

Neither “Worthless” nor “Vicious:”

Sergei Eisenstein’s Final Battles Beyond the Ice

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Prologue: A Prodigal Returns

Sergei Eisenstein returned from his unprecedented three-year sojourn in Western Europe, The United States, and Mexico to find his Soviet homeland fundamentally changed. Although Josef Stalin had personally approved of his most talented motion picture artist’s expedition to Capitalist nations to learn about emerging industry technologies being perfected in Hollywood, envious colleagues in Moscow cast unjust aspersions on Eisenstein’s loyalty to their Socialist Republics. Some Soviet filmmakers gossiped that Sergei Eisenstein was being seduced by North American studio moguls with promises of wealth the likes of which could never be offered at home. The Soviet leadership, always jealous of their nation’s celebrities, and mindful of the rumor mill, were mollified from unlikely quarters regarding Eisenstein’s fidelity. Upton Sinclair, notorious author, journalist, and political gadfly who was then running in California’s gubernatorial race had financed *Que Viva Mexico*, Eisenstein’s revolutionary saga. In a letter to Josef Stalin, Sinclair vouched for the Soviet visitor’s patriotism, commitment to the October Revolution, and indicated that Eisenstein would never forsake the doctrines of Socialist Realism since Hollywood’s business model required adherence to budgets, the use solely of contracted talent, and excessive artistic restrictions (Bergan, p. 227).

While Josef Stalin may have been satisfied that his wayward artists who, in addition to Sergei Eisenstein included the director’s long-standing colleague, Gregori Alexandrov, and cinematographer Eduard Tisse, maintained their Communist bona fides despite formidable temptations, the well-traveled trio encountered unexpected contempt from their peers.

Americans in Moscow – 1934 and 1938

Part I.

Surrounded by unfriendly colleagues, and with no directorial projects in development, Sergei Eisenstein experienced a profound sense of depression. So severe were his symptoms, the man who put Soviet cinema on the world's artistic map admitted himself to a mental health facility in July 1933 to seek help in accepting that his "Mexican Fantasy" would never be released as envisioned. Later that year, Eisenstein's spirits improved when he was reinstated as a teacher at the State Institute of Cinematography, the U.S.S.R.'s leading film school. Sergei Eisenstein's skills and vision were once again recognized, and he was assigned the task of creating the S.I.C.'s curriculum (Eisenstein Archives).

In 1934, Eisenstein's outlook improved concomitant with opportunities that came his way following a fallow period. With the hope of incorporating more music into his productions, Eisenstein invited American opera standout and Civil Rights activist Paul Robeson to visit the Soviet Union. Robeson, who won international fame as the character "Joe" in *Showboat*, the Rodgers and Hart Broadway hit, was preparing to reprise the role in Universal's screen version of the musical. Paul Robeson was not satisfied with the ways in which Universal's leadership decided to portray "Joe." In fact, Black journalists criticized Robeson's performance for perpetuating demeaning stereotypes when he might have provided his community with a badly needed positive model. A disillusioned Paul Robeson decided to travel to the Soviet Union with his wife, Essie, following the release of *Showboat*. No stranger to racism's scourge, Paul Robeson encountered uncomfortable situations in Berlin, Germany, then the only railroad connection to Moscow. Robeson was astonished by the genuinely warm welcome he received from the Russian film community. Not only was Robeson enchanted by the witty and imaginative Sergei Eisenstein, but he also spoke with gratitude of how the Communists' sense of including minorities in the over-all fabric of the emerging world power were diametrically opposed to policies and practices of his own country. Eisenstein and Robeson struck up an unlikely friendship, and inadvertently elevated both men's spirits (Duberman, pp. 188, 190).

Robeson encouraged Sergei Eisenstein to pursue his interest in elevating realizations in musical scoring which inspired the director to undertake an ambitious new production and end a lengthy period of unfinished projects, political infighting, and professional stagnation (ibid.). During 1938, in collaboration with composer Sergei Prokofiev, Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* won an Order of Lenin and the prestigious Stalin Prize (Bergan, p. 300).

