Film/Cinema (Russian Empire)

By Alexandre Sumpf

An early actor in the cinema industry, Russia held a special position due to the strong foreign, notably French and German, influences. The First World War saw an unprecedented boom in national productions and distribution networks: cinema became integrated in the lives of Russian citizens. It was also during the war that a new objective of plausibility, or verisimilitude, developed beyond borrowing theatre techniques to becoming an art in itself. Wartime newsreels, documentaries and fiction not only shaped Soviet films about the Great War, but also how audiences received them.

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The War, a Turning Point for Russian Cinema

An Unprecedented Rise in Film Production

The declaration of war against Germany brought an abrupt end to commercial exchanges with the country. On the eve of the conflict, nearly 90 percent of film productions shown in Russia had come from abroad. The conflicts on land and over sea disrupted film distribution circuits. This was an extraordinary opportunity for an industry in which branches of the large French companies, somewhat Russianized, impeded their autonomy; in which studios bearing German sounding names were threatened (e.g. the Baltic Pavel Thiemann); and in which Russian entrepreneurs strove to fill the empty screens. The numbers speak for themselves: from 129 short and medium length films in 1913, national production rose to 230 in 1914, to 370 in 1915, and then to 500 in 1916. Although Pathé and Gaumont did not cease their activities, the strengthening of national champions, the Khanzhonkov, Drankov and Ermolev Studios, was observed. They were, alongside a growing number of small companies (forty-seven in 1916, some founded by former employees of French firms), in competition for production and distribution.

Fiction films were prevalent and often strove to adapt literary or theatrical works to the screen. Russian spectators were also accustomed to seeing historical films, a genre that underwent a profound transformation because of the war. Nevertheless, other types of production were not neglected, although they were not promoted as much in the specialized publications that were edited as promotional material by each firm. For instance, a new path opened for newsreels production. Pathé-Russe, supplier of Russian images for France and a privileged importer, became a local producer for the local market. The studio competed against the Skobelev Committee for the Wounded, which, in 1914, had obtained exclusive rights from the emperor to film on the front lines, to raise funds for soldiers wounded in combat with the sale of the footage. We therefore often find the same sequences in news and documentary films of the period, whether they were produced by the committee or not.

Russia was home of one of the first masters of animation, Ladislas Starevich (1882-1965), author of the masterpiece, Lilia Belgii [The Lily of Belgium ] (Skobelev Committee, 1915). The short film on the “rape" of "poor Belgium" by the "barbaric Huns" followed the theme of German “atrocities” that flourished in all Russian arts, but mainly focused on violence committed on the French front. One of Alexander Drankov’s (1886-1949) blockbusters, Elzas [Alsace ] (1916), in effect presented a distant irredentism instead of paying heed to Galicia, Armenia or East Prussia. Alongside this kind of fiction, which was meant to shock and mobilize, was some that glorified heroes such as Kozma Kriuchkov; more rarely, films tried to shape Russianness and promote it over German identity. Indeed, the war theme was not paramount, far from it: French and Russian entertainment films filled the screens. The incontestable master of these was Evguenii Bauer (1865-1917), who was representative of “Russian quality”, alongside Piotr Chardynin (1873-1934), Iakov Protazanov (1881-1945) and...
Vladimir Gardin (1877-1965). Melodramatic romance films, mystical fiction movies such as Bauer's *Grezy [Daydreams]* (1915), and police adventure films were produced in quantity, including by the Skobelev Committee whose financial needs were continuously growing, as were commercial and monopoly expectations. Among Skobelev films, *Padenie Peremyshlia [The Fall of the Przemysl Fortress]* (1915) attained much less success than *Bedniaga umer v bol'nitse voennoi [The Poor Chap Died in an Army Hospital]*, which was the second most viewed picture in 1916.

**A Complex Distribution Network**

Whereas producers experienced difficulties in getting film stock, distributors and cinema owners found themselves confronted with wider and stricter censorship than before the war. Military authorities played a growing role in monitoring film sets, as well as in authorizing importation, distribution and even projections. Yet over such an immense territory, the decisions made by different institutions – civil and military, central and local – often contradicted one another. The outburst of censorship favored a bias and at times provoked a certain confusion, of which commercial entrepreneurs took advantage, although not without risk. German films continued to be shown under changed names and some distributors tried to import reels through Denmark, so that they would be considered “Scandinavian”. Interdictions or fines were barely coercive, and the greater risk was that there would be public uproar if people learned that the projected movies were German.

