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Biographical note

Kristina Tanis (PhD) is an associate professor at HSE University. Her research interests lie in the area of cinema, ranging from economic history and historical film perception to digital tools in cinema studies. She was a visiting fellow at the German Historical Institute in Moscow, the Aleksanteri Institute, and the Centre for Russian, Caucasian and Central European Studies. Her papers have been published in peer-reviewed journals and volumes. As a NEC fellow, she completed her first monograph dedicated to trophy films in the USSR.

TRAVELING TIBET: THE CASE STUDY OF ONE FILM'S TRANSLOCATION

Kristina Tanis

Abstract

This paper performs a case study on the film *Secret Tibet* (*Geheimnis Tibet*, 1943). The footage was filmed during the German expedition to Tibet in 1938–1939, and the first version was released on German screens in 1943. However, in 1945, the Soviet troops transported the film as part of the Reichsfilmarchiv in the USSR, made significant changes, and re-issued it as a Soviet documentary. The distributional history of *Secret Tibet* provides a fruitful platform for juxtaposing the film cultures and cultural policies of both states. Applying a comparative approach to the goals, features, and historical contexts of the film releases in both cases, it is possible to reveal German and then Soviet imagination on Tibet.

Keywords: translocations, Tibet, cultural transfers, Kulturfilm, USSR, Germany

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1. Introduction

In 1938–1939, a group of German scientists under the direction of Ernst Schäfer conducted an expedition to Tibet. These were the first Europeans who received the Tibetan government's official invitation to visit forbidden city of Lhasa. They spent in Tibet six months, visiting not only Lhasa but also Yarlung Valley, Tibet's largest cities and fortresses. As Ernesto Milá argues, "No expedition to Tibet so captured public attention with its plans

than a group of five German researchers shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War" (Milá, 1990). Despite taking place many years ago, the expedition has since become surrounded by myths and legends.

Crypto-historians and conspiracists represent the history of the expedition in the context of Himmler's interest in occultism (Trimondi, 1999). From this perspective, its mission aimed to discover links between the Aryan race and Tibetan mysticism, thereby legitimizing Nazi ideology (Caron-Belloni, 2021). However, academic discussions primarily focus on two aspects of the expedition. Some scholars approach it from political history, arguing that one of its main aims was to establish contacts with the regent of Tibet, Réting Rinpoche, and incorporate Lhasa into the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo Axis (Андреев, 2006; Hauner, 1981). Others, in contrast, emphasize the scientific objectives of the expedition (Detlev, 2006). As German Tibetologist Isrun Engelhardt suggests, Schäfer organized the expedition with purely scientific goals but found himself drawn into the processes of big politics (Engelhardt, 2003; Engelhardt, 2007; Engelhardt, 2008).

However, what remains largely unexplored is the afterlife of the film footage shot during the journey, despite the fact it served as the basis for different films. The first version of the film, *Secret Tibet* (*Geheimnis Tibet*, 1943), was released in Nazi Germany in 1943. After the Second World War, the film was transported to the Soviet Union, re-edited, and reissued as a Soviet documentary. This is the second version. Finally, the third version, based on the film footage, was created in the American occupation zone of Germany in 1950. The afterlife of the expedition's footage provides a platform for juxtaposing the versions of one film. Applying a comparative approach, this paper examines the goals, features, and historical contexts these releases. Due to the inability to access sources, in this article I analyze only two versions: the original German version and the postwar Soviet one. They highlight the particular points of convergence between German and Soviet political imagination and cinematic cultures that allowed seeing and presenting Tibet as a mute object of dissection and influence. Certainly, each version resulted from a particular political situation and cinematic cultural traditions. A common element is that the nature of the documentary footage itself allowed multiple manipulations, masking the provenance and imposing the stories on the images by voice-over. The case of *Secret Tibet* sheds some light on how displaced archival footage was re-circulated in different contexts, actualizing the differences and

similarities between cultures and political regimes and expanding the understanding of cinema's flexibility as a medium.

2. Historiography and structure

In a broader sense, the case of *Secret Tibet* is embedded in several overlapping historiographical fields. The history of the expedition constitutes a part of historiography dedicated to European engagement in Tibet and the issue of Western Imagination. Closely connected with the mechanisms of power, exploitation, and domination, the latest contributes to the construction of images of the Other (Said, 1978). Nevertheless, as Mary Louise Pratt has shown, European encounters with other cultures were heterogeneous and often included improvisation. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Tibet was a "blank canvas" for Europeans, as it was most geographically and politically isolated space, unknown and entirely unexplored, from the Western perspective (Neuhaus, 2012). Tom Neuhaus stresses that this mixture of remoteness and exoticization of ancient civilization fascinated Europeans, while the lack of information offered a considerable degree of freedom in Tibet's representation and at the same time served as a mirror.

