Alexander, a retired actor and now successful journalist, is outwardly calm and collected but actually undergoing something of a personal crisis. When the end of the world by nuclear war is declared in a news broadcast, everything appears to be lost. Alexander kneels before an invisible God and pledges a holy vow: if God saves him and his loved ones, he will make an ultimate sacrifice. The next morning the world still exists; God seems to have heard Alexander’s prayer. Then Alexander burns his house and everything he possesses with it, only to be left alone by his petrified friends and taken away to a mental institution.

Thus reads the summary of the film *The Sacrifice* (1986), the last and most famous film of the Russian cineaste Andrei Tarkovsky. Interpreted by some as Tarkovsky’s intellectual testament (he died rather young in the same year), it contains a daring and dazzling commentary on the Western concept of ‘sacrifice’. The director mixed explicit Christian iconography and language with an incomprehensible depiction of a sacrifice that seems to have no connection with the Christian tradition. What is the meaning of Tarkovsky’s film? And how can it shed light on the late-modern conception of ‘sacrifice’?

The notion of ‘sacrifice’ is a problematic one in our late modern society. While the old Christian ideal of a savior (Christ) who sacrifices himself for the salvation of humanity still has its (cultural) influences, this whole concept is questioned by modern philosophers emphasizing individual autonomy and growth in which there is no room for suffering on behalf of some ‘other’.

In this article, I want to focus on the film *The Sacrifice* as a counterexample of our own modern notion of ‘sacrifice’. Because of the close connection between Tarkovsky’s life and his work, I will begin with a short biography. As we will see, his flight from Communism has shaped all his films, *The Sacrifice* not the least of them. Secondly, I will provide a rather long synopsis of the film, which has a running time of more than two hours. *The Sacrifice* has a complex narrative structure, and the general audience will not be acquainted with it. With the use of the general (mostly nonscientific) criticism of the film, I will point out that the main ‘problem’ with the interpretation the film can be found in the depiction of the sacrifice, which I will try to solve by turning to a possible Christian and a Nietzschean interpretation of the film.
Andrei Tarkovsky was born into an educated Russian family in Zavrazhye near the Volga River. When Andrei was four and his younger sister Marina two, their parents divorced. While his father Arseny remarried (twice), mother Maria remained alone and devoted herself to raising their children. Although Andrei spent a large amount of his time with his father, the exact nature of their relationship remains somewhat of a mystery. The Tarkovsky household was full of Russian literature: Pushkin, Turgenev, and Tolstoy. Their mother took Andrei and Marina to concerts and operas. Later in his life, Andrei confessed that his mother’s own artistic, but never fulfilled ambitions led him to become an artist himself.


Little about his personal life is known other than information from his own hand or noted by his relatives. In 1957, Tarkovsky married his first wife, school friend Irma Rausch, only to leave her quite soon (1965) for Larissa Pavlovna Yegorkina, one of his assistants while filming *Rublev*. In 1970 they married. After his untimely death by cancer in 1986, Tarkovsky’s widow took responsibility for the publication of the director’s diaries, *Martyrolog* (written in German, 1989). No editor is named, but Larissa takes responsibility in a foreword. In 1991, an English translation was published as *Time within Time* (1991), also without a credited editor, and in which parts are edited, changed, or omitted. The book has not been published in the original Russian language. In 1987, Tarkovsky’s most famous book was published, *Sculpting in Time* (1987). The 1989 edition was modified, without explanation. According to Johnson and Petrie (1994), the result is somewhat of

...a myth of the martyred artist [which is] supported by an idealized biography—a composite of facts often used to misinterpret or give a pseudobiographical interpretation to his films.