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Documenting and Demystifying the Great Leader: Semen Aranovich’s Documentaries about Stalin

Glasnost-era documentary films are known for revelations of both contemporary and historical problems. Blaming Stalin for his role in the problems of the Soviet Union was nothing new by Perestroika. Stalin has already been denounced by Nikita Khrushchev in his secret speech at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 and removed from his place alongside Lenin in the mausoleum on Red Square. What glasnost-era documentaries brought to the image of Stalin was a much more personal, intimate, eye-witness look at Stalin’s personal and professional life, as well as the workings of his innermost circle. Semen Aranovich’s films *I was Stalin’s Bodyguard* (1989) and *I Worked for Stalin* (1990)both offer a look behind the closed doors of the Kremlin. In *I was Stalin’s Bodyguard* the last surviving bodyguard of Stalin, Aleksei Rybin, reminisces about all aspects of Stalin’s life, including his death. Aranovich combines footage of Rybin’s interviews with never-before-aired footage of Stalin. *I Worked for Stalin* delves even deeper into the power structure and offers many different voices to explore the system. The film uses archival footage, as well as eyewitness accounts and interviews, to explore the relationships among Stalin, Viacheslav Molotov, Andrei Zhdanov, Georgii Khrushchev, and others. This paper examines the effect of glasnost-era changes in politics and in the film industry on the production circumstances of Aranovich’s films and argues that this act of deconstructing the myth of the great leader is used as a method of coping with collective trauma, and helps form a new collective memory in the final years of the Soviet Union.