

# A New Era Remakes Bulgakov's *White Guard* in Its Own Image

Reviewed by Susan Welsh

**White Guard** (БЕЛАЯ ГВАРДИЯ), “based on the novel by Mikhail Bulgakov,” 2012, four-part Rossiya TV series, 345 minutes, in Russian online, available with English subtitles on DVD

Director: Sergei Snezhkin

Producers: Sergei Melkumov, Anton Slatopolsky, Aleksandr Rodnyansky

Screenplay: Sergei Snezhkin, Marina and Sergei Dyachenko

The accompanying picture of a huge crowd in Kyiv (Kiev) is not from the Maidan in 2014, but from St. Sophia Square in 1919, as presented in this film. Ukrainian nationalist Symon Petliura's army has defeated the tattered remnants of the White Guard, and the Ukrainian population of the city has turned out to cheer the victors. The TV serial, which bears little resemblance to Mikhail Bulgakov's novella of the same name on which it is supposedly based, was shown on Rossiya 1 television on March 3-4, 2012, the weekend of the Russian presidential election.

Watching from the vantage point of the 2013-14 events in Kyiv, it strikes this foreign viewer how viciously anti-Ukrainian this film is. Not surprisingly, the reaction from Ukraine was sharp, both from those who aspire to an inclusive and tolerant Ukraine, and those who don't. Oles Buzina, a reviewer at *segodnya.ua* (March 30, 2012), blasted producer Aleksandr Rodnyansky for “taking Russian state funds and inciting hatred between Ukraine and Russia, to line his pockets by igniting this hellish flame.” Vyacheslav Kirilenko, leader of the Za Ukrainu party, appealed to

the Ukrainian Cultural Ministry to ban the showing of the film, saying that it would enflame national enmities and is a distortion of Bulgakov's novel. “The serial is openly anti-Ukrainian,” he wrote, “it shows the Ukrainians as cynical chauvinists, sadists, and anti-Semites, when they were actually fighting for their freedom” (*Ukrainskaya Pravda*, April 24, 2012).

Political scientist Andrei Okara placed it in a broader perspective, commenting to the St. Petersburg press agency Rosbalt (April 17, 2012) that the image of Ukrainians on Russian TV has been changing. Instead of the good-natured bumpkins of Soviet films, Ukrainians “have turned into collaborators and traitors.” He cited *White Guard* as one example. Another was the film *The Match* (Матч), about a soccer game between Nazis and Ukrainians in 1942, which premiered around the same time as this latest *White Guard* screen adaptation. Thirty people from the ultra-right Svoboda party (until recently part of the Kyiv government) showed up at the theater in Kyiv where *The Match* was showing, pelting the screen with eggs and shouting, “*Moskali* [a derogatory term for Russians] go home,” until they were arrested by the riot police.

Was it the filmmakers' intention to fan the flames of discord between Russians and Ukrainians, and if so, why? Readers are invited to send me their own conspiracy theories.



From Snezhkin's film: A huge crowd greets the Petliurian army as it arrives in Kyiv's St. Sophia Square. Colonel Kozyr-Leshko, leading the column, will order his men to kill an orator who doesn't speak Ukrainian fluently. A cavalryman does the deed with a sword.

## What Would Bulgakov Have Thought?

This film in effect throws Bulgakov's novel into a food processor along with bits and pieces of a couple of other works by the same author, and produces—*voilà!*—something new! It's not exactly a *purée*, but has more of a lumpy consistency, with chunks of the original remaining. Co-screenwriter and science fiction author Sergei Dyachenko, who is Ukrainian, boasted in an interview with *segodnya.ua* published nearly two years before the film aired, "We didn't make up a thing, but used only what came from the pen of the writer himself."

Well, that's somewhat true, in the sense that they didn't take many plot elements *out* of the food processor; but the author of *White Guard* must surely be turning over in his grave.

