Red Requiems

Three films that examine communism in a revisionist light that leaves the past with nowhere to hide

Sayandeb Chowdhury

"I would go on to cover the more punitive mood towards East Germany's Stasi oppressors; the unending saga of complicity and blame; the arrival of the deutsche mark and the transition from "We are the people", to "We are one people", as unification became inevitable. It was the birth of a different Europe, free of old divisions and shackles, the one still coming to terms with its variety and responsibility even now. That's the big picture we'll be marking this year. Yet it's the details that stay freshest in the mind from that autumn that changed the world. One of the great happinesses of my life is when people ask me, 'Where were you in 1989?' I can just say: 'I was there.'"

Anne McElvoy, 'The Night the Wall Came Down', *TIME* magazine, *1989 –Remembrance special issue* (June 29-July 6, 2009)

It is two decades, to the year, since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The world has since been so profoundly churned that its state has been altered forever. This period has names laden with meaning: age of globalisation, age of the vanishing of the nation-state, age of Islamic terrorism, age of technology and the Worldwide Web. But the identifier most pertinent might be 'age of post-communism'.

"Atworst, postcommunism meant a complete erasure of the communist order. At best it shared the *fin de siecle* agnosticism of 'post' societies. But it is undeniable that postcommunism encompasses one of the most grandiose acts of political and economic reconstitution in history," writes Prof Richard Sakwa, whose ecumenical *Postcommunism* (1999) is one of first detailed studies on defining 'post-communism' and examining its epistemological foundation.

The task of defining an age that peaked – in Cold War belligerence and gargantuan state economies – years ago is problematic. By 1989, communism was already 'post' by at least a decade, the coup de grace and its dismemberment not a question of if but when.

Professor Sakwa goes on to write, "(A) distinction is often drawn between the communism as practiced by some two dozen countries that proclaimed themselves on the road to communism, and an altogether purer theoretical form outlined by the founding fathers of communism, Karl Marx, Frederick Engels and their successors. The distinction between the two communisms – the latter sometimes designated as 'Communism', while the former is more modestly referred to as 'communism' – is one that came to be accepted by communist leaders themselves."

Both communism with a capital C and with a lower case, connected by this ideology's disturbing record in power through the better part of the 20th century, found themselves on the wrong side of history in 1989. By then, 'communism' was already a residual political and economic force, its grip on the governments of the dozen or so states in Eastern Europe slipping every day, its worldwide honour and influence just a blip on the radar.

What is of greater importance to us is the fall of 'Communism' as an idea, a state of mind, an alternative. One is reminded of Czech reformist leader Vaclav Havel's pronouncement in a powerful essay titled 'The Post-Communist Nightmare' (*The New York* Review, May 1993), in which he wrote that the fall of the Communist empire was an event of the same scale of historical importance as the fall of the Roman Empire. What he was referring to was the spectacular shift of Communism from history's stage and the vacuum that was thus created, making the immediate aftermath of this reordering a case study in painful transition. It is generally agreed that 'post-communism' does not mean the political and economic erasure of communist policies and authoritarian doctrine in Eastern Europe; it means communism's departure from the theatre of history and the momentous consequences of that departure.

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An act of erasure this grand makes powerful demands on the following generation. Often, like Hollywood blockbusters made after World War II, artistic responses are over-the-top, larger-than-life and simplistic. The Cold War offered similar, 'heroic' possibilities to Hollywood, which duly exploited them with élan, mostly with science fiction and spy thrillers. Intellectual/artistic responses to the fall of Communism similarly cashed in on the popular discontent with the communist regimes. There are many ways to look at the problematic of Communism's fading. The American artistic response, for example, or that of the West, or the non-Soviet block, recorded the triumph of a 'free' state. There were responses that recorded dismay, remorse and horror. Instead of predictably displaying emotions, some responses problematised the change, recording the imminent, and immanent, chaos of change.

But one type of cinematic response to the fall of communism has been mature – if clinical – partly because cinema cultures the world over have learnt from the excesses of Hollywood. The weak whimper – instead of the roar of passing – of communism's fall prevented most artistes affected by it from deifying the forces that did communism in. Competitive nuclear spending with the US, a keeling economy and massive pressure from its allies apart, it is generally accepted that Soviet communism dismembered itself from within. Meditations on communism's expiry meant drilling into and scrutinising its every aspect, exploring the smallest details of the communist grand narrative.

