

*Enemy at the Gates* (2001)

Directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud, written by Jean-Jacques Annaud and Alain Godard

*Enemy at the Gates* fascinated me more for its political underpinnings than for its dramatic suspense. Set in the autumn of 1942, when the Russian city of Stalingrad was under attack by the German *Wermacht* in the battle that turned the tide of World War Two, director Jean-Jacques Annaud's political intent is to expose the tyranny and lies that make up the fabric of the ruthlessly impersonal Stalinist regime. Annaud's deeper subtext is to unmask the illusion of socialism itself, from the standpoint of the superiority of the individual and the personal. In the process, Annaud constructs his own mythology of Stalingrad.

How are we to understand the heroic resistance of the Red Army and the people of Stalingrad in 1942? There is no reason to assume a single viewpoint shaped the resistance. Some undoubtedly believed they were fighting to save the socialist motherland from the evil of Nazism, capitalism in its most virulent form. For Annaud, these feelings amounted to little more than a political formula utilized by the new Soviet elite in their own interests and the repetition of their slogans and propaganda by the duped Russian people. For others, Russian nationalism was a unifying ideology used by the Communist Party to rally resistance to the German invasion. Nationalism, though, is still too collectivist for Annaud's subjective vision. Even the idea that some consciously fought for Stalin is not far-fetched, whether this is attributed to the vestiges of czar-worship or the new cult of the leader that modern, authoritarian regimes cultivate, especially in times of military crisis. In Annaud's vision, the more abstract motivations of socialism or nationalism are inherently false, propagated by the privileged elite and sold wholesale to the manipulated people. Where they are not merely the puppets of power, people act for entirely personal, subjective, and individual reasons.

Annaud adds one further element. Like the proverbial overseer who shoots one reluctant labourer in order to "encourage the others," the Red Army terrorized its conscripts into battle. Through this mode, Annaud constructs another myth of Stalingrad.

As the movie opens, reluctant Russian recruits arrive by train on the eastern side of the Volga River, looking on in fear and disbelief at the inferno on the western bank that is Stalingrad. They are anything but independently motivated for battle. They have to be prodded to disembark by zealous Red Army Commissars – their first enemy – and are shepherded rudely into barges for the perilous crossing of the Volga. Germany has command of the skies, although the troop trains still arrive on undamaged tracks on the other side of the river. In a graphic battle scene reminiscent of D-Day in *Saving Private Ryan*, the Russian conscripts come under fire from German artillery and the *Luftwaffe*. The canvas roof of the river barge offers no protection. Some soldiers panic and jump into the Volga to escape the immediate terror, only to be shot in the water as deserters.

The survivors don't fare much better. The Commissars issue a few bullets and one rifle for every two soldiers. When the man with the rifle is killed, the second soldier is told, pick up his rifle. They attack across a desolate no man's land under the threat that anyone who turns tail will be shot. The Germans, entrenched in strong, defensive

positions, massacre the Russian soldiers. Since the morale of the soldiers is zero, despite the exhortations to fight for the fatherland and for Comrade Stalin, Russian troops go into battle only through naked coercion. When the few survivors retreat, the Commissars, who had neither led nor followed their troops into battle, set up a line of their own and machine gun the retreating "cowards".

It's impossible to square this image of reluctant and unmotivated recruits, forced by the barrel of a gun to fight against the mighty German machine, with the fierce, house by house and hand-to-hand combat that made every inch of Stalingrad precious and turned the city into a wasteland. Rather than historical accuracy, though, director Annaud's purpose is dramatic and political. The subtext of the movie is the brutality and hypocrisy of the Soviet State, which harnesses everything to its goal of domination. Like Hitler's Germany, it is a totalitarian regime kept in power by military terror. For Annaud, it would appear, not even Russian nationalism (and most assuredly not the defence of the Soviet revolution) is enough to motivate these terrorized conscripts. When two evils collide, how is one to choose? In the political formula of *Enemy at the Gates*, the only explanations for the fierce Russian resistance are the twin instincts of territoriality and the necessity to survive.