Whereas most reviews of the 2012 TV series were extremely negative ("total failure," "deadly boring," "a soap opera"), I liked parts of it, found it interesting enough to watch to the end, and thought some of the acting was good. I liked Kseniya Rappoport's portrayal of Elena Turbina, although many reviewers associate the actress with her role as the gun moll of an Odessa gang leader in the blockbuster 2007 TV serial *Liquidation* (Ликвидация). But I do agree with the online commentator who wrote, "The film is better if you 'forget about' Bulgakov."

The book was one of the few works by Bulgakov published in the USSR during his lifetime (he died in 1940), and only the first two thirds of it, at that (in 1925; the full work was published only in Paris in 1929). It was intended to be a trilogy, but the rest never materialized. Instead, the book morphed into a play, *The Days of the Turbins* (Дни Турбиных), which was enormously popular for decades, made the author famous, and secured him at least a minimal livelihood.

The novella *White Guard* begins with a lyrical and foreboding prologue: "Great and terrible was the year of Our Lord 1918, hardly the second since the Revolution. Its summer abundant with warmth and sun, its winter with snow. Highest in its heaven stood two stars: the shepherds' star, eventide Venus, and Mars, quivering red." (I quote from what I believe to be the 1971 translation by Michael Glenny, although the copyright page is missing from my Kindle version.) It tells the story of the Turbins, a well-to-do Russian family in Kyiv during the Russian Civil War. The widowed mother of the close-knit family has just died. The oldest son, Aleksei Turbin, is a doctor just back from the World War I battlefield, Soviet Russia having withdrawn from the war. His siblings are Elena and Nikolai, the former married, the latter a cadet at

the military academy. Their closest friends are former tsarist officers now in the service of the Hetman, Pavlo Skoropadsky, a former Russian general who is now the German satrap in the Ukrainian part of what was still the Russian Empire.

Petliura's army is closing in on Kyiv, and the Bolsheviks, though still far away, are moving down from the North. The Hetman is doing nothing to prepare to defend the city, and the mid-level White Guard officers are disgusted with both him and their own generals, "who sit drinking cognac in cafés," as they did in the war against the Germans, while sending young soldiers to die. The very day that the Hetman finally musters all Russian officers, including Aleksei, Nikolka, and their friends, to defend the city against Petliura, the Germans tell him they're pulling out. The Hetman and his commanding general abscond along with them in the dead of night, while the loyal officers awake the next day to find that the world as they knew it has vanished. Their senior officer, Colonel Malyshev, disbands the regiment and sends everybody home, since he has neither the troops, nor the guns and ammunition, nor even the chain of command above him to defend the city. The Petliurians take Kyiv, committing numerous atrocities (notably the murder of Jews, an important motif in the book).

By the end of the book, the Bolsheviks are moving in, the Petliurians are fleeing, and the epilogue is a reflection of the prologue, returning to the sublime celestial image, but now as a hint of immortality and infinite possibility: "...the curtain that God had drawn across the world was covered with stars," says the narrator. The sword of war will pass away, but the stars will remain: "There is no man who does not know that. Why, then, will we not turn our eyes to the stars? Why?"

## 1926 Play: The Lizard Loses Its Tail

"This tactic has long been familiar to playwrights: Under powerful pressure, the author deliberately mutilates his work. It is an extreme tactic! Thus a lizard, caught by its tail, breaks off the tail and escapes. For every lizard realizes that it is better to live without a tail than to lose its life altogether."

Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Life of Monsieur de Molière*,  
quoted by Ellendea Proffer, *Bulgakov: Life and Work*  
(Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1984)

Since *White Guard* was published, at least one play and two films based on it have been produced. Each rendition is mutilated in its own way, is totally different from the book, and is heavily stamped with the political and cultural imprint of its own time.

The play, *Days of the Turbins*, underwent extensive changes prior to performance, both for dramatic

reasons (Bulgakov's first script was much too long) and to satisfy the censors. The result is a work that is much weaker than the book but nevertheless astonished and greatly moved its viewers in the USSR of 1926-1941.

The play begins with the family gathered 'round the hearth, Nikolka playing the guitar and singing a song about how they're going to smash Petliura. Aleksei is not the reflective and somewhat detached physician/philosopher of the book, but rather a colonel; his own role is merged with those of Colonel Malyshev and another important character in the book, Colonel Naiturs. It is Aleksei who dissolves the regiment after the Hetman's betrayal. Many other characters are also eliminated; I'll mention some of them later.

