

11 Film and TV as a source in Soviet history

Challenges and possibilities

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The Soviet Union has sometimes been described as a ‘propaganda state’ that made unprecedentedly extensive and systematic use of mass culture to legitimize its authority.¹ Cinema played a key role in this strategy, reflected in the industry’s nationalization on 27 August 1919, as well as in the famous quote attributed to Lenin in 1922, ‘of all arts, cinema is for us the most important’, and through to Stalin’s 1924 statement that ‘[t]he cinema is a most valuable means of mass agitation. The task is to take this matter in hand’ reiterated in 1935: ‘in the hands of Soviet power cinema constitutes an enormous and invaluable force ... [w]ith unique opportunities for spiritual influence over the masses ...’² In the years between these two statements, Stalinist society succeeded in transforming cinema from the experiments of the first decade of Soviet power into a medium ‘for the millions’, and it became a key tool in its propaganda strategies, promoting various interpretations and reinterpretations of history, the hero cult, the Stalin cult and other themes. Then, during the Second World War (known as the Great Patriotic War in the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation), cinema became a key tool to exhort the Soviet population to make every effort to resist and defeat the Nazi invasion, and at the same time film was a significant means of appealing for international aid and support. Cinema remained a key dimension of the Soviet system’s appeal to its population following Stalin’s death, as Khrushchev framed his 1956 denunciation of Stalin around references to cinema, and reorganized the industry to respond to and realize the post-Stalin era’s emphasis upon persuasion rather than coercion. Cinema remained a significant facet of Soviet society through the rule of Brezhnev, right until the end of the Soviet era, playing, for example, a central role in the articulation and inculcation of what has been called ‘the cult of victory’ in the war.³ However, from the late 1950s onwards, film existed in tandem with its close relative, the medium of television, sharing many of the aesthetic trends and material resources of cinema. Both media were key in the transformations of the *Glasnost* era, and were themselves revolutionized once more by it, and by the collapse of the Soviet Union it precipitated.

Methodological reflections

While in theory, historians see all material from the past as useful, film and television have been of little interest until the last twenty years, and have been overwhelmingly treated with a special strain of the condescension extended by historians to popular culture in general and visual sources in particular.⁴ Productive uses of film in historical scholarship have a longer pedigree in French culture, starting with the work of Marc Ferro, a historian who was pioneering in championing the serious study of film in history, arguing that it is the ambiguity of film language, its need for interpretation, that makes it suspicious for historians.⁵ More recently, this includes the work of Pierre Sorlin, whose discussion of the genre of historical films emphasizes them as more revealing of the present rather than the past.⁶ Building on their work in an English-language book already in a third edition, Robert Rosenstone acknowledges historical film's factual inaccuracy, but argues that this misses the point, making the case instead for the specific strengths of film as a means for the evocation of and commentary on the past in which these two modes are conflated. Specifically, with his analysis of depictions of Sergei Eisenstein's *October* (*Oktiabr'*, 1927), Rosenstone sees it as an attempt to convey the ecstasy of revolutionary change, creating symbols, such as the storming of the Winter Palace, standing for longer processes.⁷ While valuable, Rosenstone's approach is dependent on published sources by or about Eisenstein that have been translated into English, and makes no use of archives. Moreover, its focus is on film as a form of historical representation and interpretation rather than a historical source, a trace of the historical period that generated it. In this respect, it bears similarities with the tendencies of Hayden White or of memory studies, in which the focus is on the narrative construction of the past and the message conveyed about it rather than what actually happened.⁸ In many respects this resembles the first sample analysis below.

These important contributions notwithstanding, there has been an overwhelming tendency to reference film (as with art previously) decoratively, to provide a bit of colour, possibly to lighten up the front cover. On the other hand, very detailed close readings, where the filmic text, and especially the subtleties of the style itself become more important than an overall narrative or interaction with the context, will tend to take us more towards film studies or possibly cultural studies, beyond the disciplinary borders of cultural history.

Nevertheless, in works of history, too often, films are not interrogated as systematically as a historian would with other, written, sources. Films have their own stylistic and generic conventions that are part of their meaning, and the historian needs to reckon with these in order to make nuanced arguments about them. At the same time, the historian's traditional skill in working with written documents remains key. Taken seriously, a historical analysis of film is not just about commenting upon the final, released version, but can also touch on any of the following: script variants, the literary source, internal studio and industry correspondence or discussions as well as published policy statements, mentions of a film in memoirs and other writings by the filmmakers, actors, industry figures

or audience members, reviews and many other sources. To generate the richest analysis, it is a question of relating the two dimensions, the interpretation of the visual to the written sources, and such a synoptic perspective helps to guard against any danger of excessively subjective readings. Done well, the results of such an analysis can be compelling.

