

CINEMA

Russo-Ottoman War 1877-1878

Films about the Russo-Ottoman War 1877-1878

The story of the first Soviet -Bulgarian movie about the Russian-Ottoman War “The Heroes of Shipka”

“The Heroes of Shipka” is the first Soviet – Bulgarian movie about the Russian-Ottoman war 1877-1878. It was created in the first half of the 1950s and was screened at the beginning of 1955. The movie strictly followed the requirements of the socialist art so called “socialist realism”. The joint production, directed by the famous Sergey Vasilev, was meant to serve as a model and school for the “young” Bulgarian cinematography it had to praise in cinematographic form the Soviet-Bulgarian and Russian-Bulgarian friendship.



Bulgarian and Russian posters of the film

It is a historic feature film which depicts events and facts of the RWO of 1877 – 1878, more specifically the actions on the Balkan front. The film was conceived and developed as an epic historical drama. The main focus is on the battle scenes on which the dramaturgical line is based. An emphasis is placed on the liberating nature of the war and its role in strengthening the friendship between the Russian soldiers and the Bulgarian volunteers, as well as between the Russian and Bulgarian people in general. Further the Russian Tsar and the aristocracy are presented in ironic colors.

Socialist cultural revolution

The film is set during the reign of Vălko Červenkov, who was the head of the Committee for Science, Art and Culture before becoming Prime Minister of Bulgaria. The institution was especially created in 1948 to guide the scientific and cultural institutions, including the cinema. The communist regime in Bulgaria then was characterized by extreme intolerance towards dissidents, regardless of whether they were party members or not, and with an increase of the repressive apparatus and political terror. This was the time of the buildup of Socialism through a Cultural Revolution, decreeing as well as normativizing the doctrine of socialist realism which became a mandatory “creative method”. Regarding the Bulgarian cinema during the years of the 1950s until



Soviet Director Sergej Vasil'ev

the mid-1960s, a first crisis of identity can be spotted, as Bulgarian cinema became the subject of social engineering. The main mission of the cinema at that time was to make the audience accept communist regime and to identify itself with it.

The time of making the film "Heroes of Šipka" is marked by the highest ideological confrontation and media war between the two sides of the Iron Curtain. The Cold War had already affected literature and the repertoire of dramatic theaters. Even the classics of Soviet cinematography had shot their anti-western and anti-American movies such as "Farewell, America" by Oleksandr Dovženko, "Plot of the Doomed" by Michail Kalatozov, and "Secret Mission" of Michail Romm. And when the so-called ideological thaw had just started after the death of Stalin, the film "Heroes of Šipka" had already been completed and its time on the screens began.

