



THE BIG CHIEF

From hero to enemy - a documentary on how quickly one can end up on the wrong side of history when the narrative is owned by totalitarian regimes.

A DOCUMENTARY BY
TOMASZ WOLSKI



Film details:



ORIGINAL TITLE:	Wielki Szef
INTERNATIONAL TITLE:	The Big Chief
DIRECTOR, SCRIPT, EDITING, CINEMATOGRAPHY AND ARCHIVE SELECTION:	Tomasz Wolski
PRODUCER:	Kijora Film
COPRODUCTION:	Polish Television TVP S.A., INA, Atoms & Void, KBF, The Mazovia Institute of Culture
SOUND:	Aleksandra Landsmann, Igor Kazmirchuk
CO-FINANCED BY:	Polish Film Institute
GENRE:	feature documentary



Logline

THE BIG CHIEF is a character-driven immersive spy film about an unknown, yet captivating historical figure against the backdrop of tumultuous historic events of 20th century Europe.

Brilliantly edited archival footage from various parts of the world, gradually reveals another mystery of the 20th century.

Historical context



Leopold Trepper was an agent of the Red Army Intelligence and had been working with Soviet intelligence since 1930.

The name Rote Kapelle was a cryptonym that was invented for a secret operation started [redacted] under the collective name „Red Orchestra” and wants it to be viewed above all as an espionage organization of the Soviet Union.

[redacted] network of resistance groups, connected through personal contacts, uniting hundreds of opponents of the Nazi regime.

[redacted] associated Soviet intelligence networks, working in Belgium, France, United Kingdom and the low countries, that were built up by Leopold Trepper on behalf of the Main Directorate of State Security (GRU).

Trepper ran a series of clandestine cells for organising agents. He used the latest technology, in the form of small wireless radios, to communicate with Soviet intelligence.

[redacted] the sophisticated use of the technology enabled the organisation to behave as a network, with the ability to achieve tactical surprise and deliver high-quality intelligence, including the warning of Operation Barbarossa.

[redacted] a „Red Orchestra” network in Western Europe, led by Leopold Trepper did not exist.

Synopsis

In the 1960s and 1970s in Poland, Leopold Trepper found himself caught in a Kafkaesque struggle to leave the only country he had ever known. Trepper, a legendary figure in the annals of espionage, had masterminded the most significant spy network during World War II, the „Red Orchestra.“ But now, his once-celebrated status made him a target for the opposite side, the communists.

Stripped of his job, Trepper’s every move was put under constant surveillance. His mundane existence was meticulously documented, his conversations recorded, and his image was captured in classified photographs. He desperately sought a passport permit to leave the country which was repeatedly denied. The USSR, his former ally, saw him as a burden.

News of his plight reached France, where Trepper’s allies formed a committee pressuring Polish authorities for his release. But the attempts to document his story turned out to be futile. The French film crew faced confiscation of their film footage. Further accusations of espionage against the USSR and against his Red Orchestra comrades have complicated the process.

Finally, after a hunger strike and mounting international pressure, Poland relented. Trepper could leave and eventually settle in Israel. His personal story combines espionage, betrayal, and the unwavering will to survive.

