

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Solidarity and the Aesthetics of Pain: Soviet Documentary Film and the Vietnam War\*

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## Abstract

The Soviet campaign in support of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the Vietnam War saturated Soviet public culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was the longest solidarity action in Soviet history and the first to reach mass television audiences. This article examines the production and reception of a televised documentary film about the Vietnam War made by Konstantin Simonov – a celebrity writer who played a crucial role in Soviet culture during World War II, and then, in the post-war period, in the struggle to come to terms with terrible truths about Stalinism and the chaos and trauma that war had rendered. Simonov’s film presented the Vietnam War in lyrical rather than analytical terms, calling upon viewers to draw connections between the suffering of the Vietnamese and the Soviet wartime experience and to enact their solidarity with the Vietnamese in terms of feeling. The film proposes a solidarity of pain and an understanding of war and wartime suffering as elemental and overwhelming. In dozens of letters to Simonov, we find an understanding and appreciation of this vision, which decentres Vietnam and instead sends viewers on a journey back to Soviet history and trauma.

One evening in 1977, during a televised poetry recital, someone asked Soviet writer Konstantin Simonov what he wished most for the younger generation. “That they experience a sense of responsibility about the past and the future”, he said, “and that they have the chance to exercise this responsibility in real life”.<sup>1</sup> Simonov was arguably the Soviet Union’s most famous man of letters, a position he had held more or less since World War II, when his work as a frontline correspondent and, especially, his poetry – lyrical, intimate, and inspirational – was fundamental to the

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<sup>1</sup>“Večer poezii Konstantina Simonova v kontsertnoi studii ‘Ostankino’” (Gosteleradio, 1977). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DXg7dtBeEyQ&t=2727s>; last accessed 2 January 2024.

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Soviet wartime experience. Winner of every possible literary prize (several more than once) and holder of multiple party and state offices, Simonov was an establishment figure of the first rank. But he was also, unusually in the Soviet context, a kind of celebrity in a culture with a highly ambivalent relationship to the concept: Simonov was famous not only for his work, but also for being Simonov, a public personality (*lichnost*). Everyone knew, though the information had never been published, that his most celebrated wartime poem, “Wait for Me” (“Zhdi menia”), carried in the pockets of millions of Red Army soldiers and their sweethearts, was written to his (then) mistress, the glamorous film star Valentina Serova. Simonov, too, had a kind of glamour. He was a handsome man, in youth and old age, with a calm, elegant bearing and distinctive voice people took note of. (He had a slight speech defect.) “Very few people aroused such a strong desire for imitation, both the conduct of his everyday life and his masculine demeanor”, said actor-director Oleg Tabakov in 1973.<sup>2</sup> As Simonov often represented the USSR on the international stage, his name was associated with a cosmopolitan literary elite, including cult figures such as Ernest Hemingway, whom he counted as a friend. In 1959, Simonov published the first of what would become a trilogy of novels exploring the Soviet wartime experience and, in particular, the tremendous chaos and suffering of the early war and Stalin’s personal culpability in them. The trilogy, *The Living and the Dead* (*Zhivye i mertvy*), was widely acclaimed and made it into the standard Soviet school curriculum and onto the silver screen in successful feature films. Simonov’s name was then indelibly linked with the war and with the dismantling of Stalinist mythology about the war, or, as he put it in that 1977 TV appearance, the need for a “truthful and sober-minded attitude to [our] history”. Readers across the USSR sent him searing letters with tales of their own traumatic war experiences.<sup>3</sup>

The subject of this article is a documentary film Simonov made, with director Marina Babak, about the Vietnam War,<sup>4</sup> *There’s No Such Thing as Someone Else’s Sorrow* (TsSDF, *Chuzhogo gorja ne byvaet*); or, in an alternative translation, *No Sorrow Is Foreign*.<sup>5</sup> The film, forty-three minutes long, was first shown on Soviet television on a Sunday afternoon in November 1972. Although we have no way of knowing how many people tuned in – Soviet TV did not track viewership – weekends in general were peak viewing times: Sunday afternoon was a prime slot in the Soviet TV schedule. The film also elicited a strong viewer response: the Russian archives hold a collection of roughly one hundred letters to Simonov

<sup>2</sup>Konstantin Kudriashov, “Imia sebja pridumal sam. Pochemu Konstantin Simonov narushil voliu roditelei”, *Argumenty i fakty*, 28 November 2015.

<sup>3</sup>On Simonov as an elite artist in the post-war period, see Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin’s Russia* (New York, 2007), pp. 481–508; on Simonov as a key figure in de-Stalinization and his special relationship with readers, see Polly Jones, *Myth, Memory, Trauma: Rethinking the Stalinist Past in the Soviet Union, 1953–1970* (New Haven, CT, 2013), pp. 173–211.

<sup>4</sup>The American–Vietnamese conflict went by multiple names, including the “Second Indochina War”, the “Vietnamese Civil War”, the “Resistance War against America to Save the Nation”, and the “American War” (the latter two in use in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam). I use the term most commonly found in English-language historiography, the “Vietnam War”.

<sup>5</sup>The film is available here: <https://www.net-film.ru/en/film-7276/?search=v1tt1001|78|22|78|1001ft1|5|7|8|9|1qvietnam>.

about the film, most of them written by individuals.<sup>6</sup> Like all Soviet media, Soviet television had an enormous mailbag; hundreds of people wrote every day, often about matters wholly unrelated to what they had seen on TV. The letters responding to *There's No Such Thing as Someone Else's Sorrow* were distinctive in both focus and tone: a great many of them were written on the day of the broadcast, or on the following day, and discussed the film with a sense of urgency and emotional turmoil. "I don't know who to write to and where to write, but I couldn't not write", said one. "Having watched your film today, I couldn't not write to you." Or, "Excuse me, I've never written before, but now I couldn't keep silent."<sup>7</sup>

By 1972, the Vietnam War topic would have been very familiar to any Soviet viewer, and not only from the TV screen. Vietnam had dominated Soviet international news bulletins for years. Although the USSR's economic assistance to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), launched in 1950, ebbed and flowed considerably over the decades (its high point, 1966–1969, accounted for nearly half the total expenditure for the entire 1950–1975 period), rhetorical backing for the cause was vociferous and unwavering.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the brutality of the US military in Vietnam was, alongside the oppression of African Americans at home, a fundamental theme in contemporary anti-American propaganda: they were "two sides of the same coin", in historian Dina Fainberg's phrase.<sup>9</sup> Vietnam was the subject of several other projects produced at the Central Studio for Documentary Films in Moscow, the flagship Soviet documentary studio, and some, like Simonov's film, were screened on TV.<sup>10</sup> People were also well acquainted with the topic from a wide-ranging solidarity campaign of mass meetings and marches, poetry readings, collection drives for school supplies, and more – the longest-running solidarity campaign in Soviet history.<sup>11</sup> Historian Julie Hessler described propaganda against the Vietnam War as "ubiquitous" in Soviet public culture of the late 1960s and

<sup>6</sup>The collection is in the Russian State Archive for Literature and Art (Rossiiskii gosudarsvtennyi arkhiv literaturny i iskusstva, hereafter RGALI) 1814/8/49 and 1814/8/50. The collection comprises 110 pieces of correspondence, of which roughly one hundred are letters to Simonov from individuals and groups in the USSR. Among the remaining items are several letters from viewers in the German Democratic Republic; a letter of congratulations from the Filmmakers' Union of Vietnam to Simonov (the film won a prize at the Leipzig International Festival of Documentary Film in 1972); and copies of letters written by Simonov to correspondents.

