

Screenplay for the film "1939 — Nikolai Kryuchkov. Historical Chronicles with Nikolai Svanidze" written by Marina Zhukova, translated by AI, and preceded by a summary also written by AI.

Screenplay Summary:

*The text uses the 1939 Soviet film *Tractor Drivers* and its star Nikolai Kryuchkov as a lens to explore Stalin's USSR on the eve of World War II, where culture, repression, militarization and diplomacy are tightly interwoven.*

*At the center is *Tractor Drivers*, a kolkhoz comedy built around two hit songs by the Pokrass brothers and Kryuchkov's winning smile. Director Ivan Pyriev clashes with the powerful head of Soviet cinema, Semyon Dukelsky, a former NKVD chief in Voronezh who had personally overseen the exiled poet Mandelstam. Dukelsky cuts hundreds of meters of footage; Pyriev even removes his own name from the credits. The working style of the Stalin system—night summons, arbitrary power, fear—is reproduced at every level of bureaucracy. Culture is overseen not just by artists but by prosecutors and security officials like Vyshinsky and later Beria.*

The film is inseparable from the brutal context of 1937–1939: enormous purges in the Red Army (tens of thousands of officers, including marshals and top commanders, are shot), a climate of paranoia, collapsing morale and discipline. Kryuchkov's character, a demobilized veteran of clashes with Japan at Lake Khasan, returns to a country traumatized by terror, yet he embodies joy, optimism and straightforward heroism. His arrival in the village is like a gust of freedom for peasants tied to their collective farms, while military service offers many men their only way out into the wider world.

The text also stresses the deep militarization of the Soviet economy. Tractor plants designed by American industrial architect Albert Kahn, financed with grain exports during deadly famines, are in fact dual-use facilities easily convertible to tank production. Technical collaboration with Nazi Germany—credits, machinery, military equipment—precedes and accompanies the political rapprochement that culminates in the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact (August 1939) and its secret protocols dividing Poland and parts of Eastern Europe into spheres of influence.

On the international level, the essay recalls the Munich Agreement of 1938, Chamberlain's appeasement, Churchill's warnings, and the subsequent turn: having denounced Munich as a "conspiracy", the USSR itself starts dealing directly with Hitler. It signs an economic "credit" agreement, then the non-aggression pact, and soon after takes part in the dismemberment of Poland, while in public presenting its actions as "liberation" and even cooperating locally with the Gestapo.

Running alongside this political history is the story of Kryuchkov the man. As a child he is sickly and nicknamed "Crooked Kolka", then straightens himself through boxing, works in a factory, joins the TRAM (Theatre of Working Youth), and is discovered by director Boris Barnet. He is trained in an artistic environment where figures like Bulgakov, Meyerhold's daughter, Dunayevsky and others intersect. Kryuchkov becomes an extraordinarily popular star, a "sun-person": cheerful, physically bold, convincing as a real man of the people, yet never a flat propaganda cut-out. The author suggests that, with his physique and talent, he would have been a megastar in Hollywood too.

The text underlines how Stalinist cinema, despite its ideology, shares much with Hollywood: star system, genre formulas, heroic types. Young Vasily Stalin idolizes Kryuchkov as a Soviet superhero and resists any change of his screen persona, while Kryuchkov himself craves more varied roles. Later, he moves toward roles comparable to those of Jean Gabin, and remains in memory as a symbol of the era, making the past seem warmer and nobler than it really was.

*In the end, the contrast is stark: while the USSR engages in cynical diplomacy, secret agreements, local wars (Khasan, Khalkhin Gol), the partition of Poland and preparations for a global conflict, *Tractor Drivers* triumphs on Soviet screens with a song that insists, “We do not want an inch of foreign land.” Cinema, and Kryuchkov in particular, helps to beautify a violent time and to fix in popular memory an image of an era brighter and more humane than the historical reality.*

Screenplay:

1939 – Nikolai Kryuchkov

In the summer of 1939, the film *Tractor Drivers* (“*Traktoristy*”) is showing all over the country. The calling card of the movie is its music. More precisely, two songs and Kryuchkov’s stunning smile. The brothers Daniil and Dmitri Pokrass write two hits at once for the same film.

The elder brother, Semyon Pokrass, wrote in 1919, by order of the Red Army, the famous song “*The White Army, the Black Baron*”, and in 1924 he left for the States. He becomes Sam Pokrass, a successful film composer in Hollywood. He writes for the American version of *The Three Musketeers*. Voroshilov adores this film and hums the tune by the elder American Pokrass. One day Voroshilov jokes to the younger Pokrass brothers:

“It would’ve been better, boys, if you had gone to America, and Semyon had stayed.”