The film footage's afterlife in Germany and its re-use in the Soviet Union refer to the issue of seizures and war spoliations. From this point of view, the paper follows in the footsteps of such an approach as patrimonial translocations, introduced by Bénédicte Savoy (Terroni, 2016). Taking into account that terms in the research field of war pillage and confiscations encapsulate the perspective of the victors and retrospectively legitimize the seizures, Bénédicte Savoy proposed this new concept, which, on the one hand, excludes additional political implications inherent to such terms as seizure, looting, trophy, spoliation, or salvation. On the other hand, the semantic contours of the term cover the whole range of practices associated with the object of displacement (Savoy, Bodenstein, Lagatz, 2024). The concept of translocation is borrowed from genetic chemistry and refers to the process of exchange between chromosomes caused by DNA damage. As a result of breakage and chromosomal rearrangement, a cell can mutate and acquire new properties. In the same way, a cultural object is transformed and simultaneously brings with it the transformation of the societies that lost the object and the societies that gained it through displacement. The process of fracture and recovery raises the question of

individual and collective trauma. Finally, the definition of translocation also puts the concept of place at the forefront. In this particular case, these are the place of shooting, the place of film production and exhibition, the place of exile and the place of storage, the place of mutations, and the place depicted on the Soviet screens. These travels raise the question of transnational spaces, as they witness the intellectual, aesthetic, and symbolic dynamics of states, regimes, and cultures. As Benedict Savoy argues, "the articulation of these three elements: place, wounds and transformation — is crucial in terms of understanding the logic of patrimonial appropriations and their effects" (Terroni, 2016).

Relying on archival research in Russia and Germany, this paper combines a visual analysis with the study of textual archives on the fabrication of the cinematic products. In 2015, I discovered the file on the Soviet film release in the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art and published the archival document on re-editing ("Tibet". *Perepiska s Kinostudieĭ im. M. Gor'kogo o dubliazhe nemetskogo dokumental'nogo fil'ma* "Tibet". *Diktorskiĭ tekst. Obieiasnitel'naia zapiska o peredelkakh fil'ma. Nadpisi k fil'mu*, 1948; Tanis, 2018). However, the juxtaposition of the two versions of the film has not yet become the focus of an analysis. The paper has the following structure: firstly, it presents a brief introduction to the history of the expedition based on the already published studies. However, the expedition is only of interest to this study insofar as it relates to the released film. Secondly, this study focuses on the film *Secret Tibet*, screened in Germany during World War II. Analyzing the film as a part of German popular culture, I also will pay close attention to the public narratives that accompanied its release. The latest is reconstructed based on archival sources, such as advertising booklets and press clippings preserved in *Bundesarchiv*. Finally, the last part is dedicated to the Soviet re-use of the film. The analysis mostly concentrates on the Soviet modifications of the film structure, as well as the documents that instructed the film's remaking. As I noted earlier, the paper adopts a comparative approach, but at the same time, it seeks to draw out the links between German and Soviet representations of Tibet. Further research could benefit from integrating the study of archives kept in the USA: files stored in the Library of Congress contain a third version of the film created by Ernst Schäfer in the American occupation zone of Germany after the Second World War.

3. German expedition to Tibet, 1938–1939: a very short history

For ornithologist and Tibetologist Ernst Schäfer, the 1938–1939 expedition was his third journey to Asia but his first as the head of the group. In the early 1930s, Schäfer visited Eastern Tibet twice under the guidance of American Brooke Dolan. The success of Dolan's expeditions attracted the attention of Heinrich Himmler, who, upon learning of Schäfer's plans to organize an independent research expedition to Tibet, decided that it should take place under the auspices of the *Ahnenerbe* (Detlev, 2006; Engelhardt, 2007). The *Ahnenerbe*, Ancestral Heritage, was engaged in research on occult topics, ranging from the interpretation of runes to the search for evidence supporting the superiority of the Aryan race. To achieve these goals and legitimize the outcomes, *Ahnenerbe* sought to attract scientists and experts. According to Heinrich Himmler, who was fascinated by the ideas of Asian mysticism, Schäfer had to go to Tibet in search of confirmations of Hanns Hörbiger's World Ice Theory. As it follows from the American Intelligence Report on Schäfer's expedition, "Himmler believed that ancient emigrants from Atlantis had founded a great civilization in Central Asia, the capital of which was a city called Urbe" (Engelhardt, 2007). To find evidence of this, Himmler wanted to include Edmund Kiss, a proponent of the Hörbiger doctrine, writer, and archaeologist. However, Schäfer, focused purely on scientific goals, rejected Kiss's inclusion (Mierau, 2006). Thus, the final expedition team comprised five members: Ernst Schäfer (zoologist and ornithologist), Ernst Krause (entomologist, cameraman, and photographer), Karl Wienert (geophysicist), Edmund Geer (responsible for the technical part) and Bruno Beger (anthropologist).

