

An Archive for the Millions:
Belye Stolby and the Role of Film Preservation Under Stalin

by
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I. Introduction

“Furthermore, asking to speak off the record, Demian said that his library was his enemy. He had been told this, but he hadn't understood it. He declared he was going to burn his library.”

- NKVD report to Joseph Stalin, Nov. 1936, “On the responses of writers and arts workers to the removal of Demian Bedny's 'The Bogatyrs' from the repertoire”¹

On October 28, 2014, the entire staff of the Moscow Cinema Museum, a decades-old institution dedicated to the exhibition of international cinema and the collection of Russian film paraphernalia, collectively resigned their posts. In an open letter to the Russian Minister of Culture, Vladimir Medinsky, the staff cited as their primary complaint the arbitrary and authoritative leadership of Larisa Solonitsyna, who was appointed by Medinsky as the museum's director only a few months previous. According to the letter, Solonitsyna, a former editor-in-chief of a state-run newspaper with no prior experience in museum management (or, for that matter, cinema), had already dismissed multiple members of the museum's staff, providing no reason for the decisions.² The standoff only ended two weeks later, when Naum Kleiman, the museum's director from its inception in 1992 until his forced dismissal by Medinsky, convinced the staff to return to work, declaring that their duty to the museum's mission was greater than a political dispute:

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Katerina Clark and E.A. Dobrenko, eds. *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents, 1917-1953* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 253.

² Nadia Beard, author and translator, “Entire Staff of Moscow’s Museum of Cinema Resigns in Protest Against New Director,” *The Calvert Journal*, Oct. 28, 2014, <http://calvertjournal.com/news/show/3288/entire-staff-of-moscow-museum-of-cinema-resigns-in-protest-new-director>.

[...] neither orders of the authorities nor judgments of unauthorized persons made them decide to remain at the museum under the supervision of a director whom they still do not trust. As uniquely qualified curators and archivists of Russia's film culture, they believe that the best way to save the museum is to remain at their posts. The risk that incompetent replacements could pose to traditions and collections that have been carefully developed over the past 25 years is simply too high under current circumstances.³

Two months after this incident, the Ministry of Culture quietly passed stringent new requirements for issuing exhibition licenses to individual films. Building on a law from July of 2014, which banned the use of profanity in any film played in Russian theaters, the Ministry introduced even broader ideological requirements, denying the public exhibition of movies, Russian or foreign, that “threaten the national unity of our country or denigrate its culture”⁴ (details on who might enforce this new requirement, and based on what criteria, have not been forthcoming). And almost simultaneously with this announcement, *The Moscow Times* reported that Gosfilmofond, the largest Russian state film archive, had backed out of an agreement with British director Peter Greenaway to support Greenaway's film *The Eisenstein Handshakes*, over a dispute with the film's screenplay and its depiction of the legendary Soviet director's alleged homosexuality (Russia criminalized “homosexual propaganda” in 2013).⁵

In the past year it has thus become brutally obvious that in Russia, political control and ideological influence of the cultural sphere did not end with the Cold War. The legacy of decades of authoritarian rule under the Soviet Union is re-asserting itself in discomfortingly familiar fashion. International tension threatens to once again isolate Russia – its people, its culture

³ E-mail from Naum Kleiman, “Open Letter to the Worldwide Supporters of the Cinema Museum,” Nov. 12, 2014.

⁴ Vladimir Kozlov, “Russia to Ban Films That 'Threaten National Unity' or 'Denigrate Its Culture',” *The Hollywood Reporter*, Jan. 16, 2015, www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/russia-ban-films-threaten-unity-764333?

⁵ “Russia's Film Foundation Doesn't Want Greenaway to Show Eisenstein Was Gay in Biopic,” *The Moscow Times*, Jan. 5, 2015, www.themoscowtimes.com/article.php?id=514047.

caught under a ruling administration with – it can hardly be denied – a casual disregard for human rights and freedom of expression.

At the same time, the post-Cold War years of globalization have brought on an unprecedented opportunity for international cultural exchange. In the archival world, the ability for institutions in the West and post-Soviet republics alike to directly compare collections, or make their holdings available digitally to foreign researchers, has strengthened a global community of academics, preservationists, amateurs and others working in tandem to protect and explore our collective cultural record. Not long ago, the idea that the Library of Congress could receive digital copies of 10 American silent feature films, presumed lost for decades, as a gift from Gosfilmofond,⁶ would've been both politically and practically unthinkable. Encouragingly, such exchanges may only be the tip of the iceberg: preliminary investigation has suggested that there may be as many as 200 further American features that exist only in Gosfilmofond's vaults.⁷ With luck, further cooperation will continue to enable discovery and access of rich material on both sides.

But cooperation without mutual understanding is an arduous task; and the recent political strife between the United States and Russia has only emphasized the rift in comprehension and compassion too often present between these two societies. If moving image archivists are to continue their productive relations, it might be worthwhile to consider the roots of the precarious tradition on which Russian archives rest – to examine a set of economic, social and political circumstances vastly different than those that guided any Western institution, but which

⁶ “Russia Presents Library of Congress With Digital Copies of Lost U.S. Silent Films,” Library of Congress news release, Oct. 21, 2010, <http://www.loc.gov/today/pr/2010/10-239.html>.

⁷ David Pierce, *The Survival of American Silent Feature Films: 1912-1929* (Washington, D.C.: Council on Library and Information Resources and The Library of Congress, 2013), 53.

nonetheless resulted in the mutually shared task of film preservation.

In *Keepers of the Frame*, her seminal history on the foundation and operation of the major international film archives, Penelope Houston writes of the Reichsfilmarchiv in Berlin, the Museum of Modern Art Film Library in New York, the National Film Library in London and the Cinémathèque Française in Paris – the “Big Four” founders of FIAF, the International Federation of Film Archives:

None of them had anything specifically to do with the task of preserving silent cinema. They took their character from national attitudes to cinema, methods of fundings, views about public service; even more, they reflected the tastes and passions and working methods of the people who created them.⁸

Gosfilmofond was not one of Big Four, though it was conceived in the same historical moment as these contemporaries. Houston's words could easily be extended to the Soviets, although in a nation ensnared by Stalinism, the notion of the “people who created” the archive becomes murky. The Cinémathèque Française had Henri Langlois and Georges Franju; MOMA, Iris Barry and John Abbott; the BFI, Ernest Lindgren. If there were individuals such as those in Moscow in 1935, people whose concern for the future of the medium spurred them to preserve its past, their names, like so many others in that time and place, have been, for the most part, swallowed by the larger forces at work. The Reichsfilmarchiv bore a closer resemblance: a massive, state-run enterprise collectively taken by a regime in thrall to an authoritarian personality. Like Stalin's Russia, Nazi Germany understood the potential of film – narrative, documentary, archival – for political manipulation, and was unafraid to use it. But we do not have a Reichsfilmarchiv to consider today – its contents were gutted during the war and siphoned, among other places, into

⁸ Penelope Houston, *Keepers of the Frame: The Film Archives* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 18.

the vaults of Gosfilmofond. Hitler's film archive is long gone; Stalin's still stands.

What character, then, was given the chance to survive in Belye Stolby? As Houston suggests, we can seek to answer that question by looking at the attitude of the Soviet Union in the 1930s toward cinema, in the source of the archive's financial and political support, and in the services Gosfilmofond was intended to serve the Soviet state. While the major archives in the West varied in their priorities and points of emphasis, they all, in their inception, circled around similar roles and conceptions of archival film: as object of study, as exhibition, as shared experience, as art. They were also, generally, formed in societies (Britain, France, the U.S.) with substantial political histories of democracy. From these ideas in turn were conceived principles to guide what an archive, particularly a public institution, should offer: open access, cultural collaboration, informed management and organization. Such was not necessarily the case in the Soviet Union. When the Soviet state moved towards institutional preservation of feature films in 1935, it did so in a society with a constantly shifting and totalitarian relationship toward its culture, its place on the international stage, and its own history. Bound by censorship and uncertainty, citizens and officials alike did what they were told, not what they understood. Paradox abounded: Demian Bedny may have burned his library, but there would be a record of his having done so, neatly filed away in the archive of the secret police. In such an environment, the notion of film as archival object could take on a radically idiosyncratic meaning.

This is not intended to be a complete history of film preservation at Gosfilmofond or in the Soviet Union at large. As with any of the other major archives of its age, there have been great changes in management and operations at the archive in the decades since its foundation, appropriate considering the tumultuous shifts in the society that surrounds it. But, as we often

return to Langlois, Barry and Lindgren to consider how moving image archivists in the West got where we are, so we must return to Stalin to see where Russia is now. Examining the historical roots of Russian film preservation in the unique political-cultural circumstances of the Soviet Union in the 1930s may help to illuminate points of fundamental collision – or correspondence – with the West; and if nothing else, broaden the discussion of the social factors that help shape archival operations.

II. A Damp Cellar on Sergeivsky Street

“Some precious footage had been sold abroad, without any master copies or negatives having been kept at home – too little raw film in those years to think of such niceties, or of the future.”

- Esfir Shub⁹

As in the West, the process that led to recognition of film as a medium worthy of preservation was a gradual one. Films were produced, exhibited and discarded for decades in Russia before any kind of concerted effort to collect and conserve emerged, with the 1920s standing as a particularly dire and destructive period as neglected pre-revolutionary and early Soviet material rotted away in forgotten corners of dingy buildings. This crisis will sound familiar to anyone with a passing knowledge of the history of film preservation – the core issue of physical and intellectual neglect facing the Soviet Union's film heritage was not much different than the parallel circumstances in France, Britain, the U.S. and elsewhere. However, Soviet nationalization of the film industry in 1918 introduced an element of cryptic bureaucracy and systematic disinterest in pre-revolutionary material that further complicated the acquisition and management of film collections. Between the communist revolution of 1917 and the Central Committee's State Film Fond directive of 1935, Soviet film collections existed in a fluctuating and uncertain state, often tied to the needs and whims of production.

