

# Foreign Film Review

by David Macdonald

It's not very often that I get to view any foreign title that isn't from France (the case in about 90 per cent of my reviews, it seems), but, in *Burnt By The Sun*, here is a Russian film that is equal parts amusing, pretentious, and chilling.

The story takes place in Stalin-era Russia, beginning with a very peculiar scene where a young man, apparently an employee of the state, visits with his father before he goes on assignment. His father reads from the state newspaper, and talks about "undesirable guests," apparently referring to people who are in open hostility to the Stalin regime. As he chatters, the phone rings endlessly, ignored. The young man takes out his pistol, empties it of bullets, points it to his own head, and slowly pulls the trigger, suggesting that he is hardening himself for the next time he pulls that trigger, apparently without an empty chamber.

This scene is suddenly exchanged for the Russian countryside, where peasants are in an uproar over movement of Stalin's tanks, which crush the wheat in the process. It takes persuading by the local retiring general, Kotov, to get the tanks to turn around. The sequence is light-hearted and comedic. Kotov complains that it is his day off, and in jest believes he is a scapegoat for those who want their problems solved quickly.

Later, a visitor appears in Kotov's house. Disguised as an old man, he starts teasing many people in the house in various ways. Eventually, it is revealed that he is the young man from the opening sequence. Apparently, he is an old family friend, who hasn't visited for nearly ten years. His presence is a blessing for most of the inhabitants of the large house. But occasionally, Kotov appears wary and suspicious. At first, I thought it was jealousy, owing to the fact that Kotov's wife and the young man were old "friends." But it is not until later when we know what he is really thinking.

For the most part, the movie plays as gentle human comedy, with the numerous family members and their quirks and activities. (Kotov's little daughter exhibits consistently adorable behaviour, even when the plot grows dire.) But it is the constant presence of the young visitor which gives the film some tension. Who exactly is this person, and what does he want? The answer gradually is revealed to us, and a quiet, peaceful environment (and film) ends with a vicious and cold-blooded climax.

The movie moves rather slowly. At about 2 hours and 20 minutes, some people might lose patience, but its stress on the ordinary, slice-of-life storyline does contribute to the shock of a viewer when the violent ending does arrive. Also, one probably would have to be somewhat familiar with Russia and its politics to really feel the impact. My own vagueness on describing the story's happenings probably gives you an indication of what I know. Still, the movie's message will probably make some sense even to a person like me, which is that in a Communist regime, it is to your peril if you put untested trust in everyone, even your friends.

Rating: \*\*\*1/2

## Books

By RANDY MCDONALD

I received *The Proud Tower* on New Year's Day. I have a confession to make: Even though I'm majoring not in history but in English, history is one of my personal obsessions. Literature, for all of its intrinsic value, is a reflection of the time in which it was created; the best history does its best to describe all of said time. Unfortunately, though, histories that are both detailed and exceptionally well-written are hard to find. Will and Ariel Durant, a married pair of historians who wrote, over the space of several decades, a comprehensive history of Western civilization, were able to accomplish both tasks. Another was Barbara Tuchman.

*Fin-de-siècle* Europe in the two decades bracketing 1900 was the single most powerful civilization in the world's history. European industries dominated the world, European colonial empires covered most of the world's land area, and European culture set the pace for everyone who thought him- or herself modern. Despite Europe's power, though, a sense of disorientation encroached upon the continent's population. Though this dissatisfaction was suppressed by the optimistic burghers of Europe, the horrors of the First World War stripped away Europe's complacency and left it with nothing but that

sense of disorientation. *The Proud Tower* seeks to answer the question, Why did this happen?

Tuchman was an excellent writer, and had an even better sense of style. Her choice to begin *The Proud Tower* with an overview of the Edwardian aristocracy of Great Britain – the single most influential group of people in the most powerful country in the world before the onset of mass politics – is ironic, for the next chapter deals with anarchism. Though anarchism is famous mainly for the prominent world figures who were assassinated by self-identified anarchists, anarchist theory was, ironically, driven by Kropotkin, a gentle Russian emigre who thought that the only way to solve poverty and oppression in the world was to abolish government, in the anarchist worldview the mechanism for the oppression of humanity.

After brushing past the satisfaction of the powerful and the desperation of the downtrodden, *The Proud Tower* moves quickly through chapter after chapter, each concentrating on a specific event or person in a country that can be said to sum up the major issues in each society. The chapter on the United States deals mainly with the Spanish-American War, and how that conflict made the

United States a world power. The German composer Strauss – author of vast, heroic opera – is Tuchman's icon for the powerful and expansionist, if over-exuberant, German Empire of 1900. The case of Dreyfus, a Jewish army officer who had the bad luck to falsely convicted as a spy by a reactionary army command, symbolizes the vast conflicts in France between the liberal supporters of the ideals of Enlightenment and Revolution, and the reactionaries who sought to overturn both events.

*The Proud Tower* ends in a chapter on socialism. As late as 1914, many thoughtful people believed that socialism, by giving the poor good lives and by reducing the need for competition between nations, could save the world from a tremendous conflagration. The charismatic French Jean Jaurès, leader of the French socialists and pioneer of the international labour movement, sought as late as August 1914 to keep Europe's empires from destroying one another. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of August, though, sitting in a Parisien café Jaurès was shot dead by a hoodlum who fancied himself a patriot. Three days later, the First World War came into being.

*The Proud Tower* is an unforgettable work of history, and of literature. One could do far worse by reading it.

### CIMN Chart

March 4 to 10

1C	Various	30 Hour Famine
2C	Strawberry	Brokeheart Audio
3C	Dog eat Dogma	Dogzilla
4	Fatboy Slim	You've come along Way
5	Portishead	Roseland NYC live
6	Less than Jake	Hello Rockview
7	Death in Vegas	Dead Elvis
8	88 Fingers Louie	Back on the Streets
9C	Sick Boys	Put your wieght on it
10	Pansy Division	Absurd Pop Sons Romance
11	Scott Weiland	12 Bar Blues
12	The Queers	Hopelessly Devoted to you
13	Booming Airplanes	Yarn
14C	JP Cormier	Heart and Soul
15	Gaelic Storm	Gaelic Storm
16	Richard Buckley	Since
17	Various	United States of Punk
18C	Various	Celtic Colours
19	Soul Coughing	El Oso
20	Ice Cube	War & Peace Album vol 1