

5-2018

The Iron Curtain of Russian Film: Russian Cinematography 1917-1934

Michael Anthony Levatino Jr.
University of New Orleans

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uno.edu/honors_theses



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Levatino, Michael Anthony Jr., "The Iron Curtain of Russian Film: Russian Cinematography 1917-1934" (2018). *Senior Honors Theses*. 106.

https://scholarworks.uno.edu/honors_theses/106

This Honors Thesis-Unrestricted is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Honors Thesis-Unrestricted in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Honors Thesis-Unrestricted has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

The Iron Curtain of Russian Film: Russian Cinematography 1917-1934

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

the Department of History
of the University of New Orleans

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirement for the Degree of
Bachelor of Liberal Arts, with University High Honors
and Honors in History

by

Michael Anthony Levatino Jr.

May 2018

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Tsarist and Provisional Government Era Film Strategy	2
Bolshevik Era Film Strategy.....	4
Stalinist Era Film Strategy	16
The Crumbling Soviet Film Industry	20
Bibliography.....	22

Abstract

This thesis will study the separation between the three primary eras of Soviet cinema (Tsarist/Provisional Government-era, Bolshevik-era, and Stalinist-era) and how Soviet workers (both urban and rural) were affected by, reacted to, and associated with film propaganda. The thesis will attempt to establish a narrative that follows Soviet film from its early creation and nationalization in 1919 to the heavily oppressive Stalinist era. A variety of organizations, films, and individuals are studied to relate public perception to the use of film as propaganda. The thesis will also focus on the bourgeois film leaders that lead the film industry. Not only will Soviet leaders be studied, but the reaction of urban and rural workers to films will be considered. Soviet film strategy had goals of selling a collective Soviet identity to the urban and rural worker in the Soviet Union. There are similarities and differences between the urban and rural working Soviet, but both groups ultimately rejected the avant-garde style of Soviet film.

Introduction

Historians have done noteworthy analyses of cinema and policies limiting production in the Soviet film industry. The topic is covered in detail by historians, but from differing viewpoints. Directors' modes of expression through Soviet films are the predominant field of study as well as the use of cinema for propaganda. In this thesis, the objective is to develop a narrative not limited to propaganda, but a narrative that can help determine how the Soviet worker within the culturally diverse Soviet Union reacted to film. Soviet intellectuals within the film industry and the organizations that were employed to further Soviet film will be studied to show the ineffective nature of creating a collective Soviet identity. The study is limited to English texts and western viewpoints, but articles, journals, and available materials are used to substantiate the main argument of the thesis.

Soviet citizens' responses to Soviet-era film have not been covered extensively, while an overabundance of documents and studies regarding film theory and specific directors' techniques exist. How did the working Soviet respond? Did the typical Soviet worker accept the happy and positive depiction of Soviet life in film or as a fantasy that no one lived? Were Soviet workers involved in the process of creating film? The previous questions are explored to help understand the typical working-class reaction to Soviet-era film. The Soviet Union was unsuccessful in utilizing film and the supporting organizations to enlighten and consolidate the diverse Soviet people. The film industry was restricted and limited by finances and political power struggle. Through the lens of Soviet workers or secondary reaction to Soviet film, the strategies imposed by Soviet leaders were ineffective in creating a collective Soviet identity.

Before discussing the early film organizations and the heavily regulated Stalinist period, a discussion of the various definitions of propaganda will be useful in considering a concept that will be discussed heavily throughout the thesis.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines propaganda as “the spreading of ideas, information, or rumor for the purpose of helping or injuring an institution, a cause, or person.”¹ The goal of film was to help and not injure the Soviet initiative, but in actuality Soviet-era film strategy proved to be unsuccessful. The definition is referenced regarding Bolshevik policies and implementation of film organizations.