Such an approach to the cultural history of film is one that can be practised with regard to the film industry anywhere, not just in the Soviet Union. However, applying it to the Soviet Union raises some specific issues of method. In part, this is because Soviet cultural elites themselves took a particular interest in popular culture, as the famous statements attributed to Lenin and Stalin show.⁹ For them, cinema was not simply to be a source of entertainment and business, but one of edification and education. This slightly alters the habitual approach to it, even if those funding film had to reach compromise with the filmmakers on the one hand, who often had their own aesthetic agendas, and with the preferences of audiences oriented towards entertainment on the other.¹⁰ This didactic stance was evident with regard to film, in particular, and it became a serious art around the world following the enormous success of *Battleship Potemkin* (*Bronenosets Potemkin*, directed by Sergei Eisenstein, 1925) – its moral and political seriousness were no less a part of this reason than its aesthetic ambition.¹¹ However, as Anna Lawton has commented, while both *Battleship Potemkin* and the wider 1920s film movement we have come to know as Soviet montage successfully combined aesthetic innovation with revolutionary politics, they failed in their didactic purpose, because their films were not popular with the masses.¹² These films, with their explicitly political subject matter and stunning artistic qualities, have often been the focus of film historical work on the Soviet period, including that of Rosenstone, but to an extent this perpetuates the division between high and low culture, which has a long pedigree in the study of art history and history in general,¹³ including Russian history. *Battleship Potemkin* thus is, in a sense, a product of elite culture, similar to the arts of painting and sculpture, in that it is largely produced and consumed by an elite. Moreover, the focus upon aesthetically rich films is often connected to the notion, popular in film studies, of *auteurism*, the idea that films can be seen as expressing the personal vision of their director, as part of a body of authorial work.¹⁴ In turn, such an approach places prominent individuals at the centre of its analysis and may tend to generate a reading that not only privileges aesthetic merits over others, but also follows a narrative of heroic individual versus the state, problematic for its tendency to see a clandestine liberal subject in thwarted Soviet artists.¹⁵ As discussed below, more recent approaches to Soviet subjectivity have been more nuanced.

The study of popular culture, which has been the focus of many historians especially since the 1960s,¹⁶ permits a different social focus. It also shifts our attention towards a very different set of Soviet films: those truly popular with the public that are as well understood through their position within less hallowed genres such as comedies, melodramas, and musicals. One version of this has already been pioneered by Katerina Clark in her famous study of the socialist realist novel,

where the focus is on how various examples of the Soviet novel echo a single master-plot, and rework a central dialectic between spontaneity and consciousness.¹⁷ This focus has been made relevant to the post-Stalin era too, by Sergei Yurchak's recent emphasis on the repetitious and ritualized nature of Soviet discourse.¹⁸ Both perspectives may productively inform the analysis of Soviet cinema, tracing, for example, the variations over time in a given narrative or genre of Soviet cinema, such as representations of the Civil War. The indicative analysis, below, of treatments of death and martyrdom in Soviet cinema from the revolution to 1945, albeit not devoted to the most popular genres, is an example of this kind of approach, and it is one that also has the benefit for students, of not necessarily requiring knowledge of the Russian language, since enough of the relevant films can be found on DVD or various websites with English subtitles, and there are also English-language discussions or summaries of others.

While this kind of analysis of Soviet cinema is productive, what it tends to downplay above all is the element of subjectivity in cinema. This blind spot is all the more frustrating when we consider historians' recent orientation towards the diary as a form recording Soviet subjectivity that was personal, but not individualist, breaking down the public-private distinction.¹⁹ Film was a medium that required enormous economic investment, and was thus dominated by big studios in the context of Hollywood, or by the state in the context of the Soviet Union. This tended to mitigate against diary-like expressions of a subjective vision. This is where the *auteur* theory, for all its aestheticizing bias, may still prove useful, as it is an attempt to locate and describe a subjectivity emerging from a filmmaker's *oeuvre* that was not captured by the description of a film in terms of its genre or theme. But we may see this illusive subjectivity emerge in other, more subtle ways too. This will be the focus of the second indicative analysis, below, of wartime Soviet documentary film with regard to Nazi atrocity and the Holocaust, focusing on the films of Aleksandr (Oleksandr) Dovzhenko. Through such analyses, we see that Soviet film made for propagandist purposes could end up conveying something else, be it a certain subjectivity, or inviting an alternative interpretation of events than that promoted by the Soviet government, serving as involuntary testimony, what Marc Bloch referred to, when the source was a 'witness in spite of itself' which is particularly relevant to documentary film, but applicable to fiction films too, as they tell us things they did not intend to about the attitudes of their time.²⁰

Here we need to be attentive to the interplay between the said and the unsaid, the visual and the verbal, what the film shows, and what it deliberately chooses not to show. In the case of Soviet film, to get at these decisions usually requires use of other sources to work out what else was there on the day it was recorded. So, while a film may have been commissioned for propaganda purposes, it can be possible to reveal the decision-making process and uncover alternatives through unpublished discussions, edited and censored variants. This makes the use of archives a very powerful tool for such analysis, but is dependent upon Russian language sources. What emerges is not quite a diary-like individual sensibility, nor is it a monolithically propagandist one either.