Part II.

Legendary director Frank Capra was among Hollywood's craftspeople with whom Sergei Eisenstein became acquainted during his travels to North America. Both Eisenstein and Capra were educated as engineers. Capra had earned a Ph.D. from California Polytechnic University, and shared Eisenstein's cerebral, visual approach to making motion pictures. Eisenstein had issued Capra an invitation to visit Russia during his extended visit to The United States, and the director, then in London for the premier of his much-heralded *Lost Horizon*, decided to continue to Moscow (Capra, p. 205-206).

Frank Capra, accompanied by fellow Columbia Pictures employee Bob Riskin, received a tumultuous welcome from their Soviet peers, and vainly sought out Sergei Eisenstein. When asked about Eisenstein's whereabouts, Capra received vague, evasive answers. Soviet film industry insiders hinted that Eisenstein was "not well," and that he had not been recently seen or had been assigned out of town. Returning to Moscow from Leningrad, Capra discovered an ominous message to call Eisenstein at a certain number at a prescribed time (Capra, p. 209).

In his 1971 autobiography *Frank Capra: The Name Above the Title*, the author described the sad reunion. Riskin and Capra eluded their Intourist guide and guard to travel by taxi to a "broken-down Georgian café in one of Moscow's broken-down sections." There, in a "broken-down booth," the Americans found a distressed, depressed Sergei Eisenstein who offered them tea with chunks of butter afloat in the glasses (ibid.)

"'Fronk, Bub, I am in the doghouse.' We laughed at his American slang. 'I can no make pictures, I can no go in studios, no movie workers can talk to me.' The Kremlin had asked him to make a film trilogy of *Ivan the Terrible*. 'I make Part I; the Kremlin bosses see it. They give me big

medal. Good! Soviet hero! I make Part II; big shots see it, they take back my medal, say I make big political mistake! Soviet bum!”

Capra wondered if he could appeal to Boris Shumiatsky, the de facto head of the national film industry and former leader of a Soviet delegation to Hollywood for help.

“‘No look,’ said Eisenstein, ‘he’s in doghouse, too’” (ibid.).

Josef Stalin blamed Boris Shumiatsky for the Soviet film industry’s problems. In the first months of 1938, Shumiatsky was denounced, arrested, tried for treason, and executed as a traitor (Bergan, p. 299).

Frank Capra’s notes reflect a timing impossibility as well as embellishing a conversation which could not have taken place as recalled. Sergei Eisenstein was in the official doghouse, but not for *Ivan the Terrible, Part II*, which was the object of criticism in 1945. During Capra and Riskin’s 1938 visit, Eisenstein’s woes were the result of the unreleased *Bezhin Meadow* as well as lingering dissatisfaction over *Que Viva Mexico* and suspicions associated with the director’s extended trip to Western Europe and North America.

Fortunately, for Sergei Eisenstein, the Soviet leader maintained a soft spot for the director whom he hoped would lead his biopic. Eisenstein’s career was not over, but neither were his troubles (Bergan, p. 148).

Alexander Nevsky: A Triumphant Return

Soviet cinema in the mid-1930s suffered from the same vicissitudes that plagued other state-run industries. Few movie theaters in the USSR were equipped to run sound films. Qualified projectionists were in short supply despite the fact that an ambitious construction schedule and expansion plan was in place. In some locations, untrained workers ruined new equipment. In other places, experienced operators waited in unfinished auditoriums for projection machinery to be delivered. Josef Stalin remained committed to utilizing motion pictures to inspire his people who recently endured the horrors of forced collectivization. But Stalin’s cadre of filmmakers began to understand that, when it came to cinema’s place as an affirmatively

powerful motivational tool, their leader shared the same notion as the hero of Milan Kundera's novel, *The Joke*: that "optimism is the opium of the people" (Bergan, p. 275).