Tsarist and Provisional Government Era Film Strategy

In 1915, before the Bolshevik Revolution, the Tsarist film industry was quite successful. This era of film started in 1896 to the Tsar’s abdication in 1917.² Film was popular in city centers due to its use as new technology. Russia had a total of 1412 theaters with 12 fully operational production companies. In 1915, 370 films were produced and in 1916, 500.³ In comparison to later Stalinist-era, Tsarist-era film production was lofty even with resources scarce due to World War I. Although Tsarist-era film was successful, Tsar Nicolas II did not think highly of film. He stated:

I consider that the cinema is an empty, totally useless, and even harmful form of entertainment. Only an abnormal person could place this farcical business on a par with art. It is complete rubbish and no importance whatsoever should be attached to such stupidities.⁴

¹ “Propaganda,” *Merriam-Webster Dictionary.com*. 2017. <https://merriam-webster.com> (31 October 2017).

² Richard Taylor, *The Politics of the Soviet Cinema 1917-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 1-3. Hereinafter, Taylor.

³ Vance Kepley, “Soviet Cinema and State Control: Lenin’s Nationalization Decree Reconsidered,” *Journal of Film and Video*, No. 2 (1990), 6. Hereinafter, Kepley.

⁴ Taylor, 1.

Nicolas II did not believe in the importance of film strategy in creating a collective identity for the Russian people and asserted that film was utterly useless. In March 1917, Nicolas II abdicated, and a provisional government took control. Strictly against any advances by other radical or revolutionary sects to seize power, the provisional government wanted a democratic Russia, but the Bolshevik party had other plans.

The provisional government felt threatened by the revolutionary fervor in the air. In its short rule between March 1917 and October 1917, the government was weak, with little power and control over Russia. In a memo, the provisional government stated:

At such a time, when all Russia is pulling toward one aim, when Russia gathers together her last strength in order to overthrow the cursed, hateful structure and organize a democratic Russia, any move toward disunity is criminal.⁵

It is evident that the provisional government felt a real threat. Anti-democratic forces threatened this loosely formed democratic Russia. Although not explicitly stated, the provisional government knew that risk of disunity to the structure of the provisional government was coming from the Bolshevik Party. In the end, the Bolsheviks prevailed and turned to socialist ideals. The turbulent times that unfolded allowed for creative and less restrictive measures in film.

⁵ Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1960), 94. Hereinafter, Leyda.

Bolshevik Era Film Strategy

Film became a useful tool of the newly formed Soviet Union after the 1917 October Revolution and the regime relied heavily on its influence to consolidate the Soviet workers and create a collective Soviet identity. Lenin stated, "For us, of all forms of art, the cinema is the most important."⁶ Lenin's quote represents the fundamental shift in ideology and in the use of film by Soviet leaders compared to Tsarist era film. A monarchy fell as a provisional government and then Bolshevik regime (for the working class) rose to power. The Bolshevik leadership understood the importance of cinema in consolidating the workers. Soviet policy of educating and developing a collective socialist identity was the primary purpose of film.

In 1917, film production started to decline, and Lenin inherited a crumbling film industry. Although Lenin stated film was the most important, the cinema was not a central cog in the Soviet ideology, and thus during the period of 1917 to 1922 the government placed fewer restrictions on production. Censorship was at an all-time low in the interim period of provisional and Bolshevik leadership. Between 1917 to 1922, the country was in a civil war with two primary political parties who were trying to take control, which hindered a unified front for film production. The Bolshevik party ultimately prevailed. As Bolshevik power consolidated, the intelligentsia was extremely worried about the new leadership. Historian Jay Leyda noted that some members of the intelligentsia thought the Bolshevik rule would only be a "terrible dream" that would last "two weeks," but little did they know the

⁶ Peter Kenez, "The Cultural Revolution in Cinema." *Slavic Review*, No. 3 (1988), 417.

Bolsheviks would consolidate into the future Soviet state under Lenin and Stalin.⁷

The same intelligentsia that saw the Bolsheviks as a threat to the film industry now would see film operating under the nationalized film industry.

In August 1919, under Lenin's authority, Soviet film was nationalized, which helped consolidate Soviet film resources, but not party policy and regulations for film.⁸ For Bolshevik leadership, the shortages in film stock, bourgeoisie leaders, and independent cinema producers interfered with its strategy of using propaganda as the leaders once envisioned. With the nationalization of the film industry, however, a storm of new political organizations, cinema organizations, and critic groups operated with the ambition to solidify the party's place in film and create a collective Soviet identity (i.e. ODSK, GTK, discussed in following paragraphs).