The myth of the Russians as the double liberators of the Bulgarians

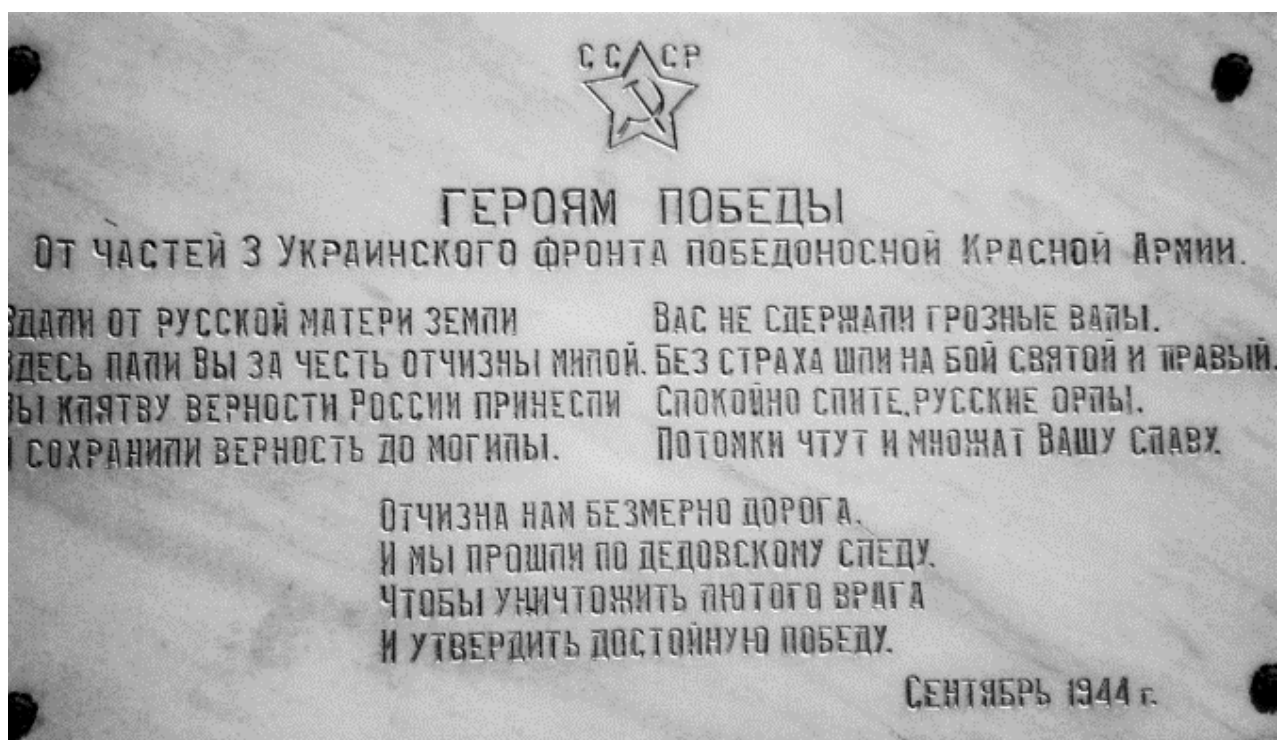
Shooting began with the official celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the Treaty of San Stefano still under way. In view of this anniversary the vice-premier Vasil Kolarov gave his symbolic speech "The Liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman rule". This speech can be described as the official legitimization of the myth of the Russians as the double liberators of the Bulgarians - from the Ottoman and Fascist yoke.



A still from the film

"Our liberator Russia... today has become the powerful Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics which, headed by its brilliant leader Stalin, broke the backbone of the Nazi monster and saved the human civilization from destruction. To this same Russia, which is now the mainstay of peace and democracy and to which the whole Slavic world and all the democratic nations look up for support, the Bulgarian democracy harbours unlimited trust and it expresses its deepest gratitude for the double liberation from foreign oppression.

An anniversary album celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Liberation was issued as well, where the formula proclaiming the double liberators was woven and portrayed not only by means of images but also by means of words.



Commemorative plaque "To the heroes of the war liberating the Slavs from Ottoman rule – from the parts of the Third Ukrainian Front of the victorious Stalinist Soviet Army.



A still from the film

"The War of Liberation (1877-1878) is a great event in the history of our country, as it put an end to the oppressive Ottoman rule lasting for five centuries. But an event even greater in our history is the invasion of the Red Army in Bulgaria in 1944 provided that thanks to its help the Bulgarian people overthrew the fascist rule forever, took its destiny firmly in its hands and set up boldly on the path of democracy and progress, on the path to socialism."

Control, domination, censorship

It was not allowed to do whatever adjustment to the literary scenario. The option that was brought to Bulgaria by Arkadij Pervencev was considered to be final and it was neither subjected to further discussing nor to any kind of change in Bulgaria. The director's script by Sergej Vasil'ev had been discussed and approved successively by the Arts Council of the cinema studio "Lenfil'm" at the Ministry of Culture of the USSR and finally in a more formal way at the Committee for Cinematography in Bulgaria. The last word, however, appears to be the one of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party.



A still from the film

The permanent form of control which is evident from the minutes of the Arts Council was exercised through the participation in the meetings of the representative of the Propaganda Department in the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party . Control, inspection and checks were carried out continuously in Bulgarian cinematography by the State Security, militia, and services of state and national control. The data for these checks within the period 1950 – 1953 were revealed through recently declassified documents from the collections of the Central Party Archive.

Soon I will have been working in the field of cinematography for three years. There has been no day without investigating – criminal militia, State Security, auditing, government control. State control authorities have not gone out of cinematography for more than a year. Ministry of Inferior comrades want a complete audit of government control. [...] I am about to be accused of anti-Soviet relations relying on the following story: in the last days of the stay of the Soviet art director Aleksandr Sergeevič Žaryonov shocking facts became known – an unacceptable attitude towards our people

and him offending our Party. I have condemned the comrades who have not told me about Žaryonov's behavior. I was convinced not to raise this issue [...] to testify that it was a drinking accident. It goes on: The document signed by Minister Tsankov arouses suspicion on the management that it does not seek or use Soviet help in a good way. [...] I showed persistence on the joint production "Heroes of Šipka" and these days I will present to you a draft treaty with the Soviet Ministry of Cinematography, which is really favorable for us.



