

# *The Command (Kursk): A dramatization of the 2000 Russian nuclear submarine disaster*

By Joanne Laurier  
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*Directed by Thomas Vinterberg; screenplay by Robert Rodat and Robert Moore, based on Moore's book, A Time to Die*

*The Command* is the US title of the 2018 English-language film directed by Danish filmmaker Thomas Vinterberg (*The Celebration, Far From the Madding Crowd*) known in most of the world as *Kursk*. The UK title is *Kursk: The Last Mission*. Based on Robert Moore's book *A Time to Die* (2002), the movie is a fictionalized version of the August 2000 *Kursk* Russian nuclear submarine disaster.

The *Kursk's* sinking was bound up with both the decay of the Russian military and the catastrophic impact of Russian capitalism. One hundred eighteen sailors died—85 instantly and 23 slowly and painfully—due to the neglect and incompetence of the Putin administration.

The Vinterberg movie is a humanized account of the episode, and clearly takes the side of the population against the military and governmental brass. As the movie gets underway, angry sailors, led by Navy captain-lieutenant Mikhail Averin (Matthias Schoenaerts) on the Vidyaevo Naval Base, are demanding back pay: "Sorry gentlemen, we have received nothing from Moscow," is the answer. "So what are we supposed to live on?," ask the seamen. "If I knew that, I would be living on it too. At least you have a deployment coming, you will get a sea bonus." "Which will not be paid," is the retort.

The deployment in question is on the 1992-era nuclear submarine *Kursk*, the pride of the Northern Fleet and the largest attack submarine in the world. In order to purchase the alcohol for a colleague's wedding, the sailors pawn their maritime watches—with unforeseen consequences. Back home, Mikhail adores his pregnant wife Tanya (Léa Seydoux) and beloved son Misha (Artemiy Spiridonov). The young boy's feelings for his father function as one of the film's emotional pivots.

On the morning of August 12, 2000, the "unsinkable" *Kursk* is participating in the first large-scale naval exercise since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Thirty ships and three submarines maneuver through the shallow Arctic waters of the Barents Sea.

Moore's book explains: "For many years now, the Russians have excelled in under-ice submarine operations. Throughout the Cold War, they studied the unique oceanography and

acoustics of the Arctic, learning how best to exploit the conditions to compensate for the superior sonar technology of the American boats."

But on this day, one of the submarines' practice torpedoes explodes with an equivalent force of 220 pounds of TNT. A good portion of the vessel is destroyed. Mikhail and those not immediately killed by the blast, skillfully react as the 23,000-ton submarine descends 350 feet and crashes onto the seabed. But there is a second explosion.

According to Moore: "The second detonation was a truly seismic event, nearly 250 times greater than the initial blast. All the warheads and the fuel in the remaining torpedoes ignited almost simultaneously, an explosion that registered 3.5 on the Richter scale ...

"Kursk had lost communications, heating, ventilation, and all but emergency lighting. The hydraulic and electrical systems had collapsed. The twenty-three sailors were entombed."

Through Anthony Dod Mantle's stylish cinematography, *The Command* depicts the courageous and super-human efforts by Mikhail and his men to stay alive in the last remaining compartments where they confront dwindling oxygen, surging water and freezing temperatures. Trying to escape to the surface is out of the question, as it would mean an excruciating decompression sickness, known as "the bends," during which gas bubbles expand and destroy nerves and tissue.

After four different diving bells and submersibles fail to connect to the submarine's escape hatch, Admiral Vyacheslav Grudzinsky (Peter Simonischek) laments the deplorable state of the Navy's rescue equipment ("Do the impossible with the inadequate").

Moore: "If the bases and main naval forces were suffering, the fate of the search-and-rescue forces of the Northern Fleet was even more disastrous. For the admirals, the rescue assets were the easiest forces to cut without damaging their careers. If the major warships and strategic submarines were stranded at port, that would be a national and very public embarrassment. But no one in Moscow would ever know, much less actually care, if the rescue submersibles and their mother-ships were kept in port, slowly decaying..."

In Vinterberg's film, a television newscast announces that "with Russian rescue assets apparently unable to reach

survivors, offers of international assistance, are now pouring in. Britain and France, Norway, and the United States [are] offering both technical help, and rescue submersibles.” Britain’s Commodore David Russell (Colin Firth) waits for permission to assist in the rescue.

