

High Stakes, Drama in Soviet Hockey

Reviewed by Susan Welsh



Legend No. 17 (Легенда № 17), 2013

Director: Nikolai Lebedev
Starring: Danila Kozlovsky, Oleg Menshikov, Svetlana Ivanova
DVD in Russian, with English subtitles.
No U.S. rating; some nudity.

Red Army, 2014.

Director: Gabe Polsky
Documentary, in English and Russian (with subtitles), rated PG,
DVD released in USA: June 2015. Theatrical release in Russia:
August 2015

Hockey was a big battleground of the Cold War, and both *Red Army* and *Legend No. 17* tell that story in quite different ways, both with a focus on Moscow's ЦСКА (Central Sports Club, Red Army). For both the United States and the Soviet Union, hockey was a symbol of national pride; for the latter it was also the recipient of large sums of money, befitting its role as a propaganda instrument. The Ministry of Defense oversaw the Red Army Team, whose players were soldiers who became the core of the top National Team that played in international competitions. The ruling Politburo even named the team captain.

Both of these enjoyable films are especially recommended for young people who have no recollection of the Cold War, as they give insight into those years, as well as into Russians today and their love/hate relationship with the country's Soviet past. They are also a useful antidote to knee-jerk New Cold War anti-Russian feelings that appear to be increasingly evident in Western society.

What's more, they show some fantastic hockey.

It is no surprise to anyone who watched the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics that sports is today both an instrument of Russian policy and big business. President Putin, with his black belt in judo, frequently emphasizes the importance of sports for the development of skills and patriotism among youth. As part of the recent celebration of the 70th anniversary of Victory Day, commemorating the Nazi capitulation to the USSR, Putin and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu suited up to join Vyacheslav Fetisov — the famous defenseman and the main character in the documentary film *Red Army* — in a "Gala Match" of the Night Hockey League in Sochi.

From left: hockey legend Vladislav Fetisov, President Vladimir Putin, and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu after the Gala Match in celebration of Victory Day, Sochi, Russia, May 16th, 2015.
Credit: kremlin.ru



Legend No. 17

This fictionalized biopic about the late Soviet hockey star Valery Kharlamov (played by Danila Kozlovsky) was the smash hit of the Russian film industry in 2013, grossing \$27 million within a month of its release. How closely it follows the life and career of the real Kharlamov (who died in a car crash in 1981) is not known to me, but Kharlamov for sure played a leading role in the famous Summit Series with Canada in 1972, when the Soviet team unexpectedly beat the tough Canadian team in the first game. Whether the handsome and exuberant young player really climbed up the fire escape to the apartment of his beloved to bring her flowers, read poetry, and ask her to marry him, is anybody's guess (not surprisingly, she had turned a cold shoulder to him when he said, while in bed with her, that the only thing he loved was hockey).

In those early years (before 1972), the team was trained by Anatoly Tarasov (played by Oleg Menshikov), a brilliant coach who is featured in both of these films. Under his leadership, the Soviet team won every world championship from 1962 to 1971. Like American coach Herb Brooks as portrayed in the 1981 American film *Miracle on Ice* (about the U.S. Olympic Team's defeat of Team USSR at Lake Placid, N.Y., in 1980), Tarasov in *Legend 17* is a tough, sometimes almost brutal, taskmaster with a heart of gold, who takes a bunch of young machos full of testosterone and turns them into an actual team. (I am informed by those more expert in these matters than myself, that without that plot line, there is no sports movie.)

One of the turning points in the film is based on real events: the game in Moscow between the National Team and the Spartak club, which was General

Secretary Leonid Brezhnev's favorite. Brezhnev attends the game, and the Communist Party and KGB functionaries who constantly circle around the hockey players like vultures looking for carrion, try to maneuver to secure a victory for Spartak, even though the National Team is far superior. When the referee disallows a clear goal by the National Team, Tarasov, in a fury, pulls his team off the ice, and the game stops. Tarasov is fired, and Kharlamov, outraged at the injustice, wrecks his car and is badly injured. Spending months in the hospital, he loses his place on the team. The two depressed has-beens meet by chance on a park bench in Moscow, drink vodka together from a bottle in a paper bag... and the plot picks up from there. No more secrets revealed here.

Red Army

This American documentary, directed by Gabe Polsky (35), the son of immigrants from the Soviet Union, uses archival footage and interviews with the dramatis personae and commentators like Vladimir Posner to tell the story of Soviet, and later Russian, hockey, up to the present day.

The story of coach Tarasov was particularly fascinating. He didn't look a bit like the handsome and fit Oleg Menshikov of *Legend 17*, but was a rather elderly, roly-poly man with bushy eyebrows, and needed help hoisting his substantial bulk from a kneeling position on the ice. He worked with both chess masters and the Bolshoi Ballet to craft an approach to hockey that was creative and strategically focused. We see him cavorting in the gym, telling his players to dance: "boogie-woogie, boogie-woogie!" His method was much admired in the West, where the teams tended to be (says sports journalist Lawrence Martin in the film) more individualistic and brutal. Tarasov was quoted in a *New York Times* obituary (Jan. 24, 1995) saying that a hockey player "must have the wisdom of a chess player, the accuracy of a sniper and the rhythm of a musician." But most important, "He must be a superb athlete."