The on-stage role of the Petliurians is much diminished. This was the subject of a big fight between the author and various authorities prior to the play's opening night (October 5, 1926). His opponents didn't want the Petliurians there at all. Bulgakov wrote angrily to the directorate of the Moscow Art Theater (MKhAT) on June 4: "I have the honor to inform you that I do not agree to the cutting of the Petliurian scene from my play *White Guard*. Reasoning: The Petliurian scene is organically connected to the play" (cited by Proffer, 1984). He raised a number of other objections, and said that if his conditions were not met, the play should "be taken off in short order." When all the arguing was over, only part of the "Petliurian scene" remained — their cruel interrogation of a deserter and a shoemaker; but without the third element, the brutality against a third man, a Jew. Thus was a crucial image in the book deleted at the stroke of a pen. The Petliurian Colonel Kozyr-Leshko was eliminated altogether.

As the play ends, one of the Turbins' friends, Captain Studzinsky, is going off to join the doomed anti-Bolshevik forces of General Denikin on the Don, while another, Captain Myshlaevsky, will join the Red Army, because, he says, it fought valiantly and professionally, and enlisting will allow him to stay in his beloved Russia, rather than facing inevitable exile with the Whites. The Reds arrive and the orchestra plays "The Internationale"; Nikolka solemnly proclaims: "Ladies and gentlemen, this evening is a great prologue to a new historical drama." Studzinsky morosely corrects him: "To some it is a prologue; but to some, an epilogue." The curtain falls.

The writer Viktor Nekrasov, who, like Bulgakov, was from Kyiv, calculated that at least a million people saw the play ("Dom Turbinykh," *Novy Mir*, 8, 1967). Translator Lilianna Lungina knew someone who saw it 32 times (*Podstrochnik* [Moscow: Corpus, 2010]).

Stalin reportedly saw it 15 times. (Why? That would be another article!)

Why were Bulgakov's book and his "mutilated" play so wildly popular? Here are some contemporary comments:

- The poet Maximilian Voloshin inscribed a gift to Bulgakov, "To the first man to engrave the soul of Russia's strife" (Proffer, 1984).
- In early 1924, Bulgakov read the manuscript of the book to a circle of friends (as was the tradition in those days). The writer Yuri Slyozkin, who was present, wrote in *Nakanune* (March 9, 1924) that it was "the first attempt at creating a great epic tale of our lives" (Lydia Yanovskaya, *Tvorcheskiy put' Mikhaila Bulgakova* [Moscow, 1983], <http://www.belousenko.com>).
- *New York Times* correspondent Walter Duranty, who attended a performance of the play, reported (November 7, 1926) that a young Communist sitting behind him "sneered audibly during the earlier part of the play." But by the time young Nikolka, badly wounded, relayed to Elena the news of Aleksei's death, the Communist was weeping. Asked why, the man replied, "I can't help it. It is too real. I saw things like that myself." "There you have it," wrote Duranty. "Scarcely a person in last night's audience was not reliving similar scenes in his own memory" (Proffer, 1984).

### 1976 Film: A Patriotic Melodrama

Still in the Soviet era but two generations later, the play was remade in 1976 as a film, directed by Vladimir Basov. It has now been larded with a new prologue and finale, in case anybody had missed the point about how glad we all are that the workers' and peasants' Revolution had been victorious. It opens with lovely shots of old Kyiv, with a stirring martial song called *The 'Proletariat' Armored Train* (Бронепоезд "Пролетарий"), about the train that brings the Bolsheviks to the city. The narrator situates the story historically, describing the role of the various players, and concludes: "Everyone wanted to control Ukraine, but only the Bolsheviks realized that it had to be defended." He describes the Moscow decree creating a Ukrainian Front in the Red Army, and then, introducing suspense: "But in Kiev, no one knew that yet..." Then the story begins.