In January 1938, *Ahnenerbe* refused to finance the expedition, declaring that its focus "has diverged too far from the targets of Reichsfuehrer-SS [Himmler]". However, "[Himmler] complied with Dr. Schäfer's request to be permitted to conduct negotiations himself concerning the expedition's financing and organization" (Engelhardt, 2007). As a result, neither Himmler nor *Ahnenerbe* financially sponsored the expedition, though they did provide political support[1]. This support included assistance in obtaining passports, acquiring foreign currency, and securing permits to enter Tibet through India. Schäfer was aware of his dependence on Himmler and had to make certain compromises. One such condition was that all members of the expedition had to join the SS.

This nexus resulted in a complex relationship between politics and science, which influenced both public and practical aspects of the expedition. The 1938–1939 expedition became known as the "SS-Expedition" or the "Nazi-Expedition." Initially, British authorities suspected the expedition's members of espionage, causing issues for Schäfer in obtaining entry permits for Sikkim and Tibet. However, after three attempts, Schäfer was able to secure an official invitation from the Tibetan government, and all the members arrived in Lhasa in January 1939. They spent almost six months in Tibet and established contacts with the ministers of the Kashag (the Tibetan governmental body), the regent, and many aristocratic families (Neuhaus, 2012; Engelhardt, 2007). This led to rumors suggesting that the expedition had political and military objectives, including establishing German representation in Tibet to potentially launch an attack on British troops stationed in India. Nevertheless, recent studies suggest that

> there is also nothing to confirm that Schäfer acted in any way as a political intermediary between the German Reich and Tibet. We know only of one courtesy document from the Tibetan regent to Hitler, which Schäfer brought back to Germany together with a present, with which Hitler is supposed to have been disappointed. The document gives expression, completely noncommittally, to the wish to intensify the at present friendly relations between our two capitals. (Brauen, 2000)

In all of his multiple public speeches, Schäfer emphasized the scientific focus of the expedition. "The main purpose of my third Tibet expedition — he argued. — was to give an overall biological picture of this enigmatic country in the broadest sense" (Engelhardt, 2007).

Indeed, the scientific output of the expedition encompassed the study of the region from various perspectives including botanical, geological, anthropological, zoological, and cultural points of view. As it follows from the report, presented by Schäfer on 25 July 1939 at the Himalaya Club Calcutta, they conducted photogrammetric measurements for map-making, carried out meteorological measurements, and documented exact altitudes of all significant locations, camps, mountain passes, contact zones, timberlines, and changes in fauna and flora. During the expedition, they amassed a collection of minerals, petrofacts, 400 anthropological measurements of the local population, cultural artifacts, about 2000 samples of wild flower seeds, several hundred dried and pressed flowering

plants that were assembled in herbariums, 3500 bird skins, 2000 bird eggs, and 400 mammals and other domestic animals. Additionally, more than 20,000 black and white photographs of the landscape, people, animals, and plants were taken, along with about 2000 colored still pictures and 40,000 ft. of motion pictures (*ibid.*). Although there was much discussion of the political and cultural aspects of the expedition itself, many items were forgotten or overlooked, with some only receiving attention years later. For example, the birds were initially cataloged by the Naturkundemuseum Berlin in 2010, and extra footage remains unprocessed in the Library of Congress. Nevertheless, the film's fate stands out in this context.

4. *Secret Tibet* (*Geheimnis Tibet*, 1943): artificial "occultization" of Tibet

Secret Tibet was released in 1943, four years after the expedition's return to Germany. The film premiere took place on January 16, 1943, and prefaced the opening ceremony of the Sven Hedin Institute for Inner Asian Research. The foundation of this institute was the next big deal for Ernst Schäfer, as he was appointed as director. The institute was tasked with researching the materials and objects collected during the exhibition and furthering the study of the Caucasian and Asian regions, which was meant to constitute a part of *Lebensraum im Osten*. The film's release almost four years after its completion can be explained by the geopolitical context of the war years. It is worth noting that the success of the German army in the East and the countries of Hitler's coalition led to common interests in Asia. The German media during these years wrote extensively about Japan, China, India, Mongolia, and Tibet. In the spring of 1942, Himmler ordered that the Tibetan and all the Asian research should be very strongly reinforced (Detlev, 2006). As a result, *Secret Tibet* fit well into this cultural policy. Additionally, it provided an opportunity for German propaganda to present Tibetans as potential allies against Britain. Taking into account the situation in January 1943, when the Germans were suffering defeat under Stalingrad, the film suggested a positive view on the possibilities for collaboration in the East.