The number of theaters considerably increased: there were almost 4,000 in 1916, of which 229 were in the capital, Petrograd, alone. That this had nearly tripled (from 1,500 in 1913) is surprising. The Russian economy affected by the war effort could not have provided such a sharp rise in supply. But it can be explained by the numerous theaters that were converted into cinemas during the theatrical off-season and troupe tours, and the ephemeral “summer cinemas” that were held outdoors in city parks. The cinema owners were people of very diverse origins who adopted a variety of practices according to their perception of “their” public. The first nationwide union was born, in 1916, to regulate competition and to oppose united contestations from both censors and producers, and later for the monopoly to be considered by the tsarist administration.

The short length of films and the increasing decline of attractions that had originally been the centers of the shows, but became entertainment between projections, allowed the number of daily showings to grow and for prices to be adjusted to attract clients. Although special projections for specific audiences were not new, they multiplied during the war. Patriotism, a value cherished even after the initial enthusiasm had vanished, served as publicity and favored the welcoming of classes, associations, etc. The cinema owners were willing to organize projections for which the product amounted to a patriotic cause (wounded, disabled, refugees, tobacco for the front, etc.), or to supply the locale for charity events where the upper levels of society would flock under the patronage of a senior officer and patronesses, and with the silent presence of invalids. The newspapers never failed to report on the events and to describe the projections reserved for soldiers (from garrisons). However, unlike other belligerents, Russia suffered from the absence of an army film unit. The
Skobelev Committee could not afford to offer its productions to soldiers on the front lines, and only the Ermolev Studios organized itinerant projections, in 1916. Beyond an obvious lack of means, it might be asked if this was a sign of faith in the soldiers’ sense of duty, or, if a fear of excesses explains the rarity of entertainment provided to soldiers.

The Public’s Eagerness for Moving Pictures

Witnesses of the period tell of how the cinema theatres were full at all hours of the day. Most historians explain this as due to the population looking to escape the somber atmosphere of the war and finding diversion in easy-to-access and inexpensive entertainment. This was likely to be the case in the two capitals and the empire’s large cities. This is where studios and distribution centres etc. were concentrated, as well as the urban public (representing roughly 20 percent of the population), that had adopted cinema. Here was also where others flooded in, such as those recruited by the institutions that managed the war effort and some 3,000,000 refugees who were fleeing occupied territories. Elsewhere, the supply most likely remained fairly low, due to a lack of buildings dedicated exclusively to the cinema, and a lack of itinerant projectionists. Whereas cinema had risen in Russian cultural consumption during the war, it was not the mass media that it was in the occidental world: its impact on the minds of the population cannot be over-interpreted. On one hand, the social elite was not won over by that which they did not yet consider to be an art. On the other hand, the peasantry in the villages or at the front was not very familiar with this appreciated but rare form of entertainment. It is difficult to know if the public adhered to the Russification of productions, and if so, whether through patriotism or through its proximity to their expectations. The familiarity with foreign productions, the fact that certain Russian producers had cut their teeth with the French, and the star status of such performers as Ivan Mozzhukhin (1889-1939) or Vera Kholodnaia (1893-1919), were all arguments for the continuity of a foreign footprint on Russian cinema.

