

## Religion, Politics, and Literature in Larisa Shepit'ko's *The Ascent*

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Scholars have noted Larisa Shepit'ko's extensive use of Christian motifs in her film *The Ascent* (1979); some contend that the film nevertheless has a mostly political significance. This paper argues that *The Ascent* should not be considered primarily a religious or a political work, but that politics, religion, and literary allusion work together in the film toward a common meaning. The paper examines the literary sources of the film, both acknowledged (Bykov's *Sotnikov*) and unacknowledged (Dostoevsky's *Brat'ia Karamazovy*), and concludes that, while Shepit'ko's *Sotnikov* does suffer like Christ, he does so with a political purpose. Parallels she establishes between her interrogation scene and Dostoevsky's meeting of Christ and the Grand Inquisitor show that her *Sotnikov* is, like Dostoevsky's Christ, an individual who stands up to the dehumanizing totalitarian philosophy represented by the investigator, Portnov. Other changes Shepit'ko introduces demonstrate that this message of opposition is relevant to all totalitarian systems, making *The Ascent* an important text not only for its treatment of World War II, but also in the artistic evaluation of Stalin's legacy. Shepit'ko's focus on Rybak's betrayal of the Soviet cause and overall development of the Judas theme suggest that there has been a larger betrayal: Stalin's infidelity to the early Soviet ideal.

Critics and scholars agree that Larisa Shepit'ko is one of Russia's most important filmmakers. They similarly concur that her final completed film, *The Ascent* (*Voskhozhdenie*; Mosfilm, 1976) is one of the most significant works of Russian cinema. Gillespie, for example, calls it 'one of the key films of the entire Brezhnev period'.<sup>1</sup> The film garnered much attention and several awards, including the Golden Bear at the 1977 International Film Festival in West Berlin.<sup>2</sup>

*The Ascent* had great significance for Shepit'ko personally. While completing her previous film, *You and I* (*Ty i ia*; Mosfilm, 1971), she accepted the advice of a colleague at Mosfilm and deleted a ten-minute section from the end of the film.<sup>3</sup> This change secured her permission to participate in the Venice Film Festival, but

<sup>1</sup> D. Gillespie, *Russian Cinema* (London: Longman, 2003), p. 139.

<sup>2</sup> For a complete list of prizes won by *The Ascent*, see *Sovetskie khudozhestvennye fil'my. Annotirovannyi katalog 1976–1977* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Vserossiiskoi gazety 'Niva Rossii', 1997), p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> See R. Holloway's articles, 'Larissa Shepitko Dies at 40', *Variety*, 25 July 1979, pp. 4, 41 (p. 41); and 'Larissa Shepitko: Her Life and Films', *Cinema India-International*, 7.2 (1990), 13–16 (p. 15).

also, in her view, compromised the quality of her film. While pregnant in 1973, she fell and suffered concussion and damage to her spine, requiring her to lie in hospital for seven months, a time she later described as a *'dolgoe puteshestvie v sebia'* ('a long journey into myself').<sup>4</sup> Shepit'ko emerged from this brush with death feeling that her next film would be her last. She wanted this work to express her true and complete worldview, and therefore resolved to never again compromise or make changes suggested by others; she would be guided only by her own ideas and would *'nikogda i nikomu ne doveriat'* ('never trust anyone').<sup>5</sup> When Shepit'ko, *'v novom svoem sostoianii'* ('in her new state') as she termed it, read Vasil' Bykau's *Sotnikov*, the film project quickly took concrete shape, because she realized that she *'ne mogla by naiti drugogo materiala'* ('would not be able to find other material') that would *'peredat' svoi vzgliady na zhizn', na smysl zhizni'* ('convey her outlook on life, on the meaning of life').<sup>6</sup> Having found the ideal literary basis for her film, Shepit'ko began work with her customary zeal. Iurii Klepikov, with whom Shepit'ko co-wrote the film's screenplay, recalled how much of the work she took upon herself, unlike all other directors with whom he had worked. Shepit'ko spent so much time writing and rewriting scenes as well as asking questions and making notes about the smallest of details, that he feared their adaptation of Bykau's novella would never be completed.<sup>7</sup> Despite his concerns and the physical suffering Shepit'ko and others endured while filming in the harsh winter environment, *The Ascent* was completed and became both Shepit'ko's last film, as she had predicted, and a powerful statement of her worldview, as she had desired. It was the first film for which she was proud to say she took full responsibility *'za kazhdyi millimetr plenki'* ('for every millimeter of the film').<sup>8</sup>

In *The Ascent* two partisans are sent to find food for their starving unit. Rybak and Sotnikov head toward a farm where Rybak once lived while hiding from the Germans; when they find only its burned remains, they continue on to the nearest village. They come to the house of the village elder, who they assume must be collaborating with the Germans. Rybak does not shoot the elder but takes a sheep, which he kills and carries off. On the way back to the unit they are confronted by a police brigade, and in the fire Sotnikov is wounded in the leg. He intends to commit suicide rather than be taken alive, but Rybak drags him away and helps

<sup>4</sup> L. Rybak, 'Poslednee interv'iu', in *Kniga o Larise Shepit'ko*, ed. by E. Klimov (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1987), pp. 179–94 (p. 188). The birth of her son at this same time reinforced this fatalistic desire to have *The Ascent* be a comprehensive expression of her self; Shepit'ko said that *'Ja khotela by, chtoby po etomu fil'mu moi syn uznal obo mne, o moem mirooshchushchenii, o moem zhiznennom vybore, o moikh idealakh'* ('I would like this film to enable my son to find out about me, my world view, my life choice, and my ideals') (A. Romanenko, 'Larisa Shepit'ko: "Kinematograf chitaet Vasil'ia Bykova"' (Beseda s rezhisserom)', *Ekran* 76–77 (1978), pp. 70–75 (p. 70)).

<sup>5</sup> V. Golovskoi, *Kinematograf 70-kh. Mezhdru ottepel'iu i glasnost'iu* (Moscow: Materik, 2004), pp. 260–61.

<sup>6</sup> Rybak, 'Poslednee interv'iu', p. 190. *Sotnikov* was published in *Novyi mir* in 1970; I will refer to its author by the Belorussian form of his name, Bykau, whereas many critics cited in this article use the Russian form, Bykov.

<sup>7</sup> Iu. Klepikov, 'Imet' tsel'', in *Kniga o Larise Shepit'ko*, ed. by E. Klimov (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1987), pp. 92–95 (p. 93).