The film's importance in German propaganda policy is confirmed by its unique distribution history during the war. Upon release, the film received the highest distinction mark, known as *Prädikate*, as politically, artistically, and culturally valuable. The term "Prädikate" was first

introduced in Weimar Germany, where it was awarded to a few films for exceptional artistic merit, providing certain tax benefits to distributors and thereby giving the film additional advantages in distribution. In Nazi Germany, under the pretext of supposedly raising the overall artistic level of films, *Prädikate* was given to all films. Furthermore, a film that did not receive *Prädikate* could be accepted by distributors only with special permission. In other words, in the Third Reich, the rating system became a form of negative taxation. The following scale of film distinction marks was established: Instructional (1920); National education (1924); Politically and artistically especially valuable (awarded from 1933); Politically especially valuable (1933); Artistically especially valuable (1933); Politically valuable (1933); Artistically valuable (1933); Culturally valuable (1933); Valuable for youth (1938); Nationally valuable (1939); and Film of the Nation (1939) (Winkel, Welch, 2011). Based on these *Prädikate,* tax benefits were determined. As historians R. V. Winkel and D. Welch note, "The system not only produced certain financial advantages but also helped to establish the appropriate expectations and responses on the part of cinema audiences" (*ibid.,* 6).

In this context, "politically valuable" meant that the film reflected the goals of the NSDAP. This distinction mark for example, was awarded to Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. The combination of "politically and artistically especially valuable" indicated special quality and documentary value, and finally, a "culturally valuable" film was considered one produced in the context of cultural propaganda. The last status was granted only to particularly prestigious films intended also for export. As we have seen, the film received all the highest ratings, was distributed not only in Germany but also in occupied territories, and was an important part of German cultural diplomacy. For instance, in 1943, Ernst Schäfer presented it as a gift to the Bulgarian king[2].

The screening of *Secret Tibet* also emphasized its special status among other *Kulturfilms*. It was shown as a separate screening, whereas *Kulturfilms* generally preceded feature films. The *Kulturfilm* is a specifically German film genre, which appeared in the first years after the First World War. It referred to documentaries that included any component of education or instruction. In other words, it was a German version of so-called useful cinema, dedicated to different, non-aesthetic, and practical purposes (Sarkisova, 2017; Thomson, 2018). Probably, the single screening might also be explained by the film's length, as its running time was 107 minutes (*Geheimnis Tibet*, 1920–1945). The promotional campaign had

a strikingly multimedia character, similar to the expedition in employing different devices. It included a range of publications in central and local newspapers, consisting mostly of a limited variety of centrally distributed texts. The film was presented in the press as "a biogenetic total show (…), which sees the cosmos as a whole" (*Richtlinien für die Propaganda für den Tibet-Expeditions-Film*, 1942). There were also several dioramas including original Tibetan artifacts to accompany the premiere. In big cities, Schäfer himself gave public talks before the premiere; in the smaller towns, local speakers were appointed. The film was presented to the public as visual evidence of "the mysterious world of Asian mysticism with its mysterious rites" (*Geheimnis Tibet*, 1920–1945).

What is the structure and content of the movie? It consists of footage filmed during an expedition, accompanied by a voice-over narration. None of the actors in the movie, including the members of the expedition and the local population, utters a single word. The voice-over narration is the only source, encapsulating the main narratives and messages of the film. The sequence of the scenes follows the expedition's path to Tibet. The film starts with a scene, explaining the geographical position of Tibet in the background of graphic mapping. The voice-over highlights the state's isolationism caused not only by geographical remoteness but also Britain imperialism, and the local political and cultural traditions. Then, it discusses how the German scientists managed to reach the country.

In some scenes, the film explicitly promotes Nazi ideology. The latest was included through the depiction of the swastika. It covered a prayer carpet in a scene as a symbol of the power of the Lamaist state. However, the most famous scene included the sculls' measurements of the local population made by the anthropologist Bruno Berger. After the Second World War, Berger was the only one of the expedition members whose reputation could not be "cleaned up". In 1943, he got involved in the measurements of prisoners in Auschwitz for the notorious "Jewish skeleton collection," all the measured prisoners had been killed in the gas chambers). In the episodes, when Berger measures skulls the local population, they appear as objects, deprived of agency. This representation is supported by other film episodes, the Tibetan people did not say a single word in the film. The only way they express themselves is through dances and songs, which are also interpreted by the voice-over. This observation character of the film shots and the complementary voice-over also contributed to the ability to be reedited and used by seemingly opposite powers.

However, in general, the film shows the expedition's journey in more or less chronological order. Starting with a journey from India through the Himalayas, the documentary continues with mountain nature, animals, and unusual features of local life, mostly connected to religion: ritual processions, prayers, funerals, and exorcism. That means that despite the statements about the comprehensive and complex scientific coverage of Tibetan life, there is a shift towards cultural exotica.

The film highlights Tibet as a mystical land and the last stronghold of ancient culture. This discursive narrative is expressed at various levels, from the very film's title *Secret Tibet* to specific scenes. For example, a widely discussed scene in the German press depicts a burial ritual where human bodies are offered to be eaten by vultures, and the bones are milled for the vultures to consume. This ritual is based on the belief that these sacral birds carry the remains to the gods, and only then can reincarnation occur. The film's final scene shows the Tibetan priest performing a ritual to banish evil spirits and demons. According to cameraman Ernst Krause, the film is "Asia's magic conjuration (...). Of all the countries on earth, the closed land of Tibet is most filled with visions of mysterious gods and sinister demons" (*Geheimnis Tibet*, 1938–1939).

