berlin". It was the revenge for September 1939. When Naróg meets his father, also a Polish soldier (clearly, the conscription age did not matter for Passendorfer and Żukrowski as both films included several Polish soldiers aged 50 or 60+), in Germany they watch the stream of German civilian refugees on the road. Naróg senior likens this picture to the scenes witnessed in Poland in 1939 commiserating with German women and children. "They will return to their homes, rebuild them, live as normal people", replies his son. "Unless they will start something again..." The father exclaims, "Who would now dare to pounce on us and the Russkies?!" The alliance with the Soviets enabled the revenge for the September catastrophe and eliminated the possibility of its repetition, another perverse claim enhancing

• • • • •

<sup>16</sup> FN, Komisja Kolaudacyjna, A-216, poz. 39 (3 December 1964), *Barwy walki*,

amnesia since the Soviets did invade Poland in 1939. For Passendorfer's protagonists the battle of Berlin was indeed the act of historical justice. The *Narógs* remembered 1939; Lieutenant Kaczmarek played by Krzysztof Chamiec (he portrayed "Kruk" in *Battle Colors*) spent years in the forest; private Zbigniew Zalewski was former AK-man and veteran of the failed Warsaw Uprising. It is the picture of their faces expressing profound emotions as they watch a Polish flag on the Branderburg Gate that ends *The Last Days*.

The Film Assessment Commission, which met to approve *Heading for Berlin* in September 1968, was a pure formality. Jerzy Bossak, professor and dean of the Department of Film Directing at the Łódź Film School who would soon lose his job as the result of the anti-Semitic campaign, compared *Heading for Berlin* with *Westerplatte* by Stanisław Rózewicz. History made a full circle from a traumatizing defeat to a glorious victory. Wincenty Kraśko liked the fact that the movie focused on Polish units rather than paying more attention to Soviet units. "It is good. We did not aim at showing the effort of the Red Army because we know it was a joint effort." He viewed Passendorfer's movie as "a monument to the fallen", combining arts and politics. Colonel Zaluski who served as a military consultant, unveiled the details of the support provided by the military and emphasized that *Naróg's* unit was to be the microcosm of Poland, Poles-All. Passendorfer's final comments demonstrated professional fulfillment and the fact that the movie was practically commissioned by the government. He complained about working with military equipment, which was due for recycling. He apologized in advance for not being able to implement all minor changes due to the deadline he had. The film was supposed to have a special screening on 12 October, the day of the Polish armed forces. Part one would premiere on 17 January 1969, the anniversary of the liberation of Warsaw; part two would be released on 9 May (the official celebration of the V-Day in the Soviet bloc). While summing up his work on the movie, he said: "I have addressed the movie to the young generation. I want young people to be proud of the struggle of their fathers (...) because we lack films that enrich tradition without turning to martyrology". He declared: "I wanted to show that that we are able not only to die for fatherland, but can also kick ass".<sup>17</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Following the completion of his tetralogy, Passendorfer made three more movies dealing with World War Two and its aftermath: *Dzień oczyszczenia* (*The Day of Purification*; Passendorfer, 1969a) on an encounter between AK and Soviet partisans, which leads to the Polish-Soviet brotherhood in arms; *Akcja Brutus* (*Operation 'Brutus'*; Passendorfer, 1970), a thriller about the struggle against the anti-communist underground after the war; and *Zwycięstwo* (*Victory*; Passendorfer, 1974), the combined and shortened version of *Heading for Berlin* and *The Last Days*. In 1973, he directed a cult TV series *Janosik* about the legendary brigand from the Tatra Mountains which probably remains his best known work among Polish audiences. Passendorfer gradually moved from directing movies to becoming a cultural apparatchik. In the first half of the 1970s he headed two film production units, "Tor", which he probably saved from liquidation, and "Panorama", which excelled in producing films by pro-party, nationalist directors, Bohdan Poręba and Ryszard Filipiński. Later he directed the Polish Cultural Institute in Vienna and was responsible for

• • • • •

<sup>17</sup> FN, Komisja Kolaudacyjna, A-344 poz. 452 (18 September 1968), *Kierunek Berlin*.

cooperation with abroad in the Polish TV. In the twilight of his life, he served as a MP of the post-communist Alliance of the Democratic Left. Ironically, his last films were the 1992 documentary on Melchior Wańkowicz and the battle of Monte Cassino, the final version of the heavily censored film he directed in 1971, and *Z ziemi szkockiej do Polski* (*From Scotland to Poland*; Passendorfer, 1995b) about his father, Władysław, and the Polish armed forces in the West.