The Bolsheviks saw the necessity of utilizing the working Soviet to further develop effective film. It could be argued that film was the Bolsheviks' most valued asset in an impoverished and turbulent Soviet Union. In her book, Sheila Fitzpatrick explains the commissariat of enlightenment Anatoly Vasilyevich Lunacharsky believed "works in science and the arts must be carried out with a minimum of outside interference and pressure." To understand this philosophy, he explained, would be to the "ultimate advantage of the state."⁹ The soviet state was optimistic in keeping film under the control of Russian state organizations to limit the influence from film imports.

⁷Leyda, 122.

⁸Kepley, 3.

⁹ Sheila Fitzpatrick. *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), XV.

Soviet leaders may have wanted film to be an instrument of control, but the many programs created to reach the Soviet worker, indoctrinate, and receive feedback did not thrive in the era of Soviet control. Despite their best efforts, class distinction still prevailed, preventing the proletariat from becoming equals to the bourgeois class.

After film nationalization in 1919, the early strategy for developing the Soviet state was to hire bourgeois specialists who would ultimately work for the good of the Soviet state.¹⁰ The immediate initiative was to build a skilled bourgeois base that could train and develop a proletariat class to work in the arts or film industry. In the early 1920s, that strategy was not as successful in action as in theory. Created in 1919, the State College of Cinematography (GTK) was supposed to be the answer for educating urban workers, who would rise to control Soviet organizations, but this college had very little positive effect. GTK was unsuccessful at educating filmmakers, directors, and cameramen of working origins, because the school had poor funding and the inability to provide proper equipment for training a proletarian class to develop film.¹¹ This failure of strategy became the product of Soviet film organizations at the time. How were bourgeois leaders supposed to reach and enlighten commoners through film when they could not relate to the working Soviet? Throughout early Soviet history, the social disconnect seems to be the issue when trying to relay ideas or concepts to Soviet workers.

¹⁰ Shelia Fitzpatrick, "The 'Soft' Line on Cultural and its Enemies: Soviet Cultural Policy, 1922-1927." *Slavic Review*, No. 2 (June 1974), 267.

¹¹ Jamie Miller, "Educating the Filmmakers: The State Institute of Cinematography in the 1930s." *The Slavonic and Easter European Review*, No. 3 (July 2007), 463.

In 1924, another organization to bolster film, the Society of Friends of Soviet Cinema (or ODSK), had been established as an instrument to educate the workers about Soviet film and to receive feedback. A general connection between party, government, cinema, and the general working Soviet was supposed to be established to further Soviet initiatives.¹² Like the GTK, the organization proved ineffective in creating a strong connection between the working Soviet and Soviet leaders. Lectures, viewings, and suggested readings were all part of the strategy to further educate the working class and develop a collective Soviet identity. Many critics were skeptical of this organization's ability to educate through cinema since the targeted people were mostly uneducated and impoverished. Before the 1920s, few rural Soviets had the ability to read and write. In Russia, over seventeen million adults were illiterate.¹³ It was a hard task to sell the collective identity to the rural working class in subtitles or complex ideas when they could not read or write. Arguably the rural worker provided very little insight or feedback because they had other issues to solve. Many Soviet workers were worried about feeding their families over providing insight on Soviet-era films. Although the input of the Soviet workers seemed to be a pitfall, the ODSK had issues itself. ODSK, like many other Soviet organizations, struggled financially. The only reasonable way to reach Soviet workers proved to be through proper finances to buy equipment, rent out spaces, and travel to sometimes-secluded parts of the Soviet Union. In reviewing many of

¹² Jamie Miller, *Soviet Cinema: Politics and Persuasion Under Stalin* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd. 2010), 109. Hereinafter, Miller.

¹³ Charles Clark, "Literacy and Labor: The Russian Literacy Campaign within the Trade Unions, 1923-1927." *Europe-Asia Studies*, No. 8 (1995), 1327.

the organizations that arose after ODSK, they, too, suffered from financial instability. The lack of financial support for ODSK led to the repositioning of the Soviet regime's prerogative.