Accordingly, as members of the creative community began to disappear or to be placed under arrest for vague policy offenses, Sergei Eisenstein realized that his personal and professional survival depended upon operating artistically within the prevailing official guidelines however stultifying they may have seemed. Officials struggled to revitalize a moribund film industry, to establish viable policies, and to organize production teams to make new features that reflected conventions of "Socialist Realism."

Ironically, it was Boris Shumiatsky who offered his long-time nemesis an opportunity to resurrect his directorial career. Shumiatsky suggested that Eisenstein choose between two properties for his next feature. One vehicle, based on Ivan Susanin, the hero of Mikhail Glinka's opera *A Life for the Tsar*, was well-known. The other scenario involved St. Alexander Nevsky, the Prince who led Novgorod's nobility to victory in the Teutonic War. Because of the mysterious nature of the facts surrounding the legendary thirteenth-century Prince's exploits, Eisenstein resolved to make *Alexander Nevsky*. One of the factors that likely influenced Eisenstein's decision was that the former title was already based on a famous opera by a notable Russian composer. Not only would *Alexander Nevsky* rely on an original screenplay, but an entire musical score would have to be created from scratch. At last, Eisenstein could invite his friend Sergei Prokofiev to bring his considerable musical talents to the big screen in a long-awaited collaboration (Bergan, p. 297).

While *Alexander Nevsky* was in preproduction, replete with a constraining shooting schedule and great expectations bearing down on Sergei Eisenstein, the director learned that Boris Shumiatsky had been arrested, and Semyon Dukelsky of the N.K.V.D. secret police agency was placed in charge of the Soviet film industry. Because Shumiatsky had been responsible for scuttling *Que Viva Mexico* and refused to release two separately completed versions of *Bezhin Meadow*, Eisenstein's first feature following his trip to the West, the director might have received news of his long-time adversary's demise with satisfaction. That Eisenstein did not take pleasure in Shumiatsky's circumstances indicates his understanding that no prominent

filmmaker was safe, and that he intended to capitalize on the opportunity to make the most of *Alexander Nevsky* (Bergan, p. 298).

No images exist of Prince Alexander Nevsky, so Eisenstein was free to cast any actor in the role. Eisenstein joked with neighbor and fellow filmmaker Mikhail Romm that he could present Nevsky as “short, tall, fat or thin.” Eventually, Eisenstein selected Nikolai Cherkassov, a former music hall comedian who had recently found success as second lead roles in films. A commanding figure, tall and deep in voice, Cherkassov would appeal to the public as the hero who would achieve sainthood (Bergan, p. 296).

Unlike almost all of Sergei Eisenstein’s other projects, *Alexander Nevsky*, despite its complex production values, proceeded apace and was completed ahead of schedule. Although *Que Viva Mexico* and *Bezhin Meadow*, Eisenstein’s previously completed but ultimately unreleased films, never reached audiences, the director’s skills were elevated. His techniques improved, and he mastered new innovations in the course of production. *Alexander Nevsky* also provided Sergei Eisenstein with new creative opportunities. Eisenstein developed what he called a “symphonic structure” in composing the photoplay. This technique resulted from the director’s close collaboration with Sergei Prokofiev who, while in his years away from Russia visited Hollywood and studied applications of music on film with an eye to scoring movies in the Soviet Union (Bergan, p. 300).

Alexander Nevsky’s most complicated scene is the climactic “Battle on the Ice” that took place on Lake Peipus, April 12, 1242. Filmed amid a stretch of scorching summer weather on a lake near Moscow, cinematographer Eduard Tisse created a blizzard effect with lens filters, white paint, and cotton batting. Special effects artists created the illusion of ice floes on the lake’s surface by supporting artificial ice segments with inflated balloons. Air was released from the balloons to facilitate the breaking up of the ice blocks under the actors’ weight (Bergan p. 301).