Prior to the Revolution of 1917, Russia had a thriving production base: in 1915, there were roughly 22 notable production companies, mostly based in the cultural centers of Moscow and Leningrad (known in imperial times as St. Petersburg, or, briefly, thanks to anti-German sentiment during World War I, Petrograd), cranking out features and shorts at a rapidly increasing pace. Though they had neither the expansive budgets nor the widespread international reach of their counterparts in

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America and Germany, these companies had released more than 2000 feature films by 1917, ranking them among the world's leaders in total production.¹⁰ The revolution, however, was a massive disruption to the industry, interrupting not only the day-to-day function of the studios - most of those men who had not already been drafted during World War I were certainly swept up into either the “Red” Bolshevik or “White” anti-Bolshevik armies in the ensuing civil war – but the very methodology behind production.¹¹ No longer driven, ideologically, by capitalist concerns of bottom-line profits, the nationalized industry was theoretically to be used for the education of the masses, and was placed under the control of Anatoly Lunacharsky, the first head of Narkompros, the People's Commissariat for Education. The idea was put forward in 1918 for a national deposit system for censorship purposes, with all production companies required to submit two copies of each film they produced to Narkompros for approval by Lunacharsky before exhibition.¹² However, the political chaos following the revolution can not be understated: battling insurrection in Ukraine and Central Asia and struggling to rebuild the entire national economy from the ground up, the Communist Party's Central Committee had little time or money to spend on re-establishing film studios, much less a censorship infrastructure. For several years Lunacharsky's efforts to mold a state-run production, distribution and exhibition system remained almost entirely symbolic,¹³ along with any effort toward a systematic collection of film materials.

As production struggled to stay solvent in the late 1910s and early 1920s, stashes of pre-revolutionary material were likewise hit hard by the uncertain and dangerous state of the nation. While in Western countries, private collectors, critics and admirers of cinema like Henri Langlois and Iris Barry proved essential to preserving otherwise forgotten prints, many of their counterparts in Russia

¹⁰ Vladimir Malyshev, *Gosfil'mofond: zemlianichnaia poliana* (Moscow: Pashkov Dom, 2005), 33-34.

¹¹ Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society, 1917-1953* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 37.

¹² Malyshev, *Gosfil'mofond*, 37.

¹³ Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society*, 40.

fled the country in 1917 or soon after, reasonably anxious that, as prominent businessmen and intellectuals, they would become targets of the Bolsheviks' anti-bourgeois policies. Numerous individuals either took their collections with them abroad, or destroyed them entirely. Compounding that, the literally explosive circumstances of revolution and war were not an ideal situation for those collections that remained: producer A.L. Savva, who estimated that he had collected 75% of all pre-revolutionary Russian feature films, watched every single print go up in flames in a fire at his former factory in 1919. In 1924, two other major fires occurred at the sites of the former Sevzapkino and Biofilm studios, a further devastating loss of increasingly rare material.¹⁴

As political stability gradually increased (by 1922 only small pockets of White Army resistance to the Bolsheviks remained, and the outlying Central Asian and Eastern European republics had been consolidated under Soviet power), Soviet film production correspondingly rose, with rebuilding the industry becoming not only an economic but an ideological priority. Recognizing the power of the medium for propaganda and persuasion, cinema became a focal point for the government's initiatives in both art and education; Lenin himself, in conversation with Lunacharsky directed the Education Commissar to “develop production on a broader basis and, in particular [...] promote among the masses in the cities and, to an even greater extent, in the countryside.”¹⁵ With domestic production more or less halted for half a decade, however, the Bolsheviks lacked thematically-approved material to replace the Western imports that still dominated Soviet theaters.¹⁶ When the two major state studios, Mosfilm and Lenfilm, were re-organized in 1923 under the umbrella government regulatory agency Goskino, the primary task given to them was the creation of newsreels and documentaries, seen as the fastest and most informative vehicles for ideological indoctrination. Again, Lenin himself neatly

¹⁴ Malyshev, *Gosfil'mofond*, 34.

¹⁵ Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, eds. *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents, 1896-1939* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 57.

¹⁶ Taylor and Christie, *The Film Factory*, 30.

summarized the Soviet Union's increasing political oversight of cinema in casual remarks to Lunacharsky: “If you have a good newsreel, serious and educational pictures, then it doesn't matter if, to attract the public, you have some kind of useless picture of the more or less casual type. Of course censorship is necessary in any case. Counterrevolutionary and immoral films should have no place.”¹⁷

Though they might have taken issue with Lenin's tolerant attitude toward “useless” pictures, many of the prominent Soviet avant-garde filmmakers of the time shared an interest in the newsreel and what Dziga Vertov referred to as “non-played” film – a documentary style combining actuality footage and often extreme editing techniques, as best exemplified by Esfir Shub's *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927) or Vertov's *A Sixth Part of the World* (1926). In a proposal put forward in *Pravda* in 1926, Vertov advocated for the construction of a more streamlined production facility in Moscow that would encourage his vision for Soviet cinema, dominated by the further development of non-played films. Interestingly, Vertov's article raised the issue, at least tangentially, of the use and storage of archival film materials:

The newsreel archives, the production of scientific films, of Soviet film newsreels, of *Cine-Pravda*, animation workshops, the production of the great 'Cine-Eye' films, the re-editing and correction of foreign educational films and, lastly, the production of such actor less hits as *A Sixth Part of the World* – all this must be concentrated in one place and not (as at present) split between each department, between each of the Goskino and Sovkino buildings scattered about Moscow.

Every non-played film in one place with a film laboratory. With an archive of non-played films.

However, Vertov's proposal is more concerned with the consolidation and increased efficiency of production than with any discussion of the actual content to be placed in this “newsreel archive.” It is clear his primary concern was with the availability of historical and stock footage for the creation of new films, rather than the safety of the archived material.¹⁸

This cavalier and utilitarian attitude toward film collection was reflective of the prevailing

¹⁷ Taylor and Christie, *The Film Factory*, 57.

¹⁸ Taylor and Christie, *The Film Factory*, 150-151.

Leftist thinking that dominated the Bolshevik-patronized cultural regime of the early and mid-1920s. So-called Futurists, such as writers Vladimir Mayakovsky and Velimir Khlebnikov and artist Kazimir Malevich, were not simply neglectful or disinterested in pre-revolutionary art and history, they were militantly aggressive towards it. Mayakovsky's close friend Vladimir Kirillov was particularly virulent, urging the people of the Soviet Union to “burn Raphael, destroy museums, trample on flowery art.”¹⁹ Futurism, as its name implies, embraced the revolution as an eternal, progressive struggle that continued into the future, constantly rejecting the past as past – and irrelevant. Paired with this movement were the emerging notions of Constructivism, espoused in the film world in the influential journal *LEF* by avant-garde filmmakers like Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein, which advocated for art supporting revolutionary ideals of building a utopian, efficient society from the ground up. Under these principles, the relics of pre-revolution cinema had little use beyond those samples that could be plundered as fuel for ideological outrage.

The experience of Esfir Shub in compiling *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* speaks much to the physical dangers posed to Soviet film collections by this belligerent neglect of the 1920s. Her idea behind the film was to construct a Bolshevik narrative of the last days of Imperial Russia and the 1917 Revolution by compiling newsreel and documentary footage from the time. However, her search was complicated by the lack of institutional collections: “[...] not in film-libraries or archives, for there were no such things then. In the damp cellars of Goskino, in “Kino Moskva,” in the Museum of the Revolution lay boxes of negatives and random prints, and no one knew how they had got there.”²⁰ Wherever Shub looked, there was bureaucratic confusion and horrific storage: in Leningrad, Shub found,

All the valuable negatives and positives of war-time and pre-revolutionary materials were kept in a damp cellar on Sergeivsky Street. The cans were coated with rust. In many places the

¹⁹ Taylor and Christie, *The Film Factory*, 9.

²⁰ Jay Leyda, *Voices of Film Experience: 1894 to the Present* (NY: Macmillan, 1977), 430.

dampness had caused the emulsion to come away from the celluloid base. Many shots that appeared on the lists had disappeared altogether.²¹

The problem, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, was not limited to footage from imperial times. Even films from the most iconic and revered moments in early Soviet history had been discarded: “Not one metre of negative or positive on the February Revolution had been preserved, and I was even shown a document that declared that no film of that event could be found in Leningrad.”²² In the economic straits of the early 1920s, the studios had sold much footage abroad to foreign news agencies, with no copy kept in Russia. And while Shub herself was very studious about making copies and never employing original negatives or prints for her compilation films, most Soviet newsreel makers were not so scrupulous, editing old pre-revolutionary film straight into contemporary newsreels with no documentation to indicate where the footage had ended up. In fact, the same fate later befell Shub's films; plundered for their historical footage, there are no complete negatives of any of her first three features, including *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*. Shub's personal filmmaking troubles may explain her differing take from Vertov regarding a documentary film archive. While Vertov's strictly utilitarian focus saw storage of archival material on-site at the studios as a boon, Shub better understood the advantages for more careful, and physically isolated organization of archival materials: “Among other lessons to be learned from this loss is the necessity for separating documentary archives from documentary film producing studios.”²³

Shub's complications in the cellars of Goskino may have sparked the Soviet state's first shift in attitude toward collecting and conserving film. Several years previous, the Central Committee had established the State Archival Fond of the Russian Federation (GAF) to preserve government records

²¹ Leyda, *Films Beget Films*, 24.

²² Leyda, *Films Beget Films*, 24.

²³ Leyda, *Films Beget Films*, 28.

of what they called “historical-revolutionary” significance;²⁴ in 1926, the Central Committee explicitly extended the same treatment to film materials, establishing the Central Archive of Film and Photo Documents (TsGAKFD).²⁵ The initial collection was created by consolidating scattered negatives that had been acquired in the preceding years by various institutions, including footage of Tsar Nicholas II and his family from the remnants of the Tsar's personal archive and educational films from several schools and museums controlled by Narkompros. GARF's purpose of gathering “historical-revolutionary material” carried over to TsGAKFD, in this case with the Central Committee explicitly defining the term to include photo and film negatives “depicting current events of the lives of contemporary political figures, with a sense of the people's struggle for power, revolutionary life, and Soviet construction in all its forms.” Leaving little to interpretation, the Committee provided a lengthy list of specific events that fit this definition, such as armed strikes and demonstrations, the confiscation of Church valuables, military maneuvers and parades, elections, rallies, the Party Congress, and the decomposition of the Imperial Army and Navy.²⁶

This early feint towards institutional collection was still utterly non-comprehensive – TsGAKFD's directive made no mention of feature films, and a deposit agreement hashed out with Goskino considered only newly produced newsreels to be considered worthy of submission to the “historical-revolutionary” collection.²⁷ Furthermore, in the years following its creation, TsGAKFD received capricious support from the Soviet state, which remained primarily concerned with boosting production and exhibition capabilities. The Central Committee's 1928 Five-Year Plan for cinema made no financial accommodations for preservation efforts at TsGAKFD or elsewhere, but it did provide the funds for the Soviet Union to triple its total number of theaters (to 30,000) and outfit essentially all of

²⁴ Gregory Freeze and S.V. Mironenko, ed. *State Archives of the Russian Federation: A Research Guide*. Vol. 1 (Moscow: Blagovest, 1994), II.