In 1920-1923, the Soviet leadership was unsuccessful in using Soviet workers as a feedback mechanism. As discussed previously, the rural working class proved to be mostly uneducated and illiterate. For example, in 1922, the early Soviet film publication, *Cinema Life*, illustrated the interest of the Soviet workers. Historian Denise Youngblood claimed the people were less interested in social enlightenment and more interested in the lives of film stars that were portrayed in the magazine. Vera Kholodania was a prominent Soviet film actor and many workers bought *Cinema Life* to admire her or other film stars.¹⁴ The magazine designed to produce readers that were dedicated to social ideals and movie interpretations failed to achieve that goal. The Soviet film industry in the 1920s, although booming in the output of films, was having serious issues that would hinder its ability to reach the workers effectively. The points argued above are supported by the fact that *Cinema Life* closed in 1923 due to low readership and sporadic output.¹⁵ *Cinema Life* was not only the organization that failed to create a collective Soviet identity, but the vast geographic expanse of the Soviet Union hindered the ability to show films across the country and in the countryside.

In 1918, the closest that the Soviet government came to reaching the rural workers was with the use of agit trains that eventually stopped due to limited

¹⁴ Denise Youngblood. *Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era, 1918-1935* (Stamford: UMI Research Press, 1985), 2-3. Hereinafter, Youngblood.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 3.

equipment and organization.¹⁶ The trains provided pamphlets, posters, and films to military outposts and rural workers on the outskirts of the Soviet Union. In theory, the trains would be perfect to depict a happy Soviet life, but this strategy could prove more complicated than simply sending trains to the outskirts of Russia's terrain and showing positive films.

In 1922, Soviet director Dziga Vertov was a participant in the agit trains and he expressed the concern and problems of showing film at this time. On his travels, he determined that most of the people watching the film never saw a film or even a play before, which made it hard for them to follow the storyline or propaganda infused into the film. He stated, "The audience was made up of illiterate or semi-literate peasants. They could not even read the subtitles. These unspoiled viewers could not understand the theatrical conventions."¹⁷ This lack of literacy would prove a serious issue in trying to educate working Soviets to the goal of the collective hero. Rural workers' lack of education or concept of film hindered the purpose of the agit trains.

Political scientist Richard Taylor argued, "cinema would be to the socialist society: a rallying-point, a unifying force."¹⁸ Cinema may have helped unify the country in a general sense because the Soviet leadership remained in power without any viable threat; however, film did not develop full support from the working

¹⁶ Malte Hagener. *Vanishing Point Soviet Union – Soviet Cinema and the West between Innovation and Repression* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007). 163. Hereinafter, Hagener.

¹⁷ Orlando Figes. *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (New York: Henry Holt and Company), 2002. Hereinafter, Figes.

¹⁸ Taylor, 29.

Soviet. Taylor builds on his theory by arguing that film associated workers with technology and modernization.¹⁹ The workers may have been exposed to new technology, but as stated above by director Vertov, many of the viewers were not able to perceive what was happening or the goal of the propaganda films because the workers exposure to technology had been limited. Although, some historians may argue that film was a unifying force for the Soviet Union, the use of film to sell a collective Soviet identity fails to establish the Soviet cinema's influence on the working Soviet.

Lenin realized the conundrum faced by the development of nationalized entities. He stated, "it is such a sad state of our decrees [aka resolutions passed or nationalization of industries/organizations]; they are signed and then we ourselves forget about them and fail to carry them out."²⁰ The Soviet leadership could not keep up with the growing organizations. The Soviet Union was nationalizing industries like film, but unable to carry out its decrees. Nationalization efforts seemed to be limited by financial constraints or, as Lenin put it, completely forgotten about. Therefore, the Soviet leaders failed to successfully reach the working Soviet.

The failure to implement Soviet ideologies was not the only obstacle facing Lenin and the Soviet film industry. Cinema leadership also faced competition with imported films. Foreign films showed romantic and funny scenes, while Russian films were dark, gloomy, and politicized. It was difficult for directors and film

¹⁹ Ibid, 54.

²⁰ Kepley, 5.

companies to produce romantic films, because the state was trying to consolidate the worker behind the faint memory of revolution as a collective identity. The early 1920s were the hardest to overcome regarding imported films. Films that were shown in Russian theaters after the Revolution consisted of 80-90 percent German films and more American films in the later 1920s.²¹ With a high number of imported films, revolutionary film struggled to adapt and change to audience tastes.