In the last episode of "Heroes of Šipka" the troops of the Soviet army led by Marshal Tolbuchin are moving towards the monument of Šipka, which was erected in honor of the heroes of the Russo-Ottoman War. There is a meeting of the veterans and volunteers of 1877 – 1878 with the Soviet army and the Bulgarian National Army. The director's decision is that it should be Marshal Tolbuchin, the young Cossack Saško Kozir and some other officers to place a commemorative plaque "To the heroes of the war liberating the Slavs from Ottoman rule – from the parts of the Third Ukrainian Front of the victorious Stalinist Soviet Army."

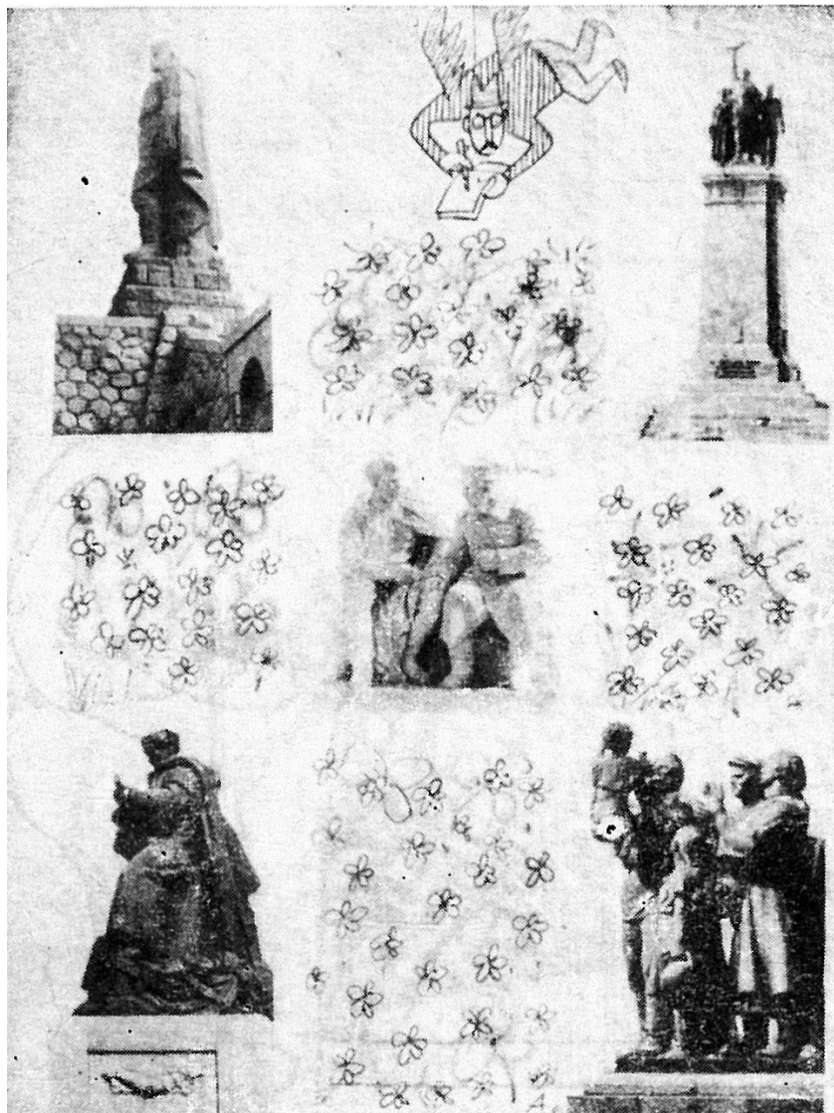


Marshal Tolbuchin and the young Cossack Saško Kozir

The impact of this episode is enhanced by an especially designed song performed by a military band. Its lyrics are also engraved in the commemorative plaque and it functions as proof that the victims are not forgotten. This end was identified by Bratoeva as "the most vivid example of the film on manipulative identification of the Soviet army that occupied Bulgaria after the Second World War, with the Russian army that liberated Bulgaria from Ottoman rule" and as "an absurd happy end to the epopee of the Liberation War 1877 – 1878 which ended with the entry of the invading Soviet tanks into Bulgaria in 1944." Thus, the finale of the movie is nothing else but a repetition of the scenario already established in the political life. The myth of the double liberators was established on Mount of St. Nicholas (now Šipka) on 17th of October 1944 and ten years later the very ritual was filmed. This was one of the main tasks of the cinematography of the 1950s – to change history with newly created myths and images.

