

# STATE FUNERAL



Een film van Sergei Loznitsa  
7 oktober in de bioscoop

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FILM & TV

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# STATE FUNERAL

Nederland, Litouwen 2019, kleur/zwartwit, 135 min.

Regie: Sergei Loznitsa

Scenario: Sergei Loznitsa

Geluid: Vladimir Golovnitski

Editor: Danielius Kokanauskis

Producent: Maria Choustova en Sergei Loznitsa namens Atoms & Void, coproducent: Studio Uljana Kim



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**Logline:** Unieke archief- en niet eerder vertoonde beelden van de vierdaagse plechtigheden rondom de begrafenis van Josef Stalin in 1953.

### **Synopsis**

Van de bombastische bekendmaking van zijn overlijden door omroepers, in kranten en op aanplakbiljetten, via de eindeloze stoet rouwende mensen die hun 'rode tsaar' snikkend een laatste eer komen bewijzen, tot de ceremoniële bijzetting in het mausoleum: vier dagen lang wordt elke fase van de plechtigheden rond de begrafenis van Jozef Stalin in maart 1953 geobserveerd.

In de traditie van zijn films over de erfenis van de Sovjet-Unie put Sergei Loznitsa uit bestaand materiaal. De vaak niet eerder vertoonde beelden zijn veelal in kleur, waarbij het Kremlinrood van de bloemen, linten en vlaggen indringend afsteekt tegen de achtergrond van besneeuwde straten, grijs geklede mensen en grauwe fabrieken: ook op afstand van Moskou leggen arbeiders het werk stil om hun partijleider te gedenken.

Een ronduit grotesk gebeuren – waar de regisseur nog meer recht aan doet met de feitelijke, historische informatie op het einde – dat pijnlijk aantoont hoe absurd de beleving van leven en dood is in een tiranniek regime, gebaseerd op een persoonlijkheidscultus.

### **Director's notes:**

***“The immortal name of STALIN will live forever!”***

***Pravda newspaper, March 9, 1953***

***“We don't wish to know that humanity is based on mythical concealment of its own violence, which has always been projected onto new victims. All cultures, all religions are based on this foundation and hide behind this shield, just like tombs surround a deceased and conceal him inside them. A killing calls for a coffin, and a coffin is nothing but a continuation and a repetition of the act of murder. Religion-tomb is in fact a concealment of its own foundation, of its only raison d'être”.***

***Rene Girard, “Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World”***

On March 5, 1953, after a serious illness, the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU, the leader of the world proletariat, Generalissimus of the Soviet Union, comrade Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin, passed away unexpectedly in his country residence.

The tragic shadow of death fell upon the entire nation. Millions of people from every corner of the Soviet Union, made their way to Moscow in order to take part in the

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funeral ceremony and to say farewell to the «friend of all children», «great helmsman», «leader and teacher» of the international proletariat. Those who weren't able to travel to Moscow gathered for meetings of remembrance in their cities, towns and villages, at their plants and factories, schools and universities, to support each other at this moment of despair and grief. They swore allegiance to their «great teacher» and their oath was heard from Brest to Vladivostok, from the river Igarka to the town of Kushka. Life across the entire country came to a standstill. An impossible thing happened – the almighty Comrade Stalin passed away. The feeling was truly apocalyptic. Bereaved members of the Soviet Government staged the *Great Farewell*. Comrade Stalin's coffin was put on display in the Pillar Hall at the House of the Unions. The people of the USSR and workers from all over the world had one last opportunity to see the Great Leader. On March 6, in spite of harsh weather and freezing temperatures, people filled the streets of Moscow, queuing up for hours on end in the hope to see Stalin's coffin.



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For three days and three nights the never-ending procession of mourners – peasants, workers, soldiers and officers, artists and scientists, representatives of Soviet intelligentsia – walked past the coffin, decorated with flowers, exotic plants and funeral wreaths. Among the mourners, there were distinguished foreigners – representatives of democratic governments of People's democracies, members of the Anti-Hitler coalition, friends of the USSR, *“all those who were devastated by the tragic news of Stalin's death and felt the urge to come to Moscow to mourn the man, to whom they owed their lives and their happiness.”*

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*“We must rally around the Communist Party!*

*The Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the workers of our country and of the entire world, have suffered a tragic loss. The heart - of the genius Leninist and Lenin's brother-in-arms, the wise Leader and Teacher of the Party and of the entire Soviet people – Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin - has stopped beating. The name of Stalin will forever remain in the hearts of our people and in the hearts of progressive mankind. This name symbolizes the glory of the Soviet Union and inspires the struggle for the bright future of all nations!” (Pravda newspaper, 8 March 1953).*



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The collection of the Russian State archive in Krasnogorsk (RGAKFD) contains unique footage shot during the period of March 5 – 9, 1953, when the USSR mourned and buried Stalin. The collection includes not only scenes from the Pillar Hall of the House of the Unions, where the coffin was displayed, the complete recordings of the funeral speeches of the Soviet party and government officials at the Red Square and the ceremony of the depositing of the coffin in the Lenin's Mausoleum, which at that point had become "Lenin's and Stalin's Mausoleum", but also the footage shot at various locations all over the USSR – of the remembrance meetings, organised at factories, schools, offices and hospitals, in which millions of people took part.