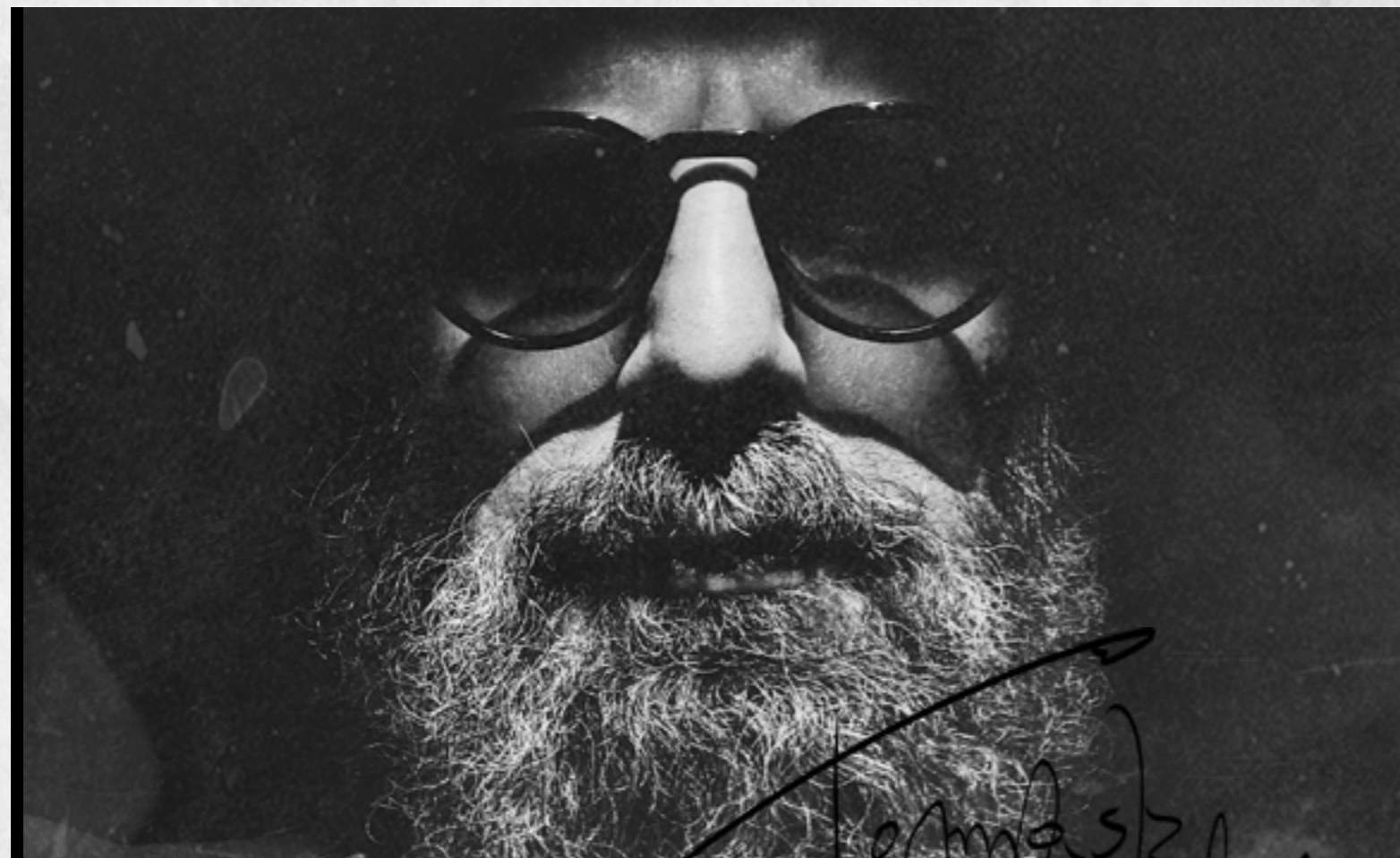
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**I AM ON A HUNGER STRIKE
TO PREVAIL ON THE POLISH
GOVERNMENT TO PERMIT MY
AILING PARENTS TO**

Director



Tomasz Wolski

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

2025 The Big Chief
2024 A Year In The Life Of A Country
2023 In Ukraine / directed with Paweł Pawlus
2020 An Ordinary Country
2021 1970

Name	Tomasz Wolski
Profession	Director, screenwriter, cinematographer, and editor.
Education	Graduated from Wajda School, received his Ph.D. at the Lodz Film School. Participated in Berlinale Talents.
Membership	Member of the Polish Filmmakers Association, the Polish Film Academy, and the European Film Academy. Since 2024, a member of the Council of the Polish Film Institute
Work	His feature-length documentary, "In Ukraine" premiered at Berlinale 2023, and his previous film, "1970," has been screened at over 50 international festivals worldwide and won numerous awards (Visions du Réel, Krakow Film Festival, Zagrebdox, Festival Film Dokumenter, Batumi International Art House Film Festival). He also edited the films Babi Yar. Context and The Kiev Trial by Sergei Loznitsa and Horse Riders by Anna Gawlita.



Director's statement

„The Big Chief“ serves as a compelling narrative delving into the tumultuous and intricate era in which our parents and grandparents navigated. It paints a vivid portrait of a man thrust into the midst of adversity, compelled to make choices that, through the lens of contemporary understanding, defy easy judgment. Audiences will be presented with a historical figure who does not correspond to the notion of a conventional straightforward hero (if such a figure even exists), a man shrouded in enigma, harbouring his secrets, and perhaps even actively crafting the mysteries surrounding his persona.