Russian – Ottoman War and the Cold War

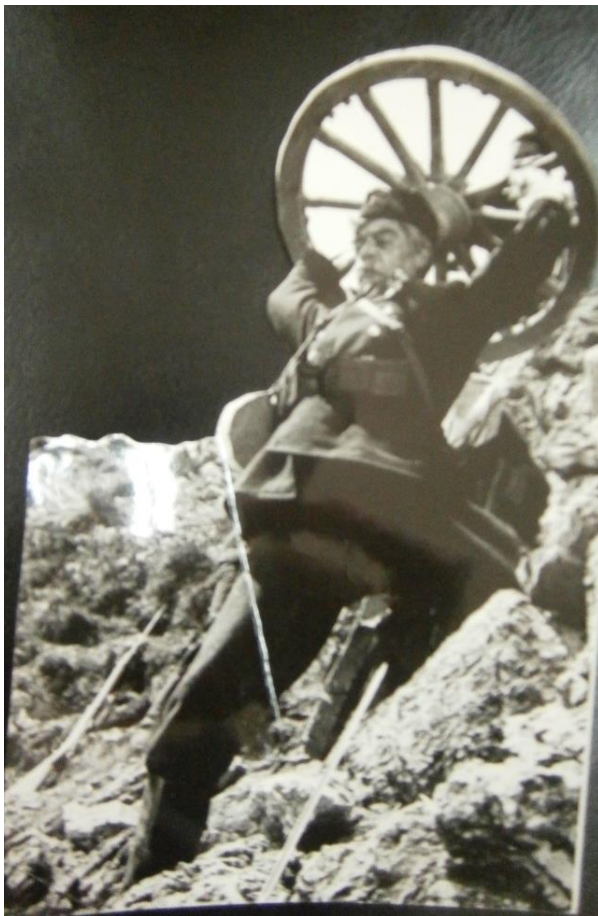
In the time of Stalin to choose as a topic the Russian-Turkish war as a subject of a joint movie production was not only "right" but in accordance with the priorities of the Cold war. The clear parallel between the Russian and Soviet military force at the end of the movie was directed not only to the Bulgarian audience but to the others behind the iron curtain, to all Westerners. In the past the Russian army and the Bulgarian-Russian military friendship were decisive for the liberation of Bulgaria and now in the time of the Cold war the tanks toward Shipka forewarn and demonstrate power securing Soviet protection against the "enemies" of Bulgaria from the West.



Bulgarian caricature

A look at the text of the literary scenario by Arkadiy Perventsev (published in April 1953) reveals the same message even more explicitly stated, as the narrator recounted: *"The just war for the liberation of Bulgaria was only ended in 1944, when the troops of the victorious Soviet Army, set on their great mission to fight fascism, brought real liberation to the Balkan Slavs"*. The director Sergey Vasilev gave the following answer to the question about the finale he chose:

"I have opted for such finale since we are writing history today. Who has written history so far? The bourgeoisie. Now we have to provide our new interpretation of these facts and we don't have to be afraid to do this!"



The Hidden Messages

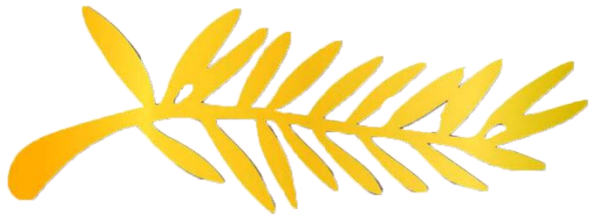
The film had a mobilizing effect on nearly 10 000 soldiers from various units in our country involved in the shooting of military operations. The daily contacts with the crew and with Soviet

people, the re-enactment of the great battles from the war for the liberation of Bulgaria and the very involvement of the soldiers, who performed the most essential to the production role, counted as events in their otherwise-not-so-interesting barracks routine. These certainly had a greater power and a deeper imprint on the minds of the then young soldiers - heroes in the film. Much in the same vein, even the allusion to the double liberators had the effect of a reflex on them, quite like an axiom that needed no additional propaganda arguments.



