

FILM REVIEW

Victory Day, directed by Sergei Loznitsa and produced by Sergei Loznitsa and Andrej Mikhailov, 2018, 94 minutes. Russian and German with English subtitles. Contact: Sergei Loznitsa, sergei@loznitsa.com. Webpage: <https://loznitsa.com/movies/a-victory-day/>. Shown at the ASN 2018 World Convention.

Every year on May 9, thousands of people visit the Treptower Park memorial in Berlin to celebrate the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany and commemorate the fallen. The media pay scant attention to this event, usually focusing only on especially outlandish participants such as members of patriotic biker gangs or uniform-clad veterans of the East German National People's Army. Such carnivalesque figures are indeed fixtures of the celebrations, but they form only a fraction of the diverse assortment of visitors. These include people who specially travel to Berlin from different parts of the former Soviet Union to show their pride in that country's victory or pay their respects to the dead: members of the large community of former Soviet citizens (and their children and grandchildren) now living in Germany; East German citizens still grateful to the Soviet Union for liberating their country from National Socialism; West German antifa groups; and other visitors ranging from radical-left and extreme-right political activists to random foreign tourists.

With no centrally organized program, except for a wreath-laying ceremony attended by diplomats and other official figures just before midday, visitors engage in a wide range of activities over the course of the day (Gabowitsch 2014; Gabowitsch 2017; Gabovich forthcoming). Some display political banners, wave flags, or distribute leaflets; others sing Russian and Ukrainian folk songs or songs about the war; yet others line up to deposit flowers or other commemorative symbols in the crypt-like memorial hall inside the base of the Soldier-Liberator statue that dominates the memorial complex. People engage in a variety of commemorative ceremonies, some honoring the more than 7,000 Soviet soldiers buried in anonymized mass graves inside the memorial and others displaying portraits of their own relatives, many of whom fought and died on the way to Berlin in the final months of the war.

Sergei Loznitsa's *Victory Day*, shot at the memorial on May 9, 2017, provides glimpses into some of these diverse activities. A celebrated Ukrainian director, Loznitsa is known for a prolific cinematic *œuvre* that ranges from drama (*In the Fog*, 2012; *A Gentle Creature*, 2017) to documentaries (*Landscape*, 2003; *Artel*, 2006) and the hybrid *Donbass* (2018), a fictional film reenacting amateur videos posted online that document real-life scenes. War and memory are among Loznitsa's recurrent themes. The cinematic techniques he uses to approach these and other topics include montage of historical material (*Blockade*, 2006; *Revue*, 2008) and the radical phenomenology of uncommented footage shot with nonmoving cameras, most famously used in the long shots of tourists visiting concentration camp memorials that make up *Austerlitz* (2016).

The latter technique is also employed in *Victory Day*, and it proves eminently suited to capturing some of the atmosphere of the celebrations. Unlike many media portrayals, Loznitsa avoids political pornography and leaves viewers with a sense of the diversity and contradictions of the goings-on. In alternating between noisy crowd scenes and quiet shots of individuals and small groups, Loznitsa faithfully captures the way in which moods can differ from one part of the memorial to the next, and shift over the course of a long day at the memorial, mixing the festive and the mournful in different proportions. We see people engaging in political debates or improvised dancing, and silently laying flowers. In one scene I found both emblematic and touching, we see a group of pro-Russian bikers,

whose leader is talking about war-era brotherhood between peoples in clichéd phrases. When he calls for any World War II veterans to step forward, a woman instead starts recounting family stories about Russian and German civilians saving each other during the war. She ends by quoting her father in Ukrainian, rephrasing the same idea in a much more personal manner.

Whatever Loznitsa's own view of his material may be, I found *Victory Day* less implicitly judgmental than *Austerlitz*. Those already convinced that post-Soviet-style war commemoration constitutes a garish and aggressive cult thoroughly tainted by its association with the Soviet and Russian political regime will interpret the scenes from Berlin as confirmation of their beliefs. Those appreciating the emotional, political, and historical complexity of this commemorative culture and the diversity of meanings it can carry will find no less ample evidence in Loznitsa's film.

Perhaps most admirable is the director's approach to the memorial site itself. The cinematic equivalent of most journalistic portrayals of Victory Day in Treptow would have been to start with an establishing shot of the entire complex and the central statue, followed by some of the Stalin quotes displayed on each of the sarcophagus-shaped limestone stelae that line the central part of the complex. However, to do so would have been to suggest that the memorial's outward political significance shapes most visitors' experience of the memorial. I know from my fieldwork that this is not the case. Many people spend hours at the site without so much as noticing the quotes, and while the soldier statue carries great significance for many visitors, it remains in the background for much of the time they spend at the site. Instead, Loznitsa intersperses his scenes with close-up shots of some of the reliefs exhibited on the stelae, which narrate the Soviet war effort in simplified and stylized form. Used in this way, they act to support the film's emotional arc. It is only at the very end of the film that we see the Soldier-Liberator and a wide shot of the complex as if seen through the soldier's eyes.

However, Loznitsa's approach also imposes limitations on viewers' understanding of his subject. The technique he chooses does not allow him to provide any context on the location, the symbols, the songs, or the people shown. Yet—somewhat ironically—most of his Western viewers will be far less familiar with either the place or the commemorative culture portrayed than they are with the Dachau and Sachsenhausen memorial sites at the heart of *Austerlitz*. At *Victory Day*'s world premiere in Berlin, some viewers chortled, many were left puzzled, and one German audience member said he couldn't believe the site was in Germany—even though most of those visiting the memorial on May 9 reside in that country. Many initiatives that regularly take place in Treptow on Victory Day are left out—such as the tradition to cover the burial mound below the central statue with flowers. I felt this lack of context especially acutely in the first scene, which shows a group of young boys in camouflage practicing a marching step. What the film leaves unsaid is that these boys are members of volunteer search units from Russia. The Berlin-based *Obelisk* association organizes an annual campaign to de-anonymize the unmarked mass graves by displaying the names of some of the buried soldiers on hundreds of handmade signs, an effort that temporarily transforms the outward appearance of large sections of the memorial and occasionally pits the association against the Russian authorities, who have the right to veto alterations to the memorial. The boys were practicing for a ceremony at which the association invited post-Soviet diplomats to lay flowers at one of these mass graves. Thus, one of the most visible, regular, and nonfrivolous events at the memorial remains completely offscreen. In Loznitsa's defense, regular visitors might also overlook the signs and remain puzzled by the uniformed boys. This lack of context is the price to pay for taking the events in Treptow Park at face value, and thus taking them seriously.

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