The events that took place in the 1970s are, on the one hand, a clear manifestation of human wickedness (anti-Semitism), and, on the other hand, an extraordinary demonstration of solidarity (the committee for the release of Trepper). The willingness and need to help those who are weaker and in need of support is a universal theme that we are dealing with constantly, in everyday life as well as in politics. We even face it in the current situation with Afghani refugees fleeing their country or the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We count on those who might help us in difficult situations.

Striving to create the most cinematic, dramatically charged narrative possible, I refrained from a voice-over narration. However, I aim to guide the viewer through significant historical events through the way I edited the film. In the most accessible yet cinematic manner possible, I'm offering context in case the viewer lacks the necessary historical knowledge. Scenes of historical events are edited with their own tension and emotional drama. They aim to convey the atmosphere and reality of those profoundly turbulent times and occasionally remind us of their brutality. All of this is to show the stark reality and dangers that Trepper faced head-on.

„The Big Chief“ delves into the life of a man who navigated through tumultuous historical events that left an indelible mark on his journey and on people who refused to remain indifferent.

TOP SECRET

Conversation with Tomasz Wolski

EXCERPT FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH PIOTR CZERKAWSKI

How did you come across your protagonist, who is practically anonymous in Poland today?

While working on *An Ordinary Country* and browsing through the archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, I came across documents labeled with the reference „Leopold Trepper.” The name meant nothing to me, but there was a surprising amount of material, which caught my attention, as the communist-era security services usu-

I could sense that we were touching on something profoundly important.

ally destroyed such records. It turned out that twenty to thirty reels of film contained an interview with

a man recounting his life during World War II. I kept digging and discovered that it had been confiscated from French television, whose journalists had traveled to interview Trepper in the 1970s. I was curious about what had prompted them to do so. I found out that the interviewer, Jean-Pierre Elkabach, was still alive. I called him, but he didn't pick up—apparently, a call from a Polish country code wasn't something he wanted to answer.

How did you eventually get in touch with him?

I sent him a text message explaining that I had access to materials from forty-five years ago, which he had thought were destroyed, as that was what Polish security services had told him. The moment Jean-Pierre read my message, he called back immediately and was deeply moved. Some time later, I took the archives to France and organized a screening in a small cinema in Paris.



Both Jean-Pierre and Gilles Perrault (the author of a book on the „Red Orchestra”) reacted very emotionally to the memories of Trepper's case. I could sense that we were touching on something profoundly important to them. Seeing the intensity of their emotions, I was even more surprised that Trepper remains virtually unknown in Poland.



Exactly—why is that the case?

I've been asking myself that question for a long time, and I still can't find an answer. There are no materials featuring him in the archives of Polish television or radio, nor in the indexes of most history books about World War II or March 1968. This is especially strange considering that, after the war, Trepper spent several years as the chairman of the Social and Cultural Association of Polish Jews. He was essentially a communist apparatchik, attending official events...

I imagine that's not the only mystery hidden in Trepper's biography.

One of the biggest enigmas is how Trepper became the head of the „Red Orchestra”—the largest spy network in France—despite not speaking French well. In fact, he mangled the language. On top of that, during World

War II, he lived right next to a Gestapo headquarters in France!

He must have been incredibly lucky—but I assume there was more to it.

Luck was certainly a factor, but so was cunning and the ability to navigate unusual situations.

So, was he a sort of Polish James Bond?

Not exactly. A fascinating perspective came from the only family member of Trepper's that I managed to find—his granddaughter, who appears in the film as a little girl in archival footage.

What did she tell you?

She said she had no idea how her grandfather could have been such a great spy, given that he had a terrible sense of direction and got lost every

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time he stepped out of the house. Moreover, she couldn't understand where his technological expertise came from, considering she had personally witnessed him putting an electric kettle on a gas stove—and, of course, burning it. Interestingly, the exact same thing happened to me while working on the film...

Logically, someone like that shouldn't have survived even a day during the war.

And yet, all the other members



It's difficult to judge wartime decisions from a modern perspective.

of the „Red Orchestra“ were caught, tortured, and executed—while Trepper was the only one who made it out alive. He claimed that this was due to an order from Canaris and Himmler, who decided that, instead of killing key spies, they should be used in intelligence games, forced to send false information to the Allies. Trepper insisted, however, that he remained a double agent and continued passing truthful reports to the Allies.