In each case here, we are faced with the need to move on and away from the limitations of the totalitarian paradigm, in which film is largely seen as a form of public thought control, from which the individual seeks refuge in a private, usually literary world. In seeking to understand how Soviet citizens actually thought, we can use film as valuable indexical traces of the mentality of this past world. It is merely a question of finding a productive methodological and conceptual framework with which to approach the topic.

Death and martyrdom in Soviet cinema

In her ground-breaking study *Night of Stone*, Catherine Merridale considered the enormous scale of death, suffering and loss suffered by Russia and Russians in the twentieth century by looking at the ritual practises associated with the commemoration of the dead. A particular focus of Merridale's book are the revolutionaries' attempts to create a new secular red funeral culture, where religion was displaced, where the grave became 'a tribune for affirmation of the cause', meaning a focus on a response of action, the fight for a new Russia, asserting that the sacrifice was not vain, which left little space for mourning and marking a real sense of loss.²¹ Merridale's reach is wide but her central materials tend to be from oral history. Consequently, the agenda of *Night of Stone* may be extended by applying them to other contexts, examining attitudes to death in the context of the first decades of Soviet film which rationalize and instrumentalize death and violence from its very earliest and most influential examples, presenting it as a worthwhile and meaningful sacrifice.

Soviet film began, however, by dismissing its ideological rivals' claims to transcendence, with *The Unsealing of the Remains of Sergii of Radonezh* (*Vskrytie moshchei Sergiia Radonezha*). Made in 1919, the year of Soviet cinema's origin and a few months before its nationalization, it has the honour of being claimed by both Dziga Vertov and Lev Kuleshov, the two key pioneers of Soviet cinema,²² and was an attempt to demonstrate the falsity of the Church's claims that the remains of the important Orthodox Christian Saint Sergius of Radonezh were 'incorrupt', that is, had resisted decay. The rather crudely made film, comprising long takes with no close-ups, shows the skeleton being taken out of its resting place and exposed as rotten. The film's final image is of a decidedly dead and decayed pile of bones. The point here was to demonstrate the hollow and unconvincing nature of Orthodox Christianity's claims to the miraculous, its pretensions to have conquered time and overcome death.

The overcoming of death was likewise a theme in the filming, in 1918, of Lenin following the unsuccessful assassination attempt on him of 30 August. Despite his initial reluctance, he agreed to be filmed in the grounds of the Kremlin near to the famous Tsar-canon, to dispel rumours of his death. This was echoed, as Victoria Bonnell has shown, in references to Lenin that were couched in religious terms and a marked increase in depictions of him as a short-hand for the Bolshevik cause.²³ These cultic tendencies reached a new pitch following Lenin's death, as his funeral was organized as a huge public event. As Nina Tumarkin argues, while the grief

expressed in this officially sanctioned outpouring was for the death of Lenin, nevertheless the sources of the emotions laid bare were also rooted in and related to the deaths that had occurred in the whole series of war, revolution and civil war experienced by Russian and Soviet society in the previous years.²⁴ Lenin's funeral recuperated and instrumentalized these disparate emotions, bending them to the overarching Soviet political narrative. Dziga Vertov's film of the funeral, his 1925 *Leninist kinopravda* (*Kinopravda 21*), gave the iconography of Lenin's funeral a compelling and enduring expression, showing the event as galvanizing the Party Central Committee and the Soviet population, who apparently express their grief spontaneously. In cinematic terms the emphasis is on the unceasing movement of the masses past the open coffin. Lenin's death has become a point of mobilization for the country as grief is moulded into a political response. The funeral sequence ends with the promise to complete Lenin's cause and teachings. The third and final reel of the film shows mass enrolments in the party, showing the progress made by the country, but ends with an exhortation to follow Lenin's course into the future. The funeral is used as a means of mobilization, to create a sense of the Soviet state as a mystical, symbolic unity between ruler and ruled, and at the same time to pass on that legitimacy to Lenin's successors in the central committee, named in the film. Thus, after showing the masses filing past the coffin, the film shows, Lenin's family (his widow and sister, Mariia Il'ichna) before showing Felix Dzerzhinskii (head of the *Cheka*), Mikhail Frunze (the legendary military leader), Leonid Krasin (who was a key figure in the organization of the funeral), and then Stalin (whose name was in bigger letters than the others), followed by the other members of the Central Committee. The implication is that, while they mourn too, the political, security and military legacies of Lenin are safe in these hands. Vertov remade this same sequence in 1934, for *Three Songs of Lenin* (*Tri pesni o Lenine*) making Stalin far more prominent.

The pattern whereby Bolshevik death is understood as a meaningful sacrifice, while established in documentary film, is repeated even more effectively in feature films, with Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* the most effective example in its use of a funeral as the central dramatic point in a process of wider, mass mobilization. The funeral, or rather public display of Vakulinchuk's dead body in the city of Odessa, mobilizes huge crowds and serves as the catalyst for the spreading of the bacillus of revolt from the battleship to the town. We see here the same parallel editing evident in Vertov stressing a contrast between the stasis of the dead body and the relentless movement of the masses, suggesting a transfer of energy from mourning the dead revolutionary to the wider revolutionary movement, a still/moving contrast and triumph over death that cinema, in its inherent nature as a series of still images animated to simulate motion, is uniquely suited to convey.