Competition between Soviet worker clubs and commercial film houses also hindered Soviet leaders from successfully reaching the working Soviet. Worker clubs as described by historian Vance Kepley, “proliferated after the Soviet revolution as part of an effort to offer the industrial proletariat relaxation and cultural enlightenment.”²² The club provided a place for workers to relax after a long day at the factory. Worker clubs began to install projectors and had large auditoriums to show films to their members. In 1923, 26 percent of worker clubs had projection equipment, and by 1930 the number rose to 89 percent.²³ Therefore, the growth of projection equipment shows the importance of film in entertainment, but a power struggle had developed between the worker clubs and commercial film houses. Commercial urban film houses began to overstep the worker clubs to gain profit. In most cases, film houses would offer tickets at a discounted price to members of a worker club.²⁴ The film house had to compete with the growing

²¹ Hagener, 164-165.

²² Vance Kepley, “Cinefication: Soviet Film Exhibition in the 1920s.” *Film History*, No 2 (1994), 269.

²³ *Ibid*, 270.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 273.

competition of worker clubs' ability to show film, but in some instances, it was not necessary to provide incentives. An audience questionnaire showed that "many workers expressed a willingness to pay more to see a current or foreign film in a comfortable commercial house" because of "inferior projection quality at club screenings."²⁵ This questionnaire gives insight into two working class concepts in Soviet-era film. Soviet workers preferred a more "comfortable" experience with less technical faults than would be experienced in worker clubs. As mentioned before, Soviet citizens preferred the romanticism of foreign films over avant-garde films. The issue of working-class film preference posed a complex issue for the domestic film industry.

The Soviet film industry received a slight boost in the mid-1920s with Eisenstein's film *Battleship Potemkin*. In the opinion of most critics and government leaders, *Potemkin* proved to be an acclaimed success compared to other soviet films. Eisenstein's increasing use of montage was possibly what captured the critical appreciation of his films. Cultural historian Orlando Figes stated, "[Eisenstein] used montage to extend time and increase tension."²⁶ Arguably Eisenstein's use of tension developed a connection to the audience and abroad. *Battleship Potemkin* referenced back to the fervor of revolution and presented a consolidation of Bolshevik morals.²⁷ Having a Bolshevik savior lead the revolt on the battleship represented the intended nature of communism in Russia. Ideally, it represented

²⁵ Ibid, 273.

²⁶ Figes, 459.

²⁷ Ron Briley. "Sergei Eisenstein: The Artist in Service of the Revolution." *The History Teacher*, No. 4 (1996), 527-528. Hereinafter, Briley.

Soviet leadership protecting and reviving the poorly treated workers.

Potemkin was praised by critics for the new implementation of a collective Soviet hero. One film critic in the Soviet Union stated:

In *Potemkin* there is no hero-individualist as in the old theatre. The mass is active. The battleship with its sailors and the town with its population predisposed towards revolution. The one and the other are constructed with the greatest mastery and brought into a complex construction...the victory of *Potemkin* is a victory for the revolutionary leftist art of Soviet Russia.²⁸

The critic asserts the collective hero made the film well received. A universal actor not limited to a single individual made a complete turnaround from the common use of a single main character. Soviet ideology supported the collective hero over the individual hero and Eisenstein's film brought the workers together through the collective ideals portrayed in *Potemkin*.

Although critics and the Soviet government praised the film, most urban workers did not have the same response. The Association of Revolutionary Cinematography (ARK) held a showing for Soviet workers. One worker named Shipukov thought that the ending of a victorious collective hero seemed unrealistic.²⁹ The reaction by Soviet workers ran contrary to the reviews by critics. In the same questionnaire done by ARK, other workers stated that the movie was unclear and difficult to follow.³⁰ *Potemkin* may have been renowned by the Soviet

²⁸ Taylor, 139.

²⁹ Denise Youngblood. *Movies for the Masses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 155.

³⁰ Ibid, 155.

leaders and critics, but not by the working Soviets.

