

# The Eternal Martyr: Karen Shakhnazarov's *White Tiger* as a Cinematic Reflection on Russian Martyrdom

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**Abstract:** *The contemporary official attempts to reconstitute a national self-image through a reinterpretation of Russia's history show strong elements of self-heroization as well as self-victimization. This renewed orientation towards the past focuses in particular on the victory of the Stalinist regime in World War II: heroism and victimhood are intertwined here in a very complex way. The new master narrative allows for an interpretation of Russia's 20<sup>th</sup>-century history in which the millions of Russian victims of the Soviet regime are recast as martyrs who died for the cause of defending or rebuilding the transhistorical Russian Empire. This paper analyzes Karen Shakhnazarov's film *White Tiger* (2012) as an artistic reflection on, or perhaps criticism of, such attempts to construct a transhistorical if not justification, then at least meaning, behind Russian history. Shakhnazarov thus takes issue with recent popular Russian films like *We are from the Future I and II* (2008 and 2010) or *Fog I and II* (2010 and 2012), films that, contrary to *White Tiger*, clearly sustain the idea that in a most literal way direct lessons for the present can be learned from the—unequivocally readable—past.*

There are in my view two main reasons why the theme of martyrdom is very relevant for contemporary Russian culture. The first is that it fits very well with official attempts to reconstitute a national self-image through a reinterpretation of Russia's history, especially, but not exclusively, that of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These attempts may be observed starting around 2005 (cf. Kopusov 2011) but are very obvious