The fact that Passendorfer, so prolific in directing action films about World War Two for over a decade, quit the genre in the 1970s was due to personal, but also political factors. The glorification of the Polish communist military accelerated during the last two years of the Gomułka regime, possibly due to the role played by the Polish army in the invasion of Czechoslovakia (Zwierzchowski, 2013, p. 36). But in December 1970, Gomułka deployed army units against the striking workers on the Baltic Sea Coast, killing dozens and wounding hundreds. The Polish army, the cherished bulwark of national pride, massacred Polish workers and brought enslavement to Czechs. This de-legitimization was possibly visible for a few, but reached its climax with the imposition of Martial Law by General Wojciech Jaruzelski in December 1981. Far more important in dramatically decreasing number of World War Two movies in People's Poland were two events that took place in December 1970: the signing of the mutual recognition treaty between the Federal Republic of Germany and People's Poland and the fall of Gomułka and his replacement by Edward Gierek.

The treaty affirmed the West German acceptance of Polish western borders and removed the threat of German territorial revanchism, depriving the party regime of one of its major ideological tools for mass mobilization, Germanophobia. Under Gierek the party turned to consumerism as the major tool in acquiring social compliance. As a result, the use of nationalism, ideology and history dramatically decreased. A war veteran, the embodiment of supreme values under Gomułka, was sent into retirement and replaced by the new hero, a socialist technocrat, an engineer building a new factory or a manager of an enterprise, competent, middle-class-like and relatively young, as exemplified in one of the most popular TV serials of the period, appropriately titled *Managers* (*Dyrektorzy*; Chmielewski, 1975).

Passendorfer's cinema constitutes a blend of propaganda and entertainment, genre filmmaking, which legitimized an ideology-driven regime, but also relied on global cinema and its mainstream pillars: thrillers, westerns, and combat dramas. In fact, Passendorfer was the godfather of Polish action movies bringing into them professional craft and relevant conventions. But he was also responsible for instilling new historical narrative, which promoted collective amnesia and served the politics of history, distorted past and legitimized contemporary processes, for example, the affirmation of Moczar's faction and their reading of Polish history. In this respect, Passendorfer's "optimism against all odds" is a warning of history.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### *Primary sources*

Archiwum Akt Nowych, Warsaw  
Filmoteka Narodowa, Warsaw

## Secondary sources

- Gębicka, E. (1994). Obcinanie kantów czyli polityka PZPR i państwa wobec kinematografii lat sześćdziesiątych. In T. Miczka (Ed.), *Syndrom konformizmu?: Kino polskie lat sześćdziesiątych* (pp. 35–57). Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.
- Haltorf, M. (2008). *Polish national cinema*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Klaczynski, Z. (1960). Nas już nie ma. *Ekran*, 4(42), 3.
- Klaczynski, Z. (1969). Trudny optymizm. *Kino*, 4(5), 4–7.
- Kliszko, Z. (1964). Nas już nic nie dzieli. *Za Wolność i Lud*, 1964(16), 3.
- Kunicki, M. (2012). Heroism, *Raison d'état*, and national communism: Red nationalism in the cinema of People's Poland. *Contemporary European History*, 21(2), 235–256. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777312000136>
- Lesiakowski, K. (1998). *Mieczysław Moczar 'Mietek': Biografia polityczna*. Warszawa: Rytm.
- Madej, A. (1994). Bohaterowie byli zmęczeni? In T. Miczka (Ed.), *Syndrom konformizmu?* (pp. 10–26). Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.
- Michalek, B. (1960). Powrót do codzienności. *Nowa Kultura*, 11(41), 10.
- Passendorfer, J. (14 March 1993). O filmie Melchiora Wańkowicza "Opowieść o bitwie" z Jerzym Passendorferem oraz o niezwyklej historii ołtarza polowego z Czarną Madonną. *Goniec Pomorski*.
- Passendorfer, J. (1995a). Kino historyczne. *Dialog*, 1995(2), 96–97.
- Sadkowski, W. (6 October 1960). Próba konfrontacji. *Trybuna Ludu*, p. 6.
- Siwiński, I. (1994). „Barwy walki” albo tęsknota z legendą. In T. Miczka (Ed.), *Syndrom konformizmu?* (pp. 127–146). Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.
- Wawrzyniak, J. (2009). *ZBoWiD i pamięć drugiej wojny światowej, 1949-1969*. Warszawa: Trio.
- Załuski, Z. (1973). *Siedem polskich grzechów głównych*. Warszawa: Iskry.
- Zaremba, M. (2001). *Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm: Nacjonalistyczna legitymizacja władzy komunistycznej w Polsce*. Warszawa: Trio.
- Zwierzchowski, P. (2013). *Kino nowej pamięci: Obraz II wojny światowej w kinie polskim lat 60*. Bydgoszcz: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego.