The responses to communism's fall, wherever they have come in from, have been varied – from the sombre (*4 months, 3 weeks and 2 days*, 2007) to the tragic (*A Pin for the Butterfly*, 1994), the farcical (*God Walks Backwards*, 1991) to the satirical (*Between Marx and a Naked Woman* 1995). But no part of the world escaped the aftershock. Bengali auteur Mrinal Sen made *Mahaprithibi* (*World Within, World Without*, 1991), about how the fall of the Berlin Wall a world away resonated inside the four walls of a Bengali middleclass family that had varying degrees of sympathy for communism.

Very few recent films, though, have treated the privately held fears of that public shame more poignantly than Aleksandr Sokurov's *Taurus* (2000) and Wolfgang Becker's *Goodbye Lenin* (2003). The cycle of complicity and blame in the Stasi regime in East Germany became the subject of Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others* (2006).

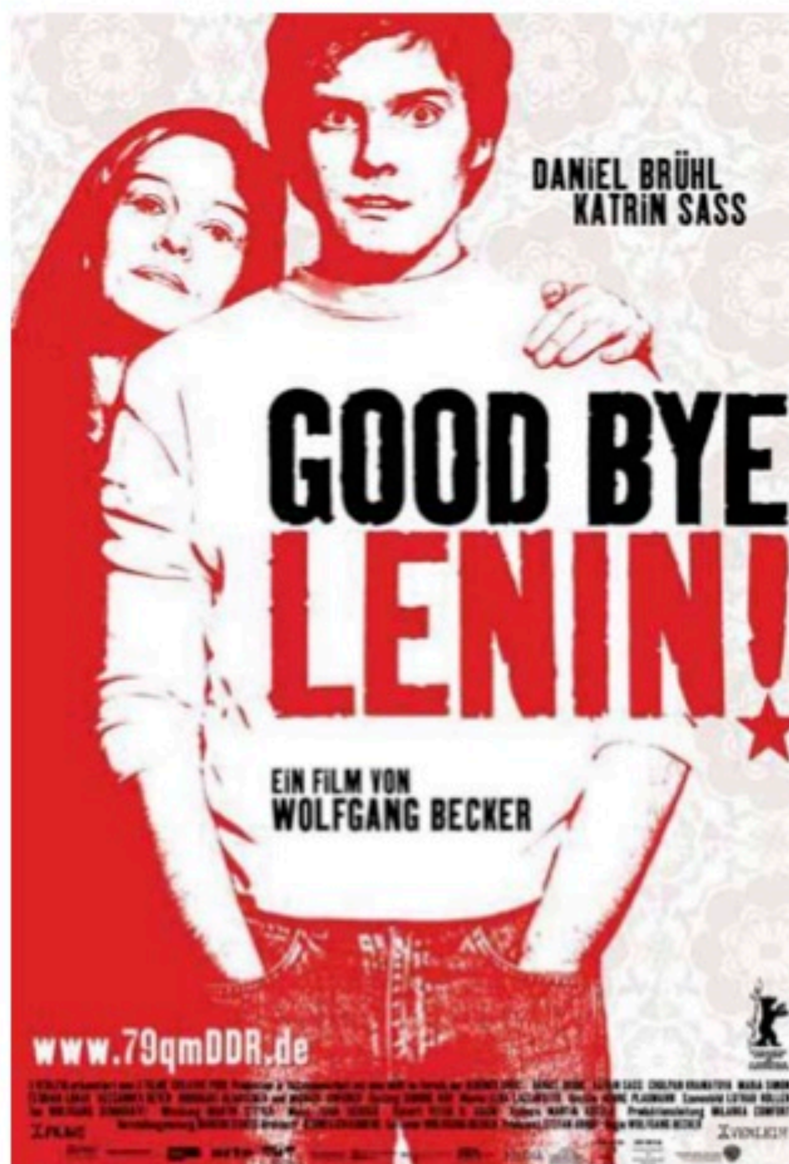
Taurus is about the pestilential last days of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, when he waits for death at the Gorky Estate in the company of his wife, far from the madding politics of the Kremlin. This edifice is riven by the power play between two politburo members, Joseph Stalin and Leon Trotsky, that is pushing the newly-founded communist country into poverty, oppression and the vanishing hope of a decent future. What this future actually looked like becomes apparent in *The Lives of Others*. This film is a powerful drama about a Stasi policeman who is asked to keep watch on the private life of a famous playwright, a scrutiny, which leads to an inevitable tragedy that is undercut by the officer's noble attempt at his own salvation. What happens when such a regime transfers its own insecurity into its innocent citizens is the subject of *Goodbye Lenin*.