<sup>7</sup>RGALI 1814/8/49, l. 18, 126, 72.

<sup>8</sup>Luong Thi Hong, "Center and Periphery in the Cold War: Soviet Economic Aid to Vietnam, 1954–1975", *International History Review* (2023), pp. 1–15. DOI 10.1080/07075332.2023.2251492.

<sup>9</sup>Dina Fainberg, *Cold War Correspondents: Soviet and American Reporters on the Ideological Front Lines* (Baltimore, MD, 2020), pp. 166–167.

<sup>10</sup>Tsentral'naia Studiia Dokumental'nykh Fil'mov, or TsSDF. L.N. Dzhulai, *Dokumental'nyi illuzion. Otechestvennyi kinodokumentalizm: Opyty sotsial'nogo tvorchestva* (Moscow, 2005), pp. 125–126. A partial list of Vietnam documentaries produced at TsSDF in the period 1965–1975 includes *Mekong v ogne* (1966); *Reportazh iz Severnogo V'etnama* (1968); *Neob"iavlennaia voina. V'etnamskii dnevnik* (1969); *Tragediia i podvig naroda* (1969); *V'etnamskii nabat* (1972); *Torzhestvo pravogo dela V'etnama* (1973); and *V'etnam – pobeditel'* (1975). Of these, only *Neob"iavlennaia voina* was a full-length film; the others ranged from ten to thirty minutes long. There were also roughly a dozen films on the theme of Soviet–Vietnamese friendship that documented reciprocal visits by the countries' leaders and delegations.

<sup>11</sup>"1973, Poveda vo V'etname", Leonid Parfenov, *Namedni. Nasha era, 1970–1980* (Moscow, 2009), p. 65.

early 1970s. And what is more, she wrote, “much like Western participants in an array of solidarity initiatives and anti-war movements, Soviet people were encouraged to believe that they could ‘make a difference’ by taking a personal stance against an evil war”.<sup>12</sup>

In many ways, *There’s No Such Thing as Someone Else’s Sorrow* slotted well into the grooves of this familiar Soviet solidarity culture. The film addressed its viewers directly and personally in the second person, “you” (in its formal form, “Vy”), and it used still photography and footage many people would have recognized – imagery recycled from Soviet newsreels and earlier documentary films – alongside new material collected in film archives in London and Paris.<sup>13</sup> Its moral focus was the figure of the child – and images of children were fundamental to not only Soviet, but also American and North Vietnamese propaganda about the war.<sup>14</sup> Yet, Simonov’s film, for all its familiar features, also questions and destabilizes the Soviet solidarity project and decentres Vietnam. To judge by the letters, many Soviet viewers felt the very opposite of what Simonov wished for them in his 1977 TV appearance – a sense of responsibility and the capacity to act upon it. Many describe, as Simonov himself describes, and also inflicts in the course of the film itself, personal pain, a kind of respect for or responsibility to that pain, and with it, an overwhelming sense of powerlessness.

### Genres: Film-Poem, Socialist Solidarity Film, Atrocity Document

In 1970, Konstantin Simonov travelled to Vietnam with his wife, the art historian Larisa Zhadova, as a correspondent for *Pravda*. *There’s No Such Thing as Someone Else’s Sorrow* is loosely based on an eponymous cycle of poems he published when they returned.<sup>15</sup> It was his first verse collection in years, and Simonov later said that he had chosen the genre because of the emotional impact of his trip. “To make people feel how it had stunned me, how it had hit me – this I could only convey with the help of verse”, he explained.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Julie Hessler, “The Soviet Public and the Vietnam War: Political Mobilization, Public Organizations, and Activism, 1965–1973”, in Alexander Sedlmaier (ed.), *Protest in the Vietnam War Era* (Switzerland, 2022), pp. 85–111, 85–86; Robert Hornsby, “The Post-Stalin Komsomol and the Soviet Fight for Third World Youth”, *Cold War History*, 16:1 (2016), pp. 83–100, 86; *idem*, “The Enemy Within? The Komsomol and Foreign Youth Inside the Post-Stalin Soviet Union, 1957–1985”, *Past and Present*, 232:1 (2016), pp. 237–278.

<sup>13</sup>Marina Babak, “Zhenskii vzgliad na voinu i pobedu”, Interview for *TV Kul’tura*, 6 May 2010. Available at: <https://csdfmuseum.ru/articles/>; last accessed 2 January 2024. Simonov and Babak were not alone among Soviet documentarists in using Western and Vietnamese footage. “Ob ruku s v’etnamskimi voinami”, *Iskusstvo kino*, 31 August 1970.

<sup>14</sup>Margaret Peacock, “Broadcasting Benevolence: Images of the Child in American, Soviet and NLF Propaganda in Vietnam, 1964–1973”, *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 3:1 (2010), pp. 15–38. On the child as “a new kind of hero” in post-Stalinist culture, see Josephine Woll, *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw* (London, 2000), pp. 112–124; Vitalii Troianovskii, “Novye liudi 60-x godov”, *Kinematograf otpepli. kniga vtoraiia* (Moscow, 2002), pp. 6–60.

<sup>15</sup>Simonov first published the poem “Chuzhogo goria ne byvaet” in *Pravda* under the title “Ot vashego korrespondenta ...” on 24 January 1971; it was republished in the collection *V’etnam, zima semideisatogo ...* (Moscow, 1971).

<sup>16</sup>Konstantin Simonov, *Segodnia i davno. Stat’i, vospominaniia, literaturnye zametki: O sobstvennoi rabote*, 3rd edn (Moscow, 1978), p. 576; G. Senchakova, “Na festival’nom ekrane. V’etnam”, *Sovetskaia*

The film *There's No Such Thing as Someone Else's Sorrow* also presented itself in poetic terms, as a “film-poem” (*kino-poema*), a genre in which Simonov had begun working earlier, in the mid-1960s, as screenwriter for a film about that most famous and romantic episode of Soviet solidarity, the Spanish Civil War.<sup>17</sup> The merging of lyrical and documentary approaches was a trend in Soviet cinema in the 1960s and 1970s, and in Western European and American cinema as well; many contemporary fiction films incorporated documentary footage, and non-fiction films introduced subjective, or poetic, elements thematically and via camera work, interviews, and voice-over commentary.<sup>18</sup> Simonov himself often cited the influence of the 1965 Soviet documentary *Ordinary Fascism* (*Obyknovennyi fashizm*), a ground-breaking exploration of the nature of Nazism and (in subtext) Stalinism that used German archival footage, montage techniques, and, most radical of all, a first-person text in place of the Stalin-era convention: the so-called voice-of-God narrator.<sup>19</sup> *Ordinary Fascism's* text is voiced by its director, Mikhail Romm, long one of Soviet cinema's leading lights, in a distinctive conversational, often ironic, tone. As film historian Jeremy Hicks explains, “by presenting himself as a fallible interlocutor, Romm was attempting to persuade rather than assert, to respect rather than harangue the viewer, in an implicitly democratic interpellation of our powers of reason”.<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that *Ordinary Fascism*, like the Simonov film, foregrounded images of children. Simonov admired Romm's work but also said he saw his own task differently: his approach was not analytical. “I see my main goal as creating the image of the person in war, a realistic, documentary and, at the same time, poetic image.” His film's theme, he said, was “children and bombs”.<sup>21</sup>

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*kul'tura*, 25 November 1972. A Vietnamese translator who travelled with Simonov in 1970 recalled him saying then that he was inspired to write poetry for the first time in years. Tat'iana Shabaeva, “O spravedlivosti i pravodati”, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 4 December 2013. Simonov's son, Aleksei, had a different explanation: “Simonov couldn't say what was *really* happening. First and foremost, he saw the extent of our [Soviet] participation in the war, and such things couldn't be published”, and for this reason he turned to poetry. Dmitrii Shevarov, “Simonov. To, chto proizoshlo s pokoleniem otsa, – strannaia istoriia”, *Rossiiskaia gazeta. Nedelia*, 7 August 2019. Available at: <https://rg.ru/2019/08/08/simonov-to-chto-proizoshlo-s-pokoleniem-otca-strannaia-istoriia.html>; last accessed 2 January 2024, italics mine.