<sup>8</sup> Rybak, 'Poslednee interv'iu', p. 190.

him to the first house they find, which is occupied by Demchikha and her several children. As they are deciding what to do with Sotnikov, another unit appears. Rybak and Sotnikov hide in her attic, but a cough from the sick Sotnikov gives them away (although it is Rybak who actually surrenders). They and Demchikha are arrested and transported to prison. Sotnikov is the first to appear before the investigator Portnov, a local man who has gone over to the Germans. Despite torture — branding with a red star — Sotnikov refuses to provide any information. Rybak, on the other hand, answers the investigator's questions, all the while convincing himself that he is playing games with the enemy and will be able to save himself and not be a traitor. Portnov offers to spare his life if he will join the occupation police. Rybak is appalled at the thought, but Portnov has sensed weakness in him. Sotnikov and Rybak are thrown in a basement holding cell, where they are joined by Demchikha, the elder (who later reveals to Sotnikov that he is working with the partisans), and Basia, a young Jewish girl who was found hiding but will not disclose who hid her. In the morning they are led out for execution. Sotnikov tells Portnov that he shot the police officer who died the previous day, and asks him to release the others. When Portnov refuses, Rybak reminds him of his offer and agrees to join the police. The four remaining condemned, accompanied by Rybak and German soldiers, are marched to the gallows. After they are executed, Rybak returns to the station, where he tries to hang himself in the latrine but is unsuccessful. The film ends with him howling in desperation as he views the walls of the station courtyard, looks out through the closing gate, and realizes what he has done.

While *The Ascent* is set in occupied Belorussia during the harsh winter of 1942, Shepit'ko — whose other films concern contemporary problems — made it clear that she saw it as much more than a war film. She argued that the war was still morally important more than thirty years later, when the construction of a new society '*kazhdyi chas trebuetsia ot cheloveka dukhovnogo vybora*' ('requires one to make spiritual choices all the time'), and that the film first and foremost was intended to '*otvetit' na segodniashnie voprosy*' ('answer modern-day questions').<sup>9</sup> Shepit'ko achieves this contemporary focus by refashioning images found in Bykau's novella and adding others with religious or political significance.

Despite potential political trouble, Shepit'ko called attention to the religious nature of her film. She called *The Ascent* '*moia Bibliia*' ('my Bible')<sup>10</sup> and defined its genre as a '*neopritcha*' ('neo-parable').<sup>11</sup> Shepit'ko's change of title (from Bykau's *Sotnikov*) emphasizes the film's religious subtext; the 'ascent' of the title is a word associated with Christ that suggests His ascent of Golgotha (Shepit'ko lingers on the climb up the road to the gallows) or His ascent into heaven after the resurrection.<sup>12</sup> Several critics have discussed the film's dense web of Christian imagery and shown

<sup>9</sup> L. Karakhan, 'Krutoi put' "Voskhozhdeniia", *Iskusstvo kino* (October 1976), pp. 85–101 (pp. 86–87).

<sup>10</sup> Rybak, 'Poslednee interv'iu', p. 190.

<sup>11</sup> Romanenko, 'Larisa Shepit'ko: "Kinematograf chitaet Vasilisa Bykova"', p. 70. This name suggests that Shepit'ko saw the film as a religious parable (*pritcha*) relevant to contemporary times (*neo*).

<sup>12</sup> Shepit'ko's film *Wings* (Kryl'ia; Mosfilm, 1966) also ends with an 'ascent', when the former fighter pilot Nadezhda Petrukhina takes a plane on an unauthorized flight.

that Shepit'ko places special emphasis on parallels between Christ and Sotnikov, for whom Rybak plays Judas.<sup>13</sup> The film chronicles Sotnikov's arrest, interrogation and suffering, execution, and resurrection. That his spirit lives on is suggested by two scenes. First, the execution is watched by a young boy, who sheds tears at the treatment Sotnikov and the others are receiving. The boy and Sotnikov exchange significant glances, and Sotnikov, managing a small smile for the only time in the film, 'consigns his soul' to the young witness, in whom his spirit will live on.<sup>14</sup> Second, when Rybak returns to the police compound he stares at the wide-open doors of the holding cell, which echo the empty tomb that served as proof of Christ's miraculous resurrection (Mark 16:4). In the holding cell, Sotnikov's face is illuminated with an almost holy glow while the other characters cling to him for support. Before leaving for the gallows, Sotnikov unsuccessfully attempts to assume all of the blame for the killing of a police officer in order to gain freedom for the others. Shepit'ko wants the viewer to see parallels between Sotnikov and Christ, so much so that Lawson calls the Christian symbolism of the film 'heavy-handed'.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the political context in which she worked, Shepit'ko downplayed the amount of religious imagery in her film. She insisted — disingenuously — that her literary source, Bykau's *Sotnikov*, contains more, implying that she could not be faulted, because she had in fact reduced the number of religious allusions in the story. Critics have not questioned this statement: Rosenberg, for example, asserts that 'She [Shepit'ko] was right when she told *Ecran* that Bykov's story makes more allusions to Christ and Judas than did her film'.<sup>16</sup> This assessment does not correspond to the reality of the two texts. While *Sotnikov* does contain references to religion, few of them explicitly concern Christ and Judas. Bykau's characters do mention God a handful of times, usually in conventional phrases such as '*Slava bogu*' ('Glory to God'), and allude to Judas only once, indirectly, when Demchikha, referring to Portnov and his fellow collaborators (not yet including Rybak), angrily states '*Chtob im na osine viset*' ('Let them hang on an aspen tree') (p. 267). Bykau's *Sotnikov* thinks of Christ once, but only when he realizes with distaste that, had his attempt to use his own death to save others succeeded, he would have been imitating Him:

*Sotnikovu bylo muchitel'no obidno za svoe naivnoe fantazerstvo — sam poteriv nadezhdu izbavit'sia ot smerti, nadumal spasat' drugikh. No te, kto tol'ko i zhazhdet liuboi tsenoi vyzhit', zasluzhivaiut li oni khotia by odnoi otdannoii za nikh zhizni? Skol'ko uzhe ikh, chelovecheskikh zhiznei, so vremeni Iisusa Khrista bylo prineseno na zhertvennyi altar'*

<sup>13</sup> See F. Beardow, 'Soviet cinema — war revisited. Part 3', *Rusistika*, 17 (March 1998), 11–24; B. Quart, 'Between Materialism and Mysticism: The Films of Larissa Shepitko', *Cineaste*, 16.3 (1988), 4–11; and K. Rosenberg, 'Shepitko', *Sight & Sound*, 56.2 (Spring 1987), 119–22, for discussion of the film's religious imagery.

<sup>14</sup> Holloway, 'Larissa Shepitko: Her Life and Films', p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> A. Lawton, *Kinoglasnost: Soviet Cinema in Our Time* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 30.

<sup>16</sup> 'Shepitko', p. 120. Beardow echoes her by asserting that 'the novel itself frequently alludes to Christ and Judas' ('Soviet cinema — war revisited', p. 12). Rosenberg does not cite a source, but she is likely referring to J. Vieira Marques and M. Martin, 'Entretien avec Larisa Chepitko', *Écran* (Paris), 15 March 1978, pp. 41–45 (p. 43).