²⁵ V.N. Batalin. *Istoriia rossiiskogo gosudarstvennogo arkhiva kinofotodokumentov: 1926-1966* (St. Petersburg, Russia: Liki Rossii, 2011), 12.

²⁶ Malyshev, *Gosfil'mofond*, 39-40, 42.

²⁷ Malyshev, *Gosfil'mofond*, 40.

them with sound-capable projectors within a decade. Once again the concerns of production proved another blow to the Soviet Union's silent film heritage: with audiences increasingly clamoring for sound features, the studios left their silent negatives and prints to languish haphazardly in warehouses and basements.²⁸

Outside of the disorderly and generally arbitrary storage of film materials at the studios and TsGAKFD, the only other collecting effort of note before Belye Stolby took place in an academic system starved for classroom resources. At the State Institute of Cinema, GIK (renamed VGIK in 1934), in Moscow, two professors frustrated by their limited ability to actually demonstrate key cinematic principles for their students began to gather a large collection of prints for educational purposes.²⁹ Though, unlike many of their colleagues at GIK (including directors and cinematographers like Mikhail Romm, Eduard Tisse, and Eisenstein himself), Sergei Komarov and G. Boltyansky were not acclaimed filmmakers in their own right, they proved resourceful with limited influence - they convinced studios to part ways with prints that had become too damaged for general circulation; they approached exhibitors to purchase their most low-quality, worn-out film copies; and they tracked down some of the few extant private collections left in the country, including a major pre-revolutionary producer's stash of several hundred negatives that had been sitting in a Ukrainian monastery since the producer fled the country in 1917. By 1934, Komarov and Boltyansky had reputedly collected over 500 complete features and shorts, and several thousand more incomplete reels. Their acquisition was robust and fervent enough to draw international attention: Henri Langlois loudly declared in the press (likely hoping to embarrass the French government, who were dragging their feet on his own efforts to create a national film depository) that the Soviet Union had created the world's first cinematheque.³⁰

Langlois' claim was generous – by 1934 the screening facility at VGIK could barely store

²⁸ Taylor and Christie, *The Film Factory*, 191; Malyshev, *Gosfil'mofond*, 50.

²⁹ M.P. Vlasov, *K istorii VGIKa: Chast' 1 (1919-1934)* (Moscow: VGIK, 2000), 17.

³⁰ Malyshev, *Gosfil'mofond*, 50-54.

Komarov and Boltyansky's collection, much less allow for further acquisition, and was completely lacking in preservation or restoration capabilities. But in the spring of 1934, the Council of People's Commissars (referred to alternately as SNK or Sovnarkom, technically the highest government body of the Soviet Union but often a mouthpiece for the Central Committee's wishes) issued a broad decree advocating for “greater organization and economizing of film production, with the creation of an expert-level research center and cinema museum.” The statement was a sudden signal of refocused priorities that might actually make room for collection and preservation, and indeed the following year, the Central Committee backed Sovnarkom's declaration with the State Film Fond directive and its order to GUKF (the regulatory agency that had at this point replaced Goskino) to build an archive for feature film negatives. An impressive 143 million-ruble budget was to be allocated to the new facility, with an additional \$170,000 in off-the books foreign currency earmarked for the purchase of archival equipment from the West.³¹

Even still, the State Film Fond would exist mostly in the abstract for some time as the head of GUKF, Boris Shumyatsky, and his successors overcame the practical considerations of a national depository. The Central Committee directive initially guaranteed space in the new archive only for films of “special historical value” - a phrase that harkened back to the establishment of TsGAKFD, but without the precise acquisition policy that had accompanied that institution's foundation. Individual studios were still expected to build their own storage facilities to house the majority of the negatives they produced, while state censors determined which individual films would be deemed worthy of the nebulous “special historical value.”³²

Less theoretical concerns also slowed the physical stabilization of the Fond. Stalin and Shumyatsky's first choice for the archive's location was within the Moscow city limits, but city

³¹ Malyshev, *Gosfil'mofond*, 54, 57, 60, 65.

³² Malyshev, *Gosfil'mofond*, 62.

authorities objected to a massive amount of nitrate consolidated within their jurisdiction. Belye Stolby, approximately 50 kilometers outside of the city, was considered a fair compromise and construction would begin in early 1936, but the lack of existing infrastructure in the outlying suburb and difficulty in prying the promised finances out of the Soviet bureaucracy made for slow going.³³ Leadership was inconsistent: the position of director of the archive was a revolving door, with three men serving the post between 1936 and 1941,³⁴ and in 1938 Shumyatsky was replaced as the head of the new Committee on Cinema Affairs by Semyon Dukelsky, an appointee from the Ministry of Internal Affairs with no interest in the Belye Stolby project.³⁵ All told, it was not until 1941, five years after breaking ground, that construction of the Belye Stolby archive was declared “complete.” Even still, only one out of the facility's three storage buildings was outfitted to long-term archival specifications, with proper shelving and a semblance of temperature control, and the sudden invasion of the Soviet Union by Germany in August of 1941 would necessitate the evacuation of the entire archive to Central Asia.³⁶

However, for the late 1930s, while Belye Stolby's storage facilities were obviously not yet ideal, they were considerably ahead of any alternative: the campus had its own electric power station for self-sufficient energy, an administrative building with restoration equipment and a film lab, and a dormitory with the capability of housing several hundred workers. Compare this to TsGAKFD, where newsreel negatives were still being thrown into warehouses with up to 100% humidity by a minimal staff with no ability for film-to-film preservation. Meanwhile, though the 1935 Central Committee directive had ordered the film studios to build their own on-site archival storage facilities, that aspect of the plan was never followed; thus the vast majority of production materials remained in disorganized and careless conditions. As soon as the ongoing construction allowed at least temporary storage, Belye Stolby began

³³ Malyshev, *Gosfil'mofond*, 64.

³⁴ Malyshev, *Gosfil'mofond*, 68.

³⁵ Jamie Miller, *Soviet Cinema: Politics and Persuasion Under Stalin* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 44.

³⁶ Malyshev, *Gosfil'mofond*, 68.

to accept not only negatives of “special historical value,” but any and all prints and elements that the studios chose to send them. The central archiving system at this time also had to handle a considerable influx of material in 1939-1940, when Moldova, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were annexed into the Soviet Union in the wake of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Archival records seized from these formerly independent republics included a substantial amount of film material, and a special committee formed in Moscow to handle these collections (mostly made up of exhibition prints of American and Western European films) determined that Belye Stolby was a more suitable home than TsGAKFD.³⁷

This gradual and stuttering process of accumulation and consolidation that led to Belye Stolby as the primary hub for the Soviet Union's film holdings reveals both the unique advantages and disadvantages played by the government's all-encompassing control over the cultural sphere when it came to film collection. On the one hand, a recently-nationalized film industry that was constantly scrabbling just to create new product was scarce inclined, or equipped, to dedicate any effort toward protecting its own history. Conversely, once preservation and storage of the USSR's cinematic works became a priority, the centralized regulatory power of the cinema system put it in a powerful position to pull together the nation's disparate, neglected collections before they were lost. While the physical identification of materials and stabilization of operations at the Belye Stolby facility took time, the 1935 State Film Fond directive marked the philosophical and ideological turning point of the Soviet state towards its film collections: rather than being left to rot in damp cellars, film as a medium had been invited into an archival system that was quickly solidifying in theory and practice.

³⁷ Malyshev, *Gosfil'mofond*, 68-70.

III. The Negative Vanishes

“Inquiries were met, after hours of waiting, with deflected answers, a shrug of the shoulders, or a harsh
'not possible!'”

- David King, *The Commissar Vanishes*³⁸

Like the film industry and so many other institutions, the Soviet archival system was nationalized shortly after the revolution. The application of state control over archival materials in the Union posed a number of issues, both practical and theoretical: who would monitor operations, what records were to be kept, how they would be arranged, who could access them. The Bolsheviks were remarkably quick and prescient to address many of these concerns: indeed, the first Central Committee decree regarding archival affairs in the Soviet Union came sixteen years ahead of the National Archives Act in the U.S. Partly they were pressed by the sheer mass of material that could be considered government property in a socialist state; but there were also larger aspects of political theory that drove Soviet interest in the archive. Even as the state transitioned into the harshest days of Stalinism in the mid-1930s, there was a certain continuity in the strict control of the Union's documentary and cultural heritage. When the State Film Fond was explicitly entered into the central archive system in 1935, its workers joined a tradition of archivists-as-gatekeepers that grew more and more stringent as Stalin's Terror increased.