<sup>17</sup>*Grenada, Grenada, Grenada moia* (TsSDF, 1967). Simonov co-wrote the scenario with celebrated documentarist Roman Karmen, who directed the film. Marina Babak, the film's assistant director, was a former student of Karmen.

<sup>18</sup>Woll, *Real Images*, p. 192. On the rise of “poetic documentary” in the 1960s, see Raisa Sidenova, “From Pravda to Verite: Soviet Documentary Film and Television, 1950–1985” (Ph.D., Yale University, 2016).

<sup>19</sup>*Ordinary Fascism* (*Obyknovennyi fashizm*) (Mosfil'm, 1965), released in English as *Triumph Over Violence*. On the Stalinist subtext, see Josephine Woll, “Mikhail Romm's *Ordinary Fascism*”, in Valerie A. Kivelson and Joan Neuberger (eds), *Picturing Russia: Explorations in Visual Culture* (New Haven, CT, 2008), pp. 224–229. On his admiration for *Ordinary Fascism*, see Konstantin Simonov, “Chuzhogo goria ne byvaet ...”, *Iskusstvo kino*, 2 (1973), p. 179; *idem*, “Shel soldat ...”, *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, 18 March 1975.

<sup>20</sup>Jeremy Hicks, “Challenging the Voice of God in World War II-Era Soviet Documentaries”, in Lilya Kaganovsky and Masha Salazkina (eds), *Sound, Speech, Music in Soviet and Post-Soviet Cinema* (Bloomington, IN, 2014), pp. 129–144, 142. Dzhulai argues that the influence of Romm's *Obyknovennyi fashizm* on Soviet cineastes was comparable to that of Dziga Vertov and Esfir Shub's work in the 1920s. Dzhulai, *Dokumental'nyi illuzion*, p. 109.

<sup>21</sup>Simonov, “Shel soldat ...”. Simonov donated the entirety of his fee for the film to the Soviet Fund for Peace. “Po zov serdsta”, *Izvestiia*, 16 April 1973.

*There's No Such Thing as Someone Else's Sorrow* begins with the poet himself, standing alone in a semi-darkened editing room, speaking directly to the camera. The aesthetic is bare – Simonov in his shirtsleeves, holding his own microphone – and this stripped-down approach characterizes the film throughout. There is no music and almost no diegetic sound in the film; only Simonov speaks. His voice has a slight tremor at times, and many letters commented on it. “Your voice brought together sorrow and tears and hatred and malice and moans and memory”, wrote one.<sup>22</sup> Simonov sounds far older than his sixty years. We hear, at different points, generic sounds of children playing, airplanes whirring and bombs exploding, bells tolling, but there is nothing to connect the film’s soundscape to Vietnam per se. The visual content, a mix of footage and still photography, is entirely in black and white and often blurry or grainy. Simonov tells viewers in this introductory section that he has watched thousands of hours of footage of the war and “thought a lot about what the Americans are doing to children in Vietnam”. In sombre, weary tones, he explains that now he “wants to think about this again, out loud and from the screen” (“*khochu eshche raz, vslukh, podumat' ob etom s ekrana*”). The film is divided into five chapters, each narrated by Simonov in a mix of excerpts from the eponymous poetry collection and new text written for the film. Simonov’s commitment to the film-poem idea is clear in the version of the scenario he published in the journal *Art of Cinema (Iskusstvo kino)* in 1973: what in its spoken form frequently sounds like prose, Simonov rendered on the page as verse.

*There's No Such Thing as Someone Else's Sorrow* shares some similarities with the two main subgenres of the socialist solidarity documentary identified by Rossen Djagalov – what he calls the “socialism-in-construction” film and the “solidarity-in-armed-struggle” film. It also resembles, in some respects, the Cuban and East German documentaries about Vietnam analysed by Christina Schwenkel.<sup>23</sup> As in these films, there are many sequences depicting the Vietnamese hard at work in fields and factories and at their studies, and of the Vietnamese as heroic fighters; they are shown as industrious, collectivist, and stoical. *There's No Such Thing as Someone Else's Sorrow* also hits some of the Orientalist notes Schwenkel identified – for example, in scenes depicting the Vietnamese as inhabiting a kind of timeless agrarian idyll, wise and at one with nature. But far more dominant visually and emotionally in Simonov’s film than any of this is repetitive imagery of raw human suffering.

Soviet culture had a robust history of deploying images of anguish, as I discuss further below. With her Cuban and East German sample in mind, Schwenkel argues that socialist films about Vietnam were distinct from Western ones precisely in that they “did *not* rely on images of suffering as a dominant visual trope”.<sup>24</sup> Soviet productions,

<sup>22</sup>RGALI 1814/8/49, l. 23.

<sup>23</sup>Rossen Djagalov, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism: Literature and Cinema between the Second and the Third Worlds* (Montreal, 2020), pp. 173–209; Christina Schwenkel, “Imaging Humanity: Socialist Film and Transnational Memories of the War in Vietnam”, *Transnational Memory: Circulation, Articulation, Scales*, 19 (2014), pp. 219–244.

<sup>24</sup>Schwenkel, “Imaging Humanity”, p. 227, italics mine; *idem*, “Exhibiting War, Reconciling Pasts: Photographic Representation and Transnational Commemoration in Contemporary Vietnam”, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 3:1 (2008), pp. 36–77, 46.

however, contradict this generalization. Among Soviet documentaries about the Vietnam War, some hewed closer to the model outlined by Schwenkel, emphasizing the heroism and stoicism of the Vietnamese, than did *There's No Such Thing as Someone Else's Sorrow*. But images of anguished, pitiable Vietnamese bodies, particularly young bodies, were commonplace: to quote Djagalov, "shots of corpses and bleeding children" were a "staple" of the Soviet solidarity-at-war genre.<sup>25</sup>

*There's No Such Thing as Someone Else's Sorrow*, however, takes the approach a step or two further to pummel the viewer with such images. They come to our eyes in waves, often cross-cut with images of living children and mothers, both Vietnamese and Western. But while we often see the living in close-up, the camera lingering on their little faces, their personalities glinting on screen, we are shown the dead children as small bodies destroyed; they are frequently naked, mutilated, faceless, and shown in groups. Several images recur, including one grainy still photo of a dead toddler lying on his or her back and covered with dirt, shot at close range.