This artificial occultization and highlighted mysticism of Tibet lead us to a paradoxical conclusion. It makes visible a certain degree of the German film industry's independence and its functioning as part of mass culture. Despite the speculative interpretation of the Nazi regime through its connection with occultism, Hitler was actually skeptical of occultism (Burleigh, 2000). According to Corinna Treitel's recent study, "the larger story of the Nazi regime and the occult movement is one of escalating hostility," and state officials "did not hesitate to oppress the occult movement brutally." And "an official decree in July 1937 dissolved Freemasonic lodges, Theosophical circles, and related groups throughout Germany. Occult action now became illegal. Then in 1941, in the wake of Hess's flight to Britain, police action against occultists rose to fever pitch" (Treitel, 2004: 211, 224). With regards to the persecution of occultism in Germany, Isrun Engelhardt also has noted, "the subject of Tibet and its religion appeared alien and irrelevant to Hitler" (Engelhardt, 2008).

From this perspective, the propagandistic purposes of the film opened to debates. Engelhardt argues that the content of the film was even not presented to Hitler as a propaganda film. As evidence, she refers to the remark made about Hitler in 1942:

> At lunch, the boss [Hitler] was told about the film about Tibet made by the SS Schäfer expedition. The boss said that if anyone tried to criticize a Tibetan priest, the whole of the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church too would scream blue murder. (*ibid.*)

However, just because the film was not presented to Hitler as propagandistic does not mean it was not. Tom Neuhaus, in contrast, interpreted the film as a part of a holistic approach to the expedition promotion. The main film's aim, according to the scholar, was the depiction of "*Gesamtlandschaft*, a total landscape, it was claimed, would demonstrate how superior the filmic material was over that of previous expeditions" (Neuhaus 2012). Neuhaus also stresses the fascination with Tibetan exoticism and the romanticization of its landscape. Recalling that the Universum Film AG (UFA) studio served as one of the expedition's financial sponsors, I urge not to reduce, in the words of Eric Rentschler, the film solely to an ideological container (Rentschler, 1996) but to consider it as part of popular German, and more broadly European, culture.

The ambivalence inherent to the Third Reich cinema has already been at the center of scholarly attention (Hake, 2001; Rentschler, 1996). In identifying multidiscursivity as the basis of National Socialist film texts, Linda Schulte-Sasse highlights the borrowings of narrative paradigms and semiotic configurations from Enlightenment literature (Schulte-Sasse, 1996). Reflecting on the multi-discursive nature of German cinematic culture, which consisted of numerous continuities and asynchronies of different cultural origins, Antje Ascheid questions why was it necessary to mobilize such a wide range of cultural means in the first place. Does this mean that National Socialist rhetoric alone was not enough? (Ascheid, 2003). The answer seems to be paradoxical — the fragmentation, eclecticism, and heterochronicity of Nazi culture make visible the very impossibility of maintaining power any other way. In other words, the opportunistic tolerance of ideologically alien elements and tendencies within entertainment practices indicates a desire to maintain power at all costs. From this perspective, the artificial "occultization" of the expedition's footage followed the prevailing not only German but also Western cultural trends of fascination with Inner Asia and its exotics. Thus, UFA studio was attempting to fit it into the contours of popular culture and acted similarly to Hollywood, which sought to make exoticism and ethnic differences the source of revenue (Rony, 1996).

In the film reviews, the press portrayed the country as "the realm of gods and demons, and woe to the mortal who dares to cross their domain. Thus, only rare and inaccurate information about the magical land, which in its seclusion became a repository of ancient mystical rules, penetrated into the world" (*Geheimnis Tibet*, 1938–1939). In the film's propaganda instructions, the first item emphasized sensation, something "that European eyes could hardly see before" (*ibid.*). The film was also presented as a cinematic document, evidence reflecting the first visit of Europeans to the closed city of Lhasa. To highlight the film's actual significance, *Secret Tibet* was promoted as part of the expedition's *Beute*, a kind of trophy. This advertising metaphor was accomplished, as the film literally turned into a trophy.

5. *Tibet* (*Тибет*, 1949): Sovietization of the footage

In 1945, *Secret Tibet* was transported to the USSR as a part of the German State Film Archive. After the collection arrived in the Soviet Union, the Soviet authorities decided to launch some of the translocated films in cinema theaters, selecting for screening the movies of popular genres such as musicals, operettas, biopics, and comedies. From 1946 to the end of the 1950s, around 130 movies, mostly German and American, circulated in Soviet cinemas. In the history of Soviet culture, they are known as *trophy films* (Tanis, 2020).