Eisenstein created another hit two years later when *October* was released. The Soviet Union was enthralled with the depiction of the 1917 October Revolution. The film gained much enthusiasm and support not only in the Soviet Union, but globally. Many critics thought this would be the revival of Soviet film. The film received a great deal of support from Russian leaders, including Stalin. While filming the scene called the storming of the winter palace, the Soviet government diverted electricity and blocked the streets for filming.³¹ Some argue that most urban and rural workers did not understand a significant amount of the cinematic montage used in the film, but the excitement and revolutionary fervor transcended general concepts. The support demonstrated by the Soviet government and critics did not last because Stalin's reign of terror would change Soviet priorities.

In 1921, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was in full swing, but the Soviet way of life did not improve. As mentioned before, the working class had a lot to consider other than seeing films and being enlightened through film. This period under the NEP that promoted a communist market economy proved problematic as expressed by Peter Kenez. He stated:

On the one hand, the Bolsheviks had far-reaching ambitions in remaking society and man, and on the other they did not possess the means to assert their will in the existing society. Their reach exceeded their grasp. Bolshevik utopianism was born out of weakness: It makes little sense to develop modest plans at a time when they lacked the tools for accomplishing even these; they felt free to allow their

³¹ Briley, 528.

imagination to roam. As a result, they disliked gradualist, ameliorist methods, and instead were attracted to all sorts of ephemeral schemes. Many of the unusual features of Soviet life in the period can be explained by keeping in mind the contradiction between great ambition and limited means.³²

This attitude sums up the period of the NEP. The Soviet Union did not possess the proper techniques or tools for completing a task, especially when it came to the use of film as propaganda. Some would argue that during this period the Soviets delivered Russian society into a vast regression worse than before the revolution.

From the period of 1919-1929, the opinion of the public is lost by the many organizations created to support film. A government that stated it was for the workers did not cooperate with them in an overall sense. Based on previous points made, organizations like the ODSK and *Cinema Life* were all failures that had goals of utilizing the public. It seems that Soviets leaders were engaged in the theory of involving the Soviet worker in the process of film rather than the actual implementation.

Early Soviet film strategy undoubtedly had failed in building support for a collective Soviet identity from the working class. The many different organizations (some mentioned above) were disorganized and mostly bourgeois in nature. The universal change in Soviet film industry was not achieved under Stalin's purges. He replaced old or bourgeois leaders with younger individuals of working-class origin, but many of these new leaders were ill-equipped or afraid to implement changes. The old leadership was too bourgeois, and the new younger working-class

³² Hagener, 166.

individuals were ill equipped. If it was difficult to find any sort of general reaction to film and the organizations created for collective identity before Stalin's reign, it was even more difficult or near impossible to find attitudes to the contrary under Stalin's New Economic Policy and the purges.

Stalinist Era Film Strategy

From 1928 to 1934, the New Economic Policy and Stalin's rise to dictatorship opened a new issue for the film industry. As discussed, the many organizations created to regulate, create, or promote the enlightenment of the proletariat to Soviet ideology had failed due to political or financial hindrances. Stalin's implementation of the first Five-Year Plan and the purges proved to be even more harmful to Soviet film and its output to the people. In the late 1920s, every aspect of cinema was brought fully under government control. The resolution of the Party Conference on Cinema in 1924 stated:

The cinema should be a weapon of the proletariat in its struggle for hegemony, leadership and influence in relation to the other classes, it 'should be, in the hands of the Party, the most powerful medium of communist enlightenment and agitation'...In the period of socialist construction the cinema should be the most powerful weapon for the deepening of the class-consciousness of the workers, for the political re-education of all the non-proletarian strata of the population, and above all the peasantry.³³

The Bolsheviks attempted to re-establish the goals outlined at the beginning of the Bolshevik Revolution. Film was to be used as "enlightenment," but in the first ten years of power that had not been the case. The government had struggled to grasp

³³ Taylor, 152.

full control of cinema and its output. The goals outlined above were not actualized until Stalin's implementation of strict regulations on film.

Stalin reorganized film under his leadership and strived to fully adopt the concept of socialist realism. It is difficult to find a specific definition for socialist realism, but historian Deming Brown in an article review stated that socialist realism is how "cultural authorities tried to give the impression of winnowing out and repudiating numerous false conceptions about the nature of socialist art that had grown up in the preceding decade and replacing them with new ones." He continues by stating what really was created "was not in fact a shining new doctrine, but merely a...selection of already existing concepts."³⁴ The conceptions were not new and only repackaged to deliver to the Soviet people. A consistent promise of a new and better Soviet Union saturated film because of socialist realism. Stalin's reorganization of film did not only hinder films effectiveness, but his implementation of the first Five-Year Plan drastically decreased film production.