The films explore some of the basic maladies of communism: personality cult, a fetish for the macabre, falsehood and artifice, and contempt for the fundamental innocence of human nature. In taking a long and hard look at communism, the films mapped an elaborate and rich tapestry of personal histories in Eastern Europe. The footnotes of small, unknown chronicles, mauled and manoeuvred by the grand narrative of history, detail the studied malevolence of totalitarian regimes. These three films serve to create a continuous narrative that begins with the rot that set in the USSR with Lenin's superannuation and retreat into the wilderness of his own paranoia (*Taurus*), moves into a close study of abuse of power and faith under communism (*Lives of Others*) and mock jocularly catches communism by its tail when it is making the final retreat (*Goodbye Lenin*).

These films are convincing examples of how cinema can evoke an era powerfully and sensitively without succumbing to sensationalism, criticism or partisanship and establish why Cinema is, at its best, the most felicitous means of understanding failed histories.

Failed histories can more often than not be traced back to the fallacies of their founding fathers, which Sokurov puts under intense scrutiny in *Taurus*. In an interview to the *Daily Telegraph*, he said, "Power is a human condition. Power does not come from God – it is people who give power to others. When people wield immense power, for some reason, at some point, they decide they are not bound by morality. Without morals, power corrupts."

Taurus is the second of Sokurov's tetralogy on men who shaped history in the previous century. But much like his Hitler (*Moloch*, 1999) and Hirohito (*The*



Sun, 2005), his Vladimir Ilyich is not the Bolshevik Lenin iconised in Soviet era books and posters. He is a Lenin few of us know and even fewer would want to know.

Kirill Galetski wrote in 'Sokurov takes intimate look at Lenin's last days' (*St Petersburg Times*, March 2, 2001), "Sokurov sees Lenin as an unfortunate and even incongruous figure. 'He slept through the Revolution,' he says. 'He really missed out on the significant events.'"

This is Lenin that the thousands who deified him in Russia and elsewhere would have best forgotten. In deconstructing Lenin's last days, Sokurov identifies the pestilence that would set in the USSR and that would end decades later only with the death of communism. Sokurov told *The Times*, "My purpose is to delve into the characters of the people involved in the story. These are not films about dictators, but about people – about people at that moment in their lives when there are no longer any advisors around them and the only advice they can and must take is that of their own character."

Lenin, in *Taurus*, is just a fragile old man at the cusp of his twilight years, waiting for his body to pass into oblivion even as his name is being immortalised to legitimise acts of unbelievable tragedy and horror in the aftermath of a Revolution that is undoing itself. This is perhaps why the film is shot in a hazy blue tinge bordering on sepia: it places under a harsh light the man and his failing anatomy.

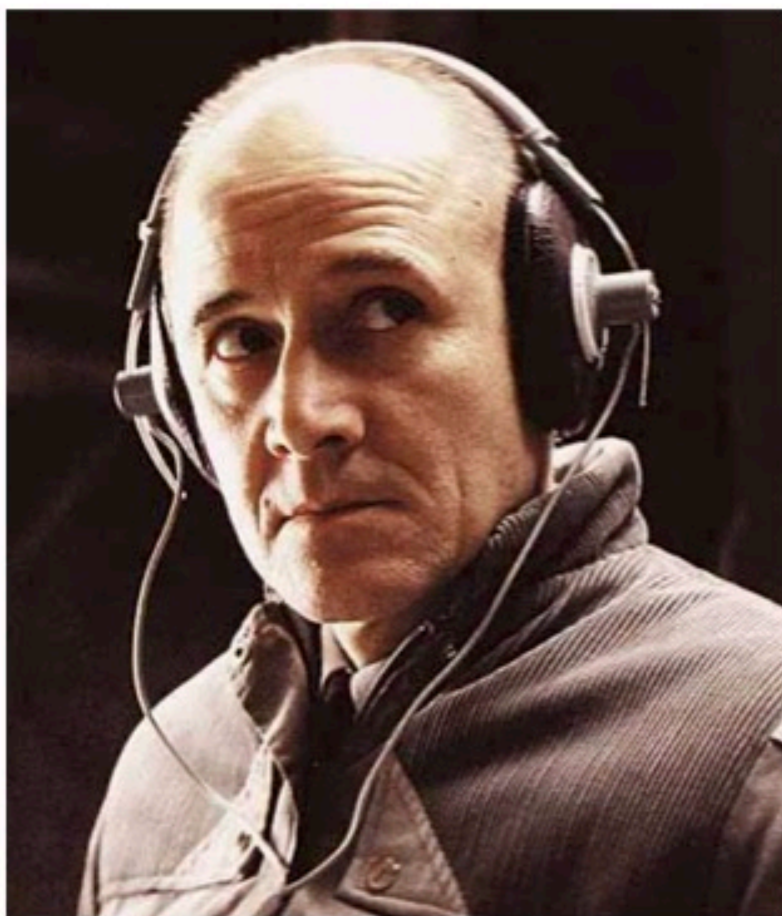
Galetski writes, "Despite the surface trappings of period detail, the film does not look at the events from a historical, political or even exclusively Russian perspective. Despite being lionized in a personality cult among the masses, he (Lenin) has himself become just about irrelevant in person. The attending staff that take care of him in his last days treat him either with perfunctory indifference or like a child. He anxiously awaits news from Moscow. The final scene, where Lenin cries out in despair only to be answered by the mooing of a cow, is particularly poignant and powerful."

