

## 63rd Berlin International Film Festival—Part 4

# An honest Russian citizen: Boris Khlebnikov's *A Long and Happy Life*

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4 March 2013

*This is the fourth in a series of articles on the recent Berlin film festival, the Berlinale, held February 7-17, 2013. Part 1 was posted on February 21, part 2 on February 27 and part 3 on March 1.*

The Russian film *A Long and Happy Life* (*Dolgaya Schastlivaya Zhisn*), by Boris Khlebnikov, was one of the more engaging works in the competition section of this year's Berlinale. The director's previous film, *Till Night Do Us Part* (*Poka noch ne razluchit*, 2012), took a satirical look at the Moscow elite. His latest film depicts the futile struggle of a small farmer in the Russian provinces against corrupt local authorities.

Sasha (Alexander Jatsenko), 35 years old or so, was quite willing to put his signature on a government document giving up his farm in exchange for compensation. Everything was decided, declared the official in the district office. But then to Sasha's surprise, his farm workers, who he pays a pittance of 300 roubles a month, announce they want to fight to retain their jobs. It is our country, they declare in rebellious fashion. When the Soviet Union existed, the region was dominated by a collective farm—a large, state-run agricultural enterprise.

After the collapse of the USSR, Sasha and other “new farmers” were able to lease patches of land without too much bureaucracy and commence private farming. Sasha is popular with his workers and also with the local officialdom. For some time he has had a semi-personal, semi-practical relationship with Anya (Anna Kotova), who works for the administration, has her own car and constantly deals with “important” men.

Sasha is convinced he will be able to save his farm when the district authorities realise that it is important

for the region. But behind the official display of affability, the authorities are perturbed by his stubbornness. The decision has been made a long time ago. A “process” had reached its end and, as was already the case in Soviet times, there could be no further discussion.

The old bureaucratic autocracy has now been spiced with ruthless capitalist shrewdness. Corruption is the norm. The local officials have taken on the appearance, even the garb, of businessmen. If needed, to exert the necessary pressure, the officialdom can always rent a cop (after office hours, of course). Or suddenly there is a fire in someone's house. The message is delivered.

The bureaucrats' first thought is that Sasha merely wants to drive up the price of his settlement. When it becomes clear he is serious and does not want to give up his farming business, an eerie silence descends. The provincial officials regard his behaviour as incomprehensible, a mental aberration. Even the farm labourers who initially encouraged him, now declare it was all a mistake and they were misguided.

Where does Sasha find the strength to carry on? Everyone has deserted him—even Anya.

In Fred Zinnemann's famous Western *High Noon* (1952), which serves as a role model for the Russian work, the lone hero, Marshal Will Kane (Gary Cooper), declares in a similar situation, “I have to do it”, knowing that he has the law on his side. Sasha lacks the same moral and legal support. But he also “has to do it”, if he wants to remain honest with himself. During a fast drive downhill, in which the camera remains fixed on him, the sound of the car's motor swells alarmingly, reflecting Sasha's growing anger and despair. *A Long and Happy Life* is a film about a man who grew up

after the collapse of the USSR and imagined he would be part of a new dawn, only to realize that he is not to be included. The instigator of the so-called “process” surrounding the sale of his farm proves to be someone Sasha long considered to be a friend. Ironically, the friend turns out to be the ominous investor buying up all the land and driving the farmers off. Sasha’s world collapses. At the end of the film, he deals violently with the three officials trying to force him to sign away his farm.

Commenting on his film, director Khlebnikov told the online magazine *Russia Today* that it was no longer viable to be a farmer in Russia. It was better to buy something and then resell it, rather than to produce. The director wanted to make a socially committed film about the plight of an ordinary man who, despite his best intentions, ends up a criminal.

The story is rooted in the impressive landscape of northern Russian. Sasha’s little cottage is located on the bank of a river. It flows monotonously, but on occasion with real force. The last shot of the film features the river as bluish and foggy. The camera pulls back slowly. Some waves are visible, then more and more appear. Is this a symbol of real change? When the river reaches the village, however, it is already calm, swimming by the grey wooden houses that appear as though they have stood there for eternity. The ageless landscape surrounds the village. At a standstill. Only the river—time—rushes on.

At the same time, the film captures tectonic shifts under the surface. The rural poor are increasingly aware that the imposition of the “free market” economy has only worsened their situation and that the dissolution of the Soviet state enterprises represented a real loss. Buds of resistance and opposition are emerging among social layers long regarded as a conservative bedrock for the powers that be. *To be continued*

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