Eisenstein of course stressed the contrasts between his own use of the funeral scene and Vertov's, seeing his 'mathematically constructed invention [as] defeat[ing] untouched truth'.²⁵ Contemporary critics such as Khrisanf Khersonskii stressed the similarities, arguing that *Battleship Potemkin* built on what was best in Vertov.²⁶ Vertov, needless to say, saw it differently, arguing that Eisenstein's

Potemkin not only owed a huge debt to *Leninist kinopravda*, but that this dramatic reinvention was a deviation, a parasitic growth that drew its power from the real depictions of life in newsreel and documentary.²⁷ Nevertheless, Eisenstein, by showing not only the funeral but the death of Vakulinchuk (and others), created an intoxicating formula that suggested a path for subsequent Soviet film's depictions of the mobilizing power of the death of a martyr: death is not defeat, it is only a temporary set-back and can be assimilated into an overarching narrative.

This pattern, established in the 1920s, continued into 1930s cinema, and the era of sound, making effective use of the greater scope for song, dialogue and character development. Grigorii Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg's narrative of the conversion to Bolshevism of a typical, even rowdily anarchic, member of the working class in *Maxim's Youth* (*Iunost' Maksima*, 1934), made the funeral the key moment of their protagonist's transformation from passive bystander to active revolutionary. Maxim is wavering, with some sympathy for the revolutionaries, but is also being approached to become a police informer. When his friend Andrei dies due to poor safety conditions at the factory, and this is followed by the death of another worker, the workers insist on burying Andrei according to their own, workers' rite: the singing of the song that had been central to the traditions of the red funeral since the 1890s: 'You Fell as a Victim', a title that might also be translated as 'You Fell as a Sacrifice'.²⁸ The first verse of which went:

You fell as a victim in the fatal fight
Of unselfish love for the people [*narod*]
You gave up all that you could for them,
For their honour, their life and their freedom!

Through close-up, reaction shots, the key sequence shows Maxim's thought processes as he becomes a revolutionary during the course of this funeral: first watching, listening and then marching, singing, before leaping on to a lamppost to make a rallying speech and ultimately being arrested, the ultimate moment of graduation to the life of a professional revolutionary. Continuing the dead person's work through activism and resistance confers immortality, promising a triumph over death (Figure 11.1).

This attitude, the Bolshevik sense that death would be recuperated by ultimate victory, was both vindicated and challenged by the unprecedented violence of the Second World War and the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. The devastation unleashed by the Nazis upon the Soviet population threatened the physical existence not only of so many citizens, but also of the Soviet state itself and its ideological underpinning. Uniquely the Soviet Union was both occupied and had a functioning cinema industry: the resulting cinema was extraordinarily candid in its depiction of Nazi brutality against the Soviet civilian population, but represented those deaths through the established logic of sacrifice and redemption. The narrative of partisan resistance to Nazi occupation was an effective way of conveying conscious, meaningful sacrifice. One of the most famous partisan films told the story of Zoia Kosmodemianskaia, an 18-year-old Moscow schoolgirl



Figure 11.1 Leonid Trauberg and Grigorii Kozintsev, *The Youth of Maxim*, Lenfil'm 1934.

who was killed by the Germans after being captured on a mission behind enemy lines in November 1941. Following a number of newspaper treatments of her story, including the publication of captured German photographs of her hanging, and Soviet ones of her mutilated corpse,²⁹ Lev Arnshtam made a 1944 film account. The film begins with Zoia being tortured, being repeatedly asked who she is. Her answer, shown in a stylistically bold flashback, starts with newsreel footage of Lenin's funeral, which coincided with her birth. Zoia's willingness to fight and sacrifice herself for the Soviets must be understood, implies the film, through the prism of Lenin's funeral – his martyrdom inspires hers, and that of others (Figure 11.2).

Yet this narrative was challenged by the brutal realities of the war. It was simply not possible to assimilate all this death and suffering into the existing paradigm of the red funeral and of meaningful sacrificial death, because it was simply too hard to believe that so many people's deaths were a reasonable price to pay, part of a utopian logic, a vision of history as redemptive and progressive. Moreover, those killed, such as the Soviet Union's secularized ethnic Jews, over 1.5 million of whom were killed by the Germans in 1941–42 in the mass shootings of the first stage of what later became called the Holocaust, were not dying for their beliefs, but rather being murdered for their inherited cultural and ethnic identity.³⁰ The mass murder of Soviet Jews was thus particularly hard to assimilate to the Soviet



Figure 11.2 Lev Arnshtam, *Zoia*, Soiuzdetfil'm, 1944.

logic of the funeral and of meaningful martyrdom. This tension was addressed in some wartime films, none more centrally than in Mark Donskoi's 1945 film, *The Unvanquished* (*Nepokorennye*), released shortly after the end of the war. Its central scene depicts a traditional red funeral for a worker killed consciously defying the Germans, but it is interrupted as the mourners see a crowd of Jews being herded to their death. The main character, Ukrainian worker Taras, recognizes the family doctor Aron Davidovich Fishman, to whom he bows. The Jews are then taken to a ravine and massacred in a hail of German bullets.

