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The Bizarre Soviet Movie That Predicted Putinism

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It could have been any sleepy industrial town anywhere across the old Soviet Union. A weary out-of-town businessman enters the office of the local factory manager and gets his first hint that things aren't quite right when he sees the manager's secretary typing away, completely naked. When the dumbstruck visitor alerts the manager that his secretary is completely nude, the manager looks and dismissively shrugs — “well, so she is” — before continuing with business as usual.

Thus begins the main character's descent into an increasingly bizarre realm where he, along with the audience, struggles to determine what is real and what is not.

The surrealist 1989 film “[City Zero](#)” ([Gorod Zero](#) in Russian) is a hidden gem of late-Soviet cinema. It is among that rare breed of eerily prophetic films that were written as dark satire in their own time but which now shine a bright light on our contemporary political reality. Like Sidney Lumet's 1976 fictional [Network](#), which [presaged the rise of sensationalist “infotainment” news media](#) and its [impacts on American politics](#), [City Zero](#) seems strikingly prescient of contemporary Russian political dynamics — including

the distinctive societal worldview Russian President Vladimir Putin has invoked for waging war on Ukraine in 2022.

City Zero, sometimes translated as “Zerograd,” was written and filmed at the height of *glasnost*’-era artistic freedom. Soviet-style communism was crumbling across Eastern Europe and Putin was a young, anonymous KGB agent stationed in Dresden, East Germany. As the confused and weary protagonist of City Zero confronts each plot twist and turn, the film lays bare a crumbling sociopolitical system based more in fantasy than reality, one that’s struggling to maintain its identity, its purpose, and its hold over its captive population through blunt propaganda and distortions of reality, both naked and subtle.

What was true of the Soviet Union in its death throes in the late 1980s [seems even more applicable to Putin’s Russia today](#), where policies are justified with paeans to an official nationalism known as *Russkii mir*, or “Russian world.” This Kremlin-sanctioned worldview suggests Russia is no ordinary nation-state but a unique, conservative “civilization,” historically distinct and [even genetically superior](#) to its European neighbors. Since returning to the presidency in 2012, Putin has increasingly invoked this civilizational discourse to [champion the interests of ethnic Russians](#), Russian speakers, and civilizational compatriots beyond Russia’s geopolitical borders. Russia’s [2008 war in Georgia](#), 2014 [annexation of Crimea](#) and proxy war in Donbas, and the all-out [invasion of Ukraine in 2022](#) have all been justified in terms of Russia’s [supposedly unique civilizational mission](#). Consequently — rather than just a fig leaf for the Kremlin’s neocolonial ambitions — *Russkii mir* is a concept worth comprehending in its own right. Conceptually, *Russkii mir* rests on three pillars: 1) a resentment-

filled Russian national chauvinism at odds with Europe and the West, 2) an illiberal [statism](#), in which the individual and society serve the interests of the state (rather than the state serving the people), and 3) official control over information and historical narratives, which bolsters this state-serving national identity. This kind of [information autocracy](#) was well described in Peter Pomerantsev's [Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia](#), in which Kremlin-run state media twists both current events and historical narratives to serve the interests of the ruling regime. Westerners got but a glimpse of this with Putin's effective declaration of war against Ukraine in February in an [angry, hour-long alt-history lecture](#) in which he asserted that [Ukrainian statehood](#) never existed.

There may be no better introduction to what this kind of dark, surrealist statism feels like than *City Zero*, which is steeped in the same, persistent unease familiar to Western visitors to Putin's Russia: that beyond the veneer of a normally functioning society, everything seems just a little bit "off."

At the risk of spoiling a 33-year-old foreign film: there is ultimately no way out of *City Zero*. The mild-mannered everyman protagonist, whose name is [Alexei Varakin](#), has become trapped in *Russkii mir* without knowing it.

