

SOVIETLAND

feature film

Script writer and director – Vladimir Podgoretsky

Status – in post production

Release date – Fall 2024

Length 90 min

TAGLINE: When you fight fear, you earn hope.

Synopsis

In 2022, the Russian government forcibly drafted 300,000 men for the war in Ukraine. Many of them didn't want to go, but under the new criminal code, the alternative was 15 years in prison.

Winter 2023

Viktor, 30 years old, is a legless veteran of the war in Ukraine who lost his legs in combat.

Before the war, Viktor had a career as a gymnast and worked as a teacher at a local sports school. His life changed dramatically when, a year ago, he was drafted against his will into the Russian army and sent to fight in Ukraine.

Several weeks after Viktor went to war, his wife received the note that Viktor was killed in a combat. She quickly moved on, selling all of Viktor's possessions and property and starting a new relationship with another man.

Six months later, Viktor returned home, legless, to discover that everyone in his town thought he was dead. His wife had all but forgotten him, and people around him saw him as a burden. The state regarded him as damaged goods, a reminder of the war's horrors.

Viktor's neighbors and friends believed he had lost his mind because he refused a substantial amount of money from the government for his service and injuries. Viktor was tormented by the thought that he had been so afraid of the Russian state that he allowed himself to be used as cannon fodder in a war he despised, forced to kill people who had done nothing to him.

Contract soldiers meet Viktor in the train station waiting room. They try to talk to him, hoping to find a kindred spirit, but when they realize Viktor is against the war, a fight

breaks out between Viktor and one of the soldiers. The police kick Viktor out of the station, threatening him with prison if he continues to appear in public places.

Viktor spends the winter night on the streets, nearly freezing to death while sitting near the gymnastic horizontal bar where he trained throughout his childhood, dreaming of becoming an Olympic champion.

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The second story takes place in 1949 in Soviet Russia, when hundreds of thousands of legless soldiers returned home after World War II. After the war, tens of thousands of these homeless veterans were arrested without cause and locked away in special institutions, where they were imprisoned for the rest of their lives.

The government removed these veterans from the streets out of fear of dissenting opinions. Poor, legless veterans with medals of honor on their chests became a dangerous symbol, exposing the government's true attitude towards its people.

Clearing the streets of disabled veterans before Stalin's anniversary remains a dark chapter in the post-war history of the USSR. This event is still forbidden to talk about, and there are no films or TV programs documenting this historical fact.

Winter 1949, the day before Stalin's 70th anniversary.

This is the story of Stepan, a legless veteran living on a collective farm with his wife Maria and mother-in-law Zinaida. In the midst of famine and post-war poverty, Stepan's dreams of a better future have been shattered. He sees his fellow villagers have forgotten the ideals they once worked and suffered for, so he takes it upon himself to remind them of the bright communist future they were promised.

Despite his disability, Stepan manages to hang a red flag with Stalin's portrait on top of the ruined bell tower for Stalin's 70th birthday. Little does he know, his life is about to take a dramatic turn. Sergei Shkiro, a former villager and rival for Maria's affection, has returned to the farm. Before the war, both Stepan and Sergei loved Maria, but she chose Stepan.

However, the war changed everything. The post-war struggles have strained Stepan and Maria's relationship. Stepan's disability requires constant care, while Sergei has risen to the rank of a powerful KGB major. Sergei still desires Maria and sees Stepan as the only obstacle in his way.

Understanding the discord between Stepan and Maria, Sergei plans to "rescue" Maria from her life with a disabled husband. He leverages the order to remove legless veterans from the streets before Stalin's birthday to have Stepan sent north to a prison-

like institution. Zinaida, Maria's mother, becomes Sergei's ally, falsely accusing Stepan of begging and abusing Maria in a statement to the police.

A sympathetic policeman warns Stepan of Sergei's plans and offers to help him escape to another village. Stepan bitterly declines, questioning if even Comrade Stalin has abandoned legless veterans like himself. On the day of Stalin's anniversary, Stepan climbs the bell tower to where the flag still flies.

Realizing his death would free Maria and recognizing that the state no longer values veterans like him, Stepan sees no place for himself in the communist future. Rather than live in hiding or be imprisoned, Stepan makes a final, tragic decision. He jumps from the bell tower, removing the last barrier between Maria and Sergei, leaving them free to live as they wish.