*chelovechestva, i mnogomu li oni nauchili eto chelovechestvo? Kak i tysiachi let nazad, cheloveka snedaet v pervuiu ochered' zabota o samom sebe, i sami blagorodnyi poryv k dobru i spravedlivosti poroi kazhetsia so storony tol'ko po men'shei mere chudachestvom, esli ne sovershenno dremuchei glupost'iu.*<sup>17</sup>

Sotnikov found his own naïve dreaming agonizingly hurtful — having lost hope of saving himself from death, he took it into his head to save others. But do those who only desire to survive by any means deserve to have even one life sacrificed for them? Human lives, how many have already been brought to the sacrificial altar of humanity since the times of Jesus Christ, and have they taught this humanity a great deal? Just like thousands of years ago, man is first and foremost consumed by a concern with himself, and the most noble drive towards good and justice is still seen from outside as just eccentric at best, if not completely and absolutely idiotic.

Bykau's title character explicitly rejects Christ-like motivation for his behaviour, because he feels that self-sacrifice is not consistent with the reality of human nature.

The other religious allusions in *Sotnikov* also work in a manner that would be antithetical to Shepit'ko's purpose. For example, in the holding cell, Bykau's Sotnikov dreams that his father (an atheist commissar who hated priests) quotes what seems to him to be a verse from the Bible: '*Byl ogon', i byla vysshaia spravedlivost' na svete*' ('There was fire, and there was a higher justice in the world') (p. 278). The Bible he recalls was owned by his mother, but the passage he hears is not from the Bible, and the only higher moral force in his life is his father, whose '*kul't*' (cult) ruled the house (p. 279). In Bykau's novella, wounded Sotnikov and Rybak pause in the village cemetery before proceeding to Demchikha's house. The narrator suggests that the cemetery seems to have been sent by God to save them, and, in what could have been a powerful image on screen, Sotnikov, who is barely able to stand, spends some time supporting himself by holding onto a cross (p. 198). However as he looks around, he rejects what the cemetery represents: the 'naïve' human desire for eternal life (pp. 199–200). Bykau's Sotnikov acknowledges only the physical aspect of life and rejects any hope in life beyond it.<sup>18</sup> He has been close to death before and models his heroic behaviour on what he has seen from others in similar situations, including a '*pozhiloi sedoi polkovnik*' ('elderly, grey-haired colonel') who does not yield under German interrogation (p. 201) and a lieutenant who helps Sotnikov and many others escape from German captivity rather than meekly die as prisoners (p. 206). This Sotnikov is also driven by an intense desire not to be a burden to other humans (e.g. pp. 148, 185). Shepit'ko eliminated all references to human models and motivation for Sotnikov's behaviour, leaving only her added parallels with Christ to explain why Sotnikov chooses suffering over betrayal.

Shepit'ko removed almost all of Bykau's religious allusions from her screenplay and replaced them with a consistent system of references to Christ and Judas. For example, she adds the old woman who twice calls Rybak 'Iuda' after the execution

<sup>17</sup> *Bykov, Sotnikov*, in *Ego batal'on: povesti* (Moscow, 2000), p. 290. Further references to *Sotnikov* come from this edition; page numbers are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>18</sup> Ironically, in this sense Bykau's Sotnikov thinks much like Shepit'ko's Portnov.

and Rybak's unsuccessful attempt to hang himself like Judas.<sup>19</sup> Shepit'ko similarly connects Sotnikov and Christ by adding an epiphany scene — reinforced by Schnittke's music — in which Sotnikov lies wounded in the snow, and by restructuring the scene in the holding cell to include the bright aura around Sotnikov's face, the elder's confession to him, and Sotnikov's pleas to the other characters to help him live until morning so he can take all the blame upon himself (in the novella he sleeps or is unconscious most of the night and never reveals his plans to the others). By emptying the novella of what religious content it had and putting in its place a more focused series of images, it appears that Shepit'ko was attempting to strongly connect Sotnikov and Rybak with Christ and Judas.

While critics have noted Shepit'ko's association of Sotnikov with Christ, they have not pointed out that Sotnikov is a far from ideal Christ figure. When he and Rybak enter the elder's hut they interrupt his reading of the Bible and inside Sotnikov is rude to the elder's wife and surprised that Rybak does not shoot the elder as a collaborator.<sup>20</sup> He later confesses to the elder that he wanted to kill him. In the holding cell he yells at his fellow captives, cursing their '*shkury prodazhnye*' ('self-seeking sell-outs') because they cling to their earthly concerns in the face of death, and threatens that their actions will be remembered '*na tom svete*' ('in the next world'). When he discovers that Rybak is considering joining the occupation police, Sotnikov spits blood in his face; the next morning Rybak agrees to join he strikes his former comrade with his bound hands, knocking him to the ground. Just before heading to the gallows, he delivers a short speech in which, among other things, he expresses regret that he is going to his death not having killed enough of the 'enemy scum'.<sup>21</sup>

Shepit'ko's attitude towards religion also makes a primarily religious reading of *The Ascent* problematic. In a question and answer session in January 1979, she described herself as '*ne religiozna*' ('not religious'), and explained that she used Christ and Judas in her film because they are eternal archetypes with which all people are familiar.<sup>22</sup> Using such well-known characters, she told an audience in Berkeley, was 'the quickest road to reach the intelligence and hearts of all viewers'.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Bykau's Rybak cannot hang himself because his belt has been confiscated; Shepit'ko's asks that this be returned after the execution. In the holding cell Demchikha calls Portnov 'Tuda', another explicit Judas reference not found in *Sotnikov*.

<sup>20</sup> Mayors and village elders served with the approval of the Germans; it was a matter of partisan policy to assassinate them as part of the effort against the occupiers (E. Howell, *The Soviet Partisan Movement 1941–1944* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1956), pp. 63, 111).

<sup>21</sup> After Rybak drags the wounded Sotnikov away from the police, he props him up against a tree inside a frozen bush, whose frozen branches surround his head 'as if he were wearing a crown of thorns' (Beardow, 'Soviet cinema — war revisited Part 3', p. 12). Beardow does not mention that Sotnikov violently smashes the branches, perhaps rejecting this association with Christ. On the other hand, Christ does state that He has 'not come to bring peace, but a sword' (Matthew 10:34), warns that 'He who is not with me is against me' (Matthew 12:30), and drives the moneychangers out of the temple with a whip (John 2:15). But Christ does not exhibit the kind of violent behaviour Sotnikov does toward Rybak.

<sup>22</sup> Shepit'ko, 'Kogda my ne naprasny ...', in *Kniga o Larise Shepit'ko*, ed. by E. Klimov (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1987), pp. 168–76 (p. 171).

<sup>23</sup> Rosenberg, 'Shepitko', p. 120.