Unnerved from his encounter with the naked secretary and planning for a speedy return to Moscow, Varakin stops by a local restaurant for a quick lunch to find the chef has somehow prepared a cake in the exact likeness of his own head. When the flabbergasted Varakin refuses to eat the head-cake, the chef shoots himself as a ragtime band strikes up on a nearby stage. After giving the police his witness testimony, Varakin makes for the

train depot, but all tickets in the empty vestibule have mysteriously been sold out. When he hails a taxi to take him to the next-nearest station, the road ends abruptly in a forest. While walking through the forest, Varakin finds that there is no station, but only the town's local-history museum in the middle of a nature preserve. For 30 kopecks, he reluctantly takes the obligatory tour, which begins in a repurposed mine shaft 28 meters below the surface.

And that's where things really get weird.

Clocking-in at almost 20 minutes, the underground-museum scene is where the film underscores the absurdity of history when re-written to valorize the state, as in Putin's Russia today. The guide leads Varakin past one museum display after another, commemorating increasingly fantastic historical relics and events that couldn't have taken place in the town, but supposedly did: the tomb of Trojan kings, the remains of Roman legions, the bed of Attila the Hun, the head of the Second False Dmitry (a pretender to the Russian throne in the 17th century) and a Soviet revolutionary betrayed by his French can-can dancer wife—all stories supposedly uncovered in the excavation of the mine-museum. (Unnervingly, all of the costumed mannequins in each museum diorama are actually unmoving, unblinking live actors.)

Still clinging to some objective reality, Varakin protests that it is all ridiculous fantasy and completely contrary to all established history. The guide assures him that this is all based on the research of the town's leading experts: professors Rotenberg and Gerasimov. (As fate would have it, in the years since the film, those surnames have acquired Putin-era significance: Two of Putin's closest childhood judo buddies-turned-multibillionaire

oligarchs are [Boris and Arkady Rotenberg](#), while Putin's chief of the general staff, architect of Russia's [hybrid-warfare doctrine](#) and leader of Russian military operations in Ukraine, is [Gen. Valery Gerasimov](#). For a contemporary viewer, those names are an uncanny coincidence.)

Back in the history mine, Varakin and the guide pass a propaganda poster declaring, "The source of our strength is the truth of our history." This too is an eerie harbinger of contemporary politics. When Putin laid out his pretext for invading Ukraine by denying Ukrainian sovereign existence and attempting to recast Ukrainians as part of *Russkii mir*, his conclusion was similarly Orwellian: having "[truth on our side is what makes us truly strong](#)."

Varakin's history excursion concludes with a giant "sculpture" labeled "Dreams": two wedding-cake-like, multi-tiered, rotating pedestals that juxtapose the differences between *Russkii mir* and the West.

The first display evokes the Kremlin's traditional red-brick walls and towers. The people-mannequins who populate it represent the diversity, traditions, bounty, achievements and contentedness — all stylized and embellished — of *Russkii mir*. It is a stunning visual depiction of Putin's assertion that "Russia is not just a country but a distinct civilization thanks to its rich traditions, multiethnic character and numerous cultures and faiths." The Soviet Union adopted this [Russocentric](#) "[friendship of nations](#)" in which [ethnic Russians play the leading role](#), but there is nothing inherently ideological or Soviet about it. Indeed, although the film was made several years before the Soviet collapse, it is noteworthy that *City Zero* makes not even the most fleeting reference to Marxism-Leninism.

The other, shabbier rotating display depicts the decadence of the West. Money-grubbing businessmen are portrayed alongside rebellious youth, militants, punks, mascara-laden rockstars, hippies, and Valley girls as the antithesis of *Russkii mir*. This paradox of Russia as culturally part of Europe but simultaneously distinct from it is hardly some novel, Putin-era development. Indeed, [it has been debated for centuries](#). Still, having it depicted so bluntly is jarring. The camera pushes in on a perplexed Varakin. Is he expected to choose one or the other? Red pill or blue pill? Russia or the West? Which world is correct? Which is real? (And are they both not depicted by real actors pretending to be fake?) The scene ends abruptly there, with no clear answers.