During postproduction, a telephone call from the Kremlin indicated that Josef Stalin wanted to see *Alexander Nevsky*. Eisenstein’s assistants took a completed print of the film for Stalin’s inspection. A late-night call from the authorities always triggered anxiety in the Soviet Union of the Stalinist period, and the crew let Eisenstein sleep instead of waking him with news

of the situation. Eisenstein need not have worried. *Alexander Nevsky's* premier was scheduled for November 23, 1938 (ibid.).

At the gala opening, Sergei Eisenstein sat between composer Sergei Prokofiev and star Nikolai Cherkassov. Prokofiev had never seen Cherkassov out of makeup that included long hair and a flowing beard. The composer nudged Eisenstein and asked who was sitting next to the director (Bergan, p. 304).

Alexander Nevsky was a hit. Eisenstein proclaimed that "my subject is patriotism," and the director, once again in official favor, was subsequently awarded the Order of Lenin as well as an honorary doctoral degree in "The Science of Arts Studies." While the price the artist paid for approbation was adhering to the Communist Party line, Eisenstein's prospects for future success improved as a result. But in the wake of the Molotov/Ribbentrop accord between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, *Alexander Nevsky's* theme became controversial and was withdrawn from circulation. However, in true Soviet tradition, once Hitler invaded Russia, Eisenstein's patriotic pageant depicting the Prince of Novgorod defeating the Teutonic warriors once again became fashionable; the film was rereleased (Bergan, p. 305).

"Terrible" Ivan

Nazi Germany launched *Operation Barbarossa*, its code name for invading the Soviet Union, on June 22, 1941. While the sudden attack came as a complete surprise to Josef Stalin, and would be tragic for his nation, Sergei Eisenstein's fortunes were ironically buoyed. The Soviet film industry, vital for upholding citizens' spirits during a traumatic period, was abruptly relocated to relative safety east of the Ural Mountains. With the first installment of Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* trilogy already approved, the director, his crew colleagues, and the cast joined other cinema evacuees in Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan, to begin production. The *Ivan* company was not the only group occupying the capital city's Culture Palace. Quarters and makeshift sound stages were limited in size which made living and creating sets for an epic Eisenstein envisioned challenging. One distinct advantage of working in Central Asia was the location's physical distance from the scrutiny of Kremlin watchdogs whose interference would hinder the artists'

creativity. *Part I* was completed as German military forces retreated and the Soviet filmmakers returned to Moscow. Work progressed on *Part II*, and *Part III* was in pre-production as *Part I* premiered in January 1945 to rave reviews (Bergan, p. 325).

That Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union precipitated formerly proscribed *Alexander Nevsky's* return to Russian motion picture theaters demonstrated the ease with which the Kremlin in general, and Josef Stalin in particular, could suddenly change their mind regarding thematic acceptability of artwork. In a reversal of the same practice, *Ivan the Terrible, Part II* was condemned in the wake of *Part I's* adulation. On one level, Stalin allegedly disapproved of Eisenstein's portrayal of a Russian leader during wartime. On another level, the film could be read that Ivan IV was Josef Stalin himself (Eisenstein, p. xiv-xv).

As *Part II's* cast and crew celebrated the positive reception their production initially received, the company's leader, Sergei Eisenstein, suffered a debilitating heart attack that necessitated a protracted period of recuperation. During Eisenstein's convalescence, *Part II* was denounced, and the director faced the prospect of being, at a minimum, exiled from the film industry and even further indicted for crimes against the government. In a sense, Eisenstein's near-fatal heart attack provided a much-needed shield from his vociferous critics. The director's recovery, in virtual confinement in healthcare facilities and his isolated dacha effectively kept him away from his detractors (Eisenstein letter to Ivor Montagu).