Even Lenin, Shepit'ko said, has been compared to Christ, making this an ideal association to use in her film.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the abundance of religious imagery in *The Ascent*, the film received generally positive reviews in major Soviet film publications,<sup>25</sup> interviews with Shepit'ko concerning the film were published,<sup>26</sup> and the film was screened in Soviet theaters, albeit with limited distribution.<sup>27</sup> After the film won a Golden Bear in Berlin in 1977 Shepit'ko was allowed to travel to film festivals in Telluride, Toronto, and again to Berlin, where she was a member of the jury in 1978. After her death in 1979 she was awarded a Soviet state prize '*za rezhisserskoe reshenie fil'mov poslednikh let*' ('for film directing in recent years').<sup>28</sup> These facts show that despite the controversial nature of her source text and the many religious images in her film, Shepit'ko and *The Ascent* enjoyed a certain level of official acceptance.<sup>29</sup>

Official Soviet criticism acknowledged the film's philosophical depth yet tried to downplay or ignore its layers of Christian imagery and avoided labelling it a religious work. For example, the review in *Sovetskii fil'm* refers to Shepit'ko and Klepikov's decision to place '*aktsent na filosofskoi podopleke sobytii, zainteresovavshikh pisatel'ia*' ('emphasis on the underlying philosophical layer of events, which caught the writer's interest').<sup>30</sup> A Soviet history of 1970's cinema interprets *The Ascent* as '*spor o sushchnosti cheloveka, o ego slabostiakh, na kotorye nabrasyvaetsia fashizm, stremias' rastoptat' v cheloveke chelovecheskoe, i o nesgibaemoi sile dukha, torzhestvuiushchei nad mucheniiami . . . Spor, reshennyi v vide tragediinoi pritchi, fil'm sozdannyi v tragedii metaforicheskogo kino*' ('a dispute about the essence of man, his weaknesses, which are exploited by fascism, striving to trample on the humane in man, and

<sup>24</sup> Shepit'ko, 'Kogda my ne naprasny . . .', pp. 171–72.

<sup>25</sup> e.g. E. Stishova, 'Khronika i legenda', *Iskusstvo kino* (September 1977), pp. 30–41; and V. Ponarin, 'Saga o dvoikh iz lesu', *Sovetskii fil'm*, 243 (1977), 35–37.

<sup>26</sup> e.g. 'Rezhisser Larisa Shepit'ko i ee novyi fil'm "Voskhozhdenie"', *Sovetskii fil'm*, 239.4 (1977), 5–8; Karakhan, 'Krutoi put' "Voskhozhdeniia"; and Romanenko, 'Larisa Shepit'ko: "Kinematograf chitaet Vasil'ia Bykova"'.

<sup>27</sup> Throughout production there were '*nemalo opaseni za sud'bu fil'ma*' ('quite a few apprehensions about the film's fate') because of its controversial source and themes (Golovskoi, *Kinematograf 70-kh. Mezhdou otpepel'iu i glasnost'iu*, p. 262). Klepikov later insisted that *The Ascent* was shown in theaters only because of the '*vyssokoe polozenie Masherova*' ('Masherov's high position') (V. Fomin, *Kino i vlast'. Sovetskoe kino 1965–1985 gody* (Moscow: Materik, 1996), p. 171). He is referring to Petr Mironovich Masherov, the powerful First Secretary of the Communist Party of Belorussia and hero of the partisan movement. Shepit'ko decided to first screen her film in Belorussia, its setting. According to Shepit'ko's husband Elem Klimov, after the screening Masherov wiped away his tears and broke the stunned silence (and official protocol) by speaking for forty minutes about the importance of this film. The many war veterans and party figures present that night agreed with him and within several days the film was officially accepted without a single change (E. Klimov, 'Slovo o Larise', in *Kniga o Larise Shepit'ko*, ed. by E. Klimov (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1987), pp. 11–20 (p. 12)).

<sup>28</sup> *Sovetskie khudozhestvennye fil'my*, p. 23.

<sup>29</sup> Golovskoi, on the other hand, labels Shepit'ko an '*outsider*' ('outsider') who engaged in a '*postoiannaia bor'ba s nachal'stvom*' ('a constant fight with the leadership') because of official efforts to ignore and repress her work as much as possible (*Kinematograf 70-kh. Mezhdou otpepel'iu i glasnost'iu*, pp. 258–61).

<sup>30</sup> Ponarin, 'Saga o dvoikh iz lesu', p. 36.

about the unbreakable spiritual power, which triumphed over the torture . . . A dispute, resolved in the context of a tragic parable, a film founded in the tragedy of metaphorical cinema').<sup>31</sup> Leonid Pochivalov recalled a discussion of the film between the Soviet ambassador and a Vatican delegate, after a showing of *The Ascent* in Accra at the ambassador's villa. When the delegate expressed his pleasure and surprise that he had just seen a '*poistine khristianskii fil'm*' ('a truly Christian film') made in an officially atheist country by a '*molodaia sovetskaia zhenshchina*' ('a young Soviet woman'), the ambassador replied that he, on the other hand, saw in the film the '*olitsotvorenie nepobedimosti dobra pered zlom i zhguchuiu, neistrebimuiu nenavist' k voine i nasiliuu*' ('a personification of the invincibility of good versus evil and a burning, undefeated hatred towards war and violence').<sup>32</sup>

Shepit'ko's use of a non-ideal Christ figure and official interpretations of the film suggest that there is a non-religious aspect to *The Ascent* that must be explored. Many critics who acknowledge the film's religious depth see in it an even stronger political meaning. Beardow, for example, argues that in the film '[t]here is a biblical sub text. It is a parable. But it is the Parable of the Good Soviet Citizen . . . his [Sotnikov's] values may be Christian, but these values stem from a belief in communism'.<sup>33</sup> He suggests that Sotnikov died so that communism could survive. Rosenberg claims that 'for all her Christian symbolism, Shepitko makes it clear — clearer than Bykov — that the source of resistance to the fascists was not the gospels but Soviet socialism'. She contends that 'in the end, Shepitko's Sotnikov turns into a model patriotic hero'.<sup>34</sup> Quart echoes them when she argues that, after her earlier films such as *Wings* were criticized, Shepit'ko 'seems to have moved quite deliberately to the firm foundation of Soviet heroism often depicted in "The Great Patriotic War"'.<sup>35</sup>

It is true that Shepit'ko, who was by no means an outspoken dissident, chose not to include many potentially politically problematic moments from Bykau's *Sotnikov*. She omits hints at poor Soviet war preparation (pp. 153–55), the elder's suggestion that the Red Army is to blame for losing the war (p. 166), and Demchikha's angry implication that partisans taking food from her are no better than Germans (p. 212). Surprised by her truculence, Rybak wonders if she was '*chem-libo obizhennaia pri Sovetskoii vlasti*' ('somewhat aggrieved with the Soviet authorities') (p. 213), which Shepit'ko similarly leaves out. She may have even altered the character of Portnov in order to avoid political problems: Bykau's investigator, the film's villain, was a communist atheist agitator before the war (p. 267), whereas Shepit'ko's was the local recreation centre director (*zavklubom*) who also directed the youth choir, a role less associated with politics.