Lenin howls and squirms his way to death. He finds no comfort in anything, least of all in himself; but he takes a passing pleasure in the details of torture and violence that rage in his name around the nation he helped bring into being. What he does not know is that he is soon to be embalmed, in a glorious display of hollow tribute, in perpetual isolation in Moscow's Red Square. It is a macabre process detailed in *Lenin's Embalmers* (1997), a gripping memoir by Ilya Zbarsky, son of Lenin's chief embalmer, Boris Zbarsky.

In his insightful essay, 'A Good Year' (*TIME*, 1989 commemorative volume, June 29-July 6, 2009), *Sunday Times* deputy editor Martin Ivens writes: "The harsh truth may (also) be that not enough people died in the final struggle in the East to make Westerners commemorate its heroes as they should. In its heyday communism concealed monstrous crimes rather well from those who did not want to know the truth. The Oscar-winning film *The Lives of Others* was such a hit because it came as a genuine surprise to many educated Western viewers that the Stasi in East Germany was so oppressive. The tendency to give communist systems the benefit of the doubt was ingrained in the anti-American left."

The power of debutant, Oscar-winning director Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others* lies, as Ivens writes, in his retelling of the past as many never knew it. More importantly, his film told the story as it should be told – stripped of affection and proselytising.

Hauptmann (captain) Gerd Wiesler of the Stasi, the East German secret police, is entrusted with keeping a watch over noted playwright Georg Dreyman and his actress partner Christa-Maria Sieland. Wiesler, Spartan and unsparing, puts his heart into the job of a spy: he thinks it is his duty to preserve the sanctity of socialism. Gradually, he realises that Dreyman is being watched not because of his suspected pro-Western sympathies but because a powerful minister, Hempf, wants the beautiful Sieland. Even as Wiesler finds himself entrenched in the complex life of his subject(s), he also becomes aware of the vacuity of his own vocation, his loneliness and the fact that his subjects are no less human than himself.