Verisimilitude, an Aesthetic and Political Issue

The War as if You Were There

The monopoly of filming on the front had some inevitable advantages – the Skobelev Committee fully benefitted from this godsend to help millions wounded in the war. But it also had its inconveniences. This parastatal institution had little support from the government or main political figures. The committee’s war film department was led by Feliks Karu, who was totally unfamiliar with this kind of industry; and it lacked human resources – it had to hire skilled workers from Pathé, or renowned directors such as Starevich. But the committee never obtained the technical and financial means to cover the immense front line, especially as their technicians, like all civilians, were subject to military restrictions on the front, and eventually suffered injuries, as did Piotr Novitskii (1885-1942). Military officials, who were far from specialists of cinema, dictated where filming was to be done and even indicated the shots to be taken. This control progressively weakened to the end of 1916. The monopoly of filming then ended and Skobelev’s cinematographers, such as Eduard Tisse (1897-
1961), turned to civil affairs and the February aftermaths. The committee documented Russian events until spring 1918, editing them in the newsreels Svobodnaia Rossiia [Free Russia], which supported the pro-war politics of the provisional government. The majority of Skobelev images (preserved at the RGAKFD, the Russian State Documentary Film and Photo Archive at Krasnogorsk) bear comparison with those by the SCA (the French Army’s Bureau of Cinematography), which were imported throughout the war, acting as models of verisimilitude, or even of the “reality” of the ongoing conflict.

Undoubtedly, the Skobelev Committee newsreels strongly impacted their contemporaries:

Our descendants, having received a historical monument such as this film from us, will see the war and the misfortune of it, and equipped with this living and informative representation of carnage, they will no doubt fight against the recurrence of such an event. Each spectator of the war news can state assuredly – I saw and I know war as it is.[1]

The public success was such that in Lugansk, the distributor Skvirskii Brothers projected forgeries. In 1916, the committee repeatedly accused the military authorities of having allowed commercial studios to film on the front lines. An enquiry into the Khanzhonkov Studios illustrated that the studios managed to film convincing imitations in peaceful landscapes near Moscow. The demand for verisimilitude, the visual pact based on live “exact reproduction”, was therefore thwarted with regard to the battles, which remained subject to the imagination of non-combatants.

In fact, it was the home front that appeared more prominently in the movies that were presented to the public. What they could see more often than the actual combats were the military parades (at times before the tsar); the hospital trains and their wounded; visits to victims of combat; and civilians participating one way or another in the war effort. It was much easier and less costly to film scenes away from the combat. Moreover, the myriad institutions and associations dedicated to assisting soldiers and their families were in need of these images, which promoted their causes and their quests for financial support. Emblematic of this was the commission given by Princess Maria Pavlovna’s (1890-1958) committee, to Drankov for Vozrozhdaemye k zhizni [Reborn to Life] (1916), a medium-length documentary on the rehabilitation of war invalids, which by ignoring the causes of their wounds, better publicized the process of dealing with the consequences.

Soviet Montage Films

The reality of the war was not immediately seen in fictional films, and it took an event as extraordinary as the overthrow of the monarchy for a filmmaker of the caliber of Bauer to take this risk. Shot after February but before October 1917, Revoliutsioner [The Revolutionary] retraced a man’s life from the first revolution of 1905 to the aftermath of February 1917. The plot, appreciated by the elite for its repudiation of the Bolsheviks, often makes scholars forget that the film is a historical document in itself. This was less a testament to the hostility of conservative patriots to Marxist defeatists than to the scenes shown – political discussions and generational conflict. The final scene,
taken from the life of a unit sent in cattle wagons to the front to “save the revolution with a final victory”, is especially remarkable. Although Bauer’s death later in 1917 left the question of his transition towards this genre of cinema open, the events had an extraordinary influence that can be seen in the film footage of newsreels on the filmmaker himself and the Khanzhonkov studio.

The visual pact of verisimilitude was, however, based on an illusion. Not even mentioning the danger of shooting on the battlefield, P. K. Novitskii, one of the Skobelev Committee cinematographers, revealed a few years later that “as experience has shown, filming under fire does not create as powerful an impact as good staging”, primarily for technical reasons (for example, smoke disrupting filming). Furthermore, officers readily participated in the production: “Some staging was undertaken under the guidance of military specialists [...]. This made it possible to film closer and more accurately. However, the percentage of staged scenes was quite insignificant, they were quite exceptional”. Novitskii thus defended himself unconvincingly at a time when the constructivist journal _LEF_ and Sergei Tret’iakov praised the art of _ocherk_ (sketch) when Esfir Shub (1894-1959) reused, as a “factograph”, original images in her first montage film. _Padenie dinastii Romanovykh [The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty]_ (1927) had been commissioned to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the revolution. Shub, having screened 200,000 meters of film, did not retrace the story of the war as it was recounted in school textbooks; the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este (1863-1914) was not even mentioned. Influenced by the Marxist vision that privileged socio-economic trends, Shub denounced by name the economic and political leaders, and emphasized less the technical aspect of the conflict and more its social consequences. The sixth part of the film (“Faces of War”) scrolls scenes of death, destruction, prisoners, wounded, refugees, scorched earth, and factory women.

