Russian Empire & Soviet Cinema: The Silent Era


The Cinema of the Russian Empire (1896-1917)

The Cinema of the Russian Empire (Pre-reform Russian orthography: Синематографъ Российской Имперії) roughly spans the period 1907 – 1920, during which time a strong infrastructure was created. From the over 2,700 art films created in Russia before 1920, around 300 remain to this day.

In April 1896, just four months after the first films were shown in Paris, the first cinematic apparatus appeared in Russia. The first films seen in the Russian Empire were via the Lumière brothers, in Moscow and St. Petersburg in May 1896. In the same month, the first film was shot in Russia, by Lumière cameraman Camille Cerf, a record of the coronation of Nicholas II at the Kremlin in Moscow. The first permanent cinema was opened in St Petersburg in 1896 at Nevsky Prospect, No. 46.

The first Russian movies were shown in the Moscow Korsh theatre by artist Vladimir Sashin. After purchasing a Vitagraph projector, Sashin started to make short films, which by August 1896 were being demonstrated to theatre audiences after the theatre performance had ended.

Film in Russia became a staple of fairs or rented auditoriums. After the Lumières came representatives from Pathé and Gaumont to open offices, after the turn of the century, to make motion pictures on location for Russian audiences. Theatres were already built, and film renting distributors had already replaced direct sales to exhibitors, when, in 1908, Alexander Drankov produced the first Russian narrative film, Stenka Razin, based on events told in a popular folk song and directed by Vladimir Romashkov. At the same time as Drankov was making his film, the Moscow cinema entrepreneur Alexander Khanzhonkov began to operate.

In 1907, the journal Kino was first published. Kino was the first Russian periodical devoted to the cinema.

Ladislas Starevich made the first Russian animated film (and the first stop motion puppet film with a story) in 1910 – Lucanus Cervus. He continued making animated films (some of which can now be bought on DVD) until his emigration to France following the 1917 October Revolution. He was decorated by the Tsar for his work in 1911.

Posle smerti (aka After Death, 1915)
Competition from French, American, German, Danish, British and Italian companies, distributing their country’s wares to the eager Russians, developed, but the indigenous industry made such strides over the next five years that 129 fully Russian films – even if many of them were comparatively short – were produced in 1918 alone. In 1912, the Kanzhonkov film studio was operational, and Ivan Mozzhukhin had made his first film there, a feature film of 2000 meters entitled “Oborona Sevastopolya” (“The Defense of Sevastopol”). The same year, a German concern filming in Russia introduced the director Yakov Protazanov to the world with its “Ukhod Velikovo Startsa” (“Departure of the Grand Old Man”), a biographical film about Lev Tolstoy. Tsar Nicholas himself made some home movies and appointed an official Court Cinematographer, although he is purported to have written in 1913 that film was “an empty matter…even something harmful…silliness…we should not attribute any significance to such trifles”.

Tsar Nicholas gave some special assistance to the makers of “The Defence of Sevastopol” and a few similar films, but the industry was not nationalized nor governmentally subsidized or otherwise controlled. There were also only a few rules of censorship on a national level – such as not making the Tsars characters in a dramatized film – but the filmmakers were largely free to produce for the mass audience; local officials might be more stringent in censoring or banning films. Detective films were popular, and various forms of melodrama.

The arrival of World War I in Russia in 1914 sparked a change. Imports dropped drastically, especially insofar as films from Germany and its allies left the market rapidly. Russian filmmakers early on turned to anti-German, “patriotic” films, often hastily made, even being filmed while the scripts were still being written, filling in the gap: in 1916, Russia produced 499 films, over three times the number of just three years earlier, and more of feature length. Russia’s allies, in turn, began to import some of the more striking product, including further films by Protazanov and Yevgeni Bauer, a specialist in psychological film, who both impacted, among others, the burgeoning American film industry. Adversely, Russian companies were forbidden to send cameramen to the “front”, and war footage had to be imported from France and England: some Russian concerns combined footage from these with enacted war material to create faux documentaries. Also, the Skobolev Committee was established by the government to oversee the making of newsreel and propaganda films.

Otets Sergiy (aka Father Sergius, 1919)

**Revolution and Civil War (1917-1922)**

And then came the Russian Revolution, on top of the ongoing international War. With audiences turning against the Tsar, film producers began turning out, after the February Revolution, a number of films with anti-Tsarist themes. These, along with the usual retinue of detective films and melodramas, filled theaters when the streets were not filled with revolutionaries. However, the destruction of the infrastructure in the major cities, the failing war-drained economy, the takeover of rural cinemas by local Soviets, and the aversion of some in the film industry to communism, caused the Russian film industry per se to effectively die out by the time Lenin on November 8, 1917 proclaimed a new country, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.
Ironically, the last significant Russian film completed, in 1917, Father Sergius would become the first new film release a year later, in the new country of the Soviets.

