

Russian Release of 'Child 44' Canceled for Being 'Negative' About Soviet Union

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The film had already been dubbed into Russian and advertised around the country, and was due to be released nationwide on April 16.

A major Russian film distribution company has decided to cancel Russian showings of the British film "Child 44" that depicts a disgraced Soviet secret services agent who comes up against the totalitarian system in his investigation of a series of child murders, the distribution company said Wednesday.

The decision was made on the eve of the planned premiere after the film, the first part of a trilogy, was shown to representatives of Russia's Culture Ministry, who criticized it for historical inaccuracies and for portraying Russia in a negative light.

"We are satisfied that our position coincides with that of the Culture Ministry. We believe that the government must strengthen control over the distribution of films that have socially significant context," Central Partnership, the distribution company, said in its statement.

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Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky issued a lengthy official statement on the subject Wednesday in which he slammed the film for its negative portrayal of the Soviet Union and called on Russians to defy attempts to belittle the importance of Russia as a great civilization that defeated Nazism 70 years ago.

"This film follows the recipe to the letter: Stalin arranges the *holodomor* [Ukrainian famine] especially for Ukraine and kills 25,000 people every day; starving children eat their weaker classmates; it is forbidden to investigate crimes in the Soviet Union because 'we don't have murders, they happen only under capitalism,'" Medinsky wrote about the film.

"This is not a country, but Mordor [a dark wasteland in the science fiction books of J. R. R. Tolkien], with physically and morally defective sub-humans, a bloody mash of some orcs and ghouls: this is the type of country in which the film's action unfolds in the 1930s-50s. This is how our country is shown — the same one that just won in a great war, became a world leader and is about to send the first human into space," Medinsky wrote.

The culture minister equated the image of the Soviet Union in the film to a direct threat to Russia's identity and statehood, and expressed surprise that the many people who had worked on bringing the film to Russia had not questioned it earlier.

The film is based on an award-winning novel written by British writer Tom Rob Smith. The book was translated into Russian and published here in 2012.

"One of the main characters of the film is Soviet Russia itself — a terrible mix of horror and absurdity," the author said in an interview in the Russian edition of the book.

Many Russian film critics gave the movie negative reviews, accusing it of containing historical inaccuracies.

The scandal over the film "Child 44" comes hot on the heels of a recent high-profile dispute over the production of Richard Wagner's opera "Tannhauser" at the Novosibirsk Opera and Ballet Theater.

After Russian Orthodox activists complained about the production, prosecutors opened an investigation into theater director Boris Mezdrich and stage director Timofei Kulyabin on suspicion of offending religious believers, and the culture minister fired Mezdrich.

In another unfolding culture scandal Wednesday, actors from western Russia complained to the culture minister about a play being staged in their theater, arguing that its characters — who include downtrodden people, corrupt bosses and a "dwarf tsar" oppressing his country — reflect "political preferences" that the troupe does not share, media outlets reported Tuesday.

The play "Banshchik" ("Bath Attendant"), which is yet to premiere at the theater, was intended as a "documentary" about Pskov's inhabitants, but has turned into a "predictable piece of 'modern art' typical of the current time" that casts the city in an unfair light, the actors said in their letter to Medinsky, TASS reported.

Troupe manager Gertruda Avdyukova said the script for the documentary play was based on transcripts of interviews with real inhabitants of Pskov, but while "interviews included all kinds of crude expressions, not all of it should go into the play," Izvestia reported.

The actors objected to the play featuring scantily clad women in a bath house, drinking and obscene language, and found faults with some of the supposed "political" connotations, according to the letter.

"The characters in the play about Pskov inhabitants will necessarily include a suffering low-ranking person, talented and oppressed by the system, who will come to a bad end," the letter was quoted as saying. "The typical representatives of our town in the 'documentary play' will be two prostitutes, an orphan with a tragic childhood, a female investigator and a low-ranking police officer."

"There will be an obligatory greedy, primitive bath house manager, and above all of that, lightly sketched, there will be the 'cause of all evil and suffering' — a dwarf tsar," the complaint read, TASS reported.

The actors claimed they had no wish to limit the theater's repertoire to upbeat plays, but said that they also "do not want to be hostages to the director's political preferences, and don't want to be involuntary supporters of crudeness," according to the letter.

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