What we see here is not martyrdom recuperated by the ultimate victory, but a tragic loss that cannot be assimilated into the established narrative. Here we are close to Freud's notion of trauma, in the sense of unassimilable, untellable, experience. It was this sense that the war meant enormous losses that could not easily be contained within the existing narrative of the red funeral, and of meaningful martyrdom, that caused it to be so difficult a theme in the late Stalin years, when very few war films were made. When, following Stalin's death, Soviet film made the war a central topic, these depictions treated the Jewish experience of it as marginal.

In generating historical analyses such as this account of the theme of death and martyrdom, it is important to place the events depicted in film alongside other sources, such as influential English-language histories of the Soviet Union. Cinema needs to be treated here with circumspection as probably the most influential source, but also probably the least reliable, and most likely to have been manipulated. This

kind of analysis requires little or even no command of the Russian language, and can even be conducted without trips to Russian archives. In this sense, it could even be suitable for an undergraduate research project. Nevertheless, the range of visual and written sources could be expanded markedly if untranslated Russian sources in all media are also considered, and if the researcher were to identify and draw on new findings from the Russian archives, be they film or paper, such as, in this case, the internal studio discussion of *The Unvanquished*.³¹ The following indicative analysis is intended to demonstrate the possibilities of such language-based analysis with slightly later material.

Wartime film

The picture of wartime Soviet film is one that gives itself less easily to the kind of analysis conducted above, in large part because, where there were controversial issues, the final film and published materials on it do not permit us to get a detailed picture of the areas of sensitivity, of the various discussions and options explored by the filmmakers prior to their final decisions.

The example of how civilian deaths during the Second World War were represented in the documentary films of Ukrainian director Dovzhenko illustrate the kinds of Russian and Ukrainian language materials available to researchers, and the kinds of insights they can generate into the tensions between the Soviet attitudes to Nazi atrocities, the Holocaust, Ukrainian nationalism and the personal vision of the filmmaker. Dovzhenko was a prominent filmmaker who had shot to international fame with his montage-style works *Arsenal* (1928), and *Earth* (*Zemlia*, 1930), and who became involved in the Soviet war effort, first as a journalist and writer at the front, and then as a co-director, with his wife Iuliia Solntseva, of a cycle of films about the Nazi occupation and Soviet liberation of Ukraine. This was (and indeed still is) a highly sensitive subject, since, while the Nazi occupation of Ukraine was brutal towards the whole population of that Soviet republic, Jews were targeted disproportionately and murdered for their ethnicity. The Ukrainian population were starved to death, violently repressed if they resisted Nazi rule, and used as slave labour. But Soviet rule in Ukraine had also been brutal, leading to mass starvation during the collectivization of agriculture (sometimes referred to as the Holodomor) and elements within the wide spectrum of Ukrainian nationalists saw the Nazis' expulsion of the Soviets as an opportunity to advance their own project of independence for a Ukrainian nation state through collaboration.³²

In this context, Dovzhenko began work in 1942 on a screenplay, *Ukraine in Flames* (*Ukraina v ogne*), and a documentary film about the liberation of Kharkov, which ultimately was released in October 1943 as *The Battle for Our Soviet Ukraine* (*Bitva za nashu sovetskuiu Ukrainu*). This film depicts not only the heroic victory of the wider Red Army, but emphasizes the Ukrainians involved in the battle, and, most importantly, emphasizes the victims of the Nazis as Ukrainian. This approach is a distinct one in that, while Soviet films' depictions of the violence the Nazis inflicted on the Soviet population were not unusual, they did not tend to focus on

a singular ethnicity, such as the Ukrainians. To make matters more complex, one of the key scenes in the film depicts Drobitskii iar, just outside Kharkov, where the Nazis killed thousands of civilians, but overwhelmingly these were Jews. The film says nothing of this.

What makes the case of Dovzhenko still more fascinating is the fact that, by the time of the war, he had more personal authority than most directors involved in wartime documentary cinema, and was thus able to make a film closer to an authorial vision than any other wartime Soviet filmmaker. Rather than simply compiling the footage they received, he and Solntseva gave specific instructions as to the kinds of images they required, so their film is in part an expression of their own vision of these historical events, their own artistic interpretation.

Both the extent of Dovzhenko's personal vision and the issues around the depiction of atrocities can only really emerge fully through an engagement with archival sources. Thus, while one can access the film in a subtitled version online, or in a dubbed version at London's National Film and Television Archive (part of the British Film Institute), and there is also an English translation of Dovzhenko's wartime diary, and a number of English-language books and articles about Dovzhenko, the context of the film's production can only really be grasped through use of Russian and Ukrainian published sources and the Russian and Ukrainian archives.