"Autocriticism" was a Soviet-era policy in which an artist would be compelled to apologize publicly for alleged creative errors that supposedly misrepresented the government's norms as applicable to painting, sculpture, music, motion pictures, and literature. Sergei Eisenstein had been directed to compose an essay of atonement following officials' dissatisfaction with his early film, *Bezhin Meadow*. Following condemnation of *Ivan the Terrible, Part II*, Eisenstein moved to rehabilitate his tarnished reputation by publishing "My Vile and Worthless Film." As a reflection of the severity of Eisenstein's gaffe, Josef Stalin personally invited the director and colleagues to attend yet another late-night meeting at the Kremlin. The sole agenda item was a discussion of how *Part II* might be salvaged for exhibition through editing. *Ivan the Terrible, Part I* would remain in circulation. Eisenstein was directed to re-edit *Part II* and submit the amended finished product for approval. The proposed *Part III's*

production was postponed pending the outcome of *Part II's* recutting. A curious footnote to Eisenstein's peril considering he must endure another round of autocriticism and contend with failing cardiac health is that, once again, Josef Stalin showed a willingness to give the director a return path to good professional standing, a concern for his condition, and an opportunity to continue making motion pictures. Few, if any, of Eisenstein's peers were accord such consideration on the mercurial Soviet leader's part (Riha, p. 715).

The "Ribbon" Unspooled

"Ribbon" is the Russian slang term for motion picture film, which like a roll of giftwrap, unspools from a reel or cardboard core and into a projector.

Sergei Eisenstein's fame as a director is based on fewer than ten completed projects made in a span of roughly twenty-five years. Eisenstein's unrealized motion pictures outnumber his releases. And, yet, so influential were the Soviet filmmaker's productions, that his star in the cinematic firmament is of a magnitude brighter than far more prolific peers.

History reflects that *Ivan the Terrible, Part II* would be re-edited, but remain uncirculated in the Soviet Union until 1958, a decade after Sergei Eisenstein's death. *Part III*, like *Que Viva Mexico* and *Bezhin Meadow* was never completed (Eisenstein, p. xiii).

Sergei Eisenstein never regained his health; a heart attack recurrence took the director's life a few weeks following his fiftieth birthday in February 1948.

Even as a young child, Sergei Eisenstein visualized how the world appears. Drawing representations of people, places, and things was a life-long occupation. And, as a trained engineer, Eisenstein's sense of composition and the means by which everything functions further enhanced the ways in which he would eventually portray moving images in film. Furthermore, Eisenstein was always generous in his attributions. From D.W. Griffith to Walt Disney, from Charlie Chaplin to Sergei Prokofiev, Sergei Eisenstein always gave credit to artists who influenced his artistry. And of course, film historians have deeply delved into Eisenstein's *Film Sense* and *Notes of a Film Director* to study the tenets of the innovator's craft. At length, Eisenstein's true genius might better be revealed and understood by examining the ribbons that

remained behind on the cutting room floor even as nearly all other eyes are fixed on the big screen.

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About the Author

In 1973, following his junior year in high school, Mr. Gregg became a student at Leningrad State University. Gregg's hometown of Vancouver, Washington's relationship with the Soviet Union was unexpectedly established in 1937 as a trans-polar flight from the U.S.S.R. to San Francisco was inadvertently forestalled by a fuel shortage. Soviet flyers landed at a former First World War Pearson Airfield and were met by Fort Vancouver's commandant George C. Marshall. An enduring friendship prevailed, and, in 1977, Mr. Gregg served as a translator when the Soviet mission's surviving pilots and crew arrived for a joyful reunion and civic celebration. As an undergraduate in Soviet Studies and Russian Language at Willamette University, Gregg's adviser was the late T.S. Berczynski, a noted Russian Literature scholar, translator, and author whose encouragement proved to be indispensable. Mr. Gregg attended Gonzaga University School of Law and earned an advanced degree in Public History at Washington State University. Since

2006, Mr. Gregg has served the Historic Preservation Commission, acting as Chair from 2010-2014, and from 2021 to the present. Active in University of Nebraska's European Studies Conference since 2020, Andrew Gregg's trilogy focusing on Sergei Eisenstein is now completed with this year's presentation.