There was no guarantee in 1917 that the Bolsheviks would've been interested in a centralized archival system at all. Mikhail Bakunin, the prominent 19th century social anarchist and a philosophical influence on many Russian communists, had suggested that it was the duty of revolutionaries to destroy

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all historical records of an overthrown regime – to annihilate the past in the name of a socialist future. In the early days of the Soviet Union, there were evidently many who shared that belief: shortly after the February Revolution, there were several incidents of attacks on old imperial archives, including the destruction of the Petrograd Police Department and Circuit Court records. The anti-history rhetoric of Mayakovsky, Kirillov and the other Futurists indicated a similar attitude present in creative and intellectual circles. Even higher-level Party authorities were no exception: during a paper shortage in the civil war, officials ordered many pre-revolutionary archival documents transported to pulp mills to refresh supplies.³⁹ Writing in 1923, the historian A.E. Presniakov confirms that this was not a matter of simple indifference, but an ideological stance:

In their view, the governmental archives appeared as the repositories of the hateful traditions of the old political and social order, which therefore did not deserve to be saved from destruction; nay, more, they should really be done away with, in so far as they were liable to serve as a documentary basis in case of a reactionary restoration.⁴⁰

However, soon after the revolution the Marxist-Leninist Bolshevik leadership had quickly and quietly recognized the necessity for control of the nation's documentary records: the creation of proper, state-approved historical texts would require the sources on which that history was based to be carefully monitored by ideologically orthodox authorities. On June 1, 1918, a Central Committee decree signed by Lenin was released on the reorganization of archives under Bolshevik rule, a document that would be cited as a theoretical base for archival activities, both broad and mundane, for many decades after. All pre-revolutionary archives were officially abolished, to be restructured and reincorporated under a centralized Soviet authority.⁴¹

The decree (forever after credited to Lenin, whether he actually authored the document or

³⁹ Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, "Lenin's Archival Decree of 1918: The Bolshevik Legacy for Soviet Archival Theory and Practice," *The American Archivist* 45 (Fall 1982): 429-443, 434.

⁴⁰ A. Presniakov, "Historical Research in Russia During the Revolutionary Crisis." *The American Historical Review* 28, (Jan. 1923): 248-257, 249.

⁴¹ Grimsted, "Lenin's Archival Decree," 433.

simply approved it) set up three major principles to guide management of the new state system. First, it nationalized the records of all government agencies as property of the State Archival Fond (GAF); including, critically, all pre-revolutionary documents from restructured archives. As these documents were now state property, their unauthorized destruction was explicitly banned, and tantamount to a crime. Clearly, this provision was at times difficult to enforce, but it represented a clear ideological break from the revolutionary anarchists and an important early precedent for including pre-revolutionary material in state protection.⁴²

The second major development of Lenin's archival decree established the State Archival Administration, otherwise known as GAU or Glavarkhiv, as the bureaucratic body tasked with custody of the State Archival Fond. Glavarkhiv was placed under the authority of the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment – later renamed to Education – and its head, Anatoly Lunacharsky. And the third, broadly ranging provision called for complete centralization of archival records through dedicated archival institutions, the better scientific utilization of records, and the ultimate, lasting preservation of those records.⁴³

The concept of the State Archival Fond is certainly familiar to Western archives; indeed, the very word “fond” was taken from French archival organization, and the establishment of national framework for public archival administration and state acknowledgement of responsibility toward its own documentary heritage can be traced back to the French Revolution or further.⁴⁴ However, where the State Archival Fond differed from similar national record systems in France or the U.S. was in its scope. After all, it wasn't just the archival system that was nationalized by the revolution: it was all industry and social services, from heavy manufacturing, to agriculture, to transportation, to media, culture, education and scientific research. There was essentially no such thing as a private agency in

⁴² Grimsted, “Lenin's Archival Decree,” 431.

⁴³ Grimsted, “Lenin's Archival Decree,” 431.

⁴⁴ Grimsted, “Lenin's Archival Decree,” 438.

communist Russia, so by folding the records of all government institutions into the Fond, Lenin's archival decree essentially asserted state control of all archival materials in the Soviet Union, including personal manuscript collections and cultural product (as the records of state-overseen trade and artistic unions and cooperatives), past and future, regardless of format. The only notable exceptions to the State Archival Fond were the records of the Communist Party itself – the archives of the Central Committee, the Politburo, the Communist International and other Party rather than state-based organizations became their own legal entity, though they would cover a similar breadth of scope and oversight over the materials entrusted to them.⁴⁵

Thus, when the Central Committee established the State Film Fond in 1935, it was only a matter of making organization and administration explicit – all film created by the Soviet film industry, or exhibited on Soviet screens, had already, in the abstract, been property of the State Archival Fond from the moment of its creation and/or display. They had already, theoretically, made arrangements for the acquisition and incorporation of documentary film and newsreels into the GAF in 1926 with the Central Archive of Film-Photo Documents – but TsGAKFD came with the provision that its film records were to be of explicit “historical-revolutionary” value, as determined by Party authorities. The State Film Fond made clear the extension of archival obligation to the entire output of the Soviet film industry (with the result, however intentional, that Gosfilmofond would eventually contain a large number of documentary films and newsreels in its holdings, despite the continued presence of TsGAKFD).⁴⁶

Administration of the State Film Fond was also made explicit by the 1935 directive, though perhaps not exactly clear. Though it was still a part of the State Archival Fond, rather than being

⁴⁵ Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, *A Handbook for Archival Research in the USSR* (Washington, DC: Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, 1989), 5.

⁴⁶ Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, *Archives and Manuscript Repositories in the USSR, Moscow and Leningrad* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 257.

placed under the oversight of Glavarkhiv – which at this point controlled TsGAKFD, and had been removed from the oversight of Narkompros, to answer directly to Sovnarkom – the State Film Fond and the Belye Stolby facility were given status as an “independent agency,” under the jurisdiction of GUKF – the film production administration, itself separately beholden to Sovnarkom. While the move to place the State Film Fond under GUKF's supervision was likely done with the intention of easing the transfer of materials from the studios to Belye Stolby, it complicated the centralized archival system – Glavarkhiv released basic regulations for collections management and the operation of “independent agencies,” but had no direct authority to actually administer them.⁴⁷

Though this element of independence with respect to controlling access and arranging holdings introduces a certain air of mystery to the history of Gosfilmofond's operations, all evidence suggests the archivists at the State Film Fond followed the same general principles as Glavarkhiv in their organization of materials.⁴⁸ Maintaining a generally close relationship with French archival theory, Glavarkhiv advocated the principles of *respects des fonds*, in which materials are grouped in archives according to the original agency/individual that created them and in the original order in which they arrived at the archive. This was building on pre-revolutionary traditions lasting well back into the 19th and 18th centuries – most imperial archives had been organized by these same methods, and it was most efficient, practically and economically speaking, to maintain the status quo in the new system (many post-revolution archives remained in the same buildings as their pre-revolutionary equivalents).⁴⁹ So, films and any other materials arriving at Belye Stolby would be separated into *fonds* – a record group generally determined by the studio depositing the materials.⁵⁰ Within the *fond*, materials would be

⁴⁷ Grimsted, *A Handbook for Archival Research in the USSR*, 6, 8.

⁴⁸ Grimsted, *Archives and Manuscript Repositories in the USSR, Moscow and Leningrad*, 257.

⁴⁹ Grimsted, “Lenin's Archival Decree,” 440.

⁵⁰ While this use would appear to make the term “fond” appear closest to the American concept of a “collection,” a “fond” in the Russian context might also be used in a more granular sense, as something an American might refer to as a “subgroup” or “series” within a broader collection defined by an individual or institution; or, as with “State Film Fond,” it can also be employed more generally to refer to all the non-current records of an institution/agency, making it more

further separated into numbered, hierarchical subgroups called *opisi*, the only structural distinction between the *fond* and individual file/object units (*delo*). *Opisi* were often assigned arbitrarily, rather than according to any easily identifiable structure of chronology or function.⁵¹

Once archival objects were assigned these groups and numbers, finding aids, archival guides or any other kind of accompanying documentation (including, at the State Film Fond, shot lists for each film), would remain under the control of the archivists working at that institution. Throughout the Soviet era, finding aids, if published at all, were published by the archive or depository in question, rather than a proper publishing house; copies were thus extremely limited, given the desire not to waste resources. In any case, the agencies under Glavarkhiv that did publish their finding aids were usually those tied closely or even contained inside schools. Gosfilmofond does not appear to have ever published its holdings, and certainly not during the Stalin era.⁵²

This system of arrangement and management, with arbitrary and often incomprehensible subdivisions and no publicly available reference, was clearly designed for internal use by the archival staff. Trained staff would be able to locate specific materials – the average student, researcher or general member of the public would have great difficulty deciphering the system, if they were even able to access the archive in the first place.⁵³ It's important to note again the third provision of Lenin's archival decree, which essentially serves as a guide for archival use, rather than arrangement and management: that 1918 document called for “long-term preservation” and “scientific utilization,” but quite obviously elides any mention of public access. Archival research was never accepted as a legal right, or even an accepted privilege, in Soviet archival theory.

The vast majority of archives under Glavarkhiv (including TsGAKFD) were designated

synonymous with the American use of “archive” itself. The distinction was almost entirely contextual and could vary greatly from one institution to another. See Grimsted, *A Handbook for Archival Research in the USSR*, 61-62.

⁵¹ Grimsted, *A Handbook for Archival Research in the USSR*, 69.

⁵² Grimsted, *A Handbook for Archival Research in the USSR*, 82.

⁵³ Grimsted, *A Handbook for Archival Research in the USSR*, 58.

“closed” archives – inaccessible to all but authorized government workers and Party officials. In fact, in 1938, Glavarkhiv's bureaucratic status would be shifted once again – rather than answering to the Central Executive Committee, Glavarkhiv was folded into the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, or NKVD. The predecessor of the KGB, the NKVD was the nation's overarching agency for law enforcement and state security, and responsible for administering the Gulag and the secret police. In other words, control of the archives was placed in the hands of the primary executors of Stalin's mass, frequently violent political repression. Though the State Film Fond, as an independent agency, was not directly under NKVD control, this assignment speaks volumes regarding the the prevailing attitude toward and role of archives in the state system. Once a negative entered the vaults at Belye Stolby, there was, in principle, no reason for it ever to leave again. The material held in the GAF was a matter for internal affairs only – they were essentially designated state secrets and undisclosed to the public, regardless of their content.⁵⁴

The first priority of an archivist, then, was to service specific requests for needed documents, most often to government and Party officials. If researchers, students, or writers were able to access a state archive, it was only ever on officially-sanctioned projects, undertaken by authorized individuals who had proposed a precise and strictly limited topic to a sponsoring academic, scientific, or cultural institution. Even once inside, that individual would not be free to browse beyond what they had requested in their proposal – they would be brought materials that had been pre-determined to be relevant to the topic by the archival staff (often on orders from higher Party officials, whether they be from the NKVD, GUKF, or even Stalin himself).⁵⁵

To the Western researcher, the inability to freely browse through collections would be seen as deflection, and the need for such specificity in one's requests frustratingly difficult or even impossible

⁵⁴ Grimsted, *A Handbook for Archival Research in the USSR*, 8.