In 1939, the Committee for Cinematography is headed by Semyon Dukelsky. He replaces Boris Shumyatsky, who has been shot. Director Mikhail Romm recalls:

“Well, it’s true, when Shumyatsky was arrested, there was great celebration in Moscow. People really hated him. In the ‘Metropol’, director Boris Barnet got dead drunk. Everyone was walking around cheerful. They said, ‘It can’t get worse than this.’”

Before being appointed to the post of the executed Shumyatsky, Dukelsky had headed the Voronezh NKVD administration. He personally oversaw the poet Mandelstam, who was in exile in Voronezh. Dukelsky had started his career as a pianist for silent films. In 1938, Dukelsky is against Marina Ladygina appearing in *Tractor Drivers*. Director Ivan Pyriev stands his ground. Ladygina is his wife. She acts in the film.

Soon, Dukelsky will be transferred from cinema to head the Soviet Navy. From June 1939 onwards, Soviet culture as a whole is supervised by the former Prosecutor General of the USSR, now Deputy Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars, Vyshinsky.

When, at the end of 1939, the actor Boris Shchukin dies, it is Vyshinsky who informs Stalin of the sudden death of the man who played Lenin. Stalin reacts:

“I would like to know who treated Shchukin. Why weren’t we informed of his illness, of the nature

of his illness? I propose that this matter be investigated quietly, and that the investigation be entrusted personally to Vyshinsky and Beria.”

Former prosecutor Vyshinsky will closely supervise culture until he moves on to his duties as Deputy People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs.

In 1939, the film *Tractor Drivers* is released nationwide without director Pyriev’s name in the credits. Pyriev demanded that his name be removed after the chairman of the Committee for Cinematography, Dukelsky, cut 600 meters of filmed material. *Tractor Drivers* is released in the version edited by the censor Dukelsky.

Mikhail Romm recalls the working style of the head of Soviet cinema. Dukelsky summoned Romm to his office for two o’clock. Romm arrived. Dukelsky asks:

“Who are you?”

Romm answers:

“I’m Romm, a film director, you sent for me.”

“When?” — snaps Dukelsky.

“At two o’clock.”

“And what time is it now?”

“Two o’clock.”

“Fourteen! Fourteen!” — yells Dukelsky. — “Two o’clock, that’s at night. You creative people aren’t used to discipline, but under me there will be discipline.”

Summoning people at night — that is Stalin’s working style. It is adopted by chiefs at all levels. The replication of Stalin’s personal habits throughout the bureaucratic vertical makes the Soviet system monolithic. External manifestations such as night meetings reflect the essence of the system. It is built on arbitrariness. It is secretive, cloistered. In 1939, after 1937 and 1938, the cadres of this system are literally ready for anything. Yet not everyone is physically and mentally capable of enduring this Stalin-style nocturnal life. It will end only with Stalin’s death. Day will again become day, and night simply night.

The star of what is now called “Stalinist cinema”, the leading actor in *Tractor Drivers*, Nikolai Kryuchkov, is not a Party member until Stalin’s death. He joins the Party only in 1953. The actress in the main female role in *Tractor Drivers*, Marina Ladygina, will never join the Party. The director of the most famous films of the 1930s–40s, Ivan Pyriev, will get his Party card in 1956, the year of Khrushchev’s anti-Stalinist 20th Congress.

Stalin liked *Tractor Drivers*. Of course, it’s not *Chapayev*, which he watched 17 times. Nonetheless, *Tractor Drivers* made a strong impression on him. In the autumn of 1946, at the Kremlin, during a meeting with prominent film directors, Stalin walks along the rows, stops and looks at those sitting in front of him. Then he goes up to Molotov and asks:

“Which one of them is *Tractor Drivers*?”

Ivan Pyriev recalls:

“He started to look at me as if I were some painting. I got the creeps. I was looking at him too. He was sort of bluish. Graying, with blue veins on his face. A little tunic of pale blue general’s cloth.”

Stalin’s recollection of *Tractor Drivers* in 1946, after the war, cannot be accidental. For him, this film is tightly bound up with 1939, just before the war. A comedy about kolkhoz life is, in fact, a

historical document, speaking both about domestic and foreign Soviet policy. The year 1939 is a year of big, global foreign politics.