Do you believe him?

I don't know. But even if I don't fully believe him, I operate on the assumption that it's difficult to judge wartime decisions from a modern perspective. One of the reasons I made *The Big Chief* was to show that war complicates human lives to such an extent that it becomes nearly impossible to untangle those complications later.

The film doesn't take a definitive stance—Trepper's story could have been drastically simplified.

It would have been enough to uncritically follow the narratives constructed by various countries' intelligence

services. But when you examine different archives, you see that each country created conflicting versions of the story to serve their own interests. The French portrayed Trepper in their records as an incompetent figure who wasn't all that important—because they preferred to glorify their own Resistance fighters. The Germans, on the other hand, described him as an elusive super-spy, to justify their failures in catching him. Meanwhile, Polish intelligence was mainly intere-



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sted in his Jewish origins and foreign connections.

You avoid such oversimplifications in all your archival-based films. Do you think there's a common thread connecting them?

An *Ordinary Country* was a broader portrait of communism in Poland, while my other two archival-based films—1970 and *A Year in the Life of a Country*, which focuses on martial law—depict specific moments in our history. *The Big Chief* also originated from that approach—its starting point is 1968 and Gomułka's anti-Semitic campaign. The March events set the tone for the film, which follows a layered, nested structure: we learn that the authorities forbade Trepper from leaving the country, and to understand why, we have to keep going further back in time. Ultimately, though, it all comes down to his Jewish heritage and a shameful chapter in Polish history—one that we must keep remembering.

Warsaw, 2025



Producer



Anna Gawlita

Name	Anna Gawlita
Bio	Awarded as Best Producer at the New Horizons International Film Festival and the Krakow Film Festival. Co-owner and chair of KIJORA FILM, member of the European Film Academy. Participant in Berlinale Talents, the Emerging Producers program at the Ji.hlava International Documentary Film Festival, and the EKRAN+ program at the Wajda School, as well as Producers to Watch at MIPCOM/DOC/TV. PhD candidate at the Łódź Film School.
Production	Producer and production manager of documentary films, including those by Tomasz Wolski, Piotr Stasik, and Aleksandra Maciuszek, which have won awards at festivals such as Visions du Réel, Jihlava FF, Krakow FF, Palm Springs FF, and Margaret Mead in New York, among others. Producer and co-producer of numerous feature films, including Hurrah, We Are Still Alive!, Via Carpatia, The Day of Chocolate, and Slovo. Director of the short documentary Riders, awarded at the Cork Film Festival and Camerimage (both festivals qualifying for the Oscars).

Kijora Film



Kijora Film produces documentaries and fictions with a strong focus on scripts about social and ethical issues of contemporary relevance and intimate, local stories. Kijora is working on author-driven films which are searching for bold forms of expression. Kijora's productions have been selected for Berlinale, Busan, Visions du Réel, Slamdance, Camerimage and many other festivals.

As producers, we strive to create a creative space for creators to develop and produce feature and documentary films. We work on projects of an original nature, seeking new forms of expression and entering into a dialogue with the present. We also produce films about art and artists. Our catalogue includes, among others, a series about Polish design „Rzecz Polska” and a documentary about the sculptor Roman Stańczak.

Kijora's permanent team consists of three producers - Anna Gawlita, Marta Szymanowska and Tomasz Filiks, as well as production assistant Alicja Ścibiorek.

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY AND AWARDS

„A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF A COUNTRY”

- doc., 85', 2024

2024 Polish premiere Kraków Film Festival, International competition - silver horn for the director of the film of high artistic merit

„IN UKRAINE”

dir. Tomasz Wolski & Piotr Pawlus, 83', 2023

2023 Berlinale Film Festival, Selection at Forum Section

2023 Visions du Reel, Mention spéciale

2023 Millennium Docs Against Gravity, Official Selection

„1970”

dir. Tomasz Wolski, documentary, 71' 2021

2021 Special Jury Award - Visions du Réel IFF

2021 Silver Hobby-Horse - Krakow FF

Contact

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PROMO MATERIALS

available to download below:

[THE BIG CHIEF / FOR MEDIA](#)



SELECTED FESTIVALS AND ACCOLADES 2025

Visions du Reel,
Burning Lights Competition
(world premiere)

Krakov Film Festival,
documentary competition,
national competition