⁵⁵ Grimsted, *A Handbook for Archival Research in the USSR*, 109.

to fulfill – after all, in many cases, the user of an archive does not know what they are looking for until they have found it. But this implies a perception of the archive as a place to explore – an open field in which the historical and cultural records of a state can be examined. In Stalinist Russia, information was not something to be found – it was provided.

That, too, was only in the case of the information existing in the first place. The practice of intellectual and physical censorship under Stalin was not frequently executed directly by the archival system, but it severely mediated the material that entered state archives. Censorship was not an activity carried out by any one, definable institution or agency of the Soviet state – overlapping hierarchies of examination and criticism existed to monitor both internal government and front-facing public activities, with the intent of preventing any dissemination of thoughts or ideas that might undermine the cult of Stalin's personality as supreme, infallible leader. Every state agency was responsible for monitoring the ideological orthodoxy of its own product: for instance, Goskomizdat, the State Committee for Publishing, was responsible for censoring all printed material, including both fiction and non-fiction, before it was even shown to anyone else in the government; Gosteleradio performed the same function for the state radio (and eventually television) programming under its control. All media would be reviewed by the General Directorate for the Protection of State Secrets in the Press, commonly abbreviated as Glavlit, before it was released to the public in any way. Glavlit answered to the Commissariat for Education (Narkompros), rather than the NKVD – who were assuredly performing their own surveillance of all media for subversive material and individuals. This is a sign of how thoroughly censorship pervaded state activity: it was not even viewed as its own, isolated step in the process of creation and production, but an ingrained constant.⁵⁶

Such extensive state censorship in the Soviet Union was not an invention of Stalin: Glavlit had

⁵⁶ David Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination, and Terror Under Stalin, 1927-1941* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 148.

been founded in 1922, while Lenin was still alive and years before Stalin's rule was consolidated. But the eradication of Stalin's political opposition in the early to mid-1930s – over 400,000 members of the Communist Party were expelled in 1933 alone, just the first year of the Great Purge – allowed for uncontested and increasingly granular reinforcement of the Stalinist cult.⁵⁷ The film industry is a strong example: Boris Shumyatsky, the head of GUKF, inserted himself earlier and more often into production as the decade wore on, until by 1937 he was returning screenplay drafts of every film in production to their respective writers with line-by-line ideological critiques.⁵⁸ Starting in 1934, Shumyatsky also started hosting biweekly screenings in the Kremlin, exclusively for Stalin and his innermost circle. While GUKF's official censorship panel, GURK, also submitted screenplay edits, post-production “fixes” and approved final versions of all studio prints, it was the late-night screenings for Stalin that often determined a film's fate, with the General Secretary's comments serving as gospel on a film's ideological acceptability.⁵⁹ As opposed to the work of GURK, there was not necessarily any record of such back-room interactions, either. Stalin, as a rule, generally preferred not to sign decrees, arrest warrants, or other official documents, forcing those around him to anticipate or intuit his desires – a strategy that both served as a sort of ideological test and allowed him to shift the blame of failed measures away from himself. “Smoking gun” documents that might definitively prove some of the most heinous crimes leveled against Stalin – for instance, that the Great Famine of 1932-33 in Ukraine was intentionally orchestrated in order to suppress an independence movement, or that the assassination of Sergei Kirov in 1934 was on the General Secretary's orders – probably never existed.⁶⁰

Compounding this comprehensive and insidious paradigm of official monitoring and

⁵⁷ Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis*, 145.

⁵⁸ Unsurprisingly Shumyatsky's micro-management had adverse effects: after healthy, rising numbers through the early 1930s, total production dropped drastically starting in 1935, bottoming out with a paltry 24 features (out of 62 planned) actually produced in 1937. See Richard Taylor, “Boris Shumyatsky and Soviet Cinema in the 1930s,” in *Inside the Film Factory: New Approaches to Russian and Soviet Cinema*, eds. Richard Taylor, Ian Christie (London; NY: Routledge, 1991), 215.

⁵⁹ Miller, *Soviet Cinema*, 63.

⁶⁰ Jonathan Brent, *Inside the Stalin Archives: Discovering the New Russia* (NY: Atlas; London: Turnaround, 2008), 233.

suppression was the atmosphere of paranoia and self-censorship that it cultivated among the general population. It has been well documented that families of purged individuals would often obscure photographs, burn diaries and manuscripts, and otherwise destroy personal records of that person in order to demonstrate their loyalty to the state and avoid further retribution from the secret police.⁶¹ The same often held in creative and intellectual circles: Mikhail Bulgakov burned the first manuscript of his novel *The Master and Margarita* when it was rejected for publication by state censors.⁶²

Considering films and documents were so carefully, even subconsciously, monitored from the moment of their creation, the State Film Fond scarcely needed to practice any kind of systematized censorship itself. Since the 1935 directive required them only to store the negatives of completed feature films, those works had already, in theory, been thoroughly vetted before they arrived in Belye Stolby.⁶³ In practice, the studios would often end up sending incomplete elements and censored footage to the State Film Fond, not particularly caring to store or destroy the film themselves (recall that destruction of material that belonged to the State Archival Fond theoretically required official authorization, which required navigating red tape, rather than just sending the footage to Belye Stolby without a thought), but with the materials tucked in “closed” vaults, physically isolated in a remote suburb and buried in a web of unnavigable organizational paperwork, there was hardly any danger of unauthorized individuals accessing unacceptable content. Even at TsGAKFD, whose newsreel and documentary contents were far more directly exposed to political changes, there was little evidence of the same kind of systematic censorship and falsification that was aimed at, for instance, photographic records.⁶⁴

⁶¹ King, *The Commissar Vanishes*, 7.

⁶² Edythe C. Haber, *Mikhail Bulgakov: The Early Years* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 239.

⁶³ Malyshev, *Gosfil'mofond*, 61.

⁶⁴ There are, for instance, some documented incidents of footage of Trotsky being excised from old newsreels following his expulsion from the Communist Party in 1927; however, these efforts were not evidently methodical, and appear to have been taken on individual initiative rather than any official order from management. See Malyshev, *Gosfil'mofond*, 44; King, *The Commissar Vanishes*, 9.

It was thus possible for officially censored material to find its way into the State Film Fond. For example, in the late 1960s, after Stalin's death temporarily thawed cultural restriction, Gosfilmofond released a glimpse of Eisenstein's incomplete film *Bezhin Meadow* using still photographs and short snippets of footage from the film's halted production. Even though the project was declared “politically bankrupt” by the Central Committee and permanently shut down by GUKF in 1937, the unedited reels had remained in Belye Stolby, and were only destroyed when they were exposed to a bombing raid during World War II. The still photos and cut pieces, at least, survived for thirty years to see the light of day again, despite being, essentially, contraband.⁶⁵

Whether Lenin had intended it that way in 1918, or Stalin manipulated it to this extreme, public exhibition and access was simply not considered part of the “scientific utilization” of archival materials in 1935. Brought into the abstract fold of the State Archival Fond, and then shuttered safely behind the archive door, feature films were guarded assets, unlikely to be seen again after their first theatrical run, if they had even managed that. The practical operations and management of archives like the State Film Fond had been sculpted to serve the often-shifting purposes of Soviet ideology. Stalin's rise saw drastic political and cultural shifts that would determine exactly what “utilization” of the archive meant, if not by the public.

⁶⁵ Jay Leyda, unpublished report on the state of Moscow and Warsaw film archives, undated (c. 1970), Jay Si-Lan Chen Leyda Papers and Photographs, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU.

IV. Archive Rats

“We ourselves will be able to determine what is true and what is not true, what is important and what is not important.”

- Joseph Stalin⁶⁶

The consolidation and centralization of the State Archival Fond under Stalin reflected an increasingly possessive attitude of the reigning political regime over not just historical documents and materials, but history itself. Stalinism did not simply “use” history, as a tool for propaganda or self-promotion – history was the entire basis for Stalin's power. Positioning himself, through the manipulation of public access and analysis of records, as Lenin's heir, the culmination of a Marxist-Leninist historical narrative that ended, inevitably, with a state under his rule, Stalin created a dictatorship that was, frighteningly, not entirely reliant on physical coercion and intimidation. History was no longer something to be altogether rejected, paved over, and constructed anew, as the 1920s Futurists had posited. It was a tool for creating continuity, for legitimizing a regime that had been established through political machination, rather than public support.

In the years immediately after the revolution, the Bolshevik intelligentsia had become accustomed to a certain amount of freedom in their interpretation of Soviet policies and other broad theoretical work. In practical terms, Party officials were far too occupied with civilian concerns of security and stability to bother with laying down “the Party line” in historical and intellectual circles: suppressing revolts in Central Asia and rebuilding a fractured economy were far more pressing tasks than monitoring the ideological correctness, on a case-by-case basis, of individual cultural works and

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academic texts. But even on a broader, more abstract level, there was little precedent under Leninism for complete control of the Soviet intellectual sphere by Party leaders. Writing in November of 1905, during the first, abortive Russian revolution, Lenin combated accusations of the Communist Party curbing intellectual freedom by asserting that the Party only had the right to control published by its members – writers and intellectuals who did not wish to conform to Party principles could simply not join the Party. Even after the October Revolution of 1917, with Bolshevik control far more comprehensive and Party membership becoming more and more of a social requirement, Lenin would never suggest, at least in any recorded form, that *partiinnost'* – the commonly held Bolshevik principle that theoretical work should support the policies of the Party – meant that Party leadership were the sole arbiters of artistic, scientific or other intellectual matters. For the most part, Party members were simply expected not to publish “unorthodox” opinions in the state press – and even then, political deviation was rarely punished with expulsion from the Party, and certainly not physical threats. For instance, I.I. Skvortsov-Stepanov, a member of the Party Central Committee and editor of the state publication *Izvestiya* for much of the 1920s, outspokenly supported interpretations of Marxist philosophy not supported by most of his colleagues in the Party leadership. He could not be held to the “Party line” because in essence, there was no line.⁶⁷