Filming of *Tractor Drivers* began in the autumn of 1938. Kryuchkov's character comes from the Far East, and it is obvious that he is meant to be a participant in the events at Lake Khasan. This local military clash with the Japanese ends with heavy losses for the USSR. The USSR is not ready for military action. Four months before Khasan, a resolution of the Far Eastern Regional Committee of the VKP(b) dated 27 April 1938 notes:

"Material resources — automobiles, tractors — are unprepared. The horse stock is poorly kept. Shoeing is unavailable, which leads to damage to the hooves."

The Party organization of the transport company of the 301st Regiment of the 48th Rifle Division also discusses the condition of the horse stock. They adopt a resolution:

"Horses are coming down with diseases and itching. Might there not be enemies of the people among our command staff?"

The entire 1930s are devoted to building a mobilization economy designed for war, whipping up military hysteria and mass suspicion, yet in 1938 this yields no real results. In the end, in this local conflict, Japan, though defeated, suffers three times fewer losses than the USSR.

The newspapers are unanimously upbeat and triumphant. But nothing can match, nothing can convince people of present and future military success as powerfully as Kryuchkov's smile. The film *Tractor Drivers* opens with this victor's smile, and filming begins immediately after Khasan.

Kryuchkov's character has four triangular insignia on his shoulder straps — he is a senior sergeant. He returns after demobilization. Thus, Kryuchkov's character, Klim Yarko, has served in the Red Army during the years of the most ferocious purges in the army. The reality and the scale of the purges are confirmed personally by the People's Commissar for Defense, Voroshilov, on 29 November 1938, at a session of the Supreme Military Council. Voroshilov says:

"We have cleaned out more than forty thousand people."

Already in January 1938, Stalin says:

"What is the strength of an army? Some think the strength of the army is in good technical equipment. Others think that all the strength of the army is in its command staff. That is also wrong. The main strength of an army lies in whether the policy of the government in the country is correct or not."

In line with this Stalinist thesis, in 1937–1938 there are shot: 3 marshals out of 5, 2 army commissars of the first rank out of 2, 2 army commanders of the 1st rank out of 4, 12 army commanders of the 2nd rank out of 12, 2 fleet flag officers of the 1st rank out of 2, 15 army commissars of the 2nd rank out of 15, 60 corps commanders out of 67, 25 corps commissars out of 28, 136 division commanders out of 199, 221 brigade commanders out of 397, 34 brigade commissars out of 36.

The outstanding Soviet commander of the Great Patriotic War, Marshal Vasilevsky, writes:

"Without '37, perhaps there would not have been any war in 1941 at all."

On 13 January 1939, a joint order of the NKVD and the People's Commissariat of Defense is issued on coordinating actions in the arrest of military personnel.

The order is largely formal, the NKVD keeps the upper hand. Its interest lies elsewhere: it explicitly states that arrests concern not only the command staff, but also the rank and file, men like Kryuchkov's character. So he has every reason to rejoice: he has survived not only the fighting, but he also has not been caught in the grinder of the Great Terror. He is alive and well, and in no case does he discuss with his fellow travellers what lies behind him.

Marshal Zhukov recalls:

"No one trusted anyone, people began to fear each other, to avoid any conversations."

He continues:

"Combat and political training of the command staff sharply declined, and, as a consequence, discipline and the entire service of the personnel weakened."

Commanders are at a loss. The moral state of the army after the purges is nightmarish. The number of suicides and accidents grows. A new provision is added to the *Disciplinary Regulations of the Red Army*:

"In the event of disobedience, the commander has the right to apply all measures of coercion. He bears no responsibility for the consequences."

Commanders gradually get used to beating their subordinates, and violence becomes the norm.

In 1938, after demobilization, Kryuchkov's hero is free. Unlike the kolkhoz peasants who, since 1933, have been deprived of this right and are tied to their collective farm.

The arrival of Kryuchkov's hero, a tankman, in the village is a gulp of freedom that makes the head spin, a whiff of the big Soviet life. A whiff in a military style. And this style is far from new.

Back in 1937, the Pokrass brothers wrote the song "*If War Comes Tomorrow*". Tomorrow's war doesn't scare; tomorrow's war adds zest, cheers people up so much that the anticipation of war becomes the leitmotif of the comedy *Tractor Drivers*.

The gas mask is the face of this time. A gas mask in the village is an unexpected initiation into high fashion. A gas mask is more accessible than a length of crepe de Chine. In *Tractor Drivers*, Marina Ladygina is constantly wearing a baggy overall. Kryuchkov taught her how to ride a motorcycle. She recalls:

"Kryuchkov could drive anything, that's the kind of man he was, and I was afraid. Then he tells me: 'Masha, don't chicken out, everything will be fine.' Kolka taught me that if I can't stop, I should turn off the engine and fall. And he taught me how to fall. So one day I did just that, I fell. He rode up, looked at me and says: 'Well, Masha, lying there?' — 'I'm lying here, Kolka.' That was it."