The phrase "shot at close range" here refers to the photographic technique, but it might well refer to the murder method, too. This image, like so many others in the film, speaks to the death and not to the person, the individual. They are *about* death. None of the people are identified in any way – by name, by age; and we know nothing of their contexts – the names of villages or battles, say, or when any of the material was shot. Nor is there any indication of whether we are looking at the work of Soviet or Western or Vietnamese journalists.<sup>26</sup> As if to underscore this absence of an embodied personhood, the recurrent still image of the dead toddler appears in a sequence cross-cut with images of young, white, Western women as Simonov asks, his voice agitated, emotional: "Is this *your* child? Or is this *your* child? Maybe this is *your* child?", followed by an image of a Vietnamese woman sobbing as Simonov intones: "No, this is her child." The repeated use of a depersonalized "this" ("*eto*") for the dead child's body only adds to the sense of horror.

In many ways, what the imagery of *There's No Such Thing as Someone Else's Sorrow* most resembles is crime scene photography; it looks like evidence. In this sense, it is in line with the approach to atrocity that Soviet mass media adopted during World War II. As historian David Shneer explained: "[b]oth in print and photojournalism, the Soviet press made Nazi atrocities a primary means of representing the German war against the Soviet Union".<sup>27</sup> Soviet journalism was sometimes graphic, even gruesome, and this included Simonov's own reportage; Simonov was, notably, the first journalist from any country to report on the liberation of a Nazi death camp, Majdanek.<sup>28</sup> Soviet print media published so-called trophy photos, or images of

<sup>25</sup>Djagalov, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism*, p. 195.

<sup>26</sup>On the important work of Vietnamese documentarists in the war, see "Ob ruku s v'etnamskimi voynami".

<sup>27</sup>David Shneer, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust* (New Brunswick, 2011), p. 28. Shneer's monograph discusses the connections to crime scene photography extensively. On Nazi atrocities in Soviet wartime media, see also Karel C. Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger* (Cambridge, MA, 2012), pp. 116–133.

<sup>28</sup>Shneer, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes*, pp. 152–164. Simonov's reports from Majdanek appeared in the newspaper *Krasnaia zvezda* on 10, 11, and 12 August 1943 and were read on the radio at 8.40 pm each evening. They were also published abroad in English translation. Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger*, p. 155.

death and destruction made by German soldiers, as well as graphic images of the dead taken by Soviet photojournalists; Shneer called this genre the “Nazi atrocity visual essay”. Some of the imagery was collected for later use in war crimes trials, and throughout the war the Soviet authorities mounted public displays in cities and towns to inform, shock, and mobilize. The Soviets also filmed atrocity sites and distributed the footage widely.<sup>29</sup> Beginning in the mid-1960s, the war atrocity genre was repurposed in Soviet public culture, as the Brezhnev regime cultivated what has been called a “cult” of World War II featuring new public monuments and rituals and an extensive “military-patriotic education” campaign targeting the young. One of the more widespread educational activities for youth was visiting former battlefields and extermination sites to uncover and identify human remains.<sup>30</sup> Atrocity history re-entered the Soviet cultural mainstream as both political tool and “memorial device”.<sup>31</sup>

Images of dead and suffering bodies, then, had clear functions in the Soviets’ World War II propaganda and its Brezhnev-era echo. The imagery of *There’s No Such Thing as Someone Else’s Sorrow* was generically similar, yet it also belonged to different political and cultural contexts. On the one hand, the film is an artefact of the Soviet culture of internationalist solidarity – and, as the work of a celebrity writer, broadcast to a union-wide audience, a particularly prominent one. On the other hand, the film defined itself as a film-poem, an artistic intervention targeting the senses. What role do we see for the imagery of atrocity in these contexts? What functions might images of dead and suffering Vietnamese bodies fulfil in Simonov’s film and Soviet solidarity culture writ large?

### A Solidarity of Pain/Solidarity as Pain

Critic and novelist Susan Sontag explored atrocity photography and its troubling allure in her last published work, the extended essay *Regarding the Pain of Others*. “One can feel obliged to look at photographs that record great cruelties and crimes”, she wrote. “One *should* feel obliged to think about what it means to look at them, about the capacity actually to assimilate what they show.”<sup>32</sup> Sontag advanced several explanations for why it is we look. One is natural, an “innate tropism toward the gruesome”, in her words, “an appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain [...] as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked”.<sup>33</sup> Sontag also traced connections to the Christian tradition and its iconography of corporeal suffering as

<sup>29</sup>Jeremy Hicks, *First Films of the Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and the Genocide of the Jews, 1938–1946* (Pittsburgh, PA, 2012). See also Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger*, pp. 116–133.

<sup>30</sup>Jonathan Brunstedt, *The Soviet Myth of World War II: Patriotic Memory and the Russian Question in the USSR* (Cambridge, 2021); Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (New York, 1994); Robert Hornsby, “Soviet Youth on the March: The All-Union Tours of Military Glory, 1965–1987”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 52:2 (2017), pp. 418–445.

<sup>31</sup>David Shneer, “Picturing Grief: Soviet Holocaust Photography at the Intersection of History and Memory”, *American Historical Review*, 115:1 (2010), pp. 28–52, 46.

<sup>32</sup>Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York, 2003), pp. 83, 86, italics mine.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 85, 35.



sacrifice and, ultimately, exaltation.<sup>34</sup> This religious view, she argued, “could not be more alien to a modern sensibility, which regards suffering as something that is a mistake or an accident or a crime. Something to be fixed. Something to be refused. Something that makes one feel powerless”.<sup>35</sup>

Simonov’s introduction to *There’s No Such Thing as Someone Else’s Sorrow* explains the film in largely personal terms: you will recall he says that *he* wants to think about the war out loud. But Simonov then elaborates on his own personal engagement with the film’s content in a pivotal segment in the second chapter. “Soon I will be sixty”, he intones, “and a lot of what I remember, I would like to forget. But I can’t [...] When I was twenty, Italian fascists bombed the children of Abyssinia. And I remember that. When I was twenty-one, German fascists bombed the children of Spain. And I remember that, too”. As Simonov speaks, we see footage of each scenario he describes (Abyssinian children in distress, families fleeing for cover in Spain, and so on).

When I was twenty-two, Japanese samurai bombed the children of China. And I remember *very well* how that was. When I was twenty-four, fascist bombs fell on the children of Poland. I was twenty-five when these bombs hit the children of England, of France [...] I was twenty-seven when German fascists, by all means of death, killed the children of Belorussia, Ukraine, Russia, summer, winter, spring, and autumn, morning and evening, afternoon and night, all means of death, and you think I am capable of forgetting that?