One attempt to do this can be found in my own 2012 book, *First Films of the Holocaust*, which makes use of a 2004 Ukrainian edition of Dovzhenko's diary that is fuller than the 1973 English translation, as well as Russian- and Ukrainian-language secondary sources, including memoirs and two collections of documents from a number of different archives, published by Valerii Fomin.³³ This draws on the studio archives of the Central Studio of Documentary Film at Russian State Archive for Literature and Art (RGALI). In those sources, we see the correspondence between Dovzhenko and Solntseva in Moscow, and the cameramen and bosses of film groups at the front, who were being instructed by the directors as to what to shoot. The archives also hold the Central House of Cinema collection, where we can read an internal studio discussion about the film. A recent publication by a team of French scholars³⁴ has expanded the source base, drawing on secret police informers' accounts of Dovzhenko's private conversations from the recently opened Ukrainian security police archives (GDA SBU), the Russian equivalents of which remain closed to researchers. These materials give a sense of Dovzhenko's ironic attitude towards the realities of Soviet life such as queuing and bureaucracy. They also make use of a fuller still more recent version of the wartime diary, which illustrates his antisemitic attitudes to his obstructive colleagues in the Soviet documentary studio, as he uses the word 'zhidok' with regard to a hypothetical typical adversary.³⁵ More insightful with regard specifically to the films, however, are the materials published from Dovzhenko's personal archive, also in RGALI. These show that Dovzhenko made the film while working as a member of the Soviet war crimes investigation committee (*Chrezvychainaia gosudarstvennaia komissiia po voostanovleniiu i rassledovaniuu zlodeianii nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov i ich soobshchnikov i prichinnogo imi ucherba grazhdanam, kolkhozam, obshchestvennym organizatsiiam, gosudarstvennym prepriatiiam i uchrezhdeniiam SSSR*),

and that he also had to fight hard to ensure that he was in control of the material, where he could ensure its frank depiction of Nazi atrocity and emphasis on the suffering of ethnic Ukrainians.³⁶

This same collection of documents enables a deeper understanding of the film that followed, and was eventually released as *Victory in Right-Bank Ukraine and the Expulsion of the German Invaders from the Boundaries of Soviet Ukrainian Lands* (*Pobeda na Pravoberezhnoi Ukraine i izgnanie Nemetskikh zakhvatchikov za predely Ukrainskikh Sovetskikh zemel'*, 1945). In particular they show how Solntseva and Dovzhenko intended a greater emphasis on Babii iar, the ravine near Kiev where the Nazis had murdered over 100,000 people, most of whom were Jewish. A letter on 9 February 1944 from Solntseva to the cameramen in Kiev shows that this was to be achieved through sound interviews with the Soviet POWs who had been forced to dig up and burn the corpses of those killed there, and with the US journalists who visited the site, who were to discuss the difficulty of getting anyone back in the US to publish or even believe these atrocity stories. The letter also calls for sound testimony of eyewitnesses to supplement the fairly inexpressive long shots of Babii iar. The final film included no sound interviews in this episode, even if some of the footage can be found in the documentary film archive, Russian State Archive of Film and Photo Documents (RGAKFD, Krasnogorsk), where outtakes and other unused materials, termed *kinoletiapis*, are preserved. The reasons why they were not included are unclear from the documentary evidence, but probably because it would have drawn undue attention to the tragic scene of suffering and loss, which would have contrasted with the Soviet media's stress in 1945 on victory and heroism far more. While Dovzhenko and Solntseva's plans for this film were not realized in their entirety, the film still displayed the poetic vision characteristic of Dovzhenko's work. As fellow director Esfir' Shub put it at a discussion of the film at the Central Studio of Documentary Film artistic council (a mechanism for internal feedback), the film demonstrated Dovzhenko's 'authorial style'.³⁷ While it would be going too far to claim that a diary-like subjectivity was expressed in either film, this was not formulaic propaganda, but something between an individual and collective vision, along the lines described by Hellbeck.

However, Dovzhenko's determination to express his own personal vision of the conflict as a Ukrainian was one that led to his screenplay for *Ukraine in Flames* being censored after Stalin criticized it for its nationalist tendencies. Dovzhenko's reactions to this are illuminated in a report by a certain Medvedev, head of the Ukrainian NKGB (as the NKVD was then named). Drawing on materials from five informers, the report details Dovzhenko's refutation of Stalin's critique of him, where he defends his depiction in *Ukraine in Flames* of Ukrainian nationalists as collaborating due to the brutal treatment they had received under collectivization, saying his conscience as an artist did not permit him to soften his criticisms.³⁸ The same report details his fears that Khrushchev, then head of the Communist Party of Ukraine and previously Dovzhenko's patron, is now leading a Russification of Ukraine, in which all that is Ukrainian will now be condemned as nationalist.