In 1939, only one kolkhoz peasant out of a hundred can afford a motorcycle like the one she rides in *Tractor Drivers*.

Ladygina and Kryuchkov in *Tractor Drivers* drive S-65 tractors. The "S" stands for *Stalinets* ("Stalinist"). They are produced at the Chelyabinsk Tractor Plant. The plant is designed by the American Albert Kahn, one of the leading industrial architects of the 20th century. He specializes in large industrial plants and developed a technology that allows one to design a huge enterprise in a few months, and build it just as quickly.

Kahn's cooperation with the Soviet government is strictly confidential. It begins in 1929, when there are no diplomatic relations between the USSR and the USA. From 1929 to 1932, Kahn

designs tractor plants in Stalingrad, Kharkov, Chelyabinsk, Tomsk; aircraft plants in Kramatorsk and Tomsk; automobile plants in Moscow, Chelyabinsk, Stalingrad, Nizhny Novgorod, Samara; foundries in Dnepropetrovsk, Chelyabinsk, Kharkov, Magnitogorsk, Sormovo, Stalingrad; rolling mills in Kuznetsk, Magnitogorsk, Upper and Lower Tagil, Sormovo. In total, 521 objects. The American Kahn designs for the USSR the key facilities of the first Stalinist Five-Year Plan. He is offered a package of orders worth two billion dollars. At today's exchange rate, that is 220 billion dollars.

The structures for the Stalinist tractor plant are made in the USA, then shipped to the USSR and assembled in six months. In Moscow, a branch of Kahn's firm is established under the Russian name *Gosproektstroj*. Payment for the orders is carried out by exporting grain. Stalin writes to Molotov in August 1930:

"We must push grain exports like mad. Otherwise we risk being left without our new metallurgical and machine-building plants (the Auto plant, the Chelyabinsk plant, etc.)."

Grain exports, for the sake of militarized industrialization, continue at the height of a deadly famine. Millions of human victims — for the sake of building tractor plants. In reality, the authorities are interested in tractor production only insofar as it can easily be converted to producing tanks.

The tractor plant is pure military infrastructure. That is what Stalin was paying Kahn for. For a purely militarist economy, the authorities pay with hunger in the country, with the death of children. Later, the regime abandons Kahn's services and places cheaper orders in Europe, including in Hitler's Germany.

On 9 April 1935, the USSR and Germany sign an "Agreement on Additional Orders of the USSR in Germany and the Financing of These Orders by Germany". Under the guarantee of the Reich government, a number of German firms receive Soviet orders. They include equipment for machine-building plants, the oil and chemical industries, transport, laboratory equipment. Technical assistance is also included. Under this credit, the USSR receives equipment from Germany worth 151.2 million marks. The credit is to be repaid in 1941. Because the war has begun, the Soviet side does not repay the credit.

Hitler lifts the ban on the export of weapons to the USSR. The Carl Zeiss works supply rangefinders and periscopes. The firm "Karlsruhe Werner" sells cartridge-making machines. In 1937, the USSR begins to receive German equipment for the airfield service of the Air Force of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army. But this information is secret; the film industry knows nothing about it. In 1939, on the eve of the signing of the Non-Aggression Pact with Germany, the tractor drivers are zealously preparing for war against her.

For the Soviet peasant, bound to his kolkhoz, conscription into the army is almost the only chance to see the wider world. After they finish their military service, men receive passports and prefer not to return to the kolkhoz.

The leadership of a kolkhoz in Eastern Siberia sends a letter of complaint to Stalin and Kalinin:

"Red Army soldiers who have completed their term of service very rarely settle down in the kolkhoz, and most of them sniff around to see what things smell like in the kolkhoz, and then slip away to work in town."

Nikolai Kryuchkov himself did not become a kolkhoznik merely by a twist of family fate. He was born in Moscow. His parents worked at the Prozorov textile mill, where the co-director was the

father of the future academicians Nikolai and Sergei Vavilov. After 1917 the factory is renamed “Trekhgorka”.

In his memoirs, Kryuchkov writes nothing about post-revolutionary life in Moscow. He speaks sparingly:

“My father and mother had a dream: to build their own house in the countryside. Now I understand,” writes Kryuchkov, “that for my mother this was the only real chance to prolong my father’s life. In the village, with fresh air and healthy food.”