Scholars indicate three key reasons for the distribution of trophy films in the USSR: firstly, the exploitation of these movies provided the Soviet government with a valuable source of revenue (Pozner, 2012); secondly, their screening compensated for the lack of movies in film distribution under the postwar poor local film production, so-called policy of *film famine* in the USSR (Laurent, 2000; Kapterev, 2009); thirdly, trophy films served as an instrument of Soviet propaganda, illustrating the flaws of capitalist society (Knight, 2017).

The main part of the film collection seizures took place from June 9 to July 4, 1945. A decree issued by the State Defense Committee on June 8, 1945, authorized the confiscation and transportation of "6,000 of the most valuable artistic and documentary films from the film storage in Berlin to Moscow" (*Postanovlenie GKO* № 8998, 1945). According to Iosif Manevich's report, who was responsible for confiscation, a total of 7,000 films were sent to Moscow during this period, including 3,700

feature films, 2,500 short films, and 800 newsreels (Manevich, 2006). However, the indicated quantity may vary as different sources provide different data. Archival documents from 1945 contain two summary lists showing that Colonel Alexander Kalishkin, the authorized representative of the Cinema Committee, sent two shipments to Moscow between April 1 and December 1, 1945. These shipments included 227 boxes of films and photographic paper weighing 8,863 kilograms, as well as 381 boxes of films weighing 25,606 kilograms (*Nakladnye, spetsifikatsii, kopii gruzovykh kvitantsiī, otgruzochnye vedomosti, svodnye vedomosti, opisaniia gruzov, otpravlennykh iz Berlina samoletom*, 1945–1946). The documents do not specify the exact number of films but indicate substantial volumes of collections being transported. Additionally, films were not only confiscated from the German State Film Archive but also from its surroundings, and the confiscation practices continued beyond 1945.

The translocation of film collections was part of the large processes of the equipment and technology requisitions. Some of them were made under the reparation policy of the Soviet Union. Others were made illegally with regard to international law, as they commenced before the Crimean and Potsdam conferences, the result of which was the plan for reparations adopted by the allies in March 1946 (Boldyrev, Nevskiī, Plumpe, 2019; Pozner, Tcherneva 2025). It is known that when patrimonial translocations are integrated into a new context, they both influence and enrich the cultural environment around them, while also being transformed by foreign aesthetic and ideological discourses. The Soviets' seizure of the German film industry led to a transformation of the Soviet cinematic landscape on various levels. From the perspective of institutional history, the translocation of a thousand movies placed the film storage near Moscow at the same level as the prominent film archives of the world, as well as led to the re-organization of film storage to the research institution State Film Archive Gosfilmofond. In the light of the Soviet film industry, the seized film equipment and the seizure of Agfacolor technology served as a basis for Soviet color film production. The most known of them, such as the episodes of *Ivan the Terrible* by Sergeī Eisenstein and the other Soviet films of the 1950s were filmed on the base of German Agfacolor technology. Finally, as foreign movies offered Soviet people other types of emotional interaction, as well as other models of living in, or feeling, the world, this different pattern usually is defined in memoirs of the Soviet people as a transformative point of self-orientation to the Western culture (Turovskaīa, 2015; Tanis, 2020).

Secret Tibet's afterlife in the USSR demonstrates the reverse side of translocations. It presents a unique example of how a film, once in a different cultural zone, undergoes such changes that it becomes a completely new cultural product. It was the only film from the German collections that underwent such radical changes. While only individual scenes that contradicted Soviet ideology were cut from other foreign films, *Secret Tibet* was completely re-constructed from documentary footage. Due to these radical changes, this movie was totally appropriated by the Soviet culture. In particular, it lost all marks of its trophy, or even foreign, status. To the Soviet public, it was presented as a Soviet documentary. The afterlife of *Secret Tibet* in the USSR raises questions about why so much effort was put into releasing this particular film. The Soviet film collections included thousands of popular foreign films. From the economic perspective, it would have been much easier and profitable to release another musical or operetta. Further, I will attempt to show that the answers may lay in two contexts — cultural-political and purely cinematic.

Initially, the film was included in the "list of foreign films that should not be released on the Soviet screen" *(Proekty postanovleniī TSK VKP(b) i Soveta Ministrov SSSR*, 1948–1953). According to the Soviet censors' explanatory report from early 1948, "the film provides a distorted view of the mores and customs of the local population. The life of Tibetan tribes is portrayed from the standpoint of racist ethnography. All attention is paid to the demonstration of religious rituals. The fanaticism of Tibetans, their detachment from life, their powerlessness in the face of nature, and their complete submission to the lamas are insistently emphasized. The film shows various experiments by the expedition participants in Tibet, measuring the skulls and faces of the local population to establish the Aryan origin of the Tibetans. Based on the presence of swastika in folk ornaments, the authors of the film conclude that swastika appeared in Tibet many centuries ago" (*ibid.*).