The use of Russian and Ukrainian archive materials, be they directly from the archives, or in published collections, thus add a richer sense of the interaction

between the filmmaker's intended plans and the obstacles to them, the tensions between the state's need for propaganda, and Dovzhenko's attempts to express his own vision of Ukraine's wartime fate. This was, as we can see from the final film, not one that corresponds to our contemporary Western understanding of the Nazi war of annihilation on the Eastern front in terms of the centrality of the Holocaust, the murder of the Jewish population, but it was nevertheless one that deviated from the dominant emphasis of Soviet wartime propaganda upon an undifferentiated Soviet victimhood, and on heroism and victory rather than loss and tragedy. This is in part a problem connected to the way that the Soviet film industry was based around the granting of a certain creative freedom to directors, as Belobudrovskaiia has argued, with the idea that the filmmakers needed this space in order to be able to reach out to and inspire the people to build socialism.³⁹ This meant that the Soviet film industry, despite the rhetoric, was never simply a propaganda machine nor a Hollywood-style factory, churning out predictable and standardized products according to the plan. This is an insight that can be much more substantially demonstrated by looking at a range of archival documents, especially those of the studios.

One of the aspects of Soviet cinema the above indicative analyses do not demonstrate particularly is the sense of cinema as a form of popular culture. In part this is because the dimension of cinema that I have chosen to focus on here is the didactic, explicitly political one, rather than that primarily of entertainment. While it is possible to trace the popular through listings, ticket sales, reviews and memoirs, some of the best materials are internal studies, generated by the industry, of audience behaviour and reactions. This is much easier to do with feature films and the most popular genres. This kind of audience behaviour study became very widespread with the advent of TV, which sought to be a mass medium that engaged the public in the post-Stalin era by reimagining the Soviet ideological project for the format of popular culture. As Christine Evans shows, Soviet Central TV made extensive use of letters and sociological surveys to gauge audience reactions.⁴⁰ They acted on the results, the records of which can be found in the Gostel'radio archive in the Russian State Archive (GARF), and expanded the television coverage of Victory Day following information that the new programmes introduced in the run-up and for 9 May 1965 were highly popular, especially one of the very first Soviet TV drama series *Drawing Fire on Ourselves* (*Výzyvaia ogon' na sebia*) in February 1965, and *A Minute's Silence*, shown on 9 May. The popularity of the latter ensured it became a yearly fixture of the Victory Day commemorations, and the TV drama series became a staple of Soviet media depictions of history to the final days of the Soviet state and beyond.⁴¹ Many of the programmes are now available to watch on YouTube and Yandex video, albeit without subtitles.

With the example of coverage of Victory Day, once again, use of unpublished archival documents enables a sense of the ways the use of moving images to legitimize the Soviet project entailed compromises with factors specific to the medium. Although there were always a number of factors, the compromise in the case of cinema was primarily with directorial talent, and in that of television the focus was on audience taste as well the need for a more direct, immediate style that at least appeared to be live.

After his rise to power in 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev began to enlist the sense of the liveness of Soviet television as an ally in his fight with party and government opponents. As well as permitting a relatively freer and more critical media environment, symbolized by the 1987 premiere of the current affairs programme *Vzgliad* (*Viewpoint*), in part this was also about Gorbachev exploiting the power of visual media, where his own youthful appearance and presence would potentially work in his favour against older opponents.⁴² However, the Soviet media system collapsed through the tensions inherent in the top-down control of an enormous weight of new information, and the need to appear spontaneous. Yet, while this collapse also entailed a crisis in domestic TV productions, with the 1990s seeing a preponderance of imported drama series, the coming to power of Vladimir Putin in the new millennium saw Russian TV return to many of the models of history drama series and documentaries that were elaborated by the Soviet media in the 1960s and 1970s.⁴³

The Soviet commitment to didactic and propagandist forms of culture meant that Soviet films, fiction and documentary constitute a unique and privileged historical source on the one hand for what they show, and for their attempts to convey a certain vision of history and culture on the other. With the help of a wider range of sources than the films alone, however, we can also get a greater sense of how what they show was the result of debate, deliberation and discussion, the interplay of a variety of factors; we can also see what they do not show, and what this tells us about those who made them, commissioned them and watched them. The vision of Soviet culture thus afforded is less one of a certain body of precious artefacts, a canon of artistic works that must be reckoned with, but rather a nexus in a web of meanings binding a society, embodying and bonding shared values. That society has since collapsed, even if its legacy endures in contemporary Russia and beyond. Analysing Soviet film as part of cultural history is a way of reconstructing the mental, emotional and conceptual world of that Soviet past that will not pass.

Notes

- 1 See David Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination and Terror under Stalin, 1927–1941* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 9; Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- 2 Joseph Stalin, 'Organizational Report of the Central Committee. 13th Party Congress, 24 May 1924', In *Works*, vol. 6 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953), p. 227. See also Joseph Stalin, 'Congratulations to Soviet Cinema on its Fifteenth Anniversary', 11 January 1935, In Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (eds.), *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896–1939* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 348.
- 3 The term 'victory cult' is from Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1994).
- 4 Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (London: Reaktion, 2007), p. 10.
- 5 Marc Ferro, *Cinéma et histoire*, new revised ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1993, 1977), translated into English as Marc Ferro, *Cinema and History*, trans. Naomi Greene (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1988).
- 6 Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980).