Kryuchkov writes these memoirs in 1964, the 25th anniversary of the release of *Tractor Drivers*. The terrible post-revolutionary Moscow famine is, naturally, off-screen. On-screen it’s just him, his younger brother and his father leaving for a village in the Tula region to build their own house. The father soon dies, in 1920. The mother takes her children, sick with typhus, back to Moscow.

Had the father not died, the family with its two sons would likely have prospered in the village and lived to see dekulakization and collectivization. In that case, the country would probably never have seen the actor Kryuchkov.

As a child, Kryuchkov was long called “Kolka the Crooked”. He writes:

“After typhus my head tilted to one side, toward my shoulder. Later I took up boxing, started holding my head straight, and the nickname disappeared.”

The factory, boxing, then theatre, then cinema and fame. From the vantage point of the 21st century, this path looks absolutely Hollywood. The writer Vasily Aksyonov writes:

“If Kryuchkov had appeared in Hollywood with his build and his talent, he would have become a megastar there too.”

He would have had dozens of Westerns and love dramas to his name. He would have been a reckless, white-toothed, super-reliable real man whom both women and men trust unconditionally. He would have sung, danced, galloped on horseback, taken a plane into the air himself. All without stunt doubles. He would have done in Hollywood exactly what he did in Soviet pre-war cinema. Kryuchkov is universal and natural, a true professional.

Hollywood is not alien to Stalinist cinema; it is even related to it. Kolkhoz plots are no obstacle. The young Vasily Stalin sensed this intuitively. He loved Kryuchkov the superhero and, as a naïve but powerful viewer, would not tolerate Kryuchkov changing his type. But Kryuchkov, as a strong actor, wanted creative range.

He recalls:

“When I started filming in *The Swineherdess and the Shepherd*, my friend Vasily Stalin turned up, a bit drunk, and started yelling that I must not play that role, that I must not disgrace my previous images. He even threatened to ‘exile me to Siberia’. And I sang back to him: ‘I’m not afraid, not afraid of Siberia. Siberia is Russian land too.’ In the morning he phoned and apologized.”

Some scenes of *The Swineherdess and the Shepherd* were filmed at the VSHV — the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition, later VDNKh, now VVC. The VSHV opened on 1 August 1939. Pyriev’s film was to be submitted for an Oscar, but it wasn’t. That was probably for the best: winning an Oscar in Stalin’s times could easily have brought fierce repression. *The Swineherdess and the Shepherd* was shown in the States with great success under the title *They Met in Moscow*.

When Kryuchkov begins to age, he moves on to the sort of roles associated with Jean Gabin. Jean Gabin, the classics of Hollywood, Nikolai Kryuchkov — art does not recognise state borders, and Nikolai Kryuchkov is a great actor for all time.

In Stalinist cinema, Kryuchkov never plays a purely poster-type character. But for millions of people he remains a symbol of the era. And the past era, because of that, seems better, more talented, brighter. Marina Alexeyevna Ladygina, who is not sentimental by nature, says of Kryuchkov:

“A sun-person.”

Even before cinema, in the early 1930s, Kryuchkov goes on tour to Perm. At this time, the Deputy People’s Commissar for Internal Affairs, but in fact head of the NKVD, Genrikh Yagoda, is lying in the Kremlin hospital with pneumonia. Friends in Perm ask Kryuchkov:

“How is Yagoda’s health? What news?”

“Bad news,” replies Kryuchkov.

“What, hopeless? Is he dying?”

“No, on the contrary, he’s getting better.”

In 1939, director Ivan Pyriev does not want to shoot the final scene of *Tractor Drivers* with Stalin’s portrait. In the original, it resembled the version made later under Khrushchev after the 20th Congress. In 1939, the head of the Committee for Cinematography, Dukelsky, forces Pyriev to reshoot the finale. Dukelsky shouts:

“Give us more Stalin. More Stalin!”

The same Vasily Aksyonov writes:

“Kryuchkov is a colossal discovery by director Barnet, comparable only to what Elia Kazan did two decades later when he discovered Marlon Brando.”

Kryuchkov himself admits that without Boris Barnet he would not have become what he did. They later become close friends. Barnet loves Kryuchkov for his cheerful, sociable nature, his simplicity and warmth. Barnet is nine years older. He is a recognized master, a popular director, and also an excellent actor and sportsman.

“And what stunts he could do,” recalls Kryuchkov. “Right before my eyes, during shooting, he jumped from the window of one building into the window of the building opposite, with no safety gear at all.”