<sup>31</sup> S. Drobashenko et al. (eds), *Sovetskoe kino: 70-e gody* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1984), p. 36. This book also describes the condemned prisoners' uphill climb to the gallows as '*podoben doroge na Golgofu*' (similar to the road to Golgotha) but does not mention Christ or develop this thought further (p. 227).

<sup>32</sup> L. Pochivalov, 'Tam, za trideviat' zemel' . . .', in *Kniga o Larise Shepit'ko*, ed. by E. Klimov (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1987), pp. 122–26 (p. 125).

<sup>33</sup> Beardow, 'Soviet cinema — war revisited', p. 15.

<sup>34</sup> Rosenberg, 'Shepitko', p. 120.

<sup>35</sup> Quart, 'Between Materialism and Mysticism', p. 11.



A political interpretation of *The Ascent* hinges on one scene. During the interrogation, Sotnikov refuses to reveal even his name, saying only '*pust' budet Ivanov*' ('let it be Ivanov'). When he tells Portnov that the others should be released because he, Sotnikov, is solely responsible for killing the policeman, Portnov answers '*Eto vse, grazhdanin Ivanov?*' ('Is that all, citizen Ivanov?'). Sotnikov replies:

*Net, ne Ivanov. Ia Sotnikov. Komandir Krasnoi armii. Rodilsia v 17om godu. Bol'shevik. Chlen partii s 35ogo goda. Po professii ia uchitel'. S nachala voiny komandoval batareei, bil vas, gadov, zhal', chto malo. Sotnikov menia zovut, Boris Andreevich. U menia est' otets, mat', rodina.*

No, not Ivanov, I am Sotnikov. A commander of the Red Army. I was born in 1917, I am a Bolshevik. A Party member since 1935. I am a teacher by profession. From the beginning of the war, I commanded an artillery battery, I fought against you bastards, it's a shame I didn't do it more. Sotnikov is my name, Boris Andreevich. I have a father, a mother and a homeland.<sup>36</sup>

These defiant words are not in Bykau's novella (p. 287), which leads more than one critic to ask whether Shepit'ko added them to appease party bureaucrats who might otherwise have shelved her film.<sup>37</sup> It seems unlikely that Shepit'ko, who was determined not to compromise and who risked her film not being shown by including so many religious images, would have added one short speech to ensure acceptance. This scene does have a certain political significance, but not necessarily of the traditional kind which may seem apparent at first glance. It could be argued that Sotnikov merely presents pieces of his biography; he does not emphasize his Party affiliation, referring to it as another fact of his life, equal to his profession as a teacher or role as a commander. Alternatively, given that the occupying Germans devoted special effort to liquidating communists, it is possible that Sotnikov mentions his Party membership specifically because he is trying to attract attention to himself and away from those around him, whom he hopes Portnov will free.<sup>38</sup> Mere mention of the Communist Party does not mean that Sotnikov is delivering a rousing propagandistic speech, especially since the words are directed only at Portnov, which Shepit'ko emphasizes by including only the two of them in a close-up shot while Sotnikov delivers these words, and then focusing on the effect they have on Portnov as he slowly turns away from his prisoner. Therefore this scene should be reexamined for other possible meanings, one of which can be found in the other, unacknowledged literary-philosophical source that informs *The Ascent*; the works of Fedor Dostoevsky.

<sup>36</sup> This speech cannot take place in Bykau's text because it is an unnamed 'nachal'nik' who listens to Sotnikov's attempt to assume blame for shooting the police officer; only after this episode does Portnov emerge and allow a pleading Rybak to join the police (pp. 287–88).

<sup>37</sup> e.g. Beardow, 'Soviet cinema — war revisited', p. 15; and Rosenberg, 'Shepitko', p. 121.

<sup>38</sup> This motivation for Sotnikov's speech is suggested by Drobashenko: '*pytaias' spasti vedomykh na kazn', Sotnikov odnomu vynosit prigovor — otkryto zaiavliaet, chto on komandir Krasnoi Armii, bol'shevik . . .*' ('trying to save those doomed for an execution, Sotnikov passes a sentence on to one of them — he openly states that he is a commander of the Red Army, a Bolshevik') (*Sovetskoe kino: 70-e gody*, p. 227).

Shepit'ko's interviews and works about her are replete with references to Dostoevsky, and he is the only cultural figure to be repeatedly mentioned by her. She discovered his works while in film school, and in 1979 said that '*Uvlekaius' Dostoevskim, liubliu ego*' ('I am keen on Dostoevsky, I love him').<sup>39</sup> The seven months spent in the hospital contemplating *The Ascent* she called '*vremenem, provedennym ne tol'ko s soboi, no eshche i s Dostoevskim*' (a time spent not only with myself, but also with Dostoevsky).<sup>40</sup> While there she wrote a screenplay based on Dostoevsky's *The Village of Stepanchikovo and its Inhabitants* (*Selo Stepanchikovo i ego obitateli*, 1859), which she referred to as a '*shagom k sleduiushchemu fil'mu*' ('a step towards her next film') (i.e. *The Ascent*).<sup>41</sup> Not surprisingly, critics referring to Shepit'ko's films frequently mention Dostoevsky's works. Romanenko argues that her films replicate 'the spiritual situations from classical novels, particularly those by Fyodor Dostoevsky'.<sup>42</sup> Elena Stishova states that Shepit'ko asks the same moral questions on which '*ves' Dostoevskii stoit, vsia russkaia kul'tura!*' ('the whole of Dostoevsky is based, the whole of Russian culture!').<sup>43</sup> Even a general work such as Thompson and Bordwell's *Film History: An Introduction* contends that 'Larissa Shepitko's films emphasize individual conscience and moral choice in the vein of Fyodor Dostoevsky and contemporary anti-Stalinist literature'.<sup>44</sup> It is logical, therefore, to look to Dostoevsky for clues as to the meaning of Sotnikov and his speech.

Of the changes Shepit'ko made to Bykau's text, perhaps the most significant come in the interrogation scene between Portnov and Sotnikov, which she and Klepikov, according to her own account, rewrote six times,<sup>45</sup> in an effort to turn Bykau's standard interrogation scene into a '*poedinok protivoborstvuiushchikh chelovecheskikh nachal*' ('a duel between conflicting human fundamentals').<sup>46</sup> The resulting moral duel is the film's main episode,<sup>47</sup> its '*ideino-filosofskii sterzhen*' ('ideological-philosophical core').<sup>48</sup>

The first part of Shepit'ko's interrogation scene does not stray far from Bykau's text.<sup>49</sup> Portnov introduces himself, Sotnikov refuses to give his name, and Portnov

<sup>39</sup> Shepit'ko, 'Kogda my ne naprasny . . .', pp. 169, 175.