As Simonov continues, the images roll on and on. “I was twenty-eight when in Poland, in the Majdanek death camp, I saw a million pairs of women’s and children’s shoes, taken off the murdered. I was twenty-nine when I saw these children in Auschwitz, with the marks of death on their arms.” (The footage shows children thrusting out little forearms to show tattooed numbers.) “No, that’s something you cannot forget. (*Net, takoe ne zabyvaetsia*). Wherever it may happen, in our country or not in our country, when we’re talking about children, there is no ‘nearby’ or ‘faraway’, there is no ‘ours’ and ‘others’. I was thirty when in Nuremberg, finally, however incomplete, there was a reckoning with those who had done all that [...]”. And then Simonov asks,

How many people were like me then and thought all of that was finished forever more? But almost at exactly at the same time, as the Nuremberg trial was ending, and Europe lay in ruins, on the other end of the earth, in Vietnam, the cannons of the French navy started to shell Haiphong – men, women, and children. Of course, children.<sup>36</sup>

What Simonov vocalizes in this remarkable last passage is an absolute refusal of suffering, in Sontag’s terms. There is no redemptive power to the pain of others in

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup>Simonov, “Chuzhogo goria ne byvaet ...”, pp. 183–184. Some reviews quoted this passage at length. N. Zelenko, “Chuzhogo goria ne byvaet”, *Sovetskaia kul’tura*, 16 November 1972; I. Mar, “Chuzhogo goria ne byvaet. Novyi fil’m o geroicheskom V’etname”, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 9 November 1972.

this reading; suffering, Simonov tells us, is a mistake and a crime. The pain of the film, moreover, is not only external, but also internal – not only theirs, the Vietnamese people’s, but his, Simonov’s. And not only Simonov’s, but the viewers’, ours. The film shows us violence as something both relentless and ineluctable. There is no such thing as someone else’s suffering, *and there is always suffering*. Via the filmic experience, Simonov demonstrates that his trauma and powerlessness are ours, too; they are – they must be – universal.

One of the ways the film expresses this universality is by constantly shifting its reference points for “I” and “you”. In introductory notes to the poetry collection, Simonov explained that he had wanted to step into the shoes of the Vietnamese, and there are several sections, in the poetry and in the film, in which the “I” is a Vietnamese person.<sup>37</sup> “My sister successfully gave birth yesterday”, begins one chapter, and the “I” here is quickly established as belonging to a Vietnamese soldier. But confusingly, Simonov also uses “I” for his own voice throughout. Even more multivalent is the “you” of the text, which refers to, variously, an implied Soviet viewer, a Vietnamese translator, the generic unidentified Western woman in the “Is that your child?” segment, an American anti-war protester, and even US President Richard Nixon.

Visually, too, the film plays with the notion of universality. As its principal device, the film uses contrasting images of everyday life at war and in peace. But while the war segments nearly all depict Vietnamese people, much of the imagery used to show peace was shot in the West. (Although not marked out as such, elements such as domestic interiors and street scenes make it identifiably Western.) Simonov’s narration speaks to this Western imagery without taking any notice of it. For example, as we watch an American family eating dinner together, Simonov invites us to imagine this is our family and then to imagine further that our family faces the circumstances of the Vietnamese at war. “This is your husband. Did you know that he was shot down from a helicopter when they were clearing the jungle?” (The image of the husband is then whited out on screen.) “And your oldest son was blown up by a mine thrown from an American airplane.” (The image of the son goes to white.) This American family tableau is contrasted with footage of a solitary Vietnamese woman, chin in hand and eyes cast down, deep in sorrow. Simonov speaks, removing each American family member around the table one by one, and then declares: “No, none of this happened to you! I am returning all your loved ones to you.”<sup>38</sup> The whited-out images are restored.

The fact that *There’s No Such Thing as Someone Else’s Sorrow*, here and elsewhere, uses Western images to address Soviet audiences about themselves is odd and not, I think, something Soviet viewers are likely to have overlooked. Its very strangeness compounds the unnerving effect of the film as a whole. In his introduction, Simonov does acknowledge the American footage, saying they have used images shot to justify the war in order to argue against them. Yet even this explanation cannot account for the conflation of “you” the American housewife on screen, for example, and “you” the Soviet viewer. The film did compete in international film

<sup>37</sup>Senchakova, “Na festival’nom ekrane. V’etnam”.

<sup>38</sup>Simonov, “Chuzhogo gorja ne byvaet ...”, pp. 181–182.

festivals, and perhaps Simonov and director Marina Babak had international audiences in mind from the start. But in that case, how to explain the other segments of the film unambiguously addressed to a Soviet viewer?

Sontag argued that while texts are written with audiences in mind, photographs by their nature have a universal address: “A photograph has only one language and is destined potentially for us all”, she writes.<sup>39</sup> In Simonov’s poetic text, the audience is constantly shifting, as if to do the work of universalizing that photography manages without trying. We are all of us implicated in the war in Vietnam – “there’s no such thing as someone else’s sorrow”.<sup>40</sup> In the full verse that gave the film its title, Simonov goes further, declaring there are only two kinds of people in the world: those who suffer and those who inflict suffering. It goes like this: “There’s no such thing as someone else’s sorrow / He who is afraid to confirm this / Is probably either a killer / Or readying himself to kill.” Simonov’s film is a call to declare your allegiances, like all solidarity culture: “which side are you on?”, it asks. The answer must be the side of the oppressed, the suffering. Simonov’s model of solidarity speaks of shared victimization more vividly, and more convincingly, than shared ideals, or collective strength. It offers a solidarity of, and as, endured pain.

### Viewers: Tears and Haunting

How did Soviet viewers take in the solidarity as pain that entered their living rooms in late 1972? Reviewing the film for *Art of Cinema*, A. Karaganov praised its “restraint” (“*sderzhannost*”), which, he said, was like that of “a soldier who has learned to manage his sorrow by gritting his teeth”. For Karaganov, it was this quality of the film that made it particularly “modern”, in contrast to a “didactic” approach or “the intonation of a rally”.<sup>41</sup>

*There’s No Such Thing as Someone Else’s Sorrow* ran on the most important Soviet television channel, the first, which broadcast from Moscow in Russian to all areas of the USSR. It held a prominent slot: 4.00 pm on a Sunday. Because weekends were considered particularly important in the Soviet TV schedule, both by viewers and by TV programmers, weekend programming often featured audience-friendly fare: if news and public affairs programming were roughly half the schedule on weekdays, they filled only a quarter of TV time on weekends.<sup>42</sup> Documentaries were not popular with Soviet audiences – a fact filmmakers themselves often discussed in meetings – and documentaries did not feature in most weekend TV schedules.<sup>43</sup> In

<sup>39</sup>Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 15. Babak later recalled that it was in the course of editing the film that she realized still photographs were superior to footage in conveying the emotion of Simonov’s poetry. Babak, “Zhenskii vzgliad na voinu i pobedu”.

<sup>40</sup>Sontag’s description of the photograph as “like a quotation, or a maxim or proverb” brings to mind the title of Simonov’s film itself. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 17.

<sup>41</sup>A. Karaganov, “Fil’m Konstantina Simonova”, *Iskusstvo kino*, 4 (1973), pp. 57–62, 58.

<sup>42</sup>Ellen Mickiewicz, *Split Signals: Television and Politics in the Soviet Union* (Oxford, 1990), p. 159. A few letters also mention broadcasts on 27 November 1972 and 4 December 1972.

<sup>43</sup>On conversations in the film industry about documentary as unpopular with audiences, see Sidenova, “From Pravda to Verite”, pp. 96–97. One such discussion took place at the First All-Union Commission on Film Distribution in November 1966: RGALI 2936/4/1307, ll. 58–77. On TV programming policy, see Kristin Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire that Lost the*

this case, I think, Simonov's celebrity status probably helped: Simonov's celebrity may well have had something to do with his film securing a Sunday afternoon slot, and it surely contributed to what looks to have been a healthy-sized audience, based on the number of letters; the film was listed in the printed TV schedule as Simonov's work.<sup>44</sup> It also ran in some cinemas, apparently, but every letter writer who mentioned the viewing context – and many of them did – said they had seen the film on TV.