Kryuchkov writes:

“I suppose that all my work in boxing, wrestling, weightlifting and target shooting was, to some extent, ‘directed’ by Boris Barnet.”

Barnet’s first film with Kryuchkov is *Outskirts (Okraina)*. The premiere of *Outskirts* takes place at the recently opened cinema *Udarnik*. The police will not let Kryuchkov into his own premiere. He is dressed outrageously, with a cocky quiff. He unnerves the respectable public. Barnet has to bring him in “through connections”.

Kirill Stolyarov, son of the famous actor Sergei Stolyarov, a friend of Kryuchkov, recalls:

“Uncle Kolya never put on airs. He was sincere to the end. That’s why he was loved. He wore that cap of his, which he called his ‘kelar’. ‘I’ve got my kelar, old man. My cap!’ He never once wore a hat.”

At a parade on Red Square, while everyone else craned their necks to watch the airplane, he was gnawing an apple and looking around.

When he came out on stage with his accordion and sang *Three Tankmen*, everyone would jump up and yell like mad.

Barnet discovered Kryuchkov at the Moscow TRAM — the Theatre of Working Youth, from which the Lenin Komsomol Theatre would later grow. Kryuchkov studied at the theatre's studio for two years. Acting was taught by MKhAT actors Nikolai Batalov, Alexei Gribov, Nikolai Khmelev, who played Alexei Turbin in Bulgakov's play. Bulgakov himself headed the literary department. He ended up in that post at TRAM after his famous phone conversation with Stalin in the spring of 1930. Bulgakov dreamed of the MKhAT and ended up at TRAM.

Kryuchkov visited Bulgakov's apartment. The musical department at TRAM was headed by Isaak Dunayevsky. Biomechanics was taught by Meyerhold's daughter, Irina Khold.

The next time Kryuchkov would see Meyerhold's daughter, after Stalin had had Meyerhold destroyed, would be on the set of *The Star* in 1948.

In *The Star*, as in *Heavenly Slug*, Kryuchkov appears with Vasily Merkurjev. Merkurjev brings Irina Khold to him and says:

“My wife.”

At that time, all Merkurjev's brothers are in the camps. He is raising his brother Pyotr's three children together with his own three.

The Star will be released in 1953, after Stalin's death. In the final scene, Kryuchkov pulls the pin of a grenade out with his teeth. He recalls:

“Stalin didn't like that my character, Sergeant Mamochkin, before blowing himself up, says: ‘So that's that,’ and not ‘For Stalin’. The film was banned.”

At TRAM, dance is taught by a famous ballerina of that time, Natalia Plan. Dance classes at TRAM verge on collective obsession.

Kryuchkov recalls his dance in *Tractor Drivers*:

“I did twenty-six moves in a row. And without a double.”

Natalia Plan is Boris Barnet's wife. It is she who introduces Barnet to Kryuchkov.

“Here is my dance partner.”

Barnet brings him into cinema.

Barnet also instills in him a passion for fishing. Kryuchkov will go fishing whenever he can, even during shooting. Shortly before his death, when he no longer has the strength, he will simply watch his wife fish, and even that will give him pleasure.

While on screen Kryuchkov's hero in *Tractor Drivers* is returning from the events at Khasan, in real life military action is starting on the Khalkhin Gol. In 1939, the Khalkhin Gol river flows through a 100-kilometre border zone between Mongolia and the state of Manchukuo, created by Japan in northeast China.

Skirmishes occur between Mongolian and Japanese border guards. It is unclear whose territory they are on, as the border is not clearly defined. Mongolia is under Soviet control and lives in complete isolation. Japan proposes that Mongolia begin negotiations on border demarcation.

Moscow is against negotiations and against Mongolia having diplomatic relations with any country. Soviet troops had already been stationed in Mongolia since 1937.

In 1939, not one of the existing topographical documents — neither the 1906 one, nor those of 1933 and 1934 — confirms that the disputed territory along the Khalkhin Gol belongs to Soviet-controlled Mongolia. Eventually a map from 1887 is found that suits the Soviet leadership, and that means the start of military operations.

In the first battles in May 1939, corps commander Georgy Zhukov has great difficulty stopping his troops from fleeing the battlefield. Additional Soviet forces are sent to Mongolia. On 31 August, Zhukov reports that Japanese units have been routed.

Meanwhile, Stalin replaces the entire leadership of Mongolia. These people are arrested, brought to Moscow and imprisoned. The leaders of the Mongolian state are tried by the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR. They are shot near Moscow. Only Marshal Choibalsan survives.