However, a new text for the voice-over had been written by September 20, 1948. According to the document, it provided "a correct scientific interpretation of the material" (*Postanovleniia Politbiuro-Prezidiuma, Sekretariata TSK VKP(b)-KPSS*, 1936–1962). The consultant of the text served Sergeī Tokarev, anthropologist and professor of the Ethnographic Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. The director of the re-edited version, was Vladimir Sukhobokov. In the same year, he received an honorary diploma from the Central Committee of the Komsomol for editing the Soviet blockbuster *The Young Guard*. Before the film's release,

the creators reduced it almost in half, from 2800 meters to 1500 meters. By November 1948, the dubbing was completed, and the film received a distribution license № 966/48 (n.a., n.d.). It was approved for screening from 11 November 1948 to 31 December 1951. However according to the resolution of the Central Committee, the film was launched on the screens only three months later, on March 21, 1949, under the title *Tibet* (*Materialy o sostoianii trofeĭnogo fil'mofonda*, 1947–1949). The introduction credit title presented it as a Soviet documentary created "based on foreign newsreels".

Why was the film finally issued? The new version was a component of the Soviet policy of that period. In the early 1920s, the Soviet Union sought to exert influence over Inner Asia. Tibetan students were trained at Soviet schools, and Soviet missions were sent to Tibet (Neuhaus, 2012). After the United Kingdom diplomatically recognized the USSR, Soviet interest in Tibet waned in the 1930s and early 1940s, as the situation there was not favorable to the Soviet Union (Andreev, 2006). However, the onset of a Civil War in China brought Asia to the forefront of international relations. By the spring of 1949, it became clear that the Communists and Mao Zedong, who enjoyed Soviet support, would emerge victorious from the war. Consequently, the release of a film in March, 1949 aligned with the overall cultural policy of the USSR, which was heavily influenced by international situations.

Since the late 1940s, the Soviet media renewed the interest in Tibet. This led to the republishing of works by famous Russian travelers to Tibet and Central Asia. For instance, in 1947–1948, the works of Przheval'skiĭ were republished (Przheval'skiĭ, 1947; Przheval'skiĭ, 1948; Przheval'skiĭ, 1948a). The film opened a series of movies on Inner Asia. According to the production plan for feature documentaries for 1949, the films *China* and *Przheval'skiĭ* were planned for production. As noted in the annotations to the films, *China* is "a film about the struggle of the People's Liberation Army against the reactionary Kuomintang and American imperialists, about the new life in the liberated democratic regions of China" (*Perepiska po obshchim i organizatsionnym voprosam Ministerstva kinematografii SSSR*, 1948). *Przheval'skiĭ* was planned to portray "the scientific feat of the Russian scientist-patriot, about the priority of Russian science" (*ibid.*). *Przheval'skiĭ* was conceived as a film "about the life and scientific activity of the Russian geographer-traveler N. M. Przheval'skiĭ, whose expeditions in Central Asia brought world fame to Russian geographical science" (*ibid.*).

The new version of the film implicitly promoted Soviet support of China. For instance, the opening episode reproduces the logic of the original version: the voice-over explains the geographical location of Tibet while graphics depict the state on the map. However, the Soviet version emphasizes that "formally, Tibet belongs to the Republic of China, but in reality, it is governed by an autocratic monarch who has minimal regard for the Chinese government but is obedient to the will of the British" (Tanis, 2018). Nevertheless, the political status of Tibet was ambiguous in those years; de facto, Tibet functioned as an independent state. The film reflected the official Soviet position on Tibet's status. For instance, the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* of 1946 advocated for the same idea: "According to the Chinese constitution, Tibet is part of China (...) At present, Tibet enjoys internal independence under the nominal Chinese suzerainty and the actual influence of England" (Andreev, 2006). Yet, the political dimension is not the sole explanation for the film's release. The purely cinematic context is equally important. To focus on it, we should take a closer look at the film's structure and genre.

The film, as the original, consists of original film footage, accompanied by a voice-over narration. However, all the episodes depicting the expedition members were cut from the Soviet film. The explanatory report of the film's re-establishing explains these cuttings the following way:

> all materials showing the history of the expedition, its participants, their daily life, equipment, and so on were removed; shots of endless processions of German travelers under the fascist flag in the mountains of the Himalayas and the steppes of Tibet, their campsites, and amusements were taken out. As a consequence, the scenes savoring the 'racial' research of German scientists measuring the skulls, hands, and feet of the natives, as well as the footage depicting the behavior of Germans in Tibet among the local population, were removed. (Tanis, 2018)

By cutting out the storyline of the German expedition, Soviet censors used the remained episodes to create an impersonal documentary about Tibet. The structure of the new movie included a consistent set of scenes, depicting the geographical location of the state, vegetation, wildlife and climate, the population of Tibet and its occupation, daily life, rituals (including the famous scene of burial), and culture, religion and political regime, Lhasa, its architecture, a celebration of the New Year, a parade of carnival and modern Tibetan troops.

