In the past decade, as a result of increased access to the Russian audience in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and as a result of more general scholarly trends, Western Slavists have become increasingly interested in manifestations of popular culture during the Soviet period. The relative independence of the Soviet cultural economy from market considerations makes it difficult, if not impossible, to draw a strict line of demarcation between officially generated mass cultural phenomena and genuinely popular entertainment. Nonetheless there is ample evidence that Soviet readers and television viewers, film goers and music lovers sought within the censored culture itself and, at least in the post-Stalin period, successfully found, if in insufficient quantities, cultural products that answered a genuine desire for entertainment and therefore enjoyed indisputable popularity among the Soviet audience. In this context, I will focus this article on what was arguably one of the most important "low" culture events of the Brezhnev period: the airing in 1973 of the twelve-part miniseries (some 14 hours of TV viewing long), Seventeen Moments in Spring (Semnadtsat' mgnovenii vesny), which chronicles the adventures of the fictional Soviet double agent Maksim Maksimovich Isaev, working under cover as SS officer Max Otto von Shtirlits, in the upper echelons of the Nazi high command during the last months of World War II. As a testimony to the enduring appeal of the film, the June 15, 1998 issue of Ogonek carried the following brief news note under the heading "Shtirlits Came Back" (Shtirlits vemulsia) about a guest appearance at a film festival in Sochi by the actor Viacheslav Tikhonov, who played Shtirlits in the series:
"Shtirlits has arrived!" rejoiced the children and citizens who were meeting the great ones of the world at the "Kinotaur" festival. Shtirlits decorously made his rounds of the crowd, shaking hands. There were so many people who wanted to squeeze the palm of the real live Shtirlits that an incredible crush formed, in which a pickpocket touring in the south had his hand pulled out of joint. The victim was taken to the hospital. A prison one.¹

In the same vein, a post-Soviet commentator remarked, apparently only partly tongue in cheek: "after a showing of the film in 1995 on Russian Central Television it was noted that, just like twenty years before, city streets were empty during the showing of Moments on TV, a drop in the crime level almost to zero was noted in cities, which testifies to the popularity of the film not only among the people, but also in the criminal milieu (what, aren’t they people too?)."²

This commentary, by virtue of having been posted on the internet, also belongs among what is perhaps the most compelling post factum evidence of the original and continuing appeal of this made-for-TV movie, and especially of its central character Shtirlits – that is, its indisputably popular aftermath in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, culminating in a rather striking presence on the internet. A 2002 article charting popularity on the Russian internet (Runet) by the number of mentions of a given figure on websites, observed that “[Alla] Pugacheva’s popularity was comparable to that of Shtirlits,” commenting:

But on the whole much more interesting is the presence in the list not of politicians, but of mythical and semi-mythical popular [narodnykh] personages like Shtirlits, who are the heroes of numerous jokes. Precisely they – Vovochka, Chapaev, Lieutenant Rzhevsky and Rabinovich – possess the most constant popularity: independent of the political structure and trends in fashion and culture anecdotes from internet-folklore about Vovochka and

². [Posted on the Kontora brat’ev Divanovyh website], “K istorii voprosa o Shtirlitse” (http://webidees.com/shtirlits/history.htm).