Soon after his history reeducation, Varakin is taken to the city prosecutor, who shares his own conspiracy theory that the chef, whose name is Nikolayev, was actually murdered. What's more, he suspects that — rather some stranger from far-off Moscow — Varakin is in fact the chef's long-lost son, even though Varakin had never seen him before. Still, as witness to a crime, the prosecutor asks Varakin not only to remain in the city, but to go along with the rumors about town that he's actually the chef's son.

With a dejected expression of existential despair, Varakin pleads that he wants only to go back home.

“You fail to appreciate the seriousness of the Nikolayev case,” comes the reply, and then the prosecutor adds, ominously, “as it affects the interests of the State.”

At that point, the prosecutor pulls up a chair and delivers to Varakin perhaps the most succinct articulation of *Russkii mir* statism, in which Russian society is to serve the needs of the

state, rather than the other way around.

“Since the times of the Tatar-Mongolian invasion, the main idea uniting us—which inspired generations of our forefathers — is the idea of statehood,” he proclaims. “A great and mighty state is the ideal for which the Russian is willing to suffer, to bear any deprivation. Ready — if need be — to give his life.”

Noting Varakin’s silence, the prosecutor continues:

“This is an irrational idea. It is not the pragmatic European striving to extract the maximum of personal profit. It is the idea of the great Russian spirit, of which your own individuality, and mine, is only a small subordinate part, but which repays us a hundred times over. This feeling of belonging to a great organism inspires our spirits with a feeling of strength and immortality. The West has always striven to discredit our idea of statehood. But the greatest danger lies not in the West, but in ourselves. We grasp at all these incessant and fashionable Western ideas, seduced by their obvious rationality and practicality, not realizing that just these qualities give them a fatal power over us.”

Varakin says nothing. “But never mind,” the prosecutor continues.

“In the end our own idea always emerges victorious. Look, all of our revolutions have finally led not to the destruction, but to the strengthening and reinforcement of the State. They always will. But not many people realize that the present moment is one of the most critical in our entire history. And the case of the chef Nikolayev — which appears so trivial at first glance — has a profound significance.”

“So... there’s no way you can leave town.”

Defeated, Varakin understands that struggling against the official narrative is futile. Any hope of contentedness can come only from subordination to the state-sanctioned alternative reality. And as he does so — and begrudgingly acquiesces to the role of the slain chef's son — he is fêted as a hero by the citizens of this bizarre City Zero.

Varakin's resignation undoubtedly feels familiar to many citizens of contemporary Russia, especially following Putin's invasion of Ukraine, with its accompanying clampdowns on free expression against anyone questioning Russia's "special military operation." For independent-minded journalists, activists, and even [oligarchic elites](#), the only means of political survival is either to [subordinate oneself](#) to the [surreality](#) of Putin's *Russkii mir*, or to leave it; and it is getting [increasingly difficult to flee it](#), much like the trap of City Zero.

The movie concludes with the townspeople accompanying Varakin on a midnight visit to the town's storied 1,000-year-old oak tree. It was said that Grand Prince Dmitrii Donskoi and Ivan the Terrible both took limbs from the oak, and each in turn became Russia's ruler. But now the tree of power was now dead and rotting. While the townspeople preoccupied themselves by gathering its limbs as souvenirs of the power that once was, Varakin makes a break for it, running off through the dark wilderness. Approaching a riverbank, he finds a boat with no oars. As dawn breaks, he casts himself afloat into the wide, foggy river, adrift and powerless.

Does he ever make it back to the real world? Will Russia? The movie offers no hints.

While the fates of Varakin and contemporary Russia are

unknowable, with the passage of time, it is curious to see what has become of the main figures in the movie.

Varakin's character was played by actor Leonid Filatov, whose weary blue eyes and sympathetic manners belied Varakin's eternal torment. Sadly, he died of pneumonia in 2003 at the age of 56.