From the wider canvas of the battle, Annaud narrows his focus, bringing the conflict to the personal dimension. In the initial assault into Stalingrad, two Russians are caught between the withering firepower of the Nazis ahead and the wrath of the political Commissars behind. One is Vassili (Jude Law), a young shepherd from the Urals; the other is a Party official named Danilov (Joseph Fiennes), who is first seen inexplicably careening through no man's land in an automobile. Danilov's eyeglasses label him an intellectual and introduce the persistence of class differences in the USSR - a key theme in the movie. It may be the supposedly classless society, but Danilov is urban, educated, and an "official". Vassili, in contrast, is a peasant who has difficulty expressing himself, writes painstakingly, and serves as a "grunt" in the army. He has, however, a more practical skill than Danilov's ability to manipulate words: he is a sharpshooter. Vasili's grandfather taught him to shoot at a very tender age, a lesson reprised in the opening credit scene when, as a five year old, Vassili failed with his one and only bullet to shoot a wolf that his grandfather had lured to attack a tethered horse. The use of an otherwise innocent lure is a theme that will recur in the climactic scene. When he finds himself trapped in Stalingrad's no-man's-land, Vasili saves both his and Danilov's hides, dispatching six German officers and a soldier with the minimum use of his rationed bullets. With the help of Danilov's propaganda newsletter, Vasili becomes a Red Army hero whose name spreads throughout the Soviet Union. It is a mantle the sharp-shooter wears reluctantly, though he does his duty, personally answering his fan mail.

A rather improbable role is played by Bob Hoskins, who bears a remarkable resemblance to his character, Nikita Khrushchev. The real Khrushchev had been assigned to head the political department at the southern front, so his appearance in the movie is not entirely fortuitous. The character is useful because he represents a Russian leader Americans would remember. Khrushchev is shown, not as the leader who would raise his own star by denouncing Stalin in 1956, but as Stalin's crony. He refers to the

General Secretary as the "boss", an interesting term again reflecting the persistence of social differences in the USSR. Otherwise Khrushchev's role is to demonstrate further – if that were necessary – the ruthlessness of the Communist Party. He stresses to the political Commissars that this city must be defended at all costs, not because it is the gateway to the rich oil fields of middle Asia, but because it bears Stalin's name. In Annaud's vision, perpetrating atrocities in the name of a "symbol" is the height of tyranny. Khrushchev's political predecessor, who had failed to maintain morale, is left to put a bullet into his own mouth while Khrushchev asks his lieutenants to make new suggestions. How about using the soldiers' families as hostages to keep up morale? one suggests, in the spirit, Annaud suggests, of those about to rise quickly in Stalin's regime. Khrushchev dismisses the idea. It is too obvious for his more subtle taste. Danilov suggests that the soldiers be offered "hope". Telling stories about the heroes of the battle will inspire both the cannon fodder on the frontlines and the toiling masses at home. Given the choice, Khrushchev prefers lies to violent tyranny. As his kill number increases, Vasili has greatness thrust upon him by Danilov's propaganda.

The mass battle scenes recede into the background while Annaud's camera focuses narrowly on Vasily and his individualistic duels over love and death. The sub-plot involves Danilov and Vasili in a love triangle with Tania (Rachel Weisz). Tania is a patriot, not for any of the political reasons hyped by the Commissar's motivational speeches but on "realistic" grounds which, for Annaud, means she has a "personal" motive to seek revenge. Tania's parents, who were Jews and told their daughter there was no "motherland" worth fighting for except Israel, were murdered horrifically by the Germans. Among hundreds of Russian Jews rounded up by the Gestapo, they were part of a convoy taken by truck to the middle of a bridge. The prisoners were bound together in pairs – mother to daughter, husband to wife. One of the two was then killed by a single bullet – another scheme to ration ammunition. Pushed into the river, the victims who were still alive were dragged under the water by the weight of their tethered partners.

