“And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, Come and see. And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.”

—Revelation 6:7–8

**COME AND SEE**

This legendary film from Soviet director Elem Klimov is a senses-shattering plunge into the dehumanizing horrors of war. As Nazi forces encroach on his small village in what today is known as Belarus, teenage Flyora (Alexei Kravchenko, in a searing depiction of anguish) eagerly joins the Soviet resistance. Rather than the adventure and glory he envisioned, what he finds is a waking nightmare of unimaginable carnage and cruelty—rendered with a feverish, otherworldly intensity by Klimov’s subjective camera work and expressionistic sound design. Nearly blocked from being made by Soviet censors who took seven years to approve its script, *Come and See* is perhaps the most visceral, impossible-to-forget antiwar film ever made.

A Mosfilm Cinema restoration produced by Karen Shakhnazarov
ELEM KLIMOV (1933–2003) was born in the Soviet city of Stalingrad and still lived there in 1942, when the brutal Battle of Stalingrad began; he was evacuated with his family but never forgot what he saw as a child during World War II—memories he would one day draw on for the film now widely considered his masterpiece, Come and See.

In 1957, he graduated from Moscow’s Higher Institute of Aviation, briefly considering a career in journalism before enrolling in the prestigious Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography (VGIK), where he met fellow film student Larisa Sheptiko, whom he married in 1963. Klimov made his feature-film-directing debut in 1964 with Welcome, or No Trespassing, released just days before Communist Party leader Nikita Khrushchev, who since 1953 had presided over a period of liberalizing cultural policies, was removed from office. In 1962, Klimov had joined the Communist Party, a decision that theoretically helped advance his career, though Welcome and his following two full-length films were all satires that irritated officialdom and had very limited distribution. From 1964 to 1982, under the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet Union entered a period of backlash against the Khrushchev “thaw.” Films were subjected to increasingly strict control by state authorities, and directors like Klimov who appeared allergic to conformity found it difficult—though not impossible—to work. Klimov spent much of the first half of the seventies making Agony, a film about Rasputin that he finished in 1975 but was shelved by Soviet authorities until 1985.

After the tragic death of Shepitko and her film crew in a car accident in 1979, Klimov committed to finishing the movie she had been working on, Farewell, a veiled critique of Soviet hydroelectric policies; the film was released in 1983, after two years on the shelf. In 1985, after another lengthy period of delays (for more details, see the Preproduction section of these notes), the harrowing Come and See, the film that would be the director’s last, premiered.

Between 1986 and 1988, during then–party leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s push for political and cultural reform, Klimov headed the Soviet Union of Cinematographers and oversaw the release of virtually all previously banned films. Although he announced that he was relinquishing his post at the Union of Cinematographers to make more movies of his own, he never completed another. “I lost interest in making films . . . Everything that was possible I felt I had already done,” Klimov said in 2001, two years before his death.

ALES ADAMOVICH (1927–1994) was a well-known Soviet writer, critic, academic, and political activist born in Minsk, Belorussia, USSR. He joined a partisan band in 1942, at the age of fifteen, serving as a scout and soldier—the basis of his lifelong determination to bring the German atrocities in Belorussia to the attention of the Soviet Union and the world. His second novel, Khatyn, first published in 1971, draws on archival material and interviews in recounting the story of the 1943 massacre at Khatyn, one of the hundreds of Belorussian villages razed, with all or most of their inhabitants killed, by the Nazis. Adamovich followed Khatyn in 1975 with Out of the Fire, a nonfiction collective history of the war in Belorussia, cowritten with Yanka Bryl and Vladimir Kolesnik. After reading these works, Klimov began discussing with Adamovich the possibility of writing a script together.

In the years following the release of Come and See, Adamovich became an outspoken political activist. He took the lead in raising Soviet awareness about the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, which had had a devastating impact on Belorusia, where much of the fallout from the nuclear accident had settled. He also became active in opposition and secession politics, serving
as an elected representative to the new People’s Congress from 1989 to 1992. He continued to be involved in film affairs as well, becoming, in 1987, the director of the Soviet state film research institute, at Klimov’s urging.