On 11 May 1939, the day the Khalkhin Gol events begin, Hero of the Soviet Union, pilot Anatoly Serov, husband of actress Valentina Serova, is killed near Ryazan during aircraft tests. Her long and difficult romantic story with Konstantin Simonov will begin in 1940.

In 1939, Simonov is at Khalkhin Gol, although he arrives there at the end of the events. He writes:

“But I spent time with people who had been there FROM THE VERY BEGINNING. And it was no secret to me that our armoured cars burned like candles, that our fast BT-5 and BT-7 tanks suddenly proved very vulnerable to artillery fire, that our fighters were slower than the Japanese. At first the Japanese were shooting down our inexperienced pilots in the air, and things only turned when our best pilots, who had distinguished themselves in Spain, came to Khalkhin Gol.”

Simonov frankly admits that before Khalkhin Gol, the army had seemed to him much better prepared for war than it really was.

“I saw with my own eyes,” he writes, “that Japanese infantry fought desperately, died but did not surrender. The enemy was brave, and I allowed that we could expect the same from the Germans.”

He barely manages to defend the line:

“Yes, the enemy was brave, the greater is our glory.”

But on the radio he hears a completely different version:

“Yes, the enemy was treacherous.”

The radio, the chief mass medium at the time, does not tolerate on air even a suggestion that the enemy might be brave. The population must be kept under the illusion that victories will be easy. This deception — an expression of Stalin’s mistrust of his own people — will cost the country dearly. In 1941, a generation of Soviet people, brutally deceived by the authorities yet sincerely loving their motherland, will go into battle.

In the film *A Lad from Our Town*, based on Simonov’s play, Kryuchkov’s character, Sergei Lukonin, is at Khalkhin Gol in August 1939, just like Simonov himself. It is at this moment in Moscow that the famous Soviet-German agreement, known as the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, is being signed.

Vyacheslav Molotov has been People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs since May 1939, replacing Maxim Litvinov. Joachim von Ribbentrop is the Reich Foreign Minister. The idea of the pact comes from the German side, that is, from Hitler.

Yet already in early 1939 there are signs of a mutual drift towards rapprochement. The British and French press discuss possible German aggression against the USSR.

Stalin, speaking at the 18th Party Congress on 10 March, mocks this:

“It looks as if this suspicious noise has the aim of inciting the Soviet Union against Germany.”

In Berlin, Stalin’s words are clearly heard. Ribbentrop informs Hitler about the speech. Göring discusses it with Mussolini. Mussolini considers that it will be easy to come to terms with Russia.

At the heart of the mutual attraction and growing mutual loyalty between the USSR and Germany lie acute economic interests.

Germany, in view of its preparations for a major war, needs from the USSR oil, grain, iron ore, apatites, non-ferrous metals.

There is a list with notes in Stalin’s hand.

The USSR, from Germany, requires advanced technology and high-performance equipment. Aircraft. And various other, as Stalin calls them, “trifles”.

Soviet industrialization has not given, and could not give, Stalin the results he wanted. The pre-war Soviet economy cannot function without financial and technical support from outside.

Mutual Soviet-German satisfaction becomes reality after the event that took place in Munich in September 1938. On 29 September, an agreement is signed between Germany, France, Britain and Italy. Germany receives the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia, populated mainly by Germans. It is a great success for Hitler.

The Munich Agreement remains a shameful page in the diplomatic history of the European democracies.

In autumn 1938, British Prime Minister Chamberlain returns to London with the words: “I have returned with peace for our time.”

Shocked by the policy of appeasement of the aggressor, future British Prime Minister Churchill says:

“We have sustained a total and unmitigated defeat. There is no reason to suppose that this is the end. This is only the first sip of a bitter cup which will be proffered to us year by year if... we do not arise again and take our stand for freedom as in olden time.”

The Munich Agreement does not last long. Six months later, Germany ignores its deal with its partners. Czechoslovakia is wiped off the political map of Europe. That is March 1939.

The USSR condemns the Munich Agreement outright, calling it the “Munich conspiracy”.

Immediately after this statement, the USSR enters into contact with Germany and places its own military orders with enterprises in occupied Czechoslovakia.

In May 1939, Germany once again seeks contact with Britain. It needs this before attacking Poland, which is no longer far off. But a second Munich fails. In Britain, alongside “the man of Munich” Chamberlain, there are sober-minded people who understand the danger of a deal with Hitler. And, crucially, Britain has a free press. Journalists expose the backstage negotiations with Germany. Newspapers come out with headlines such as “No Second Munich”.