This left Party historians and writers largely unprepared for the quasi-theocracy of Stalinism. As the Soviet economy experienced exponential growth under the first Five-Year Plan starting in 1928, and his position as General Secretary was secured (with the Party expulsion and exile of Trotsky), Stalin began to turn communist ideology into a belief system, rather than an academic position, with himself as omniscient pontificate. Starting in the late 1920s, Party authorities, and Stalin in particular, began to subtly manipulate Lenin's notion of *partiinnost'* into the right to control the content of all

⁶⁷ Barber, *Soviet Historians in Crisis*, 5.

intellectual work published in the Soviet Union.⁶⁸

In October of 1931, Stalin zeroed in specifically on the field of history as the target for his new definition of *partiinost'*. The General Secretary published a letter in the popular state journal *Proletarskaya revolyutsiya*, criticizing Party historians for favoring arcane research and complex intellectual debates that were unintelligible to the common citizen. He referred to all historians, even those who had been extremely supportive of his policies, as “grave diggers” and “archive rats,” and ordered Party ideologists to steer clear of source-study and focus on a history of Soviet Union and the Communist Party that was “lively, animated, engaging and relevant to people's lives” (principles echoed in the cultural articulation of socialist realism that would shortly emerge as well). Historians were, essentially, kicked out of the archive.⁶⁹

In practical terms, Stalin's call for “lively, animated” history meant hero worship: the only way to animate brutally complex principles of Marxism-Leninism was to focus on the narrative of the Party leaders who fought for it. Lenin and Stalin himself were obviously the favored subjects on these grounds, but other Bolshevik heroes of the revolution and civil war were theoretically acceptable as well. The overwhelming necessity was that the historical subjects be recognizable to the public – names, events and ideas that the working class would already be familiar with from the state-run press, the state-produced newsreels, the state-published instructional and political pamphlets distributed at worker's clubs and social centers. The high-minded intellectual pursuit of history taking place in academic institutions and certain journals was to be replaced by history as a narrative for popular consumption – one that advanced “a larger-than-life hero [Stalin] capable of embodying the power, legitimacy and appeal of the Soviet experiment.”⁷⁰

The shift in intellectual application of history and historical documents was visible even in more

⁶⁸ Barber, *Soviet Historians in Crisis*, 1.

⁶⁹ Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis*, 26-27, 36-37; Barber, *Soviet Historians in Crisis*, 126-131.

⁷⁰ Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis*, 52.

creative circles. The contrast in Dziga Vertov's work between the 1920s and 1930s, for instance, is representative of the broader treatment of historical narrative by Stalinization. Vertov's *A Sixth Part of the World* (1926), a travelogue of newsreel and found footage of citizens in the Central Asian republics, is generally interpreted as supporting of revolutionary ideals of the cultural and economic diversity in a unified Soviet society; the use of documentary footage is in service of creating, first-hand, a new, utopian, history for the Soviet Union. But the film's complex visual strategy of montage editing and obscure inter-titles (similar to the director's radical writings for *LEF*) met with strong criticism from Party bureaucracy, and the film was banned from exhibition by Sovkino in 1927.⁷¹ Several years later, Vertov's *Three Songs About Lenin* (1934), a celebratory ode built around Lenin's own cult of personality, is visibly more straightforward and emotionally manipulative: inter-titles are reduced to simple, pithy slogans, and the direct employment of musical rhythms creates a less cerebral sort of visual appeal. The archival footage employed here by the director is now a second-hand repetition of the state's narrative of Soviet history (albeit still filtered through Vertov's intensely personal and unconventional methods) – an authentication of Lenin's place as beloved leader, and, by extension, Stalin's rightful place as his successor.⁷²

Even with such relatively clear marching orders, Party intellectuals struggled throughout the 1930s to produce historical and educational texts that were acceptable to Stalin – thanks, in large part, to Stalin's own political paranoia. The General Secretary's call to focus on Party leadership came at essentially the exact same time that he decided to expunge the vast majority of that leadership. Hundreds of old-guard Party revolutionaries were arrested in the first Great Purge of 1933, and the 1934 assassination of Sergei Kirov, Stalin's greatest political rival, led to a massive campaign against

⁷¹ Graham Roberts, *Forward Soviet!: History and Non-Fiction Film in the USSR* (London; NY: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 25.

⁷² The contrast of Vertov's historical approach in these two films was made by Oksana Sarkisova in her presentation “Archival Eye: Dziga Vertov and Curated Image Archives” at the symposium *Re-Mediating the Archive: Image, Word, Performance*, sponsored by the NYU Department of Comparative Literature, April 24, 2015.

“internal dissent” that would last until the outbreak of World War II. Show trials, forced confessions, and thousands of political executions would ensue as Stalin attempted to completely break down the same Party mechanism that he had exploited for his own gain. The writing of Party history became more or less impossible – historians did not who they could use for the center of the “inspirational hero” narratives that Stalin was demanding when a respected Party official could be denounced the next day as an enemy of the state. Even Stalin himself was a difficult matter – how could the General Secretary's rise to power be properly explained when his closest associates and greatest supporters, “Old Bolsheviks” like Mikhail Bukharin and Alexei Rykov, were being arrested and accused of internal disruption and “Trotsky-ism?”⁷³ Even more successful historical propaganda, like *Three Songs About Lenin*, had to be removed from circulation for several years, until its footage of Old Bolsheviks like Bukharin could be excised.⁷⁴ As the Great Terror wore on, the situation worsened as intellectuals and historians themselves became targets. Their inaction and lack of acceptable production turned them into saboteurs under the bottom-line social policies of Stalin's Five-Year Plans; even though, without archival sources or even ideological figureheads available to them, the Party's usable history had been throttled to almost nothing.⁷⁵

Somewhat ironically, most of the only histories that were published during this time were document collections straight from the archives. Without needing to present a biographical or historical narrative, these texts avoided the problem of Stalin's shifting relationship with Party elite that might later fall out of favor. Of course, these collections were not typically produced by historians or academics, but hand-picked by Party officials, often including Stalin himself, to focus on certain acceptable themes (such as the Red Army's military triumph in the civil war, or the success of the first

⁷³ See Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis*, 49-50, 151.

⁷⁴ Combined with the anti-formalist campaign and rise of socialist realism in the cinema industry in the mid-1930s (see Chapter V), this curtailed victory for Vertov essentially spelled the end of his career as a director. He managed to make a few more films, *Lullaby* (1937) and *Sergo Ordzhonikidze* (1937), but never had complete creative control again. See Roberts, *Forward Soviet!*, 128-129, 137.

⁷⁵ Barber, *Soviet Historians in Crisis*, 140-141.

Five-Year Plan). Access and control of these records had been ceded to Party officials and the archivists in organizations like Glavarkhiv or the State Film Fond, acting as political gate-keepers.⁷⁶

It fell on public cultural institutions, such as museums and libraries, to provide “history” where Party historians were failing. Libraries, however, were just as muddled by the chaos of the Great Terror – in the mid-1930s, Glavlit, the supervising directorate for censoring unacceptable texts, issued a new bulletin of banned authors and titles to provincial libraries every 10 days. Card catalog records were perpetually checked and destroyed, to the point that Glavlit briefly lost control of censorship in 1937 as subordinates preemptively began wildly and arbitrarily disposing of any texts they might even vaguely consider subversive. Museums thus became one of the primary sites for public mobilization of Party ideology. In 1935, over 200,000 people toured Moscow's Museum of the Workers and Peasants' Red Army, and the same year the newly-opened Central Lenin Museum hosted over 2000 visitors per day in its first month. As with published document collections, museums allowed for the strategic exploitation of archival material – a public space in which the historical narrative could be carefully monitored and manipulated.⁷⁷

The State Film Fond was thus established in a moment when access, authorship and censorship of history had been conflated and placed in the hands of a select few. The archive had become an information equivalent of the Internal Affairs department's Gulag – a place where the state could remove politically unsuitable details from circulation, while still preserving them as fuel for Stalin's constructed narratives of history and biography. In one of the few accepted historical texts published in the 1930s, the *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, the authors declared “In order not to err in politics, one must look forward, not backward,” a prime example of the contradictory temporality that Stalin manipulated to the advantage of his own image: history was presented as an irrelevant and

⁷⁶ Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis*, 158-159.

⁷⁷ Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis*, 132-133, 148-150; E.A. Dobrenko, *Stalinist Cinema and the Production of History: Museum of the Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 12.

off-limits occupation to the Soviet citizenry, but at the same time its presentation was an immediate, pressing concern for the Party leadership.⁷⁸ With archival records removed from public view, they became an extension of Party propaganda, and could be used, unchallenged, to legitimize the Stalinist regime. With the abstract position of the archive and its role in the Stalinist historical narrative in place, the further extension of political manipulation into the creation of the records that went into the archive in the first place was inevitable. The creation of this new “historicism” required not just control of old documents but the creation of new ones, in the form of popular culture.

⁷⁸ Dobrenko, *Stalinist Cinema and the Production of History*, 18-21.

V. Cinema for the Millions

“...you must remember that, of all the arts, for us the cinema is the most important.”

- V.I. Lenin, quoted by Anatoly Lunacharsky⁷⁹

The source of the State Film Fond's content would determine the function of the archive as much as its place within Stalin's broader social construction of historical narrative. From a theoretical perspective, the nationalization of the film industry and the incorporation of narrative film into the State Archival Fond made feature film as an archival record indistinguishable from documentation and correspondence of a government agency. But as the most public, accessible element of the state's activities, the creative output of the Soviet Union was often treated with the same, if not greater, scrutiny as matters of the economy and security. The materials to be deposited at the State Film Fond in Belye Stolby were not just limited to internal records – the contents of the archive, if not the archive itself, were front-facing. Linked from the outset to GUKF and the output of the Soviet film industry, the State Film Fond became inextricably connected to the radically shifting priorities of cinematic production under Stalinism.