Unsurprisingly, the editing of the sidelines of combat gives the best-constructed passage of the film. Other documentaries could be made from the same archives. _Mirovaia voina [The World War]_ (1929), a montage by Evgenii Iakushkin that was directed in the studio of the Red Army (Gosvoenkino) on the fifteenth anniversary of the declaration of war, presented hitherto unseen scenes on the military experience in the field that was reduced elsewhere to parades and weaponry. For example, the third part of this film portrays the officers as professionals, around a three-dimensional battle schema. The film also underlines the conditions of life at the front and the work in war factories. Whereas Shub composes a montage that looks to demonstrate the “true” imperialist nature of war, Iakushkin tries to provide the most accurate reproduction, given the footage preserved, of the tremendous effort that this conflict represented for Russians.

_A Cinematographic Memory of the Great War in Soviet Cinema: The Interwar Period_

_Fiction Films as Directories of War Experiences_

Beyond the canonic films of the 1927 jubilee, such as _Konets Sankt-Peterburga [The End of Saint-"
Vsevolod Pudovkin (1893-1953), *Oktyabr* [October] by Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948) or *Padenie dinastii Romanovykh* [The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty] by Esfir Shub, the illustrious *Oblomok imperii* [A Fragment of Empire] (Fridrikh Ermler, 1928), *Arsenal* (Aleksandr Dovzhenko, 1929) or *Okraina* [Outskirts] (Boris Barnet, 1932), there are at least fifteen Soviet productions wholly or partially about the Great War. These include *Baby riazanskie* [Women of R'iazan] (Preobrazhenskaia, 1929), *Bog voiny* [God of War] (Dzigan, 1929), *Her Way* (Shtrizhak, 1929), *Torgovtsy slavoi* [Merchants of Glory] (Obolenskii, 1929), *Goroda i gody* [Cities and Years] (Cherv’iakov, 1930), *Obrechennye* [Doomed] (Push, 1930), *Snaiper* [Sniper] (Timoshenko, 1931), *Tikhii Don* [Quiet Flows the Don] (Preobrazhenskaia, 1931), *Tri soldata* [Three Soldiers] (Ivanov, 1932), and *Pervyi vzvod* [The First Platoon] (Gutman, 1933).

Before 1927, only *Tovarisch Abram* [Comrade Abram] (Razumnyi, 1919) and *Vragi* [Enemies] (Sabinskii, 1924) dealt with the First World War, in a context of low national production and focus on the civil war. The main period of representing the Great War corresponds to the boom of this theme in Occidental cinema and to the peak of pacifism in Europe. The relatively dense set of production counters the idea of a “war that wasn’t”, which does not take full account of the use of this war in the discourse of Bolshevik mobilization or the Soviet position on the international front.

The war itself is, at times, just a backdrop to the plot (*Women of R'iazan*), or the principle place of action (*God of War*, *Sniper* or *The First Platoon*). It weighs heavily on a small local community in *Comrade Abram* (Razumnyi, 1919), *Her Way* and *Outskirts*. In most of the twenty-one fiction films identified, the war separates families and, sharpening consciences, introduces class struggle. The Manichean structure, classic in war films, is deepened and in addition to the traditional opposition of the classes is that between men and women or between front and rear. Finally, certain places benefit from particular cinematographic attention. In addition to the frontlines, the countryside (including the Jewish shtetl); the small artisan or factory cities (*Outskirts, Arsenal*) more than the capital cities; and France, which appears in no fewer than three films (*Merchants of Glory, Doomed* and *Sniper*), stand out.