The first Soviet Russian state film organization, the Film Subdepartment of the People’s Commissariat of Education, was established in 1917. The work of the nationalized motion-picture studios was administered by the All-Russian Photography and Motion Picture Department, which was recognized in 1923 into Goskino, which in 1926 became Sovkino. The world’s first state-filmmaking school, the First State School of Cinematography, was established in Moscow in 1919.

During the Russian Civil War, agitation trains and ships visited soldiers, workers, and peasants. Lectures, reports, and political meetings were accompanied by newsreels about events at the various fronts. (Wikipedia)

When the new Bolshevik regime began to organize its own governmental agencies in early 1918, the leadership took stock of the nation’s extant cinema resources in the hope the medium could serve as an instrument of political persuasion. Authority for cinema affairs was assigned to the Commissariat of Education and its energetic head, Anatoly Vasilyevich Lunacharsky (who served in that post from 1917 to 1929) who found the Russian film industry had plunged into recession. Movie theaters closed during the last year of World War I and the tumultuous early months of the revolution. Veteran film personnel fled the country, taking film assets with them. Resources dwindled through the late 1910s and early 1920s, and the Soviets could not resupply because of a trade embargo mounted in Western Europe. Although a White Russian film community succeeded in making movies in regions outside of Bolshevik authority (such as the Crimea) in the late 1910s, the nation’s film industry all but shut down by 1920. Vladimir Lenin’s famous decree nationalizing cinema in 1919 was something of an empty gesture, since there were precious few film assets to take over. (filmreference.com)

**Cinema of the Soviet Union: Silent Era (1922-1935)**

The new state, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, officially came into existence on December 30, 1922. From the outset, this new republic held that film would be the most ideal propaganda tool for the Soviet Union because of its widespread popularity among the established citizenry of the new land; Vladimir Lenin, in fact, declared it the most important medium for educating the masses in the ways, means and successes of Communism, a position which was later echoed by Joseph Stalin. Meanwhile, between World War I and the Russian Revolution, the film industry, and the infrastructure needed to support it (e.g., electrical power), had deteriorated to the point of unworkability. The majority of cinemas had been in the corridor between Moscow and St. Petersburg, and most were out of commission. Additionally, many of the performers, producers, directors and other artists of pre-Soviet Russia, had fled the country or were moving ahead of the Red Army forces as they pushed further and further south into what remained of the Russian Empire. Furthermore, the new government did not have the funds to spare for an extensive reworking of the system of filmmaking. Thus, they initially opted for project approval and censorship guidelines while leaving what remained of the industry in private hands. As this amounted mostly to cinema houses, the first Soviet films consisted of recycled films of the Russian Empire and its imports, to the extent that these were not determined to be offensive to the new Soviet ideology. Ironically, the first new film released in Soviet Russia did not exactly fit this mold:
this was Father Sergius, a religious film completed during the last weeks of the Russian Empire but not yet exhibited. It appeared on Soviet screens in 1918.

Bronenosets Potyomkin (aka The Battleship Potemkin, 1925)

Beyond this, the government was principally able to fund only short, educational films, the most notorious of which were the agitki—propaganda films intended to “agitrate”, or energize and enthuse, the masses to participate fully in approved Soviet activities, and deal effectively with those who remained in opposition to the new order. These short (often one small reel) films were often simple visual aids and accompaniments to live lectures and speeches, and were carried from city to city, town to town, village to village (along with the lecturers) to indoctrinate the entire countryside, even reaching areas where film had not been previously seen.

Newsreels, as documentaries, were the other major form of earliest Soviet cinema. Dziga Vertov’s newsreel series Kino-Pravda, the best known of these, lasted from 1922 to 1925 and had a propagandistic bent; Vertov used the series to promote socialist realism but also to experiment with cinema.

New talent joined the experienced remainder, and an artistic community assembled with the goal of defining “Soviet film” as something distinct and better from the output of “decadent capitalism”. The leaders of this community viewed it essential to this goal to be free to experiment with the entire nature of film, a position which would result in several well-known creative efforts but would also result in an unforeseen counter-reaction by the increasingly solidifying administrators of the government-controlled society. (Wikipedia)

Mat (aka Mother, 1926)

Still, in 1921, there was not one functioning cinema in Moscow until late in the year. [citation needed] Its rapid success, utilizing old Russian and imported feature films, jumpstarted the industry significantly, especially insofar as the government did not heavily or directly regulate what was shown, and by 1923 an additional 89 cinemas had opened. [citation needed] Despite extremely high taxation of ticket sales and film rentals, there was an incentive for individuals to begin making feature film product again – there were places to show the films – albeit they now had to conform their subject matter to a Soviet world view. In this context, the directors and writers who had remained in support of the objectives of Communism assumed quick dominance in the industry, as they were the ones who could most reliably and convincingly turn out films that would satisfy government censors.
Lunacharsky set about rebuilding the film industry in the early 1920s when Lenin instituted the semicapitalist New Economic Policy (NEP), in which market practices returned to the Soviet economy. This revived the urban economy and the Russian middle class. Lunacharsky calculated that city dwellers, who had provided the audience base of pre-revolutionary cinema, would return to movie theaters if new foreign product could be brought in. He arranged for the renewed importation of foreign films beginning in 1922, the same year the trade embargo ended. German, French, Scandinavian, and especially American movies once again filled commercial movie theaters in Russia, attracting paying audiences. Income went to the purchase of new film supplies and to the refitting of movie studios. Soviet productivity increased gradually through the 1920s, even as foreign movies enjoyed long commercial runs. In 1923 the USSR released just thirty-eight homemade features; by 1928 that figure was up to 109.