In the era of Stalin's first Five-Year Plan, Soviet leadership had high hopes for film and its influence and production. In 1929, the film industry consumed 25 million meters of raw film all imported. In 1930, the amount of consumption doubled, but only one million meters of the raw film was domestic. The Soviet factories were able to produce five thousand projectors annually.³⁵ These figures may seem impressive for Soviet production, but after reaching the ability to produce

³⁴ Deming Brown, review of *Soviet Literary Theories of 1917-1934: Genesis of Socialist Realism*, Herman Ermolaev. *The Slavic and Easter European Journal*, No. 1 (1967), 87.

³⁵ Paul Babitsky. *The Soviet Film Industry* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Inc. 1955), 239.

most of the raw film within the confines of the Soviet Union, film production drastically decreased. The optimism Soviet leaders had for production and “enlightenment” was short-lived. Excitement created by successful films that had circulated a few years earlier was now only a memory and no longer relevant to the impending struggle.

Although internal production in Soviet Union had grown, the actual number of films produced dropped drastically. By 1933, Soviet leaders had a goal of procuring 350 full-length films, but in 1933 only 10 percent of the goal was achieved.³⁶ Why did film production drop during this period? Arguably it was due to Stalin’s oppressive policies and the global depression that strictly limited production. If it was hard to gain a viewpoint from the working Soviet in the early Soviet film industry, it was now near impossible to do so because of the fear of being purged or imprisoned.

Beginning in 1930, Stalin had tightened his grip on the government and began to control all aspects of Soviet power. Opposition would be exiled or purged. The country faced great economic strain after the implementation of the FYP and collectivization. The year 1932 began the worst of Stalin’s grasp on the country. Collectivization was in full swing and 60 percent of rural workers had been collectivized; while up to 70 percent of the crops were part of collectivization.³⁷ His strict leadership made an industrialized nation into a strained and weak culture.

³⁶ Ibid, 239-240.

³⁷ Hiroaki Kuromiya. *Stalin: Profiles in Power* (Great Britain: Pearson Publishing, 2005), 96.

Starving, poor, and in fear, the people were limited in their chances to experience film and even propaganda. This period killed film production.

In 1929, at the start of the purges, the best explanation for the purging of cinema and film heads can be found in a magazine of the time:

Crisis in the laboratory. Crisis in film stock. Crisis in scenarios. Crisis in directorship. Crisis in artistic and ideological leadership. A factory needs oil: cinematography, people. Not dross, not an accidental "service person," but real people from cinematography. Who is causing the crisis? We need to answer the question directly--- people...a bad doctor might slaughter dozens of different people. A harmful film slaughters millions. Cinematography is the strongest narcotic. It must be entrusted to the most responsible people. It is necessary to educate responsible people.³⁸

The magazine argues workers were not successfully "enlightened" as the Soviet leaders once hoped. The only way to save the "millions" from being "slaughtered" would be by purging the incompetent film leaders. It is not necessarily what most Soviet leaders imagined, but nonetheless, it happened. It can be argued Stalin decided purging film leaders and even leaders of other government institutions would solve the issue of control and consolidated ideals. Arguably, the outcry, quoted above, brought about the purges within film.

By 1929, ODSK came under strict scrutiny. As described above, ODSK's mission has been to consolidate Soviet workers behind the idea of a collective identity through film and lectures. The organization was now being criticized for not achieving its goal. Harsh criticism was part of the period in Stalinist leadership usually leading to purges, but in this example, ODSK was able to survive the storm.

³⁸ Youngblood, 189.

In 1934, ODSK was liquidated instead of having the leaders and organizers purged.³⁹ ODSK proves to be an example of an organization that was able to fare the growing fears and purges, but most government organizations did not manage as well.