On the other hand, a battle film from the mid 20th century, shot with 10 000 soldiers from the Bulgarian army and even showing tanks in the finale, did certainly have such a purpose: to demonstrate power and to intimidate the enemy. These intimidating messages were addressed to member-countries of NATO.

The festival in Cannes



The movie provoked interest in Cannes and it was nominated for "Golden palm"; Sergey Vasilev got the reward for best director.

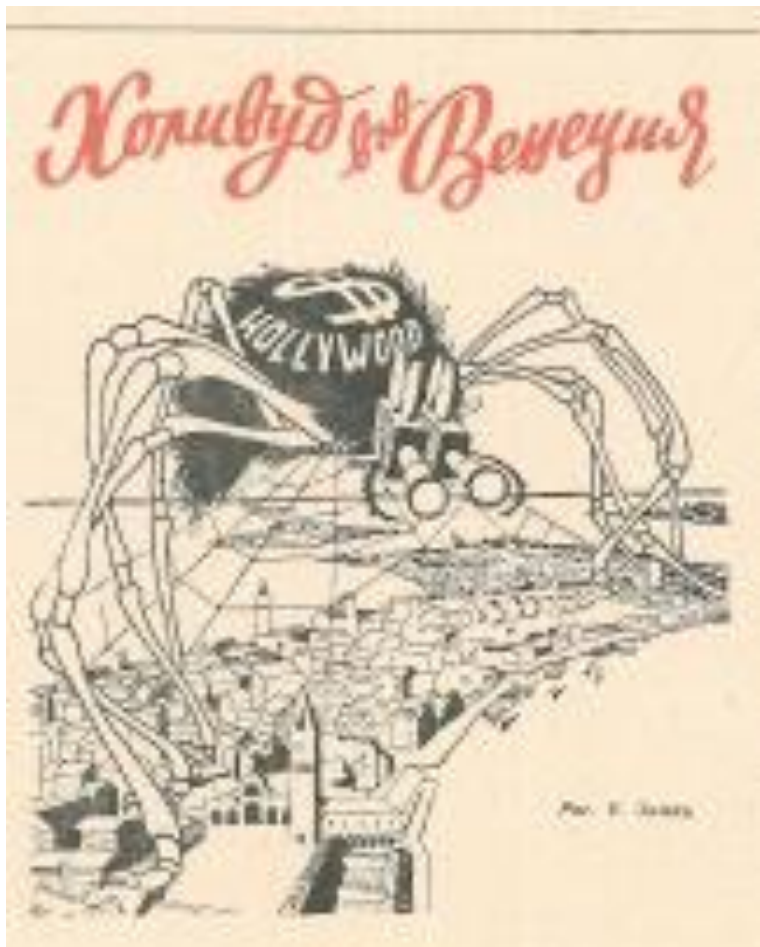
In the history of the Bulgarian cinema before 1989 "The Heroes of Shipka" was considered as an achievement and model for battle, historical movie about the Russian-Turkish war 1877-1878. Present authors consider the movie as etalon work of "socialist realism" and as a product of cultural engineering, propaganda and legitimation of communist ideology.



The Russian delegation on the Cannes festival

"Contrary to the past, we are no longer in the time of the Hollywood deathly dances that used to reign in the festivals. Cannes 1955 is a victory of the national cinematographies, a victory of the national heroes and a victory of life!"

This Festival, just like the Moscow International Film Festival (1935), was intended as a contra-festival to the Venice Film Festival, the oldest of the three. The Cannes Film Festival was conceived a way back in 1938 as a festival of countries opposed to fascism and to the Venice Film Festival influenced by fascist Germany and Italy.