Much of the film is an interview with former Team USSR captain Vyacheslav ("Slava") Fetisov, who is today an official in Russian and international sporting associations. (Oddly, this film never mentions teammate Valery Kharlamov, and *Legend 17* never mentions Fetisov. Is there a story here?)

The interview gets off to a rocky start. Fetisov (56), who is built like a brick outhouse (6 ft 1 inches, 215 pounds), at first flatly refused to be interviewed by the skinny young novice director from Chicago. He finally agreed to give Polsky 15 minutes. While Fetisov is still on a phone call, Polsky starts nervously asking



Valery Kharlamov (on the phone, played by Danila Kozlovsky) and other players in Montreal celebrate their victory over the Canadian team in a call to their ousted coach and beloved mentor Anatoly Tarasov.

Credit: *Legend No. 17*



The doctor who fixed Kharlamov's broken leg (played hilariously by Nina Usatova) and other hospital staff watch the Montreal game on television, cheering for Team USSR.

Credit: *Legend No. 17*

him the sort of questions you might expect from Oprah Winfrey: "How did you *feel* when Soviet athletes were not allowed to travel?" Fetisov tells him to wait a minute, but Polsky keeps babbling, the camera keeps rolling, and Fetisov shoots him the middle finger. But it turns out that Polsky is not as dumb as he first sounds, and Fetisov is not as nasty as he first appears. By the end of five hours of conversation, spread over several sessions, the two men have established a rapport.

We watch Fetisov's rugged face as he watches video footage of the team's past victories and defeats, and it is as though he is reliving each of those moments. Sometimes he breaks into an ebullient laugh; sometimes he is close to tears.

Slava never thought of defecting from the land of his birth; but in the perestroika years, the cash-strapped USSR started "leasing" its top hockey players to the National Hockey League (the player would get \$1,000 per month, and the rest of the contract would

go — secretly — to the Soviet government). Slava flatly refused the deal, by which the players would effectively be bought and sold like pork bellies on the commodity markets. In 1989 he was “invited” to come see Defense Minister Dmitri Yazov (later one of the perpetrators of the August 1991 coup attempt). Yazov insisted that he accept the deal, but Slava said he wanted his full contract with the New Jersey Devils, or nothing. He quotes Yazov: “You — sucker. You try to play for our enemies? You know what I can do with you? I’ll send you to Siberia. You’ll never get out.” And the story continues. No more secrets revealed here.

Fetisov and Polsky both summed up their thoughts after the film was released:

Fetisov told TASS (Jan. 26, 2015): “This picture tells the story of my country and my team. I think the film turned out interesting. Polsky managed to incorporate elements of a thriller and make a documentary film exciting. It is noteworthy that a film about successful Soviet guys and about the Soviet school, which was the best, is coming to screens during such a complicated geopolitical time.”

And Polsky told NPR (Jan. 22, 2015): “Fetisov is probably one of the most famous people in Russia, and with that comes a lot of responsibility. Russia was a country that needed heroes. I think they suffer from a lack of people for young people to look up to. It was, still is, a country that was rebuilding itself from the collapse of the Soviet Union, and still trying to find itself. I think Fetisov felt a sense of responsibility for his country, his people, and he considers Russia his home. I think he wants to help make the country as good as it can be.... I think that the story basically brings to life the difficulties that Russia has had after the collapse of the Soviet Union and finding its place in the world, being prideful and finding its national identity, and regaining the prestige that it had during the Soviet years.”



Susan Welsh is *SlavFile*'s film editor. She and *SlavFile* invite others to submit reviews of films from the Slavic-speaking world. She can be reached at: welsh_business@verizon.net

CALLING ALL IDIOM SAVANTS (AND AREN'T WE ALL?)

For an ATA conference presentation we are asking for reader recommendations for dictionaries, websites, and web search procedures that translators from and into Slavic languages have found useful in dealing not with only idioms narrowly defined, but also with such kissing cousins of idioms as slang, clichés, phrasal verbs, memes, winged words, proverbs, etc., etc. Identification of seemingly relevant resources that should be shunned would be equally useful.

We would also love to have your favorite examples of brilliant translations (or mistranslations) of such terms, terms that have left you tearing your hair, and the downright impossible to translate

Everyone who writes us will receive a compendium of all the material we receive in addition to everything we generate ourselves for the presentation. Opt out of this generous offer, which includes an IDIOM SAVANT certificate suitable for framing, at your own risk.

Send all contributions to lydiastone@verizon.net. Putting “Idiom Savants” on the subject line would be useful, but is not mandatory.