It is precisely British public opinion that prevents a repeat of Munich's disgrace. Chamberlain soon resigns. Churchill takes his place.

Stalin, in his own way, exploits the story of this thwarted second Munich. It provides excellent motivation and cover for his own big international game. Its result is the document that has gone down in history as the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact.

In the USSR, the public has no idea about relations with Germany. Moreover, the upcoming pact is not even discussed in the Politburo. Decisions are made by one man. Two or three people possess the information.

The conclusion of the pact is a multi-step combination.

On 19 August 1939, an economic “credit agreement” is signed. Germany grants the USSR a credit of 200 million marks. The initiative comes from Germany.

After the credit agreement, on 23 August 1939, a political document is signed in Moscow by the two foreign ministers — the “Non-Aggression Pact” between the Soviet Union and Germany.

The German draft of the treaty includes in the preamble references to the friendly nature of Soviet-German relations. Stalin crosses them out. In August he considers declarations of friendship to be too unexpected for Soviet and world public opinion. Friendship is postponed for a month.

The Non-Aggression Pact includes a secret protocol.

According to this protocol, Germany and the USSR divide Poland between them along the rivers Vistula, Narew and San, from north to south, essentially in half.

In addition, Bessarabia and the Baltic states — Finland, Latvia, Estonia — fall into the Soviet sphere of influence. All except Lithuania.

At the banquet after signing the pact, Stalin proposes a toast to Hitler:

“I know how much the German nation loves its Führer. And so I would like to drink to his health.”

On 1 September 1939, Germany invades Poland. This is the beginning of the Second World War. The day before, on 31 August, Ribbentrop informs Stalin of the coming invasion. The message ends with the words:

“The German army has set out.”

Soviet troops immediately, in accordance with the secret protocol, enter the territory of Eastern Poland.

In the Soviet press, this is described as an “operation to liberate” Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine.

A year earlier, Hitler had called the entry of German troops into the Sudetenland, populated by ethnic Germans, an “operation of liberation”. This was done in accordance with the Munich Agreement. Soon, all Czechoslovakia was seized.

In 1939, Poland disappears from the map of Europe. The Soviet Union and Nazi Germany now have a common border.

In the last week of September 1939, after the war has already begun, new negotiations with Germany start. Stalin decides to exchange certain slices of the partitioned territories. He no longer

wants the strip of Poland up to the Vistula, perhaps recalling the resistance that the Poles put up against the Red Army in 1920.

In 1939, Stalin gives Hitler a bit more of Poland but in return takes Lithuania.

On 28 September 1939, after the joint partition of Poland, the USSR and Germany sign a new document with new secret protocols.

This document is now called the “Treaty of Friendship and Border”.

On 30 September, all the central newspapers, including *Pionerskaya Pravda*, publish a map of the former Poland. Under the map is the caption:

“Border of the mutual state interests of the USSR and Germany on the territory of the former Polish state.”

In the Polish town of Zakopane, the NKVD and the Gestapo set up a joint centre to “combat Polish agitation”.

Khrushchev, at that time First Secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party, recalls:

“The People’s Commissar for Internal Affairs of Ukraine, State Security Commissar 3rd Rank Ivan Serov, established contacts with the Gestapo. The NKVD handed over to the Gestapo a large group of communists who thought they would find refuge from Nazism in the Soviet Union.”

The Second World War, the bloodiest in human history, begins and for almost two years, until June 1941, goes on under the sign of official friendship between Hitler and Stalin.

Before signing the Treaty of Friendship, Stalin says to Ribbentrop:

“If Germany, contrary to expectations, should find itself in a difficult situation, the Soviet people will come to Germany’s aid and will not allow Germany to be thrown to the ground.”

In December 1939, on the occasion of Stalin’s 60th birthday, Hitler sends him congratulations. Ribbentrop sends a separate message. Stalin replies:

“I thank you, Mr. Minister. The friendship of the peoples of Germany and the Soviet Union, cemented by blood, has every reason to be long-lasting and firm.”

Stalin means Polish blood.

Georgi Dimitrov, chairman of the Comintern Executive Committee, notes in his diary that on his sixtieth birthday Stalin tells his guests:

“The Union has become cramped. Finland and Bessarabia will not hurt us.”

Cinema cannot keep up with politics. In *Tractor Drivers*, which is triumphantly rolling across the country’s screens at this time, they are still singing:

“We do not want an inch of foreign land.”