*There's No Such Thing as Someone Else's Sorrow* is not an analytical film; it has little to say about the history of the Vietnam War or its politics. What it proposes instead is a crushing emotional experience. We can only speculate, but the fact that people watched the film at home on a weekend – a context many associated with security, relaxation, love – may well have heightened its emotional punch. One man wrote: "After having watched the film, it's impossible, uncomfortable, and shameful to watch all the following programmes on TV."<sup>45</sup> Many letter writers describe having watched it with their families, in several cases even with their young children.<sup>46</sup>

To judge by the letters, Simonov's film elicited intense and, to some viewers, surprising emotional reactions. Several people acknowledged that there was no new information in the film, and that even the visuals were often familiar. But the experience of the film was somehow different. People wrote: "It's difficult, simply impossible to put into words what an indelible impression the film left on me",<sup>47</sup> and "I have never before experienced such an emotional upheaval".<sup>48</sup> They told Simonov they were unable to sleep after watching the film or had nightmares.<sup>49</sup> "Not long ago, I watched your film-poem [...] and I've had awful scenes of people's annihilation before my eyes and the sound of your voice in my ears for days."<sup>50</sup> Many people mentioned their tears. "I cried from the beginning to the end", wrote one. Another person, a veteran, signed off his letter: "I can't write any more now, I'm crying."<sup>51</sup> Or: "I just finished watching the documentary *There's No Such Thing as Someone Else's Sorrow*. Looking at the awful images, my heart breaks and tears are running down my cheeks in streams."<sup>52</sup> The letters to Simonov expressed anger, most of it clearly targeted at Americans, who are frequently labelled "fiends", but also "twentieth-century cannibals", "monsters", and "worse than the fascists of the Third Reich".<sup>53</sup> They also expressed deep gratitude to him for having made the film.

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*Cultural Cold War* (Ithaca, NY [etc.], 2011); Christine Evans, *Between Truth and Time: A History of Soviet Central Television* (New Haven, CT, 2016).

<sup>44</sup>Another possible advantage was its scheduling between two popular shows: a "magazine"-style programme targeted at the peasant audience, *Village Hour* (*Sel'skii chas*), and one of Soviet television's much-loved staples, the travel programme *Film-Travellers' Club* (*Klub kinoputeshestvennikov*). Meanwhile, the second channel (available only in Russia at this time) was screening a very successful romantic comedy, *The Girls* (*Devchata*, Mosfil'm, 1962).

<sup>45</sup>RGALI 1814/8/50, l. 6.

<sup>46</sup>RGALI 1814/8/50, l. 53.

<sup>47</sup>RGALI 1814/8/50, l. 80.

<sup>48</sup>RGALI 1814/8/49, l. 241.

<sup>49</sup>RGALI 1814/8/49, l. 118; l. 124.

<sup>50</sup>RGALI 1814/8/49, l. 58.

<sup>51</sup>RGALI 1814/8/49, l. 86; l. 177.

<sup>52</sup>RGALI 1814/8/50, l. 107

<sup>53</sup>RGALI 1814/8/49, l. 107; l. 156; l. 18.

Although not all letter writers included personal information, most did; they were both men and women, ranged in age from school children to pensioners, and listed a variety of occupations. The personal connection to Simonov is made plain, especially in letters from those who were alive during the war. Some recalled how important his poetry had been to them, and a good number sent in verses of their own.

Other people shared personal stories of the war and described the experience of watching the film as a kind of haunting, echoing Simonov's own reflections on having been haunted by his own memories while in Vietnam. "Today, watching and listening to your programme, it was as if I was living through the horror of those long-ago days of 1941–1945 a second time", wrote one woman who had, she explained, survived the 900-day Leningrad siege on her own with two infants.<sup>54</sup> Another woman, from Kishinev, told her own harrowing story of the war: "I watched the film and was flooded with tears", she began. "I remembered the death camp where the fascists drove me and my children. I remembered how the *polizei* came and beat us with whips." She went on in detail and explained that she had watched her three young sons as they were thrown alive into a pit to die. "I live on this earth with a devastated soul; my wound is suppurating, and it will suppurate until the end of my days."<sup>55</sup> Along with her letter, she enclosed a snapshot of herself and something that one can only imagine as having been very precious to her, a family photograph: herself, her husband, and the sons they had lost.

The same letters that described the effect of *There's No Such Thing as Someone Else's Sorrow* as a kind of haunting often also expressed profound gratitude for the film. Haunting, however painful, might also be cherished: to be haunted is, in some sense, to be in communion with the dead. In Sontag's words, "[m]emory is, achingly, the only relation we have with the dead, so the belief that remembering is an ethical act is deep in our natures as humans".<sup>56</sup> Watching Simonov's film was a profoundly upsetting experience for many viewers. But by linking the suffering of the Vietnamese so directly to the Soviets' own past, it was also welcomed as an invitation to remember and to mourn. It is striking how many people asked for the film, in all its brutality, to be *re*-broadcast. Some people made clear that they thought others should have the opportunity to see it too and suggested that the film could help end the war.<sup>57</sup> Many others said they simply wanted to watch it again themselves: they wanted to see and to suffer all over again.

### The Logic of Powerlessness

*There's No Such Thing as Someone Else's Sorrow* shows Vietnamese people of all ages, at work, at home, in school, and in battle. Yet, the Vietnamese never speak, the only Vietnamese person granted an identity in the film is the leader Ho Chi Minh, and even then the identification is indirect: never named, Ho is shown with children and

<sup>54</sup>RGALI 1814/8/49, l. 72.

<sup>55</sup>RGALI 1814/8/49, l. 185.

<sup>56</sup>Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 101.

<sup>57</sup>"I recommend that THIS film is shown not just DAILY, but two and three times a day until there is peace in Vietnam", wrote one. RGALI 1814/8/50/l. 18, capitalization in the original.

discussed briefly as a leader and a poet who wrote verses for children.<sup>58</sup> The absence of Vietnamese voices (or, indeed, any voices besides Simonov's) in *There's No Such Thing as Someone Else's Sorrow* can be related to its form, which Simonov emphasized in interviews; it is a film-poem, not reportage. Simonov said the film's theme was "children and bombs", and it *is* about children and bombs, and the relentless threat to children *of* bombs. In the letters, Vietnam appears as a "small", "heroic", and "long-suffering" ("*mnogostradal'naia*") country or, more often, not at all. One man addressed his letter simply to "Comrade Simonov, author of the film about little kids and wars" ("*avtor fil'ma o rebiatishkakh i voynakh*").<sup>59</sup> Like Vietnamese voices, the specificity of the Vietnamese situation was absent.

But if the solidarity as pain proposed in the film decentred Vietnam for the Soviet viewer, it also offered little in the way of hope or solace. By the time the film was broadcast in late 1972, the DRV's resistance had inspired millions worldwide and convinced the majority of the American public to support withdrawal.<sup>60</sup> The US had drawn down its troop presence in Vietnam to just 69,000 from well over 500,000 in 1969.<sup>61</sup> Peace negotiations had been underway, on and off, since as far back as 1968. All this was widely known in the Soviet Union, reported in the press and on television and discussed in public meetings. Yet, the letters to Simonov make no mention of any prospects for peace whatsoever; on the contrary, they reflect the film's own vision of war as unrelenting. Simonov intones: "To be honest, if I want to live in this world, it is only because I believe that finally an 'X' will cross out not this [and we see images of children on screen] but what it should have crossed out long ago" [that is, war]. As a statement of belief, Simonov's words are not particularly convincing ("*if I want to live in this world*"), and the repetitive and anonymous imagery of suffering in the film undermines them thoroughly in any event. In *There's No Such Thing as Someone Else's Sorrow*, war looks like no less an elemental fact of life than the beauty of children's faces and the joy of their play. Simonov expresses his own powerlessness before the dominion of war in the film in the long segment discussed earlier, in which he seems almost to mock himself for once believing, after Nuremberg, that bombs would never fall again. He also conveys it in his wearied vocal tones, as mentioned by so many letter writers.