Few productions represent the exact instant of mobilization, the crucial starting point of this shared experience. In *Outskirts* and in films set in urban areas, the factory whistle, replacing the church tocsin, sets off the frantic course of the “townspeople” learning the news, and wearing forlorn faces. The anti-capitalist and anti-bourgeois speeches inserted in these scenes seem fictional. In *God of War*, the goodbye scene with Natasha and her fiancé Gueorgui, on the platform of the train station, is more convincing – although this uses clichéd romance to dramatize the plot (the heroine's father opposing this misalliance). The departure scenes in “peasant” films are the most realistic. In *Her Way* (1929), Shtrizhak imposes, for example, a very slow tempo to the walk between the village and the gathering point, showing the whole of the community crying and singing, without patriotic enthusiasm, but alive with the pain of being torn apart and the incertitude of the threat of death.

**Filming Combat Scenes and Honoring Heroes**
The battlefield of modern war is empty; battles are a combination of blind combat from a distance and brutal body-to-body engagements. The cannon-smoke-explosion trio is found in all Soviet and foreign fictions: the war of position and attrition involved creating a new visual and acoustic landscape. The scenery disappears, sucked up by the explosion that projects sheaves of earth and sometimes buries fighters. The machine gun plays a major role in visual “sound” experience of combat – at a time when silent cinema was not actually silent but accompanied by music. Soviet filmmakers, from Sergei Eisenstein to Boris Barnet (1902-1965) and especially Fridrikh Markovich Ermler (1898-1967), multiplied close-up views of the muzzle of this machine that was capable of eliminating an entire company in minutes, to reflect on the screen the mechanical ferocity of the war. Soviet directors had to further fulfill an esthetic challenge of the battle scenes, launched in 1917 by D. W. Griffith (1875-1948) and still represented by Lewis Milestone (1895-1980) in his 1930 adaptation of Erich Maria Remarque's (1898-1970) novel. A debate on the verisimilitude of combat and the didactic role of film also involved specialists, who regretted the lack of popular military films in USSR showing “real combat”. They denounced the infantry assaults, shoulder against shoulder, which did not correspond to low-on-the-ground combat with soldiers crawling, as well as the recurring scenes on horseback that were more reminiscent of the civil war. It was therefore difficult to get beyond the reference to this earlier conflict – omnipresent in political speech and in the personal path of the historical actors – especially in the definition of heroism. On the screen, it was a matter of political consciousness and involved the sacrifice of the individual to the collective cause: it was not rare for one of the heroes to perish (Timosh in Arsenal) or lose someone dear to them (Praskovia in Her Way). Some that seemed heroic, revolted, but also knew how to remain constant through the successive trials of these troubled years, like the simple soldier in Sniper or the German Kurt in Cities and Years.

Defining Pacifism, between Internationalist Pacifism and War to Come

Soviet films about the Great War propose, of course, an explanation of the revolution, which was fundamental for the Bolshevik regime, but equally revealed the social trauma of the war. The former implied the criticism that former elites had betrayed the people – military officers (Colonel Hrushchev in Doomed) or clergy (Bishop Arsen in God of War) – and the denunciation of the capitalist system. The sequence of the Bourse in The End of Saint-Petersburg establishes a parallel between the accumulating lost lives and economic growth, whereas Merchants of Glory and A Fragment of Empire denounces war freeloaders. The social criticism could be more violent, attacking, for example, the false bourgeois solidarity expressed hypocritically through charity. In God of War, in the lower half of the screen, a hiding officer proposes a toast to the fighters while scenes of the front are shown in the upper part of the screen; a thick cloud of combat gas then overflows and envelopes the benefactresses in their elegant hats. The erasure of the otherwise airtight barrier between their world and those of the exploited clearly expresses violence towards the wealthy classes.

Proletarian solidarity, which is considered authentic, was demonstrated in the fraternizations on the
front lines. These episodes (the finale of *Outskirts*) were a cliché in the Soviet representation of the Great War – unlike those of soldier committees, which were politically more problematic. Fraternity did not transcend class, like in the French trenches, but united the international proletariat against the dominating bourgeoisie. As such, the German figure as an enemy, common to all film of the Entente, was complicated in the USSR by the question of class. Soviet fictions reflect hesitations of the era between pacifist internationalism, resumption of the revolutionary conquest, and preparation for the war to come – a major theme from 1931. To the political considerations, commercial interests were added: Weimar Germany was the hub of the European film market, where Soviet studios presented their films in the hopes that their success would guarantee further exportations and where they bought foreign material and productions.