The Cinema Institute was one such institution. The head of the Cinema Institute was terminated in the early years of the purges. Soon after, Sergei Eisenstein was appointed head of the institute.⁴⁰ Surprisingly, many of the people hired after Eisenstein's appointment had been previously exiled or banned from film production. The purges and Five-Year Plan decimated an industry that was slowly becoming irrelevant.

Before the purges and FYP, Soviet film had slowly gained popularity for entertainment purposes. Examples were Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* and *October*. These films broke into the foreign market and had critical success. After the start of the FYP, the success stalled. Famine, poverty, and fear transcended to all aspects of Russian society. The Soviet workers did not have much interest in the "enlightenment" that was supposed to occur through film. Survival was their primary concern.

The Crumbling Soviet Film Industry

After 1934, Soviet-era film declined and made little to no impact on Soviet society. As hostilities began to develop between western nations and the world headed to World War II, Soviet leaders and other leaders around the world were more focused on external threats than consolidation through film. Eisenstein did

³⁹ Miller, 78.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 79.

release two popular films, *Alexander Nevsky* in 1938 and *Ivan the Terrible* in 1944, but the two films fell to the same conventions of earlier Soviet film. Although outside the scope of this thesis, both films reached back to the memory of revolution and internal strife to create a unified Soviet identity.⁴¹ The Soviet-era cinema had been unsuccessful in developing a strategic system that would consolidate the working Soviet to the socialist cause and a collective identity. Although some films had been popular and even influential, Soviet people had gravitated to entertainment over a unified Soviet identity.

A study of Soviet-era film can add to an understanding of the overall narrative of the Soviet Union. The film industry within the Soviet Union was unorganized and ineffective due to budgetary constraints and incompetent leaders. The experience of film organizations is a microcosm of the overall experience of Soviet government. Therefore, the study of Soviet film strategy and effectiveness can help explain Soviet initiatives and organizational structure during the period of 1917-1934.

⁴¹ Kristin Thompson, "Ivan the Terrible and Stalinist Russia: a Reexamination." *Cinema Journal*, No. 1 (1977), 32.

Bibliography

- Babitsky, Paul. *The Soviet Film Industry*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger Inc., 1955.
- Briley, Ron. "Sergei Eisenstein: The Artist in Service of the Revolution." *The History Teacher*, No. 4 (1996).
- Brown, Deming, review of *Soviet Literary Theories of 1917-1934: Genesis of Socialist Realism*, Herman Ermolaev. *The Slavic and Easter European Journal*, No. 1 (1967).
- Clark, Charles. "Literacy and Labor: The Russian Literacy Campaign within the Trade Union, 1923-1927." *Europe-Asia Studies*, No. 8 (1995).
- Figes, Orlando. *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002.
- Fitzpatrick, Sheila. *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Luacharsky*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.
- Fitzpatrick, Sheila. "The Soft' Line on Culture and its Enemies: Soviet Cultural Policy, 1922-1927." *Slavic Review*, No 2. (1974).
- Hagener, Malte. *Vanishing Point: Soviet Union-Soviet Cinema and the West between Innovation and Repression*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007.
- Kenez, Peter. "The Cultural Revolution in Cinema." *Slavic Review*, No. 3 (1988).
- Kepley, Vance. "Cinification: Soviet Film Exhibition in the 1920s." *Film History*, No.2 (1994)

- Kepley, Vance. "Soviet Cinema and State Control: Lenin's Nationalization Decree Reconsidered." *Journal of Film and Video*, No. 2 (1990).
- Kuromiya, Hiroaki. *Stalin: Profiles in Power*. Great Britain: Pearson Publishing, 2005.
- Leyda, Jay. *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1960.
- Miller, Jamie. "Educating the Filmmakers: The State Institute of Cinematography in the 1930s." *The Slavonic and Easter European Review*, No. 3 (2007).
- Miller, Jamie. *Soviet Cinema: Politics and Persuasion Under Stalin*. New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd. 2010.
- Taylor, Richard. *The Politics of the Soviet Cinema 1917-1929*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
- Thompson, Kristin. "Ivan the Terrible and Stalinist Russia: A Reexamination." *Cinema Journal*, No. 1 (1977).
- Youngblood, Denise. *Movies for the Masses*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Youngblood, Denise. *Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era, 1918-1935*. Stanford: UMI Research Press, 1985.