<sup>40</sup> Rybak, 'Poslednee interv'iu', p. 189.

<sup>41</sup> This screenplay was initially accepted but was not allowed into production; at this point Klimov suggested Valentin Rasputin's *Proshchanie s Materoi* as a subject for her next film (N. Riazantseva, 'Prednaznachenie', in *Kniga o Larise Shepit'ko*, ed. by E. Klimov (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1987), pp. 142-46 (p. 146)). Interestingly, Klimov himself long desired to make a film version of Dostoevsky's *The Devils* (Shepit'ko, 'Kogda my ne naprasny . . .', p. 175).

<sup>42</sup> A. Romanenko, *Elem Klimov and Larisa Shepitko: Soviet Cultural Figures* (Moscow: Novosti, 1990), p. 54.

<sup>43</sup> This quote comes in a 'postskriptum' Stishova added to the republished version of her article 'Khronika i legenda' in *Kniga o Larise Shepit'ko*, ed. by E. Klimov (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1987), pp. 276-89 (p. 288).

<sup>44</sup> K. Thompson, Kristin and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), p. 627.

<sup>45</sup> Karakhan, 'Krutoi put' "Voskhozhdeniia", p. 99.

<sup>46</sup> Romanenko, 'Larisa Shepit'ko: "Kinematograf chitaet Vasilia Bykova"', p. 74.

<sup>47</sup> Romanenko, *E. Klimov and Larisa Shepitko*, p. 65.

<sup>48</sup> Golovskoi, *Kinematograf 70-kh. Mezhdru ottepel'iu i glasnost'iu*, p. 263.

<sup>49</sup> The sole exception to this is the question '*ty kto?*' ('who are you?') with which Shepit'ko's Portnov begins the scene. This question is significant because, as Portnov later explains, Sotnikov will find out who he truly is in the course of the interview and subsequent torture. He does find out, but the answer is not what Portnov expected.

asks how long Demchikha has been a partisan agent and where Sotnikov was wounded. Sotnikov tells him that Demchikha had nothing to do with their group, and appeals to Portnov, reminding him that she has three children. Here Shepit'ko's changes start to emerge; her Portnov tells Sotnikov that they already have enough evidence to execute them all, but repeats '*no deti, deti . . .*' ('but the children, the children . . .'). He tells Sotnikov that '*vam pridetsia obremenit' svoiu sovest'; teper' tak ili inache pridetsia*' ('you will have to burden your conscience; one way or another, you will have no choice'), i.e. either by answering questions to save the children, or by being responsible for their deaths.<sup>50</sup> Sotnikov replies '*ia ne predam, ne predam*' ('I will not betray, I will not betray'), because '*est' veshchi povazhnei sobstvennoi shkury*' ('there are things more weighty than one's own skin').<sup>51</sup> This rebellious statement elicits a laugh from Portnov, who has clearly considered these questions before. Portnov challenges him by asking '*nu gde oni? Nu chto eto? Iz chego on sostoit?*' ('Well, where are they then? Well, what is it? What does it consist of?') and counters his bravery with '*Eto chush'. My zhe konechny. So smert'iu dlia nas konchaetsia vse, vsia zhizn', my sami, ves' mir*' ('That's rubbish. We are mortal. With death, everything ends for us, our whole life, we ourselves, the whole world'). Portnov continues the mental torture by telling Sotnikov that if he does not cooperate they will receive the needed information from someone else but label Sotnikov as the traitor ('*i spishem vse na tebia*'; 'and blame everything on you'). In response Sotnikov calls him '*mraz*' ('scum'), to which Portnov calmly replies '*Vot seichas vy uvidite, chto takoe mraz' na samom dele*' ('As a matter of fact, you will now find out what scum is'), because all of his bravery and idealism will be replaced by simple fear ('*vse vytesnit strakh*'; 'everything will be replaced by fear') in the face of pain and death, and Sotnikov will see that he is the true '*mraz*'. Portnov attentively watches while Sotnikov is tortured, but sees only that he does not give in. After Sotnikov has been splashed with water to wake him, Portnov is unnerved by the sight of his glowing face, turns away, and orders him to be carried out.

Shepit'ko decided to '*uglubit' obraz Portnova*' ('deepen Portnov's image')<sup>52</sup> to remake Bykau's standard interrogation scene into a debate about human nature, in which Portnov and Sotnikov are '*dukhovnye opponenty*' ('spiritual opponents').<sup>53</sup> This confrontation pits Portnov's '*ia znaiu chto takoe chelovek na samom dele*' ('I know what a human truly is') against Sotnikov's insistence on values higher than one's own life. In *The Ascent* Portnov embodies an idea commonly found in Dostoevsky, the '*otsutstvie svobody vybora mezhdum dobrom i zlom*' ('the absence of the freedom of choice between good and evil').<sup>54</sup> Portnov, who himself must have made

<sup>50</sup> Bykau's Portnov simply says '*Pochemu todga vy ne podumali o rebiatakh? . . . A teper' pozdno*' ('Why didn't you think about the children then? . . . And now it's too late') (p. 239). He threatens solely with physical torture, while Shepit'ko's Portnov is much more cerebral, appealing to Sotnikov's sense of guilt and responsibility.

<sup>51</sup> Sotnikov's line contrasts sharply with Rybak's words to Portnov: '*kto zhit'-to ne khochet?*' ('who on earth doesn't want to live?').

<sup>52</sup> Shepit'ko, 'Kogda my ne naprasny . . .', p. 172.

<sup>53</sup> Romanenko, 'Larisa Shepit'ko: "Kinematograf chitaet Vasilia Bykova"', p. 74.

<sup>54</sup> Romanenko, 'Larisa Shepit'ko: "Kinematograf chitaet Vasilia Bykova"', p. 74.

compromises to stay alive,<sup>55</sup> insists that only the physical exists; humans are mortal and *'nachinnyye obyknovennym der'mom'* ('filled with ordinary shit'). Therefore, with no hope of an afterlife or existence beyond the physical, under extreme torture all people will react in the same manner, forgetting higher ideals such as patriotism, loyalty, and honour and making any sort of compromise to save their physical life. All humans can be reduced to this same principle and therefore, he argues, resistance is pointless. For him, *'vot gde istina'* ('this is where the truth lies'). Sotnikov, however, proves this theory invalid. He is an individual who stands up to Portnov's reductive philosophy and confirms that there are things more important than one's own skin, demonstrating that while they might not all have the moral strength to do so, all people have the freedom to choose good or evil. He picks death rather than betray his ideals; the choice of how to die — with honour — also remains his, as signified by his refusal of Rybak's help to mount the gallows (*'Ia sam'*; 'I'll do it on my own'). More importantly according to Shepit'ko, when Portnov sees the young boy at the execution, who will never forget what he has witnessed, he understands that he has lost the battle with Sotnikov, because *'Sotnikovy bessmertny'* ('Sotnikovs are immortal').<sup>56</sup>