**Conclusion**

During the Great War, cinema started to play an unseen role in Russia among the media: informing, shaping collective representations and mobilizing audiences. This crucial visual experience and this industrial development deeply influenced early Soviet cinema and the memory of the Great War it propagated. The issue of internal political dynamics, as much as of the larger cultural and economic European context, it did not neglect important social traumas with particular accents in the USSR: the destruction; the losses; the problematic return of former fighters (A Fragment of Empire) or prisoners of war (Doomed); and the terrible fate of war invalids (Merchants of Glory, Quiet Flows the Don). Soviet cinema equally attempted, with less success, to extol the liberation of women (Her Way, God of War). Alongside literature, and in the limits of using these films for internal and external propaganda, film has constituted a major vector, not so much in the commemoration of this conflict, but in its recollection: the footage echoes the lives of spectators and the visual pact made during the war itself.

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**Selected Filmography**

Lilia Belgii [The Lily of Belgium] (Russia, 1915, Ladislav Starevich)

Elzas [Alsace] (Russia, 1916, Studio Drankov)

Grezy [Daydreams] (Russia, 1915, Evgueny Bauer/Aleksandr Khanzhonkov)

Padenie Peremyshlia [The Fall of the Przemyśl Fortress] (Russia, 1915, Skobelev Committee production)

Bedniaga umer v bol'nitse voennoi [The Poor Chap Died in an Army Hospital] (Russia 1915, Skobelev Committee production)
Vozrozhdaemye k zhizni [Reborn to Life] (Russia, 1916, Great-Duchess Maria Pavlovna Committee production)

Svobodnaia Rossiia [Free Russia, newsreels] (Russia, 1917, Skobelev Committee production)

Revolutsioner [The Revolutionary] (Russia, 1917, Evgueny Bauer/Aleksandr Khanzhonkov)

Tovarisch Abram [Comrade Abram], (Russia, 1918, Aleksandr Razumnyi/studio Ermolev )

Vragi [Enemies] (USSR, 1924, Cheslav Sabinskii/Goskino)

Padenie dinastii Romanovykh [The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty] (USSR, 1927, Esfir Shub/Sovkino)

Konets Sankt-Peterburga [The End of Saint-Petersburg] (USSR, 1927, Vsevolod Pudovkin/Mezhrabpom-Rus)

Oktiabr [October] (USSR, 1927, Sergei Eisenstein/Sovkino)

Baby riazanske [Women of R'iazan] (USSR, 1927, Ol'ga Preobrazhenskaia/Sovkino)

Oblokon imperii [A Fragment of Empire] (USSR, 1928, Fridrikh Ermler)

Arsenal (USSR, 1928, Aleksandr Dovzhenko/VUFKU)

Bog voiny [God of War] (USSR, 1929, Efim Dzigan/Goskinprom Gruzii Aleksandr Shrizhak/Sovkino)

Mirovaia voina [The World War], (USSR, 1929, Evgeny Yakushkin)

Obrechennye [Doomed] (USSR, 1929, Lev Push/Goskinprom Gruzii)

Goroda i gody [Cities and Years] (USSR, 1930, Evgeny Cherviakov/Soiuzkino)

Tikhii Don (Quiet Flows the Don] (USSR, 1930, Ol'ga Preobrazhenskaia/Soiuzkino)

Torgovtsy slavoi [Merchants of Glory] (USSR, 1931, Leonid Obolensky/Mezhrabpom-Rus)

Snaiper [Sniper] (USSR, 1931, Semen Timoshenko/Soiuzkino Leningrad)

Tri soldata [Three Soldiers] (USSR, 1932, Aleksandr Ivanov/Rosfil'm)

Pervyi vzvod [The First Platoon] (USSR, 1933, Vladimir Korsh-Sablin/Belgoskino)

Okraina [Outskirts] (USSR, 1933, Boris Barnet/Mezhrabpomfil'm)

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