As Tania falls in love with Vasily, more personal, inner enemies are awakened. Danilov becomes jealous and tries to divert Tania from her plan to extract bloody, direct revenge, which ties her to Vasily. Like Danilov, Tania is an intellectual, educated at Moscow University, where she studied German. Tania's library is replete with German books by Goethe and Schilling -- even Karl Marx, Tania says dryly to Danilov. Even the highest civilizations may revert to barbarism. Tania's life as an intellectual, Danilov explains, is more valuable than the lives of those who are dying on the front, more valuable than Vasili's – referring again to the class differences in the USSR. Partly for her safety and partly to keep her away from Vasili, Danilov arranges to transfer Tania to his political office. Her ability to translate German dispatches will save many more lives than she could possibly take, he tells her, without risking her own. Her new work, however, offers only a remote and abstract revenge, not suitable for Tania who is personally loyal to her parent's memory and the living Vasili. She follows Vasili to the barracks where the Red Army snipers live life as fully as they can, in the knowledge that tomorrow may be their last.

Tania is housed with a Russian woman and her son, Sacha, who worships Vasili and plays a dangerous double-agent game. Sacha's keeps his family supplied with scarce foods – fruit, meat, chocolate – which the boy receives for shoe-shining German boots and passing on planted information. It is not only the Germans who have scarce goods, though. As a Commissar, Danilov has access to the buffet meals provided to maintain the high living of the Russian officials. From the point of view of the average Russian, Annaud implies, the internal and external enemies have much in common.

At one point Vasili tells Tania that he once visited a factory and had decided to become a factory worker after the war, surely the sentiments of a good proletarian. Then he adds that the person he most admired in the factory was the man who stood on the catwalk, far above the workbenches, and surveyed the whole plant. It was clearly a reference to his solitary and individualistic role as a protector of sheep and assassin of German officers, but it also betrayed an ambition to become an overseer, a manager; to rise in the class structure. Vasili is a peasant with standard bourgeois ambitions.

Whether Vasili can succeed in any of his ambitions depends on other forces. Enter the antagonist, Major Konig (Ed Harris), a German sniper sent to take out Vasili and score a reverse propaganda coup for the German Army. Creating legends, whether true or false, is consequential. With Konig, many of the themes of the movie coalesce. He is a German aristocrat who learned to shoot while hunting game for sport. Vasili had lived a far more precarious life, protecting his family's sheep and their bare livelihood from wolves. Between Konig and Vasili is the class struggle in microcosm. Their duel also stands in the place of the battle of Stalingrad, the confrontation between Nazism and Communism. Although Annaud offers few glimpses into the Nazi doctrine, we are presumably well versed on German atrocities and the story about the death of Tania's parents is all we need as a reminder. To go by the movie, though, the Communists direct their terror as much at their own people as against the enemy at the gate.

At one point, Vasili is "hunting" Konig with the help of a second sniper. Annaud uses this scene as an opportunity to stress the arbitrary and apparently senseless brutality of the Communist regime and express his indictment of it. Vasili's back-up sniper says that he had spent 16 months in Germany, when "Joseph and Adolf were walking hand in hand". This reference to the non-aggression pact signed between Germany and the USSR in 1939, on the eve of the invasion and subsequent division of Poland, drives home the point that the two tyrannies were ultimately indistinguishable. The Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939 was a cynical act of big-power politics and a betrayal of the anti-fascist struggle. By 1941, though, Germany acted on its long-standing desire to add living-space in the East and destroy Marxism, and had invaded the USSR. So, when he returned to Russia in 1941, the sniper said, the political atmosphere had completely changed:

"Threw my ass in prison. 'What were you doing in Germany, eh?'  
"Excuse me, but it was Comrade Stalin who sent me there."