In many ways, Shepit'ko's revised interrogation scene recalls the meeting of the Grand Inquisitor and Christ in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (*Brat'ia Karamazovy*, 1879).<sup>57</sup> Many of the parallels are already in Bykau's novella, for example, both have an interrogator speaking with a man arrested that day, whom they threaten to execute, but the interrogator does most of the talking (all in Dostoevsky's case). Both have as their background non-believers being murdered in the name of an idea. The Grand Inquisitor and Portnov have switched sides and vainly hope that the man they challenge — who represents the diametrically opposed view — will understand their actions and do the same. Shepit'ko adds elements that take the viewer even closer to Dostoevsky's text. Her interrogation, like Dostoevsky's, is mostly about human essence, not the actual 'crime'. The scene begins with a long shot of Portnov's roaring fire, echoing the fires that burn the heretics in Seville. Portnov gazes at Sotnikov for several long seconds before speaking, recalling the Grand Inquisitor, who *'dolgo, minutu ili dve, vsmatryvaetsia v litso ego'* ('for a long time, a minute or two, stares into his face') before speaking to Christ.<sup>58</sup> His first words are about identity; he asks Christ *'Eto ty?'* ('Is it you?'),

<sup>55</sup> Golovskoi suggests that Portnov switched to the German side *'ibo nenavidel sovetskii stroi'* ('because he hated the Soviet system') (*Kinematograf 70-kh. Mezhdū ottepel'iu i glasnost'iu*, p. 263) but his motivation remains unclear in the film.

<sup>56</sup> Romanenko, 'Larisa Shepit'ko: "Kinematograf chitaet Vasilia Bykova"', p. 74. Into the exchange between Sotnikov and the young boy Shepit'ko edits shots of Portnov staring intently, suggesting that he is aware of what takes place between them. During the interrogation Portnov questions Sotnikov's reasons for resisting, asking *'Radi chego? Primer dlia potomkov?'* ('For what purpose? As an example for future generations?'), and now he sees that this is in fact what has occurred.

<sup>57</sup> Rosenberg suggests 'there is more of him [Dostoevsky] than Bykov in this scene' ('Shepit'ko', p. 120). *The Ascent* is not the only example of a film about World War II that is informed by *The Brothers Karamazov*. Dunlop argues that the same is true of Chukhrai's *Ballad of a Soldier* ('Grigorii Chukhrai's "Ballad of a Soldier"', *Stanford Slavic Studies*, 1 (1987), 349–60.

<sup>58</sup> F. Dostoevsky, *Brat'ia Karamazovy* in *Sobranie sochinenii, Tom IX* (Moscow, 1958), p. 314.

paralleling Portnov's opening question, *'ty kto?'* ('who are you?'). Both questions go unanswered. Like the Grand Inquisitor, by the end of the scene Portnov still has physical power, yet the audience senses his moral weakness in the face of a better example. Each still clings to his original ideas, but clearly has been shaken by this meeting.

The Grand Inquisitor's words are the 'rationale that virtually every totalitarian system has used to justify its rule'.<sup>59</sup> By alluding to Dostoevsky's 'Legend of the Grand Inquisitor', and placing her Christ figure Sotnikov within this allusion, Shepit'ko creates a potential new reading of *The Ascent*. Opposed to the Grand Inquisitor stands Christ, the ultimate individual who, for Dostoevsky, rejects all coercion and affirms mankind's ability to choose between good and evil that dehumanizing totalitarian philosophies take away. In contrast to the herd that the Grand Inquisitor and Portnov see so condescendingly, Christ and Sotnikov stand for the individual and his inherent ability to choose between good and evil.<sup>60</sup>

In this light Sotnikov's final words to Portnov take on a potential new meaning. During the interrogation he refuses to give his last name to Portnov. The next morning before heading for the gallows, however, he reveals it, along with other biographical information, as a means of reminding Portnov that he is an individual with an identity, despite the investigator's attempts to deny him this uniqueness. Sotnikov's expression of his individuality demonstrates his refusal to become a member of the faceless herd that bows down to Portnov's dehumanizing philosophy in an attempt to save their lives.<sup>61</sup>

Shepit'ko insisted that each generation must have its own *'osoznannaia tochka npravstvennogo otcheta'* ('acknowledged point of moral reference') and rediscover spiritual values for itself.<sup>62</sup> Passively accepting these values unquestioningly from others places humanity's *'chelovecheskaia priroda v opasnosti'* ('human nature in danger'); this, she said, is the topic of the film (*'Ob etom fil'm'*; 'This is what the film is about').<sup>63</sup> Rybak is Shepit'ko's example of this danger; he, she warns, exemplifies *'katastrofichnost' bezdukhovnosti i obezlichenosti, vsiu tragichnost' otsutstviia u cheloveka podlinnykh idealov'* ('the catastrophic nature of despiritualisation and de-personalization, the whole tragedy of the man who lacks true ideals').<sup>64</sup> Shepit'ko shows Rybak's loss of humanity by connecting him with two animals, sheep and dogs. When the sleigh carrying the prisoners enters the police compound, the

<sup>59</sup> R. Feuer Miller, *The Brothers Karamazov: Worlds of the Novel* (New York: Twayne, 1992), p. 67.

<sup>60</sup> Portnov watches sadly as Sotnikov is tortured, as if realizing that Sotnikov represents a path he could have taken if he had the moral strength; this is perhaps why Shepit'ko introduces a connection between the two not present in Bykau's novella. They studied in the same teachers' institute in Vitebsk, the one piece of information about his past she supplies.

<sup>61</sup> The closing words of the interrogation are also about identity, emphasizing this important theme. Their roles are briefly switched, as Sotnikov asks Portnov *'kem ty byl do voiny?'* ('who were you before the war?') and Portnov does not answer, likely because he is aware he is also part of the faceless machine he represents.

<sup>62</sup> Karakhan, 'Krutoi put' "Voskhozhdeniia", p. 86.

<sup>63</sup> Romanenko, 'Larisa Shepit'ko: "Kinematograf chitaet Vasilii Bykova"', p. 70.

<sup>64</sup> Karakhan, 'Krutoi put' "Voskhozhdeniia", p. 91.

camera quickly shows a sheep being skinned nearby by German soldiers, who watch attentively as the prisoners are driven into the police station courtyard. Immediately after this, the camera cuts to Rybak, who is wearing a sheepskin coat, to which attention is called when one of the guards calls him *'polushuba'* ('sheepskin coat').<sup>65</sup> Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor condescendingly refers to humans as an obedient herd (*'poslushnoe stado'*), and Rybak follows along like one of the sheep of Portnov's herd. When wounded, Sotnikov confesses to Rybak that he was afraid to die *'odin v pole, kak sobaka'* ('alone in a field, like a dog'), but he does not, and the elder later tells him that he will die a human, not a dog (Bykau's Sotnikov, on the other hand, once feared burial in a nameless mass grave, but that now seems like a *'mechta'* ('dream') in light of how the Germans will likely dispose of his body; p. 188). Rybak, on the other hand, saves his physical life, but becomes the dog Sotnikov so feared. Barking is heard in the background throughout the final scene and the camera draws attention to a dog standing by the closing gate, with which Rybak is now alone in the courtyard. Rybak's desperate howl after his failed suicide attempt, on which the film ends, illustrates the dehumanizing effect his choice has had.