Along with the change in the film's structure, the film puts different accents, supporting Soviet discursive narratives. For example, in the original version, there is a scene depicting the punishment of thieves. However, in the Soviet version, the thieves are portrayed as impoverished peasants, with a voice-over suggesting that the rich can evade punishment. The film consistently highlights the poverty and hardships faced by the Tibetan people, indirectly attributing it to British influence and Lamaism, as the main causes of the country's "political and economic backwardness". This Soviet version paradoxically intertwined anti-colonial rhetoric with the colonial logic of civilizing missions. Despite the film supported the political and ideological agenda, the way of its re-edition was created by cinematic traditions. The very sequence of scenes and discursive accents refer to Sovietized versions of *Kulturfilm*.

The German genre of *Kulturfilm* appeared in the USSR in the 1920s. One of the agents of this cultural transfer was Vladimir Erofeev, a journalist and the director. Having first seen *Kulturfilms* at the UFA film studio in the 1920s, he promoted the genre in the USSR as a successful example of enlightenment and entertainment that Soviet cinema culture was striving for (Erofeev, 1926). In the Soviet Union, *Kulturfilms* formed the "cinematographic atlas" between 1926 and 1940, "a series of films showing the various, particularly little known, regions of the Soviet Union" (Sarkisova, 2017). According to Oksana Sarkisova, these documentary travelogs about the Soviet republics "shared with their Western counterparts the 'surplus pleasure' from the sights of 'exotic' cultural others" (*ibid.*). At the same time, the Sovietization of nations and small nationalities was equated with modernization and progress.

> Understood as didactic films implying the status of objective truth, *Kulturfilms* were made with the primary aim of supplying new knowledge and ordering the audience's ideas about the world". Thus "ethnographic perspective turned films into a 'useful' entertainment. (*ibid.*)

From this perspective, *Tibet* followed the canons and visual formulas of the Sovietized version of the genre. Structured as *Kulturfilms* about the Soviet republics, it fulfilled several functions. First, it served as a tool for enlightenment and learning about the world, which was an important feature of the genre. Second, under limited mobility, it provided the audience with a new spatial experience, expanding the boundaries of an imagined geography. Third, by showing the country's "backward", poverty,

and poorness on the threshold of the Chinese communist revolution, the film also provided viewers with a new temporal experience, temporally localizing the depicted on the line of imagined historical progress.

Thus, the metaphor of translocation in the Soviet context was acquiring additional connotations. The prefix *trans-* was becoming no less significant, as it made visible the very process of movement and crossing of space (through), indicates a border state (inter-), or fixes a boundary, indicating something beyond the known. All three of these dimensions came to the fore with the Soviet version of the film. Therefore, in the case of patrimonial translocations in the USSR, it is worth looking not only at the place of origin and the place of movement of objects but also at the place of non-motility and the place of the audience's imaginary journey. The metaphor of translocations in this context was literally realized: the films helped the viewers to make an imaginary journey and move to the other side of the border (*trans- location*), to look at this territory with a Soviet gaze and, disappointed, to return.

6. Conclusions

The production and afterlife of *Secret Tibet* demonstrate that not just political but also cultural factors play a decisive role in shaping a film's final form. The original German version constructed Tibet as a mystical, exotic land steeped in occult symbolism, aligning with broader Western fascinations with Inner Asia. In this light, the film functioned within the commercial and cultural logic of mass entertainment, capitalizing on exoticism to appeal to audiences. The film's emphasis on Tibet's "otherness" thus reflects not just Nazi ideology but also a wider European cultural trend that commodified exoticism for mass consumption. Once in Soviet culture, the film framed Tibet as a space in need of liberation, both from British influence and its own feudal structures. This version juxtaposed Tibet's poverty and Lamaist traditions with implicit promises of modernization under communism. Yet, despite its political messages, the Soviet version also catered to audience curiosity about distant lands, offering an imaginary journey that reinforced the USSR's self-image as a progressive force. The result of the film's cultural transfer was a new hybrid product, straddling the line between entertainment and political education, foreign cinematic product and Soviet useful cinema, Western ideological subversion and the Soviet tool for discrediting opponents. The irony lies

in the fact that the final product emerged from a doubling of German cultural transfers into Soviet cinematic culture. In the 1920s, the German concept of *Kulturfilm* showed Soviet filmmakers how a didactic function could be transformed into a distinct cinematic genre. By the 1940s, Soviet cinematic culture put this knowledge into practice, repurposing German entertainment cinema into its own version of the *Kulturfilm*.

Endnotes

1 Official sponsors were UFA Film Studio, DFG, the Public Relations and Advertising Council of German Business (Werberat der deutschen Wirtschaft), the Foreign Office, Eher Verlag, and other private donors including Brooke Dolan.

2 We discovered this fact together with Oksana Maistat, doing research in the Bundesarchiv in 2017.

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