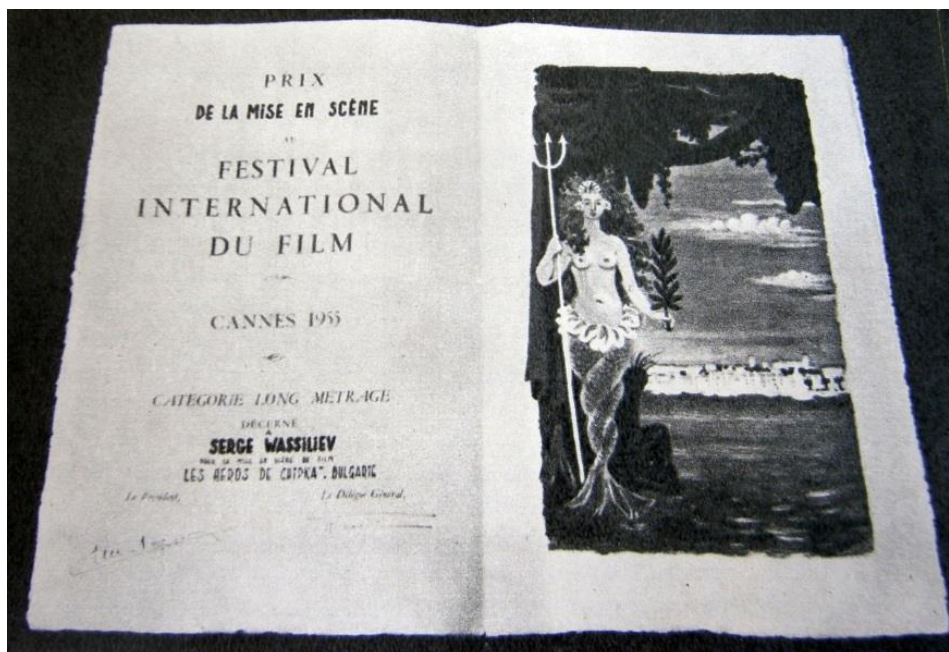
Bulgarian Caricature –Hollywood in Venice

The inauguration of the Cannes Film Festival was intended to take place on September 1, 1939 by Louis Lumière, himself. As the war broke out, the inauguration ritual was postponed until 1946.

A cursory inquiry into the history of the Best Director Award of the Cannes Film Festival revealed that it was traditionally awarded to Frenchmen from 1949 to 1964 with only a few exceptions: it was awarded to Luis Buñuel in 1951 and to Ingmar Bergman in 1958. Two more exceptions were made for Soviet directors, namely Sergey Yutkevich (1954) and Sergey Vasilev (1955).

No doubt, both the 1954 prize that went to Sergei Yutkevich for "The great warrior of Albania Skanderbeg" and the 1955 prize won by Sergey Vasilev (he shared this award with Jules Dassin) were determined by the political context. Both joint film productions provided assistance to developing cinematographies, the Albanian and the Bulgarian one, and both were spectacular battle films, but first and foremost they were productions of the Cold War.

In his memoirs Sergey Yutkevich raised the curtain and revealed where and how decisions were made regarding the awards at Cannes. Thus, in 1954 he found out that *"the majority of French intellectuals continue to cavort with the Communists."*



The certificate of the award

Remarkably, the Soviet press represented "Heroes of Shipka" as a joint production with Bulgarian filmmakers rather as an exception. As a rule this film was listed and went completely under the sign of Soviet cinema. What is more, not a single mention was made of the fact that the director Sergey Vasilev actually shared his award with the French director Jules Dassin. On the contrary, the new film by Dassin was described as a deviation from the achievements of the "progressive activist of art". The certificate of award given to Sergey Vasilev put it in an even more explicit way. Here the film was referred to as the *Bulgarian film* "Heroes of Shipka". Not a single reference to a joint production, not a single reference to any Soviet involvement in it... Perhaps, this was a matter of oversight, or it was also possible that the effect of the error was sought after, whatever the truth behind it, it was a fact.

Turkish films about Nene Hatun

Who was Nene Hatun

On Wikipedia, Nene Hatun is described as "a Turkish folk heroine, who became known for brutally massacring dying and wounded Russian soldiers left behind on the battlefield after the recapture of Fort Aziziye in Erzurum from Russian forces at the start of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877 – 1878", whereas the Turkish version venerates her as a "Turkish woman who put her stamp on history by participating in the defence of the Aziziye Bastion." Both Wikipedia articles are marked in need of additional citations for verification. Indeed, this is the gist of the problem: There is no monographic study about Nene Hatun based on verifiable historical facts. The bulk of the material readily available is literary in nature, and mainly aimed at children.