“No foreign interference,” is the bureaucratic refrain. Max von Sydow plays a Russian admiral executing this command. He says to Russell: “The Russian rescue assets are in position and functioning very well. Tomorrow the decision will be made whether you and your men will be allowed to participate in the operation.”

“You go to hell! You, and your admirals, and your bureaucrats ... To hell with you!” cry angry families when they are callously told: “Your husbands and sons, are sailors in the Russian Navy. Every one of them took an oath to defend his country with his life.”

When foreign aid is finally reluctantly approved, it is too late.

Moore reveals a horrible reality: “On shore, inside the disintegrating and underfunded bases, the decay and neglect led to widespread misery and frequent tragedies in the main prompted by that perennial, demoralizing issue, lack of pay.

“In Vidyaevo, one naval officer took his own life, leaving for his superiors a one-sentence suicide note of such simple power it became the whispered and shocked talk of the Northern Fleet: ‘Please pay my salary, what’s owed to me, and pass the money on to my wife and two hungry children.’ The Russian Navy seeks to hide the statistics, but in 1999, on Northern Fleet bases alone, at least twelve sailors committed suicide. In the year 2000, eighteen men took their own lives, most shooting themselves in the head with their service pistols.”

*The Command* is a taut, tension-filled movie, with all actors giving committed performances. A few scenes drag, and the sequences of Mikhail’s family life are too idyllic. Nonetheless, Vinterberg, the former Dogme 5 director, carefully attempts to show the human cost of the preventable tragedy. This does not include, however, any effort to venture outside the immediate framework of the disaster, and of course, there is no mention of the immediate cause: the restoration of capitalism in Russia.

On August 23, 2000, the WSWS wrote about the sinking of the *Kursk*: “The incompetence, arrogance and narrowness of Russia’s rulers is, in the end, a function of their objective socio-political and historical role. They personify the inviability of the abortion that is Russian capitalism. Ignorance, coarseness, pitilessness and disdain towards the ordinary people are the characteristics of the ‘new Russian’ capitalists, and these qualities are brought to the surface of social life by Putin and those around him.”

And later on August 29 of the same year, the WSWS wrote: the Russian bourgeoisie “compensates for its physical and spiritual inadequacies with national self-adulation and pompous symbolism, not the least of which was the recent naval exercise. To maintain this combination of incapacity in fact and omnipotence in words, the 118 sailors of the *Kursk* paid with

their lives.”

The dramatization of events such as the *Kursk* affair and the 1986 Chernobyl disaster (the subject of a recent television series) is welcome and entirely legitimate. These were major episodes and present opportunities to explore various social and human dramas, including ones that involved extraordinary nobility and self-sacrifice.

Nonetheless, it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that arousing enthusiasm (and financing!) from US or Western European production companies or filmmakers for “hard-hitting” depictions of Russian or Soviet calamities is an easier task than interesting them in equally forceful exposés of disasters in their own countries or the result of the Western Powers’ endless military interventions. The barrage of anti-Russian howling must have a direct and an indirect impact.

Proving the point, the problem finds expression *internally* in *The Command*. While the film portrays the military Russian hierarchy as vile, which it undoubtedly is, it also passes on fantasies about the Western armed services—most prominently in the form of upright, squeaky-clean Commodore Russell. (One recalls that in 1913 Winston Churchill, then the First Lord of the Admiralty, replied to the charge that he was impugning the “traditions” of the Royal Navy by remarking, “And what are they? They are rum, sodomy and the lash.”)

Where is the \$40 million (the approximate cost of *The Command*) “major motion picture” about the destruction of Fallujah, the Iraqi city where US forces slaughtered between 3,000 and 6,000 men, women and children in a siege in November 2004, and rendered 200,000 homeless? For that matter, where is the big-budget dramatization of the June 2017 Grenfell Tower fire in London that killed 72 people, including many children, and injured another 70, in what was a crime against the working class? Or Hurricane Katrina, in which 1,800 people died due to official neglect and indifference? In regard to these “home-grown” catastrophes and countless others, the American and European film world continues to demonstrate a great deal of reticence.

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