Shepit'ko consciously chose to use abundant religious imagery, but the religious and political complement each other in the film and work towards the same goal. Shepit'ko often spoke of the spiritual and the political in the same contexts; for example, in Bykau's *Sotnikov* she saw *'znachenie v zhizni liudei ne tol'ko obshchechelovecheskikh poniatii — "dukhovnost'", "samosoznanie", "moral'nyi dolg", — no glavnoe — znachenie tekh kommunisticheskikh idealov, kotorye vospitany v nas sovetskim stroem. Povest' govorit o dukhovnosti sovetskogo cheloveka'* ('the significance in people's lives not only of universal human concepts- "spirituality", "self-awareness", "moral debt" — but mainly — the importance of those communist ideals, which we have been taught by the Soviet system. The story talks about the spirituality of the Soviet man').<sup>66</sup> Shepit'ko demonstrates the convergence of Christian and political elements in two important moments. The young boy in whom Sotnikov will live on is wearing a *budenovka*, the Red Army hat introduced in 1919 and associated with the earliest days of communist rule in the Soviet Union. Its star echoes the star from Sotnikov's *pilotka*, which disappears after his capture.<sup>67</sup> In addition, Shepit'ko's Sotnikov proudly states that he was born in 1917; he is a literal child of the revolution (in the novella he was born in 1916, like Rybak). In an interview Shepit'ko describes Sotnikov as imbued with the positive spirit of this era: *'idei vremeni, vysokie idealy, entuziazm, al'truizm, napolniaiushchie te gody, — vse eto stalo neot'emlemoi chast'iu ego sushchestva'* ('the ideas of the time, high ideals, enthusiasm, altruism

<sup>65</sup> This passage also has Christian associations; immediately afterward two guards argue about who will receive this sheepskin coat after Rybak is executed, recalling the Roman soldiers casting lots for Christ's clothes (Mark 15:24). In the Gospels Christ is called the 'Lamb of God' (John 1:29) and His followers are sheep (John 21:16–17).

<sup>66</sup> Karakhan, *'Krutoi put' "Voskhozhdeniia"*, p. 87.

<sup>67</sup> Sotnikov is also branded with a star; while this was a real form of torture employed on partisans, it also emphasizes that his Christ-like suffering has political overtones (Bykau's Sotnikov is beaten and has his fingernails prized off).

which filled these years — all this became an integral part of his existence').<sup>68</sup> He goes to his death rather than be untrue to the ideals of 1917.

The repeated Judas images Shepit'ko introduces into *The Ascent* emphasize the theme of betrayal. Here it is important to note that Rybak plays Judas on two levels. First, he is the one who surrenders and thereby leads Sotnikov into captivity (although Sotnikov's alternative is death in Demchikha's attic). Second, and more importantly, Rybak betrays his country. The young boy in the *budenovka* witnesses Rybak's treacherous act and glares at him in silent judgment. Shepit'ko's references to the Grand Inquisitor, who has been disloyal to Christ, parallel Rybak's betrayal of higher ideals, in this case of a political nature against his country. The young boy and Sotnikov, the children of the revolution, have both been betrayed by Rybak, and ultimately by Portnov and his philosophy. In Bykau's novella Sotnikov thinks that Portnov looks like Hitler (p. 235), but Shepit'ko removes this similarity, allowing the viewer to compare Portnov to other totalitarian dictators, especially Hitler's opponent in World War II, Stalin. Stalin and his oppressive government, in this interpretation, represent a betrayal of early communist ideals — as Beardow notes, many have seen similarities between early communism and Christianity<sup>69</sup> — in favor of a totalitarian system that represses the individual. Gillespie strongly hints in the direction of this more universal reading when he asks, 'Portnov would have served as the typical "positive hero" in Stalinist fiction, the centre of resistance to Nazism, yet here he is its evil embodiment. Is Shepitko here suggesting that there is little difference between serving Nazi or communist masters?'.<sup>70</sup> He does not develop this thought further, but my analysis suggests an affirmative answer to his question.

Shepit'ko repeatedly said that her film would make sense '*lish' v tom sluchae, esli ideia kartiny okazhetsia tselikom napravlennoi v nashi dni*' ('only if the point of the picture turns out to be entirely focused on our time').<sup>71</sup> Sotnikovs, she argued, are needed today no less than they were during the war years, because of the important moral choices that must be made every day.<sup>72</sup> In order to better '*vstriakhnut' pogruzivshikhsia v son'*' ('shake up those who have fallen asleep')<sup>73</sup> she included references to Christ, politics, and literature in her film, all of which work toward the same end. The key to understanding Larisa Shepit'ko's *The Ascent* lies not in isolating layers of meaning and calling it a 'political' or 'religious' film, but in

<sup>68</sup> Karakhan, 'Krutoi put' "Voskhozhdeniia", p. 90.

<sup>69</sup> 'Soviet cinema — war revisited', p. 15.

<sup>70</sup> Gillespie, *Russian Cinema*, p. 139.

<sup>71</sup> Iu. Raksha, 'Moe proizvedenie — nash fil'm', in *Kniga o Larise Shepit'ko*, ed. by E. Klimov (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1987), pp. 129–37 (p. 130).

<sup>72</sup> Karakhan, 'Krutoi put' "Voskhozhdeniia", p. 87. It is important to note that Sotnikov's moral choice is echoed in the others who are executed alongside him. The elder says nothing about his partisan connections. Young Basia, despite torture, does not tell who helped to hide her. Demchikha, hysterical at the thought of leaving her children orphans, offers to reveal who hid Basia, but then, encouraged by the elder's words, supplies an obviously false name and refuses to say more. The same is true of Rybak's beloved Zosia and her family, who are shot and their farmhouse burned down.

<sup>73</sup> Karakhan, 'Krutoi put' "Voskhozhdeniia", p. 86.

considering its religious, literary, and political layers together. Her Sotnikov is like Christ, especially Dostoevsky's, but his suffering has political overtones, as he rejects (Stalinist) totalitarianism and dies for the firm individual stand he takes. Despite Portnov's best efforts, however, Sotnikov's example will live on as future generations look back and judge the events they have witnessed. Like the young boy's memory, Shepit'ko's film records an act of betrayal that current generations must judge and in turn be judged by the conclusion they reach. Therefore *The Ascent* must be considered an important example of a work dealing with Stalin's legacy that, she would likely argue, is still relevant today.