The historical knowledge concerning Nene Hatun depends on general works on the role of women in the Turkish Independence War. These compilations usually underline the significance of women's participation in the war as a precursor to their role in the newly founded Republic. They usually set up a prototypical female heroine instead of an actual figure who lived and died in a historical setting. As Kızıltoprak mentions in her thesis, in which she specifically tries to deconstruct the myth of Kara Fatma (another female heroine myth) – "Nene Hatun became popular not during the Ottoman period, rather during the Republican period." Her life story, as it can also be observed by Kızıltoprak's explanations on Kara Fatma, is embedded in a general national myth of Turkish women as a defender of the homeland alongside the men.

In this respect, the story of Nene Hatun and what “really” happened during the defence of Erzurum against the Russian threat does not matter at all. What matters is how Nene Hatun, as a fictional character rather than a flesh and blood person, is represented alongside other similar heroines, such as Kara Fatma among others.



Nene Hatun with the American General Matthew Ridgway, who was visiting Erzurum after the Korean War as the NATO commander in 1952

It is nearly impossible to give a balanced summary of the true nature of events because the variations are multiple. In one version, Nene Hatun has an infant daughter, in another two children; her husband is in the house or on the battlefield; in one story the man on the battlefield is her brother, while in another he died before she rushed to Aziziye, and so on. Nonetheless her story or at least the general version that is most repeated, goes like this: Nene Hatun was a married woman before the war, and when the 93 Harbi broke out, she moved to Erzurum from her village with her family. During the Aziziye attack her husband joined the defence of the city and told her to stay at home and kill herself and the children in order to prevent themselves from torture and

rape if the Russians succeeded in breaching the city defences. Despite her husband's warning, Nene Hatun left her children behind, rallied the other women behind her and rushed to Aziziye armed with an axe to fight side by side with the men against the Russians.

Nene Hatun as a movie heroine



Poster of the movie "Gazi Kadın"

Turkish filmography has produced two different kinds of Nene Hatun as a heroine. The first, "Gazi Kadın" [Veteran Woman] was shot in 1973, which, as the lead actor Kadir İnanır, who played the role of Ahmet later confessed, began as a film on Nene Hatun that turned into a more general love story revolving around Zeynep (played by Türkan Şoray) and Ahmed during the 93 Harbi (Russian – Ottoman War 1877-1878). In a way this film was a replica of famous Ottoman-Byzantium movies shot during the 1970s. These movies tended to highlight the power of Turks-Muslims despite the tricks of Byzantine Christians shot on an "imagined" (a)historical background.

The film was initially titled 'Nene Hatun' and was supposed to be exclusively on Nene Hatun's heroic story, was later titled Gazi Kadın. The first version of the scenario, which was titled "Nene Hatun" was found inappropriate, contradictory with the historical facts and, as a result, banned by the Commission for the Control of Moving Pictures. As a practical solution, Safa Önal changed the scenario's main protagonist to Gazi Kadın, who was also part of Aziziye battle, but stayed

anonymous in the following years. Moreover, some conservative/nationalist criticism combined with local reaction prevented the crew from shooting the film in Erzurum. Alternatively, the film was shot in Gerede. Both the script writer, Sefa Önal, and the director, Osman F. Seden, tried later to distance themselves from the fact that the film had been planned as a movie about the life of Nene Hatun. They did it because of the negative reactions during parliamentary sessions which had questioned the use of the Beylerbeyi Palace to shoot scenes.

The film starts with the map showing the establishment of the Ottoman Empire as a world power and the highest civilization of the world after the conquest of Constantinople. It is stated that the Empire had been experiencing a decline in the decades preceding the Russian-Ottoman war 1877-1878, since the Ottoman Empire had started to lose its lands because its non-Muslim subjects had started demanding reform and national independence. This has been done because of the provocation of the Great Powers! Remembrance of this great empire and its loss of power were emphasized by Abdülhamid II's on his words after the declaration of war by the Russians in 1877: "I would have liked to solve this issue with politics rather than by war". Specific symbols and scenes were used in order to describe the Ottomans as both Muslim and Turk and the "others" as Christian and constant enemies of the Turks/Muslims. While Abdülhamid was praying in a mosque, the Russian commander was depicted praying in a church.