The prosecutor was played by acclaimed Soviet film director Vladimir Menshov, whose "[Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears](#)" won the 1981 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. But in his later years, his personal politics became virtually indistinguishable from the role he played as City Zero's prosecutor, especially regarding his fealty to *Russkii mir*. Following Putin's occupation of Crimea in 2014, [Menshov declared](#) the annexation "a supernatural event" which not only demonstrated the "vitality" of Russia as a unique civilization, but provided "proof of the existence of a quintessential Russian God" which would deliver salvation to Russia after years of being led astray by the individualistic, money-grubbing West. Not long after, Menshov would be [blacklisted in Ukraine](#), while Putin would award Menshov the 2nd Degree Order for "Merit to the Fatherland." Menshov died in July 2021 [from Covid-19](#).

Yet perhaps most disturbing of all has been the evolution of the man who co-wrote and directed City Zero, Karen Shakhnazarov. In the heady Russia of the 1990s, Shakhnazarov was appointed director general of Mosfilm studios, and in 2011, was instrumental in uploading the [entire Mosfilm catalogue of movies to YouTube](#) — including [City Zero](#) — where they can be viewed anywhere for free, complete with subtitles.

In recent years, Shakhnazarov has become a pivotal proponent of

Putin's *Russkii mir* in the realm of cultural politics. Putin has decorated him with numerous state awards, including the 4th Degree Order "[For Merit to the Fatherland](#)" (2012) and the [Order of Alexander Nevsky](#) (2018). He has taken an active role in Kremlin politics and Putin's United Russia party, even [heading an official working group](#) to amend Russia's constitution.

More importantly, he has become one of the most outspoken [public supporters of Putin's neo-imperial invasion](#) of Ukraine, which he [blames the United States](#) for instigating. He appears regularly on the most widely watched and [bombastic mouthpiece](#) of Putin's propaganda, [Vladimir Solovyov](#)'s nightly commentary program on Russian state television. To rapt audiences, Shakhnazarov has spoken glowingly of Putin's re-establishment of Russia as a [great civilizational empire](#), and warned that "unpatriotic" domestic opponents uncomfortable with brandishing the letter Z — an emblem of the "special military operation" in Ukraine — will face "[concentration camps, re-education, and sterilization. It is all very serious.](#)"

While he later claimed that his concentration-camp comments were [taken out of context](#), he then reappeared on Solovyov's propaganda show to proclaim that—should Russia fail in its great and historic mission to reconquer Ukraine—[it is the West that will have concentration camps ready](#), and will send all Russians there without mercy.

Of course — here in the real world — such hyperbole seems unimaginable, almost laughably so. But if Putin's decision to invade Ukraine has taught us anything, it is that we make light of the Kremlin's alternate-reality echo chamber at our own peril. When Russia's godfather of movie fantasy applies his techniques

to an entire country, it should command our attention.

Even as many outsiders ascribe to Putin this curious worldview that has enabled the monstrosity unleashed on Ukraine, *City Zero* underscores that the Kremlin's self-serving worldview isn't particularly novel at all. In fact, all three of the pillars of *Russkii mir* are evident in the film, even when Putin was still a lowly KGB officer in East Germany. The chauvinistic Russian nationalism in opposition to "decadent" European values — as shown by the twin rotating "sculptures" in the history mine — certainly goes back generations. The illiberal statism — in which people serve the state instead of the state serving the people, as explained by the prosecutor — likewise has deep roots in Russian culture. Finally, as in the history mine, state control over information and manipulation of history is likewise a longstanding hallmark of Russian autocracy, whether from tsarist censors or Soviet propaganda.

If anything, the difference between contemporary Putinism and the autocracies of Russia's past are differences of degree, rather than kind. Instead of being invented out of whole cloth, Putin's *Russkii mir* relies on many warmed-over traditions of Russian autocracy; albeit infused with the power of modern social media, mass persuasion, and information technology unimaginable to prior generations of autocrats.

Back in 1989, when the Berlin Wall was crumbling along with the communist autocracies of Eastern Europe, Shakhnazarov's *City Zero* seemed a fitting, surrealist critique of the absurdities and contradictions of autocracy. Now, if anything, it seems to serve as an unironic and disturbing blueprint for how autocrats can manipulate history, information, and even reality itself to suit the

needs of the state and the self-serving desires of its leader.