Stalin's manipulation of publicly accessible factual information, guided by state-run newspapers, radio stations, schools, publishing houses and more, in some ways required even tighter control over culture and the arts. Soviet citizens were well aware that common sources of “truth” could be manipulated: textbooks could be rewritten, documents forged, photographs airbrushed. As discussed earlier, in the atmosphere of paranoia and self-censorship cultivated by Stalin's department of Internal Affairs, the public was often performing this work themselves, eliminating relatives who had become “non-persons” from family photos or tearing out the pages of books that discussed purged Party

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officials. Art and fiction, on the other hand, are by their very nature subject to contrivance and creative license. Artists were, in theory, free to speak “the truth,” making their product all the more dangerous to the careful public construction of Stalin's image.⁸⁰

Stalin's first forays into the cultural sphere came primarily through the manipulation of writer's unions and cooperatives – perhaps because written texts were most easily monitored and censored, perhaps because of Stalin's close personal relationship with Maxim Gorky, a popular author with great influence in the community and a supporter of Stalin's rule. In 1932, the Central Committee disbanded the two state cultural organizations that had greatest influence over Soviet writing and censorship of written works during the late 1920s: the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP) and Proletkult, a Commissariat of Education-funded enterprise that encouraged experimental and avant-garde works drawn from a “working class” aesthetic. As had happened with Party historians, Stalin was increasingly dissatisfied with the output of RAPP and Proletkult, who often sponsored complex, intellectually-driven implementations of Marxism-Leninism in literary and graphic design, and targeted both pro- and anti-Bolshevik writers alike who did not enthusiastically follow their iconoclastic attacks on institutionalized art. RAPP and Proletkult were replaced by the Union of Soviet Writers, with Gorky serving as its first chairman. Union leadership was populated more by Party officials than cultural figureheads, allowing for tighter ideological control by Stalin himself. Membership in the Union became essentially required for publication, removing the potential for any works that were not thoroughly vetted to slip through the cracks. Stalin began to use this new position of power to conform literary output to his thematic and stylistic demands. The aesthetic chosen to most effectively glorify Stalin's leadership became known as “socialist realism.”⁸¹

Though socialist realism was declared the mandatory methodological approach for every branch

⁸⁰ Dobrenko, *Stalinist Cinema and the Production of History*, 112.

⁸¹ Clark and Dobrenko, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 50, 139-144.

of Soviet culture by Sovnarkom in May of 1932, the exact terms and desired application of the term remain vague and undefined, beyond a general consensus that Soviet art should serve to promulgate the goals of socialism and communism. Works were generally favored by the state in an often arbitrary, case-by-case fashion by individual author or artist: for instance, *Days of the Turbins*, a play by Mikhail Bulgakov, enjoyed great success on the stage, receiving glowing notices in the state press and running continually in Moscow from 1926 until 1941, even while *The White Guard*, Bulgakov's serial novel from which he had adapted *Turbins*, was repeatedly denied publication throughout the 1930s. It was not until 1934, when Stalin and Gorky convened the Union of Soviet Writers at the First Congress of Soviet Writers, that socialist realism was properly articulated. Writers and artists, as state employees, were directed to adhere their work to four principle tenets: it was to be “proletarian” - both relevant to the working class and understandable by them; “typical” - containing scenes of everyday life; “realistic” in its formal representation; and “partisan” - supportive of the Communist Party and the goals of the Soviet state.⁸²

This directive pertained to Soviet cinema as well. It was received enthusiastically by Boris Shumyatsky, the head of GUKF. Shumyatsky was an old-time Bolshevik – by 1930, when he was placed in charge of film production, he had already served as the Soviet Union's ambassador to Persia and a member of the Central Asian Bureau of the Central Committee. Though he had no direct experience in the cinema, he was considered something of an expert propagandist, having been a writer and publisher of revolutionary pamphlets since the failed Russian revolution of 1905. Since taking over GUKF, Shumyatsky had succeeded in a number of measurable matters of production and exhibition: the total number of theaters and projectors in the Soviet Union, particularly in rural areas, had risen greatly under his tenure, nearly all of them equipped with sound capability; total production had also risen to satisfactorily replace the loss of displayable content following the ban on importing American

⁸² Clark and Dobrenko, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 91-94, 139-141.

films in 1931.⁸³

Both Shumyatsky and Stalin, however, were unsatisfied with the actual content being produced. As with RAPP and Proletkult in the literary world, film production in the early 1930s was still populated and dominated by the internationally-acclaimed avant-garde experimenters of the 1920s: filmmakers like Eisenstein, Vertov, Dovzhenko, and Kuleshov. While these directors, in developing the theories of montage and attraction that drove their art, had drawn on principles of popular culture and vocally strove to make their work accessible to the common worker, they had undeniably failed to connect with mass audiences.⁸⁴ Part of the reason Hollywood films were banned from exhibition in 1931 was that they were routinely outgrossing domestic products at the Soviet box office – an unacceptable ideological embarrassment. Montage theory and experimental editing was, in Shumyatsky's eyes, incomprehensible to the working class and therefore useless in pushing the Party agenda.⁸⁵

The articulation of socialist realism in 1934 gave Shumyatsky the political ammunition to actively push for a radical shift in content, starting a campaign against the creative excess of what he called “formalism.” Eisenstein in particular became a symbolic target, thanks to his strong international ties: multiple trips to Western Europe and the United States between 1928-1933 were used as a sign that the director was not a proper “Soviet.” Accusations in the Soviet press that Eisenstein was a traitor to a state had trickled out to the director while he was working in Guadalajara on his never-completed, American-sponsored feature *Que Viva Mexico!*, but even turning over his negatives to American editors and returning to his home country in 1933 did not alleviate the attacks.⁸⁶ Serving as a professor

⁸³ Boris Bagaev, *Boris Shumyatskii: ocherk zhizni i deiatel'nosti* (Moscow: Krasnoiarskoe Kn. Izd-Vo, 1974); Taylor, *Inside the Film Factory*, 198-200.

⁸⁴ Richard Taylor, “Popular Culture in Soviet Cinema,” in *The Red Screen: Politics Society, Art in Soviet Cinema* (London; NY: Routledge, 1992), 51.

⁸⁵ Taylor, *Inside the Film Factory*, 202-203.

⁸⁶ This is admittedly an extremely simplified version of the monstrously complicated web of events surrounding Eisenstein's time in Mexico and the making of *Que Viva Mexico!* For more details, see Marie Seton's *Sergei M.*

at the State Institute of Cinematography upon his return, the director was accused of further corrupting the next generation of film artists. Eisenstein's attempt to return to the good graces of the regime, *Bezhin Meadow*, was constantly delayed, harshly criticized in the state press, and eventually shut down completely in 1937. Eisenstein's undoubted intellectual fealty to Bolshevism (*Bezhin Meadow* was based on the true story of a Ukrainian peasant boy attempting to turn his father in to the political authorities for sabotaging a harvest, and appears to have been implicitly supportive of collectivization) was overshadowed by his formal experimentation and less-than-enthusiastic attitude toward Stalin himself (one sequence in *Bezhin Meadow* reputedly visually compared the General Secretary's artistic cult to that of a pagan god).⁸⁷

Ironically, considering the attacks of capitalist collusion leveled against Eisenstein, Shumyatsky also turned westward in developing his desired aesthetic for a cinema of socialist realism. The head of GUKF had already looked to Hollywood as a methodological model for production: adopting a producer-centered system at the major studios (with individual producers commissioning and shepherding scripts), and splitting specialized material (including newsreels, educational films and animation) off into their own administrative branches were major factors in the rise of production through the early 1930s.⁸⁸ Now Shumyatsky began to find thematic and creative inspiration in American narrative and aesthetic strategies as well. In his 1935 book articulating his principles of production, *Cinema for the Millions*, Shumyatsky emphasized appealing genre work over artistic experimentation and the avant-garde:

We need genres that are infused with optimism, with mobilizing emotions, *joie de vivre* and laughter. Genres that provide us with the maximum opportunity to demonstrate the best

Eisenstein: A Biography (NY: Grove Press, 1960), especially Chapter 9, "The Eternal Circle," and Chapter 10, "Cinematography with Tears."

⁸⁷ Birgit Beumers, *A History of Russian Cinema* (Oxford; NY: Berg, 2009), 100.

⁸⁸ Shumyatsky even took a trip to Los Angeles himself in 1935, meeting with major figures like Charlie Chaplin and Frank Capra. He returned to the Soviet Union with dreams of creating a Hollywood-esque "cinema-city" in the Crimea, though that plan would never come to fruition. See Taylor, *Inside the Film Factory*, 213-215.; Bagaev, *Boris Shumiatskii*, 201-202.

Bolshevik traditions: an implacable attitude to opportunism, with tenacity, skill and a Bolshevik scale of work.⁸⁹

Shumyatsky had flipped the priorities of newsreel and documentaries over feature films articulated by Lenin in his conversations with Lunacharsky a decade earlier – his ideological argument of Bolshevik optimism brought formerly “useless” narrative entertainment into the political fold. Formally, classical continuity editing was to be favored over montage, and screenwriters were encouraged to use singular, identifiable heroes to hold the audience's interest. Just as Stalin thought Party history was more engaging when focused on individual leaders, Shumyatsky similarly divined that an empathetic protagonist would improve Soviet cinema's popularity.⁹⁰ Productions like Sergei Yutkevich and Fredrikh Ermler's *Counterplan* (1932) and Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg's *Maxim's Youth* (1934) marked Shumyatsky's attempts to gradually shift away from the nameless masses of Eisenstein and Vertov, but the most influential success of the decade proved to be that of Georgi and Sergei Vasilyev's⁹¹ *Chapaev* (1934).

The real Vasily Chapaev, a Red Army general who achieved great military success but perished during the civil war, was already something of a folk hero by the time the film was made, thanks to his reputation as an uneducated peasant who nonetheless proved an intuitive tactician. With dramatic battle scenes and a simple, polished narrative arc that tracked the Chapaev's gradual political enlightenment, *Chapaev* the film became one of the biggest blockbusters in the history of the Soviet Union. Starting in late 1934, over 30 million Soviets reputedly saw the film in its first year, and it would remain in theaters long after. It was prominently rumored to be Stalin's favorite film – whether that reflected the General Secretary's actual taste or his recognition of the film's ideological power (perhaps an impossible delineation to make), he undeniably screened it over 20 times at the Kremlin from 1934-

⁸⁹ Quoted in Lilya Kaganovsky, “Russian Rock on Soviet Bones,” in *Sound, Speech, Music in Soviet and Post-Soviet Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), 258.