The film was shot as the story of a Muslim/Turkish heroine. Nevertheless, the movie was in fact more of a love story and was different to the storyline of the usual Nene Hatun stories. In the film Nene Hatun was named Zeynep. Immediately after her wedding day she is left alone by her husband Ahmet who leaves for war together with her brother. During the film, we never hear her being called Nene Hatun. At the very end of the story Zeynep is shown as a heroine when she encounters veterans retreating from the front. She prevents them from retreating with a speech: "Isn't one arm enough to use a weapon, isn't one eye enough to fight? What will we do if our glorious prayer (ezan) does not resound in the sky? For the sake of God, for the sake of our motherland, for the sake of Turkishness, for the sake of Islam, we should fight!" The film ends with the famous lines of Mithat Cemal Kuntay: "Blood gave the true meaning of the flags! Soil is the motherland if there is someone to die for it!"

The construction of the myth about Nene Hatun



Poster of the film"

September 2010, a new film on Nene Hatun was released in Turkey: unsurprisingly titled "Nene Hatun: Aziziye". This second movie represent Nene Hatun as similar to modern Hollywood heroes, and to show Aziziye as the epitome of Turkish patriotism with visually appealing scenes. Even though their aspirations to match up with Hollywood failed colossally, some scenes did reflect the bloody and violent imagery of the comic book published before the movie.

The promotion of "Nene Hatun: Aziziye" was based on the idea that: "Every single piece of motherland is valuable to such an extent that even if every man dies, women do not hand any piece of it into the enemy." In addition, as the part of the promotion of the film, it was released on 29 October 2010, the 87th anniversary of the foundation of the Turkish Republic. This shows the continuity established in terms of Republican symbolism alongside an ahistorical representation of Nene Hatun. Like most of the books, the film and the comic book also finish their story by skipping a period of the Republican era in order to establish a direct link between

the Nene Hatun of the 93 Harbi and the Nene Hatun who was recognized as a national heroine in 1952 with the establishment of the Aziziye monument.



A still from "Nene Hatun: Aziziye", showing Nene Hatun attacking a Russian soldier

The film was directed by Avni Kütükoğlu who was also its scriptwriter. It was produced by Kat Productions with a budget of 3.750.000 TL. Nene Hatun was played by Açıya Elmas who is known for her roles in contemporary TV series. The film can be assessed as a failed attempt to utilize the "history craze" of popular Turkish cinema in recent years. The film had an abysmal record at the box office with 34.679 viewers and 244.254 TL revenue in total during its 14-week-long screening in cinemas throughout Turkey.

The announced plot of the film tries to connect contemporary issues, and initially, as it is stated in the press release of the film makers, the heroic act of Nene Hatun was intended to be connected in the script with the story of a contemporary girl in today's Turkey who is a good student and a talented skier. She was about to go to Erzurum for a ski contest. Having found out about the serious illness of her brother she is devastated and abandons the contest. Then her teacher tells

her the story of Nene Hatun (also from Erzurum) to give her the message that one should not be discouraged by the demoralising and overwhelming difficulties that life presents. The film, surprisingly, left out this moral and focused on the historical event of the Aziziye Battle emphasizing the heroic role of Nene Hatun. In this film Nene Hatun's place among other civilians participants in the battle is actually not as exaggerated as in all other stories in popular media that present her as the leader or initiator of this civilian participation.

However, this attempt to depict Nene Hatun as a historical figure, and as one of the many "heroines", plus the overemphasis on the war itself, failed to correspond, or at least resonate, with the popular imagination that emphasizes the uniqueness of her extraordinary deeds. As one of the commentators on an online cinema platform underlines:

"Nene Hatun was a significant figure for Turkishness [...] (However) we had been left with a film that hooks onto the Ottoman Russian War, for reasons that escape me, and moves away from what it actually needs to show. We were expecting it to tell how Nene Hatun underwent such a transformation to become a heroine and her deeds by focusing on her. As such, Nene Hatun here becomes no different from thousands of others in Erzurum."

Not in the same vein, but, nonetheless, all of the critics converge on the fact that its cinematography was not satisfactory, acting was not fit for a historical story and representation of the historical events was not authentic enough. Combined with this harsh criticism were the response of certain nationalist conservative groups. They clearly condemned both the producer and the director for representing Nene Hatun as woman whose headscarf comes and goes from scene to scene and the fact that the lead actress had a prior career as a model.

Therefore it is not a coincidence that all of the Nene Hatun's stories – whether a children's book, a historical novel, a comic book or a feature film – were constructed after the transformation of the Aziziye Bastion into a monument. It would be seen that the transformation itself provided so one may say, a place to reflect on this local and non-Republican story and shift it into the greater discourse of Turkish nationalism in construction.