At the time of Adamovich’s death in 1994, he was widely regarded as the conscience of the newly independent Belarus. Svetlana Alexievich, the Belarusian writer who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2015, claims Adamovich as her mentor.

Unlike Klimov and Adamovich, ALEXEI RODIONOV (1947–), who would go on to become one of the most accomplished Soviet/Russian cinematographers of the postwar era, had no direct connection to World War II, as he was born in Moscow after the conflict. In his first important project as a cinematographer, Rodionov joined Klimov in finishing Shepitko’s Farewell. A few years later, Rodionov worked with Klimov again on Come and See, the film for which they both remain best known. Rodionov’s striking visuals—including naturalistic colors, long Steadicam shots, and extreme close-ups of faces—are essential to the film’s nightmarish, otherworldly tone.

After the fall of the USSR in 1991, Rodionov ventured abroad, shooting Sally Potter’s opulent period drama Orlando (1992), among other non-Russian works (he went on to collaborate with Potter again on the black-and-white 2017 comedy The Party). Among his best-known post-Soviet Russian films are Vladimir Khotinenko’s The Muslim (1995) and Andrei Kravchuk’s The Admiral (2008), both of which also concern wars and their aftermaths.

ALEXEI KRAVCHENKO (1969–) was only fourteen when Klimov cast him as Flyora, the protagonist of Come and See, eliciting from him one of the most memorable and visceral performances in film history. Afterward, Kravchenko finished vocational school and served in the navy before entering Moscow’s prestigious Boris Shchukin Theatre Institute, where he trained as an actor from 1991 to 1995. Kravchenko has since appeared regularly in films and on television, as well as onstage—in 2007 he joined the troupe of the Moscow Art Theatre. He recently costarred in Václav Marhoul’s adaptation of Jerzy Kosiński’s Holocaust novel The Painted Bird, a film that won several awards on the festival circuit last year.

HISTORICAL NOTE

Come and See is set in Soviet Belorussia in 1943, when the German army was retreating west after losing the decisive battles of Stalingrad and Kursk. The Germans adopted a brutal “scorched earth” policy in retreat, determined to destroy as many villages and take as many civilian lives as they could; as the title card at the end of Come and See accurately states, “628 Belorussian villages were burned to the ground, with all their inhabitants.” More than two million Belorussian people were killed during the war, about a quarter of the country’s prewar population.

At the time of the events depicted in the film, and also at the time the film was made, the region where it is set was called the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, or Belorussia, not Belarus, as it is known today. The Soviet characters in Come and See represent different specific Soviet ethnicities: Belorussian, Russian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, etc. All were “Soviet,” but not necessarily “Russians”—a term that should be reserved for ethnic Russians.

As regards the armed group in the film, “Soviet partisans” is the most accurate label for it. Broadly speaking, there were three types of partisan groups active in the USSR during the war: independent, Red Army, and hybrid (meaning a few soldiers alongside civilians). Until the war’s midpoint, most partisan groups were grassroots, i.e., not controlled by the Red Army. Once it was apparent that the Soviets would be victorious on the eastern front, however, the Soviet government sought to gain control over the “irregular” partisans by converting them to Red Army units. The partisans in Come and See appear to be a hybrid group, with their commander, Kosach, representing the Red Army, while other members, like the boy Flyora, have either volunteered or been pressed into service.
PREPRODUCTION

Elem Klimov began work on *Come and See* in the midseventies, while his wife, Larisa Shepitko, was preparing to make her own World War II film, *The Ascent*. He later said he thought at the time: “The world doesn't know about Khatyn! They know about Katyn, about the massacre of the Polish officers there. But they don't know about Belorussia. Even though more than six hundred villages were burned there!”

Inspired by Ales Adamovich’s books about the atrocities committed by the Nazis in Belorussia, Klimov approached the writer about collaborating on a film, and the two began working together on a script. Of the role his own wartime experiences played in the writing process, Klimov later said, “As a young boy, I had been in hell . . . Had I included everything I knew [in *Come and See*] and shown the whole truth, even I could not have watched it.”