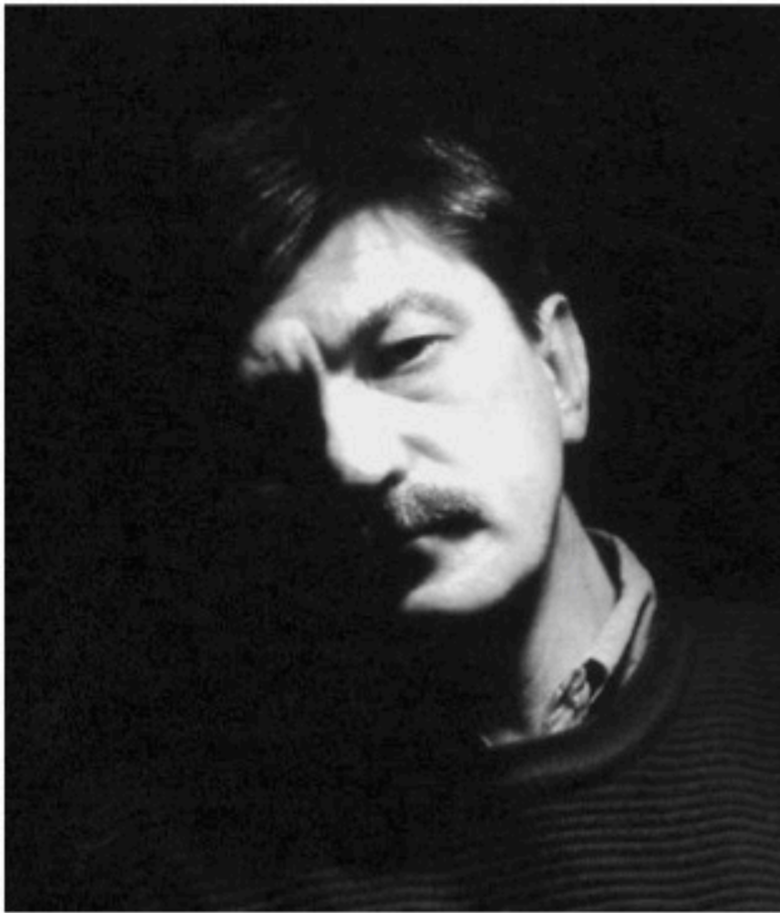


A still from The Lives of Others

When Dreyman eventually takes on the regime, Wiesler acts on his own faith and saves him at the cost of his own honour. By then, the stakes are too high to avoid a final collision that kills Sieland, saves Dreyman and sends Wiesler to a professional wilderness. Only after the fall of the Wall does Dreyman know the truth. He writes a book, dedicating it to the anonymous HGW XX/7, Wiesler's code name, whom he has never met. The book is titled *Sonata for a Good Man*.

The Lives of Others completely eschews any experimental intent; it lets old-fashioned realist narrative take the story forward. Victims of the Stasi might not appreciate the manner in which a Stasi captain is permitted salvation. But, then, people tend to act unpredictably; human behaviour is not directed by indoctrinated logic but by faith in itself, a lesson that communism learnt at its own expense.

While *Taurus* infantalises L enin and *The Lives of Others* humanises the Stasi, *Goodbye Lenin* allegorises communism. Set in East Berlin, in the period between just prior to the fall of the Wall and the Unification of the two Germanys, the film traces the very ordinary life of Christiane, her son Alexander, daughter Ariane, and Ariane's daughter Paula. Since her husband abandoned the family for the West 10 years ago, Christiane has learnt to tune her life, her beliefs and her thoughts according to the com-



Alexander Sokurov

mand of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany. She is the utterly gullible common person, hypnotised by the gobbledygook of a mythical welfare doctrine and unable to imagine a life outside the regime.

No wonder that when she discovers her son's presence in anti-government protests in the months leading to the fall of the Wall, she collapses and retreats into a coma. When she wakes up eight months later, the Wall is gone and her East is forever changed. Before she catches on, however, on advice of doctors who fear that such a shock could prove catastrophic, her children whisk her away to her room and create an eloquent and elaborate artifice to make her believe that socialism is intact. The artifice becomes increasingly elaborate and complicated as Christiane gets better and wants to see more of the world around her, whose changes she senses but is unable to pin down.

The film juxtaposes Christiane's make-believe world with the evolving world outside. Western advertisements, giant billboards of multinationals and the gradual effacement of communist hagiography at the periphery of her vision sit uneasily with visuals of old clothes, socialist anthems, acts of forced forgetting – and a generous sprinkling of community-manufactured pickle jars. Christiane dies just after the Unification, sensing but without the full conviction that socialism is dead. Her ashes are scattered in the wind that travels across the recently-dismembered Wall.

No doubt, the changes and trials attending the change of guard in Eastern Europe were far more widespread and complicated than that the three films could have hoped to capture. What the films do, perhaps a little more than others made in the same period, is tease us into arguments about what finally killed communism. Corruption? Mistrust? Big Brother butchery? Mass hypnotism? Gorbachev? Desire for freedom? Or a combination of all these?

A quick answer lies, perhaps, in an event closer home. At the Calcutta Film Festival 2001, the West Bengal Left government, the patron of the festival, stalled the screening of *Taurus* when it discovered that the film had Lenin's old age as its theme. The government reasoned that the film was distorted, not historical. Sokurov was attending the festival; he abruptly departed for London, apparently very miffed with the ban.

In the same festival four years later, *Goodbye Lenin* was shown to full houses. And last year, *The Lives of Others* released in cinema halls in the city, without stirring up trouble. Nor has any other revisionist film shown lately in the city faced opposition.

The Indian Left's apprehensions notwithstanding, all that *Taurus* does is strip communism's founding father of cultist glory. It has not struck the Left establishment that in *Goodbye Lenin* the implication that all of communism is an artifice fuelled by and exploiting the people's hope is far more ideologically damaging. But, then, this is the kind of irony that post-Cold War revisionist cinema is made of – and the three films above are the best reinterpretations of a past whose death rattle continues to shake the world. ◻