- 7 Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 47–61.
- 8 Astrid Erll, 'Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction', in Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning and in collaboration with Sara B. Young (eds.), *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies* (Berlin and New York, NY: De Gruyter, 2010), pp. 1–15; Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD, and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).
- 9 Denise J. Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses: Popular Cinema and Soviet Society in the 1920s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 35–8.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- 11 Inaugurating a 'new understanding of cinema' the film was transformative not just in Europe, where it stunned German and then other audiences, but even in the US, where Chaplin described it as 'the best film of all time'. Bulgakova, *Sergei Eisenstein: A Biography*, trans. Anne Dwyer (Berlin and San Francisco, CA: Potemkin Press, 2001), pp. 65–6; Richard Taylor, *The Battleship Potemkin* (London and New York, NY: I. B. Tauris, 2000), pp. 65–127. Also see Jeremy Hicks, 'Lost in Translation? Did Sound Stop Soviet Films Finding Foreign Audiences?', in Stephen Hutchings (ed.), *Screening Intercultural Dialogue: Russia and its Other(s) on Film* (London: Routledge-Curzon, 2008), pp. 113–29.
- 12 Anna Lawton, *The Red Screen: Politics, Society, Art in Soviet Cinema* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 1992), p. 3.
- 13 John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*, 5th ed. (Harlow: Pearson, 2010), p. 247.
- 14 John Caughie, 'Introduction', in John Caughie (ed.), *Theories of Authorship* (London: Routledge, 1981), pp. 9–16.
- 15 Anna Krylova, 'The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies', *Kritika*, 1 (2000), pp. 119–46. See the indicatively titled Herbert Marshall, *Masters of the Soviet Cinema: Crippled Creative Biographies* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983).
- 16 Peter Burke, *What Is Cultural History?* 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), pp. 27–9.
- 17 Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 3rd ed. (Indiana, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000).
- 18 Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).
- 19 Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 4.
- 20 Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. by Peter Putnam, with an introduction by Joseph R. Strayer (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1954), p. 61.
- 21 Catherine Merridale, *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Twentieth Century Russia* (New York, NY: Viking, 2001), p. 84.
- 22 Yuri Tsivian (ed.), *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*, trans. by Julian Graffy (Pordenone: Giornate del cinema muto, 2004), p. 406.
- 23 Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 141–2.
- 24 Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 142.
- 25 Tsivian (ed.), *Lines of Resistance*, p. 144.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 134; Dziga Vertov, *Iz Naslediia. Stat'i i vystupleniia*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Eisenstein Centre, 2008), p. 115.
- 28 At meetings called to mark Lenin's death, it was one of two songs that were almost invariably sung, along with *The Internationale*, anthem of the Communist movement, then 'national' anthem of the USSR until 1943.

- 29 There were 20 different publications on Zoia up to 1945 mostly as small pocket-sized brochures. See Rosalinde Sartorti, 'On the Making of Heroes, Heroines, and Saints', in Richard Stites (ed.), *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 176–93 (p. 184).
- 30 Yitzhak Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2009).
- 31 See Jeremy Hicks, *First Films of the Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and the Genocide of the Jews, 1938–1946* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), pp. 134–56.
- 32 Karel Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).
- 33 Valerii Fomin (ed.), *Kino na voine: dokumenty i svidetel'stva* (Moscow: Materik, 2005); Valerii Fomin (ed.), *Tsena kadra. Kazhdyi vtoroi—ranen, kazhdyi chetvertyi ubit. Sovetskaia frontovaia kinokhronika 1941–1945 gg. Dokumenty i svidetel'stva* (Moscow: Kanon, 2010).
- 34 Vanessa Voisin, Valérie Pozner and Irina Cherneva (eds.), *Perezhit' voinu. Kinoindustriia v SSSR, 1939–1949 gody* (Moscow: Politicheskaiia entsiklopediia, 2018).
- 35 Aleksandr Dovzhenko, *Dnevnikovye zapisi, 1939–1956* (Khar'kov: Foloi, 2013); Voisin, Pozner and Cherneva (eds.), *Perezhit' voinu*, p. 442.
- 36 Voisin, Pozner and Cherneva (eds.), *Perezhit' voinu*, p. 452.
- 37 Ibid., p. 488.
- 38 Ibid., p. 480.
- 39 Maria Belodubrovskaiia, *Not According to Plan: Filmmaking under Stalin* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2017).
- 40 Christine E. Evans, *Between Truth and Time: A History of Soviet Central Television* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 16.
- 41 Jeremy Hicks, *The Victory Banner: Film, Ritual and Repetition in Russia's Memory of World War Two* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020).
- 42 Joseph Gibbs, *Gorbachev's Glasnost. The Soviet Media in the First Phase of Perestroika* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), p. 16; Ellen Mickiewicz, *Changing Channels: Television and the Struggle for Power in Russia* (New York, NY, and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 69.
- 43 Birgit Beumers, 'The Serialization of Culture, or the Culture of Serialization,' in Birgit Beumers, Stephen Hutchings and Natalia Rulyova (eds.), *The Post-Soviet Russian Media: Conflicting Signals* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), pp. 159–77.

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