After the completion of the script, *Come and See* endured years of delays. Klimov was prepared to begin shooting the film in 1977, but the State Committee for Cinematography (Goskino) objected to a screenplay that it viewed as espousing the “aesthetics of dirtiness.” The film was delayed still further after Shepitko’s death in 1979, as Klimov undertook to complete her film *Farewell*. Only after Communist Party leader Leonid Brezhnev’s death in 1982, which opened the door to a measure of cultural relaxation, was *Come and See* finally approved for production, as one of a number of World War II films (Yuri Ozerov’s *The Battle of Moscow* also among them) intended to mark the fortieth anniversary of Victory Day.

PRODUCTION

A coproduction of Mosfilm, the USSR’s largest and most important studio, and the Belorussian studio Belarusfilm, *Come and See* was shot, in sequence, over a period of nine months in 1984. According to Klimov: “*Come and See* was shot only on [Belorussian] soil. The events with the people, the peasants, actually happened as shown in the film. [It] doesn’t have any professional actors . . . What was important was that all the events depicted in the film really did happen in [Belorussia].”

The shoot was intense and arduous. Lead actor Alexei Kravchenko, a teenager who had never appeared in a film before, said that while making the film he underwent “the most debilitating fatigue and hunger. I kept a strict diet, and after the filming was over I returned to school not only thin but gray-haired.” Klimov attempted to have the young actor hypnotized for the scenes depicting particularly harrowing events, so he wouldn’t remember them, but Kravchenko turned out not to be susceptible to hypnosis. Instead of blanks, real bullets were often used during filming: Kravchenko has said that these bullets sometimes passed just inches above his head.
**RELEASE**

*Come and See* debuted at the Moscow International Film Festival in 1985, an honor reserved for high-profile Soviet films, and won the grand prize. It came in sixth at the Soviet box office in 1986, attracting nearly twenty-nine million viewers (a very large audience for a serious film in the television age) and was voted best film of the year by readers of *Soviet Screen*, a popular movie magazine. The film’s bleak worldview and relentless, at times almost surreal horror startled Soviet viewers accustomed to the domestic war movies approved by Brezhnev (and Joseph Stalin before him), which, in the tradition of socialist realism, generally avoided graphic violence and were centered around positive heroes on a path of discovery.

The film was released in the United States in 1987. It was also the official Soviet submission for the foreign-language-film category of the fifty-eighth Academy Awards, though it was not ultimately shortlisted.

**LEGACY**

As celebrated as *Come and See* was upon its initial release, it seemed for years to stand alone, at least in the post-Soviet world. Interest in the “Great Patriotic War,” as the conflict fought from 1941 to 1945 on the eastern front is still known in Russia, plummeted in the dismal 1990s, when the storied Soviet film industry (always centered in Russia) almost went out of business. There were no films commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Soviet victory in 1995. By 2005, however, a few Russian television serials in the critical spirit of *Come and See* appeared for the sixtieth anniversary of Victory Day, including Nikolai Dostal’s *Penal Battalion* and Vladimir Fatianov’s *Major Pugachev’s Last Battle*.

In the West, the film has risen steadily in popularity and influence over the past three decades. In 2008, *Come and See* placed sixtieth on *Empire* magazine’s list of the five hundred greatest movies of all time, and two years later it ranked number 24 in *Empire*’s “100 Best Films of World Cinema.” In June 2010, Roger Ebert posted a review of *Come and See* as part of his “Great Movies” series, describing it as “one of the most devastating films ever about anything, and in it, the survivors must envy the dead.” And in 2012, it ranked 154th among critics, and thirtieth among directors, in *Sight & Sound*’s poll of the greatest films ever made.

**FILM FACTS**

*Come and See* was originally titled *Kill Hitler.*

Oscar-winning cinematographer Roger Deakins (1917) has said: “I think I am right in saying that *Come and See* utilized Steadicam in a way than had not been done up to that time . . . [The camera] forces the viewer to consider [the characters’] plight.”

The film features a rare screen appearance by the red slender loris, a small nocturnal primate. The animal is the pet perched on the shoulder of the Nazi SS major.

Many of the uniforms and weapons seen in the film are originals from the war.