Towards the end of the film, Simonov recites a fragment from one of his Vietnam poems directly to US President Nixon. This is the longest continuous poetic sequence in the film, and it is also visually one of the most static: as Simonov recites, viewers see just a single photograph of Nixon in profile. The poem is written in the voice of a Vietnamese person (the "I" in the poem is a Vietnamese man). Simonov ventriloquizes; here, as in other sections, the Soviet poet literally embodies the victims of war. But what stands out is Simonov's introduction to the reading, in

<sup>58</sup>Images of Ho with children were widely circulated in the DRV. Schwenkel, "Imaging Humanity", p. 229.

<sup>59</sup>RGALI 1814/8/49, l. 79.

<sup>60</sup>Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War* (New York, 2007), pp. 192–193; Richard Nixon Foundation, "President Nixon's May 8th Decision: A Lesson in Leadership", 28 June 2016. Available at: <https://www.nixonfoundation.org/2016/06/president-nixons-may-8th-decision-a-lesson-in-leadership/>; last accessed 2 January 2024.

<sup>61</sup>William L. Lurch and Peter W. Sperlich, "American Public Opinion and the War in Vietnam", *The Western Political Quarterly*, 32:1 (1979), pp. 21–44.

which he claims he has no other way to reach Nixon than to recite his verse to him, in Russian, in this film, made for Soviet audiences.<sup>62</sup> Again, Simonov makes a less than convincing case: as a celebrated Soviet public intellectual, he had unrivalled access to the world stage, and it is hard to imagine the *New York Times* or *Pravda* would have turned down any anti-Vietnam War missive he cared to send them. One letter writer took Simonov to task for this sequence. “You yourself are aware that this way of appealing to Nixon is hardly likely to reach him”, the man said, adding that Simonov would certainly get an answer if he wrote to the president, unlike “ordinary Soviet citizens”.<sup>63</sup> The implication was that the sequence was something of a gimmick.

To my mind, the address to Nixon has an emotional logic in the context of the film that overrides the reality of the poet’s privileged situation: what Simonov conveys in this sequence is less fact than feeling – the feeling of powerlessness in the face of war and in the face of a distant and cruel governmental authority (in this case, quite literally, Nixon’s face, which can function as the face of authority in modern societies more generally). One man sent Simonov his own lengthy letter to Nixon: “This is my protest against the war. What more can I do?”, he wrote.<sup>64</sup> And many other letter writers reflected on their own sense of powerlessness, with undertones of guilt. One man wrote that he had been walking around with a “stone weighing on [his] heart” since watching. “I walk around peacefully, I laugh, and over there in Vietnam, children perish. And what have I done so that they can have a childhood like all the other children of the world?” A group of school children wrote: “We really feel for Vietnamese children, but we *can’t help them* in any way.” A woman agreed: “You said that every person should defend them any way they can. But I don’t have any way [to do that].” Another wrote that she prayed to God for all fascists to die and called Simonov “a messenger of the holy truth”. She continued: “and where is the holy truth? The truth is that there are millions of us, but we cannot defend a poor people from brutal executioners”.<sup>65</sup>

A handful of people did write to Simonov with concrete suggestions. Several offered their personal services – as an adoptive mother to Vietnamese children, for instance, or as a skilled electrician.<sup>66</sup> Someone suggested the Soviet Union help the Vietnamese attack the US: “Is it really not possible for Vietnamese napalm to fall on American soil?”, wrote one man. “We have the weapons and the means to get them there too.”<sup>67</sup> But these are the exceptions to the rule in the correspondence, which consistently expressed emotional overload and a resigned incapacity to act.

Even letters expressing criticism of either the film or Simonov (four in total) evoked the theme of powerlessness. The man who took issue with the recitation to Nixon segment used the theme to elaborate on a critique of Soviet policy: “Our government zealously supports the war in Vietnam, supports Arab extremists and adventurists with dubious goals in Latin America and other parts of the world”, he wrote. “And

<sup>62</sup>I have found no press coverage of the film being screened in the US.

<sup>63</sup>RGALI 1814/8/49, l. 2.

<sup>64</sup>RGALI 1814/8/50, l. 73

<sup>65</sup>RGALI 1814/8/49, l. 33; l. 204; l. 27; l. 40–41, italics mine.

<sup>66</sup>RGALI 1814/8/50, l. 6; l. 37. RGALI 1814/8/49, l. 77.

<sup>67</sup>RGALI 1814/8/50, l. 6.

we're rounded up for meetings 'to protest American aggression in Vietnam.' American people actually do protest against this war and against their government's policies in Vietnam, while for some reason we are obliged to agree with any action our government takes".<sup>68</sup> A mother of a severely disabled son wrote about her powerlessness to secure him a decent quality of life in the face of a callous Soviet bureaucracy and criticized Simonov for ignoring suffering at home. "I don't want to talk about the film. After all, all people talk about is Vietnamese children. But who will talk about *our* handicapped children?"<sup>69</sup> A letter signed "The Fedotovs" attacked Simonov's own incapacity – or unwillingness – to speak truthfully about the war: "We listened to your 'introductory remarks' to the film [...] and lost all respect for you. You know very well who the aggressor is in Vietnam", they wrote, [you know] "why the Americans are bombing military targets in north Vietnam, and whose missiles, bombs, and shells are killing south Vietnamese children".<sup>70</sup>

Simonov spent many years, from Stalin's death to his own in 1979, grappling with the question of power and powerlessness, of personal and collective responsibility. It was the leitmotif of his fiction: Stalin's personal responsibility for the chaos and mass suffering of 1941, the individual Soviet person's stepping up to responsibility during the war, and, ultimately, the Soviet people's power, as Simonov argued that it was the Soviet people (not Stalin, not the party) who were the war's true heroes. In his first-person reflections, Simonov interrogated his own sense of powerlessness in the face of Stalin-era repression; he came to judge himself harshly for his actions in the past and what he called his "moral compromises".<sup>71</sup> As he told his audience of poetry lovers in 1977, his greatest wish for Soviet young people was that they might understand their own responsibilities and exercise their own power. He, Simonov, had understood too late and done too little.

Power and responsibility were also major structuring frames for Soviet mass media throughout the Cold War. In the 1980s, political scientist Ellen Mickiewicz showed that "the clearest and most powerful way" Soviet news media made sense of the world for their audiences was by "imputing responsibility", and that they identified the US as the responsible agent, in her words, "the puppet master pulling the strings around the world", in nearly every story.<sup>72</sup> The overall framework of "responsibility" with its promise of legibility, or coherence, had an impact more profound than simple Soviet anti-Americanism. To frame world news in terms of responsibility is to invite easy judgement: if you know who is responsible, you are empowered to blame. It is also, when responsibility resides at a systemic, global level, to detach individuals from any possible sense of their own responsibility or efficacy. It is an argument for the logic of powerlessness.