The "Petliurian scene" has now been eliminated altogether. Petliura's army remains off-stage, mentioned with fear and loathing by other characters but never seen, except when nationalist soldiers are shown marching down the street.

Colonel Aleksei Turbin is killed two thirds of the way through the film, having remained heroically at his post with a machine gun to cover the escape of his young soldiers from the arriving Petliurians, who then

kill him. The rest of the film is essentially a patriotic melodrama, although entertaining (if you like patriotic melodramas) and generally well performed. It ends as the train pulls into the station, while a stalwart Red Army soldier keeps watch in the bitter cold, and *The Proletariat's Armored Train* theme song strikes up again and proclaims that we're fighting for the future, for Soviet power, and there can be no return to the past. What an irony this is when viewed in 2014, after the Soviet Union, like the Russian Empire before it, has passed from the scene.

By now, Bulgakov's book is almost totally unrecognizable.

## 2012 Film: What Is *White Guard* Really About?

Reviewers of the 2012 film, who almost universally compare it unfavorably to the 1976 production, seem to be reacting mostly from nostalgia. Notable is Andrei Vorontsov's review in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (March 7, 2012), where he writes that "*White Guard* is first and foremost a family novel, and only secondarily historical, philosophical, symbolic, and whatnot." The proper interpretation, in his view, was captured in Basov's film, but Snezhkin's is a flop. "At the end of Snezhkin's film, the Turbins' home is empty," he writes. "Sad? Yes, sad, but not very, because I didn't feel the warmth of the Russian hearth there in the first place." *Kommersant's* Anna Narinskaya (March 3, 2012) laments the lack of "warm coziness" in the new film, saying that Bulgakov treasured this familial coziness as the only thing that could withstand destruction.

So, is *White Guard* really about "family values"? Only if you argue that, say, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *War and Peace*, and *The Cherry Orchard* are too.

Insofar as it is about a family, the subject is the *impact* on a family — as the microcosm of an entire society — of cataclysmic change: world war, revolutionary upheaval, and civil war. It is also about the moral terrain on which choices must be made, for good or ill.

Snezhkin's film begins in the clinic of Dr. Aleksei Turbin (yes, he's a doctor again now), where he is examining the crotch of the young syphilitic radical poet Rusakov. In the book, Rusakov

is a very minor character who makes his appearance only toward the end. What in the world did Snezhkin have in mind by putting this scene first? I have no idea.

Otherwise, the main plot features and characters of the book have returned, although the order is at the mercy of the cinematic food processor. Very strange things begin to happen. The Petliurians' viciousness is much accentuated, especially in the amplified, sadistic personality of Colonel Kozyr-Leshko. The Bolsheviks are now played as equally hideous creatures. (Bulgakov's own attitudes toward the Petliurian nationalists and the Bolsheviks are beyond the scope of this review. Suffice it to say that there were no positive alternatives to either on the scene in 1919.)

Of course, this being a production of the 2010s and not the 1920s, blood and gore spill everywhere. After disbanding the White regiment, Colonel Malyshev blows his brains out, spattering them on the wall behind him. Kozyr-Leshko orders his men to slice and dice the heads from Jews, cadets, and orators whose mastery of the Ukrainian language he finds unsatisfactory, and generally anybody he doesn't like. The discussion of the two "stars" — Venus and Mars — has returned in this film, but rather than poetically framing the entire story, for some reason it is put into the mouth of the bestial Kozyr-Leshko, talking to an aide before leading the assault on the city. It is late at night, they are on a hill overlooking Kyiv, and the atmosphere is ominous. After his brief astronomical dissertation, he orders, "Let's go," and the regiment moves into position for the morning's battle.

The discussion of the stars here is not only meaningless in context; it actually sabotages Bulgakov's unifying metaphor of the entire book, arching from Venus and Mars (love and war) at the beginning to God's heaven and man's potential for immortality at the end. In the next scene, Kozyr-Leshko beats the living daylights out of the same aide. Later on, Dr. Turbin, forced by Kyiv's new rulers to tend to a wound received by Kozyr-Leshko, shoots and kills the Petliurian colonel. (This twist of the plot is one of many that was dumped into the food processor from another play, in this case *I Have Killed* [Я убил]).