I'm faced with an abundance of material. For example: several camera crews for three days in a row filmed the never-ending streams of people, who had been queuing up

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in the streets, waiting for their turn to enter the House of the Unions. Those “lucky” ones, who were admitted inside, formed two lines and walked up the grand staircase, decorated with flowers and banners, and finally reached the coffin of the Leader. A lot of footage is dedicated to prominent party officials and Soviet celebrities, who took turns to stand by Stalin’s coffin, as guards of honour. There is footage of the artists, taking a cast for a death mask or making sketches for a posthumous portrait... A special collection of images is dedicated to the floral compositions and wreaths, which were sent from all over the country, to be put on Stalin’s grave.

One episode of the film will feature the arrivals of the international delegations, some of them headed by the leaders of the countries, which were “friends” of the USSR. Upon arrival at the airport, they were met and greeted by Soviet officials. At the same time, thousands of ordinary people were arriving at Moscow train stations from Leningrad and Kazan, from Kursk and Saratov, from Kiev and Minsk – in a hurry to make it to the Leader’s funeral...



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The scope of the event was truly universal. I shall edit the footage, depicting gatherings of mourners and remembrance meetings, which took place all across the USSR and in many countries abroad. Every speaker who took the floor at any of these gatherings, spoke similar words about the importance of being “together” at this moment of grieving an unbearable loss, about the greatness of the Party and swore an oath to the memory of Stalin and Lenin, promising to continue the stride towards

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communism.

The film will follow the chronology of the 4 days – from the announcement of Stalin’s death to the funeral in the Red Square. I intend to show how gradually the feeling of shock, instigated by the media reports, grew into a mass hysteria, which culminated in a stampede at the Trubnaya Square in Moscow, 3 kilometres away from the Kremlin, where hundreds of mourners lost their lives...

The day of Stalin’s death was a pivotal point in the history of the USSR. This event brought with it a change, though almost invisible and ephemeral at the start, which ultimately brought down the entire communist regime. The fear, the tradition of silent obedience and servility, dominating the country, built by the will, cruelty and despotism of one tyrant, lingered on for many years, but the regime lost its backbone and was doomed. The death of Stalin meant the death of an epoch. Without even realising this, millions of people, mourning the Leader in March 1953, were also living through a life-changing experience in their own private histories.

It is crucial for me to bring the spectator inside this experience – not as an impartial observer of a historical event or an admirer of rare archival footage – but as a participant and a witness of a grandiose, terrifying and grotesque spectacle, revealing the essence of a tyrannical regime.



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Just as in my previous montage films, based on archive footage, (“Blockade”, “Revue”,

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“The Event”, “The Trial”), I shall work with my sound designer, Vladimir Golovnitski, in order to create and “re-create” atmospheric sound, bringing the archive images back to life. We shall also work on the image restoration and visual effects, so that the quality of the image meets the highest contemporary standard and the film can be projected in cinemas.

I see this film as a visual study of the nature of Stalin’s personality cult and an attempt to deconstruct the ritual, which formed the foundation of the bloody regime. It is unthinkable that today, in Moscow circa 2019, 6 years after Stalin’s death, thousands of people gather at his tomb on March 5<sup>th</sup>, in order to lay flowers and mourn his death. I believe it’s my duty as a filmmaker to employ the power of documentary image to appeal to the minds of my contemporaries, and to seek truth.

*Sergei Loznitsa*

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**SERGEI LOZNITSA** – Ukrainian director/script writer/ producer, was born on 5 September 1964 in Baranovici (USSR). He grew up in Kiev (Ukraine), and in 1987 graduated from the Kiev Polytechnic with a degree in applied mathematics. Sergei Loznitsa studied feature film making at the Russian State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in Moscow. Loznitsa has directed 20 internationally acclaimed documentary films and 4 feature films, all of which premiered in the Official Selection of Cannes Film Festival. Sergei continues to work both in documentary and feature genres.

In 2013, Sergei Loznitsa launched a film production company ATOMS & VOID.

Selected filmography: BLOCKADE (2006), MY JOY (2010), IN THE FOG (2012), MAIDAN (2014), THE EVENT (2015), AUSTERLITZ (2016), A GENTLE CREATURE (2017), DONBASS (2018), THE TRIAL (2018)

**ATOMS & VOID (The Netherlands)** is a film production company run by Sergei Loznitsa and Maria Choustova. Since its creation in 2013, the company has produced 7 documentary films by Sergei Loznitsa. ATOMS & VOID also participates as associate producer in the production of feature films by Sergei Loznitsa.

Selected filmography: LETTER (2013, European Film Academy nomination for Best Short Film), THE OLD JEWISH CEMETERY (2014, Special Screening Rotterdam IFF), MAIDAN (2014, Special Screening Cannes IFF), THE EVENT (2015, Out of Competition Venice IFF), THE TRIAL (2018, Out of Competition Venice IFF)

**STUDIO ULJANA KIM (Lithuania)** is a leading company in Lithuania for producing full-length features. Since its foundation in 1997, fourteen feature films and seven documentaries have been produced by the company. The company's goal is to produce & co-produce high quality art-house films intended for a worldwide audience.

Selected filmography: KIEMAS (1999, Director's Fortnight Cannes IFF), YOU AM I (2006, Un Certain Regard Cannes IFF), PERPETUUM MOBILE (2008, Rotterdam IFF), SENECA'S DAY (2016, Lithuania's foreign language film Oscar submission), A GENTLE CREATURE (2017, Main Competition Cannes IFF)

**CURRENT TIME TV/НАСТОЯЩЕЕ ВРЕМЯ (USA)** is the digital and TV Russian-language news and features network of U.S. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). It is a leading broadcaster of independent documentary films for Russian speaking audiences.

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