"Don't bring our glorious leader into your treachery! Confess, spy bastard. Confess."

"And, Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! There wasn't a sickle, but there was a hammer.

"And, Bang! Knocked out all my teeth.

"That's right, boy, have no illusions. That's the land of socialism and universal bliss for you."

So much for the USSR, the socialist motherland. The illusion, though, runs deeper than the success or failure of a single regime. Annaud questions the possibility of socialism itself.

As the wolf and hunter game proceeds, Vasili shows he is "only human" by having self-doubts and asking to be reassigned to a regular infantry unit. Konig, he thinks, is too good for him. Vasili is not the legend he was made out to be, just as the USSR was not the land of socialism and universal bliss. But surrender is impossible – for the Russians at Stalingrad and for Vasili in his own tête-à-tête with Konig. Annaud reintroduces his vision of the arbitrariness of oppression in Stalin's Russia, this time emphasizing the personal motivations behind apparently political struggles. Realizing he has lost Tania's love to Vasily, Danilov proceeds to denounce his personal rival as a vacillator and coward in the same newspaper that he used to create his legend. Yesterday's hero becomes today's coward and tomorrow's traitor.

By this time events are rapidly approaching a climax. Both Danilov and Vasili have involved young Sacha in their double-agent game and Konig knowingly plays along. Sacha has been useful to both sides. Konig is at once gentlemanly and ruthless – the perfect aristocrat, willing to commit any barbarity as long as it is done with good manners. The main characters play their allotted role, including Sacha who ends up a tethered lure to attract Vasili to his destruction. Predictably, it is Danilov who undergoes the most moral change. He committed the unpardonable sin of believing some of his own propaganda. Sacha's death weighs heavily on his conscience. When Danilov tells Sacha's mother that her son isn't coming back, he softens the blow by saying he had defected to the Germans. She can at least believe a lie that is useful for her, that Sacha is still alive although she would never see him again. Personal lives are more important than political doctrines or even self-sacrifice for a cause. Telling lies comes easily to Danilov, but this time the lie is not for some general cause greater than the individual; it is a lie told for personal reasons, to relieve the suffering of just one person. Danilov is beginning to understand the political lessons that Annaud has set him up to learn. When Tania is cut down by shrapnel and Danilov believes she is dead, his conversion is complete. Danilov has one last act of self-sacrifice, as well as a political confession, to make. He seeks out Vasili, engaged in the final hand of the game of patience played by the rival snipers:

I've been such a fool, Vasily.

Man will always be man.

There is no "new man".

We tried so hard to create a society that was equal.

Where there'd be nothing to envy your neighbour.  
But there's always something to envy.  
A smile, a friendship.  
Something you don't have and want to appropriate.  
In this world, even a Soviet world,  
there will always be rich and poor.  
Rich in gifts, poor in gifts.  
Rich in love, poor in love.

...

You're a good man, Vasily.  
I want to help you, Vasily.  
If I might do one last thing.  
Something useful for a change.  
Let me show you where the major is.

Danilov's self-sacrificial death, which reveals Konig's position, atones for his personal sins. Konig is the one who is lured from cover. The aristocrat to the end, he acknowledges the victor. Konig's surrender parallels the fate of the German army at Stalingrad, an end that was foreshadowed during an earlier, inconclusive dual between Konig and Vasili in the industrial zone. The building is hit by German bombers and the prominently displayed bust of Lenin wobbles, but doesn't topple.

Annaud still has the romantic Hollywood loose end to tie, although the reuniting of Vasili with a recovering Tania following the surrender of the German Army is a deservedly brief afterthought. The director, though, gets in one more parting shot against Soviet propaganda: the omnipresent loudspeaker boasts of the victory, praising what it calls the "voluntary self-sacrifices" of the Russian soldiers and implying that casualties weren't heavy. The regime of lies has survived. The enemy at the gates has been beaten back; the enemy inside the gates is still intact.