The Bolsheviks are now prominently on-stage, in the person of the demonic Shpolyansky, who sabotages the precious few armored



vehicles of his erstwhile White Guard comrades-in-arms. A stone-cold killer, he executes all who oppose him and leaves town, returning with the Red Army. Shpolyansky had a brief but important existence in the novel but none at all in the play or the 1976 film. His mistress Julia, who rescues Aleksei when the latter is badly wounded, and with whom Aleksei falls in love, had also been eliminated from previous productions, but has now returned, so of course there are the requisite 2012 bedroom scenes. The churlish Bolsheviks use the cross held aloft by the colossal statue of St. Vladimir (Volodymyr), which towers over Kyiv, for target practice.

This is all a grotesque distortion of the book; the film ends with Aleksei and Julia staring at one another in existential anguish, confronting a new world that is apparently devoid of meaning and even of love. A far cry from Bulgakov's heavenly curtain of stars.

### An Eternal Question: Russia's Identity

Like the audiences in Bulgakov's day, today's Russian adults have also lived through cataclysmic change. Twenty-three years ago the USSR was wiped off the map, and people woke up one morning to find that they now lived in Russia, Ukraine, or one of the other new states, instead of the Soviet Union of their birth, education, and cultural mindset. Elena Turbina

Talberg's plaintive cry surely strikes a chord with post-1991 audiences: "Our whole life is falling apart. Everything is crashing down, collapsing."

Where is the Bulgakov of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, to "engrave the soul of Russia's strife"? In Russian cinema today, stereotypes predominate: "men's films" (action, machismo, endless replays of the Great Patriotic War), "women's films" (relationships, soap operas), existentialism and depression, dystopic fantasy films, or that "safe ground" of Soviet times, Russian literary classics.

An insight from outside the film domain is helpful. Foreign policy analyst Fyodor Lukyanov wrote about "The Ukrainian Crisis as an Opportunity" at RBTH.com on March 31, 2014. His interesting analysis includes this point: "Russia is undergoing a search for a new national identity to replace the Soviet one, which has exhausted itself. As in other countries that have passed through similar transformations, national feelings are growing more intense."

After 23 years, that new national identity remains elusive. It is the job of the great artist to lead his or her people in this quest, as Mikhail Bulgakov did in his time. Until such artists emerge, we can expect more disappointing films, like Snezhkin's *White Guard*.

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## SLAVFILE LITE

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Here is a photograph of two felt figures I bought at a bookstore. They can be used either as refrigerator magnets or finger puppets (or, I suppose as both alternately). Do you recognize Anton Pavlovich and Lev Nikolayevich? Evidently Fyodor Mikhailovich is also available but was out of stock at the bookstore! Who says the cultural level of this country is falling? Of course nothing is perfect, and the manufacturers, [www.philosophersguild.com](http://www.philosophersguild.com), have not yet evolved to the point of including Aleksandr Sergeyevich in their panoply. (Or do I mean pantheon?) But, as if the product's double function were not enough, the figures also come with a biosketch and sample quote. For the ones now gracing my Kenmore, the quotes are: "You ask me: 'What is life?' That is like asking what is a carrot? A carrot is a carrot and that's all there is to it" and "The one thing necessary, in life as in art, is to tell the truth."



Finally, a new illustration of just how complex English article use is for those born into a language without articles. A few weeks ago squirrels chewed through some of our outside electric power wires causing an outage in some but not all portions of our house. When I reported this to a Russonate friend (with excellent English by the way), I received the reply: "Your squirrels have a strange taste." Knowing this to be a completely understandable error, I still could not resist writing back, "Well, then you had better stop eating them."

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This just in: I would not want anyone to think that my hometown rag, *The Washington Post*, is not an equal opportunity idiom bungler. This morning's edition contained a reader letter complaining of a sports columnist's use of the well-known English idiom, *by a hare's breath*. (I certainly hope there was no garlic in the carrots.)  
Poka, Lydia