Meanwhile, the regime campaigned to “cinefy” the countryside by spreading the exhibition network to reach the entire Soviet population. By 1928 urban spectators could see movies in 2,730 commercial movie theaters, almost twice the number from 1913. This commercial exhibition network was complemented by worker clubs, a Soviet innovation to provide industrial workers and their families with entertainment and cultural enlightenment during leisure hours. Some 4,680 worker clubs regularly showed movies at discount prices to proletarian audiences. And for the first time, cinema was reaching the vast peasant population. Both fixed and portable projectors served villages by the late 1920s: in 1928, 1,820 villages had permanent installations and another 3,770 portable units toured rural circuits.

Chelovek s kino-apparatom (aka Man with a Movie Camera, 1929)

Dziga Vertov celebrated both cinema and industry in Chelovek s kino-apparatom (Man with a Movie Camera, 1929).

The union-wide film market was also reorganized to encourage the USSR’s member republics to develop their own film studios and distribution networks. The Russian Republic remained dominant with 70 percent of the USSR’s film market and the leading studios Sovkino and Mezhrabpom. But other republics in the Soviet system developed indigenous film activity during the middle 1920s. Leading non-Russian studios included Georgia’s Gosinprom Gruzii and Ukraine’s VUFKU. This rehabilitated infrastructure made possible the great creative achievements of Soviet silent cinema, including the innovations of the montage directors Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948), V. I. Pudovkin (1893–1953), Alexander Dovzhenko (1894–1956), and Dziga Vertov (1896–1954). All produced their most acclaimed works in the brief period of film prosperity in the mid- to late-1920s.

The seeds for the montage movement had been planted earlier. The State Film Institute in Moscow was established in 1919 to train a new generation of filmmakers during the rebuilding period. Lev Kuleshov (1899–1970) joined the faculty in 1920 and surrounded himself with a promising group of students, including Pudovkin and (briefly) Eisenstein, who studied with him in the early 1920s, and then began their own filmmaking careers in the
middle 1920s once the film industry resumed productivity. Kuleshov and his students took note of the sophisticated editing techniques evident in the American movies playing in Moscow’s cinemas. They embraced editing as the key to successful filmmaking and as a welcome contrast to the theatrical style of pre-revolutionary Russian cinema. Rapid editing also seemed to offer a dynamic style that paralleled some of the modernist techniques of the USSR’s artistic avant-garde.

Zemlya (aka Earth, 1930)

Among the montage directors, Pudovkin is commonly regarded as having followed a more conventional narrative line, consistent with his acknowledged interest in Hollywood-style continuity editing, whereas his colleague Eisenstein explored a more radical montage possibility. Pudovkin’s preference is evident in his adaptation of the Maxim Gorky novel Mat (Mother, 1926). This account of the 1905 uprising treats revolutionary activity through the experiences of a single title character and often subordinates editing to the demands of character development. Eisenstein’s more aggressive aesthetic is illustrated in his parallel treatment of the 1905 rebellion, Bronenosets Potyomkin (Battleship Potemkin, also known as Potemkin, 1925). He eschews conventional protagonists in favor of a collective hero, and his more discontinuous editing stresses conflict rather than linear development.

(filmreference.com)

Directors (Selection)

Sergei M. Eisenstein (1898–1948)
Vsevolod Pudovkin (1893–1953)
Dziga Vertov (1896–1954)
Aleksandr Dovzhenko
Lev Kuleshov (1899–1970)
Boris Barnet (1902–1965)
Yakov Protazanov (1881–1945)

Films (Selection)

Aelita: Queen of Mars Yakov Protazanov
The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks Lev Kuleshov
Kino Eye Dziga Vertov
Battleship Potemkin Sergei Eisenstein

Strike Sergei Eisenstein

By the Law Lev Kuleshov

Forward, Soviet! Dziga Vertov

Mother Vsevolod Pudovkin

The End of St. Petersburg Vsevolod Pudovkin

The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty Esfir Shub

October (Ten Days That Shook the World) Sergei Eisenstein

Arsenal Aleksandr Dovzhenko

Storm Over Asia Vsevolod Pudovkin

The House on Trubnaia Square Boris Barnet

Man with a Movie Camera Dziga Vertov

Old and New Sergei Eisenstein

Earth Aleksandr Dovzhenko

Salt for Svanetia Mikhail Kalatozov