## Filmography

- Chmielewski, Z. (Director). (1975). *Dyrektorzy [Managers]* [Motion picture]. Poland: Centralna Wytwórnia Programów i Filmów Telewizyjnych Poltel.
- Passendorfer, J. (Director). (1958). *Zamach [Answer to violence]* [Motion picture]. Poland: Studio Filmowe Iluzjon.
- Passendorfer, J. (Director). (1960). *Powrót [Return]* [Motion picture]. Poland: Zespół Filmowy Iluzjon.
- Passendorfer, J. (Director). (1963). *Skąpani w ogniu [Fire bath]* [Motion picture]. Poland: Zespół Filmowy Iluzjon.
- Passendorfer, J. (Director). (1964). *Barwy walki [Battle colours]* [Motion picture]. Poland: Studio Filmowe Iluzjon.
- Passendorfer, J. (Director). (1966). *Mocne uderzenie [Big beat]* [Motion picture]. Poland: Zespół Filmowy Kadr.
- Passendorfer, J. (Director). (1968). *Kierunek Berlin [Heading for Berlin]* [Motion picture]. Poland: Zespół Filmowy Studio.
- Passendorfer, J. (Director). (1969a). *Dzień oczyszczenia [The day of purification]* [Motion picture]. Poland: Zespół Filmowy Wektor.

- Passendorfer, J. (Director). (1969b). *Ostatnie dni* [*The last days*] [Motion picture]. Poland: Zespół Filmowy Studio.
- Passendorfer, J. (Director). (1970). *Akcja Brutus* [*Operation 'Brutus'*] [Motion picture]. Poland: Zespół Filmowy Wektor.
- Passendorfer, J. (Director). (1971). *Melchior Wańkowicz – opowieść o bitwie o Monte Cassino* [*Melchior Wankowicz: The story of the battle of Monte Cassino*] [Documentary]. Poland: Wytwórnia Filmów Oświatowych.
- Passendorfer, J. (Director). (1973). *Janosik* [Motion picture]. Poland: Zespół Filmowy Panorama.
- Passendorfer, J. (Director). (1974). *Zwycięstwo* [*Victory*] [Motion picture]. Poland: Zespół Filmowy Panorama.
- Passendorfer, J. (Director). (1992). *Melchior Wańkowicz – opowieść o bitwie* [*Melchior Wankowicz: The story of a battle*] [Documentary]. Poland: Wytwórnia Filmów Oświatowych (Łódź).
- Passendorfer, J. (Director). (1995b). *Z ziemi szkockiej do Polski* [*From Scotland to Poland*] [Documentary]. Poland: Telewizja Polska.
- Resnais, A. (Director). (1959). *Hiroshima mon amour* [Motion picture]. France: Argos Films, Como Films, Daiei Studios, Pathé Entertainment.
- Resnais, A. (Director). (1966). *La guerre c'est finie* [*The war is over*] [Motion picture]. France.
- Wajda, A. (Director). (1957). *Kanał* [*Kanał*] [Motion picture]. Poland: Zespół Filmowy Kadr.
- Wajda, A. (Director). (1958). *Popiół i diament* [*Ashes and diamonds*] [Motion picture]. Poland: Studio Filmowe Kadr.
- Zinnemann, F. (Director). (1952). *High noon* [Motion picture]. United States: Stanley Kramer Productions, Inc.