*There's No Such Thing as Someone Else's Sorrow* does impute responsibility for the Vietnam War to the US. But it also hints at other elemental, deep-seated causes.

<sup>68</sup>RGALI 1814/8/49, l. 2.

<sup>69</sup>RGALI 1814/8/50, l. 62.

<sup>70</sup>RGALI 1814/8/50, l. 97.

<sup>71</sup>Figes, *The Whisperers*, p. 624.

<sup>72</sup>Mickiewicz, *Split Signals*, pp. 127–129; Ellen Mickiewicz, "Understanding the World: The Cognitive Grid of Soviet Television News", in Thomas F. Remington (ed.), *Politics and the Soviet System: Essays in Honour of Frederick C. Barghoorn* (New York, 1989), pp. 12–28.



Simonov's text, for one, critiques society's fixation with "technological progress" – and it is modern society, we understand, not only its American version. "It's assumed it would be useful for the achievements of technological progress to be experienced somewhere far from your own shores", he says, "in some technologically backward country, so that they might get to know this technological progress in practice and understand, once and for all, what technological progress is". As Simonov muses acidly, images of bombers fill the screen. America is responsible in Vietnam, but it is impossible to conclude that this is a film about Vietnam alone. Simonov's depiction of war crosses over into the territory of universality and inevitability.<sup>73</sup> His expressions of faith in the film that someday the Vietnamese people will triumph dim in the unshakeable darkness of his own memories of suffering and dead bodies and in the overwhelming sadness of his tone. Simonov once said he felt himself "condemned for life" to the war theme, but his film suggested otherwise; his film suggested that we all are.<sup>74</sup>

## Conclusion

*There's No Such Thing as Someone Else's Sorrow* was not the only Soviet documentary about the Vietnam War, but it was a particularly significant one. And what made it so significant, I would argue, is Simonov's own role in it, on the one hand, and its character as a televisual experience, on the other. Among the other Soviet Vietnam documentaries, none was made by a figure of his stature and with his level of intimacy with the Soviet public; none was made by an artist and defined itself as art. Simonov's celebrity was something unique and consequential in Soviet culture: it drove people to the film and to certain forms of interaction with the film.

At a minimum, what the example of *There's No Such Thing as Someone Else's Sorrow* shows is the compound top-down/bottom-up nature of Soviet solidarity culture. As a cultural event, the film's broadcast embodies verticality – from the very heights of Soviet culture (Simonov, the celebrity writer) and of the Soviet media hierarchy (the giant Ostankino TV tower in Moscow) right down to the common viewer. Yet, it also shows the interpenetration of top-down solidarity cultures and domesticity, of internationalist politics and private sentiment. If Simonov's film was "propaganda" – and this is not a characterization he would have disputed – then we must recognize that propaganda could be an emotionally and aesthetically complex thing, even in the Brezhnev era, when Soviet political ideals are often said to have lost their purchase. Propaganda could bring you together with your family and inspire you to write lyric poetry; propaganda could make you weep and ask for more.<sup>75</sup> Historian Christine Evans has argued that in the 1970s, Soviet central television itself took an "affective turn", with programmes that underscored

<sup>73</sup>The *Pravda* reviewer wrote: "it is important to emphasize that Simonov's film is not a local one. It goes beyond the borders of a single country, of Vietnam alone". O Ignate'v, "Chuzhogo gorja ne byvaet. Kinopoezma Konstantina Simonova", *Pravda*, 16 November 1972.

<sup>74</sup>Simonov, "Shel soldat ...".

<sup>75</sup>For another reading of the intersections of propaganda culture and emotion in late Soviet cultural production, see Polly Jones, *Revolution Rekindled: The Writers and Readers of Late Soviet Biography* (Oxford, 2019).

“emotional and spiritual qualities as the defining feature of both the new Soviet person and of the Soviet socialist civilization as a whole”.<sup>76</sup> Her chief example is a television series called *From the Bottom of My Heart* (*Ot Vsei dushi*), a talk show that featured personal narratives of World War II, often tragic, and along with them, many tears. Simonov’s solidarity film in this context was a perfect fit.

More broadly, *There’s No Such Thing as Someone Else’s Sorrow* serves as an important example of Soviet culture’s great insularity and self-referentiality, and of the enduring power of Soviet trauma and mourning.<sup>77</sup> Insularity may seem an incongruous term to use to characterize a culture of solidarity, of internationalism. The film is a work about Vietnam, after all. Yet, it was, as we have seen, also very much a film about the Soviet Union and Soviet history, as the many viewers who wrote to Simonov understood. Arguably, Simonov was so bound up with World War II in people’s minds that any work he made, on any topic, was likely to carry them back to it. *There’s No Such Thing as Someone Else’s Sorrow* delivered the association with overwhelming emotional power, effectively decentring Vietnam. Vietnam is less the subject of the film than its method: reflecting on the war in Vietnam is a way to reflect (again) on the traumas of Soviet history and on the nature of war in general.

Some historians have argued that Cold War socialist solidarity cultures were a resource for ideas and activism that went in unanticipated directions and challenged political elites.<sup>78</sup> If there is anything subtly subversive or destabilizing about *There’s No Such Thing as Someone Else’s Sorrow*, it is not really its emotional gut punch, or even its self-referentiality, both of which were well represented in Soviet culture, perhaps especially well at that time on TV. What stands out as subversive is its pessimism, its barely camouflaged despair. Simonov not only connects the sorrow of the Vietnamese to his own personal trauma and that of millions of Soviet people, but he also suggests that the wellspring of war and of suffering is somehow elemental, something like a universal truth. Like Sontag, who defended the use of atrocity imagery as an education in what humanity is capable of – “Let the atrocious images haunt us”, she said – Simonov insisted that we look.<sup>79</sup> Simonov’s vision proposed a solidarity in, and as, pain. The film both invited judgement and demanded blame, but it also located responsibility in some indeterminate space, somewhere far beyond the ken of any individual; as a film-poem, it insisted on its non-analytical approach; it offered no solutions. The letters to Simonov show a clear echo of, and even a certain satisfaction in, that position. People asked to watch

<sup>76</sup>Christine Evans, “The ‘Soviet Way of Life’ as a Way of Feeling”, *Cahiers du monde russe*, 56:2 (2015), pp. 543–570, 544.

<sup>77</sup>For trauma and mourning in late Soviet culture and society, see Jones, *Myth, Memory, Trauma*; Alexander Etkind, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied* (Palo Alto, CA, 2013); Catherine Merridale, “Soviet Memories: Patriotism and Trauma”, in Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz (eds), *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates* (New York, 2010), pp. 376–389; Joy Neumeier, “Late Socialism as a Time of Weeping: The Life, Death, and Resurrection of Vladimir Vysotskii”, *Kritika*, 22:3 (2021), pp. 511–533.

<sup>78</sup>Péter Apor and James Mark, “Home Front”, in James Mark and Paul Betts (eds), *Socialism Goes Global: The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the Age of Decolonisation* (Oxford, 2022), pp. 318–358.

<sup>79</sup>Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 100.

*There's No Such Thing as Someone Else's Sorrow* again. Solidarity as pain offered lyricism, connections between self and other in easy, unchallenging terms, explanations for a bewildering and often frightening past and present, and, not least, an open invitation to feel and to continue feeling without expectation of an end.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup>Cf. Sergei Oushakine's argument about the productivity and endless circularity of traumatic expression in post-Soviet Russia. Sergei Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia* (Ithaca, NY, 2009).

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