1935 alone.⁹⁰

The wild success of *Chapaev* was followed quickly by Grigori Aleksandrov's musical-comedy *Jolly Fellows* (1934). Incorporating popular jazz styles, the film contained acceptably relatable characters and a relentless positivity that implicitly reflected well back on the Soviet state even if it did not overtly discuss politics. With two successful templates in place, Soviet production would be dominated by adventure/war films – e.g. *Aerograd* (1935), *We Are From Kronstadt* (1936), *Schors* (1939) – and musicals – *Circus* (1936), *Volga-Volga* (1938) – for the rest of the decade. Hagiographies like *Lenin in October* (1937) and *The Great Citizen* (1938, a thinly veiled biography of Sergei Kirov) rounded out the obligation of socialist realist cinema to “partisanship.”⁹¹

The Soviet public's ravenous acceptance of Shumyatsky's “cinema for the millions” presented the film industry with unexpected practical issues. For one thing, the Soviet Union had been more or less permanently short on film stock since the revolution: the Soviet studios had relied on importing celluloid from Germany until 1932, when Shumyatsky insisted on establishing Soviet manufacturers as part of his efficiency reforms. Even by 1934, supplies were still low, and production was barely able to keep up with the demand for exhibition prints of *Chapaev*. Even more troubling was that the general shortage of stock had forced the studios to by and large ignore the process of using interpositives and internegatives to protect original film elements – release prints were struck directly off the original edited negative. This had not been as much of a problem when Soviet audiences barely wanted to see Soviet films, and the overall number of necessary prints was relatively limited; but with the creation of a genuinely popular cinema, the studios were in a sudden, grave danger of irreversibly damaging their own films. Only a few months into the release of *Chapaev*, the studios were already detecting a noticeable dip in the quality of new release prints, as the original negative was physically worn into

⁹⁰ Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society*, 172.

⁹¹ Beumers, *A History of Russian Cinema*, 82-98.

oblivion.⁹²

This crisis in the industry was noted in the 1935 State Film Fond directive. In fact, in justifying the creation of the Fond, the Central Committee explicitly cited the need to prevent the *Chapaev* negative from incurring further damage, and further named *Aerograd* and *Jolly Fellows*, among others, as works deserving of protection (none of the 1920s Soviet masterworks considered canon by Western film scholars – *Battleship Potemkin*, *Man with a Movie Camera*, etc. - were mentioned). It was an unusual step for such a broad decree to stoop to such granularity, affirming that the State Film Fond, perhaps uniquely even among the various branches of the State Archival Fond, was tightly linked to the needs of production. Putting the State Film Fond under the control of Shumyatsky and GUKF, rather than Glavarkhiv, further reinforced these ties. Though it was not until 1948 that the materials that studios were required to deposit in the State Film Fond were explicitly defined (the original negative, a sound negative, two interpositives and a release print of every film they produced), studios began sending many of their most valuable elements to Belye Stolby of their own accord as soon as the facility would allow, in 1938.⁹³

Maintenance and preservation of their own assets was a task for which the studios were woefully unequipped and uninterested. GUKF funds for infrastructure had, since 1928, been overwhelmingly allocated toward the gradual process of converting production and exhibition to sound capability, leaving few resources available for improved storage. Even as GUKF generally completed the monumental task of sound conversion around 1936, and supplies of film stock began to rise as domestic manufacturing gained ground, priorities shifted once again back to raising total production numbers. After success in the first half of the decade, under Shumyatsky's micro-managing hands, the industry had started falling well short of the projected numbers from Stalin's second Five-Year Plan of

⁹² Malyshev, *Gosfil'mofond*, 56, 62.

⁹³ Malyshev, *Gosfil'mofond*, 61, 70, 92-94.

1932. In early 1938, Shumyatsky was arrested and denounced as a saboteur in the press – he disappeared, and it would only be decades later that the state acknowledged he was shot a few months after the arrest. Preservation was thus hardly the biggest concern on the minds of studio heads. Belye Stolby was a convenient out for them, providing an authorized and capable location for fulfilling the negative protection called for by the Central Committee, while allowing them to remain focused on producing approved content.⁹⁴

The State Film Fond would remain under the oversight of production-minded Party officials until the fall of the Soviet Union, even as the film industry's place in the web of Soviet bureaucracy shifted from one committee to another. Belye Stolby, at least at its outset, was seen almost as a glorified warehouse (and indeed, until after the war, it was only somewhat better equipped than one). Preservation and production were inextricably tied together – one not possible without the other. Whatever they ended up taking to suit the studio's convenience, their prime directive was to protect camera negatives - to ensure the continued success of the ideological gains of Stalin's newly-created socialist realist cinema. Stalin and the Central Committee weren't concerned about losing neglected films – they were concerned about losing popular ones. Even in its earliest years, this particular set of priorities for the State Film Fond would lead to clashes and confusion with Western archivists who had a very different cultural perspective.

⁹⁴ Taylor, *Inside the Film Factory*, 216.

VI. Enemies Abroad

“Frankly we were by no means convinced that anything at all would come of this.”

- Iris Barry⁹⁵

The Soviet Union's perspective on international affairs shifted greatly as Stalin's authoritarian rise refocused state priorities from revolutionary ideals to security and self-preservation. The dream of worldwide revolution was hemmed by the emergence of fascism in Germany, a threat the Soviets were wary of much sooner than many Western European nations because of the opposition to communist influence posed by right-wing extremism. As the 1930s wore on and Hitler's power grew, anti-fascism came to dominate nearly all aspects of Soviet foreign policy, cultural exchange and collaboration included, as Stalin alternately tried to curry support in the West and rally his own people together for a war he saw as inevitable (though, as his military unpreparedness for the actual German invasion of 1941 suggests, not necessarily imminent). Foreign interactions were only useful so much as they explicitly strengthened or benefited the Soviet state – ultimately encouraging a sort of cultural isolationism, long before the Cold War, that left archivists at the State Film Fond cut off from their Western contemporaries from its inception.

In the summer of 1936, Iris Barry and John Abbott, co-founders of MOMA's Film Library in New York, went on a tour of several European nations, hoping to establish contact with their counterparts abroad and, if possible, grow MOMA's new film collection by arranging to acquire or trade for prints. They found at least varying degrees of success in France, Germany and Poland: in Paris, they met both Henri Langlois and Georges Franju for the first time, giving the young enthusiasts advice on organizing their desired cinèmathèque and justifying its necessity to the French government;

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in Berlin they were greeted enthusiastically at the Reichsfilmarchiv, and made arrangements to acquire numerous examples of renowned German art films. But upon arriving in Moscow, hoping to acquire copies of early, avant-garde works by Eisenstein, Vertov, Pudovkin, and others which had been exhibited and praised by Western cinephiles during their runs in New York and London in the 1920s, Barry and Abbott were almost completely stymied.⁹⁶

For the better part of a week, despite advance warning of their arrival and numerous calls to his office, Boris Shumyatsky simply refused to take a meeting with the pair. Finally speaking to them on the phone, Shumyatsky informed Barry that the USSR could not possibly cooperate because it did not have its own archive in order, and could therefore not properly locate the films MOMA was asking for, or arrange for duplicate prints to be made for exchange. The State Film Fond could not possibly help until construction was completed – in two years. While it's certainly true that construction had only begun in Belye Stolby a few months earlier, and the state's film holdings were not properly cataloged and accounted for, it seems terribly unlikely that the Mosfilm studios were in such disarray that they could not even locate prints of *Battleship Potemkin* or Pudovkin's *Mother* – two of the films Barry and Abbott most desired. Indeed, Barry dismisses Shumyatsky's assertion as “nonsense” and claims that she and Abbott already knew exactly where the prints they wanted were – probably thanks to their personal acquaintance with Eisenstein.⁹⁷

There are any number of reasons that could explain Shumyatsky's dismissive attitude toward Barry and Abbott, not least of which being that MOMA was primarily interested in the “formalist” directors for whom Shumyatsky had such a strong personal and political disdain. After the success of *Chapaev*, *Jolly Fellows* and the 1936 blockbuster musical-comedy *Circus*, Shumyatsky's anti-formalist campaign and vision of a “cinema for the millions” was at its peak – making Barry's request for works

⁹⁶ Houston, *Keepers of the Frame*, 20.

⁹⁷ File 05-12A, Barry Collection, MOMA.

from 1920s auteurs and pre-revolutionary cinema, referring to them explicitly as “representative” of Soviet film, spectacularly ill-timed and poorly phrased. When, shortly before Barry and Abbott left the USSR, Shumyatsky (through his assistant; he never actually met in person with the couple) finally offered copies of a few prints, they were all examples of relatively recent, Stalin-approved adventure films by directors who had, by 1936, transitioned into the aesthetic of socialist realism – e.g. Fredrikh Ermler's *Fragment of an Empire* (1929), Ilya Trauberg's *China Express* (1929). These were “representative,” forerunners of the new, Stalinist cinema, not the daring avant-garde experiments that Barry and Abbott remembered. Spreading revolutionary principles through revolutionary art was no longer a priority of the state. After attending a few screenings of current Soviet films – including *Nightingale*, *Little Nightingale*, a trifling socialist realism drama about female factory employees during the failed revolution of 1905, which primarily existed to show off an early two-color process developed by GUKF – Barry somewhat cannily recognized the shift that had occurred in the Soviet film industry under Shumyatsky: “they are no longer trying particularly to make films to impress the non-Soviet world.”⁹⁸

It was not necessarily the place of the new State Film Fond to suit the needs of the non-Soviet world, either. Offering prints (still valuable production assets, making use of the the Union's limited supply of film stock) of any kind, in return for nothing but the altruistic benefit of cultural exchange, would not have been an enticing offer to Party officials in the benchmark-obsessed economic world of Stalin's Five-Year Plans. The idea of a foot-for-foot exchange of film was at one point raised by Shumyatsky, apparently at the behest of VGIK, the State Institute of Cinematography, which would have been interested in prints of American and European films for teaching purposes. However, Barry makes no further mention of this in her accounts of the 1936 trip; what films VGIK specifically was

⁹⁸ Files 05-12A and 06-11, Barry Collection, MOMA.

requesting, or whether MOMA ended up sending anything to the Soviets, is unclear.⁹⁹

Barry and Abbott would have another encounter with VGIK during their 10 days in the Soviet Union that speaks to some of the fundamental miscommunication at work in that time between Western and Soviet conceptions of film preservation. A young American in Moscow by the name of Jay Leyda, later to become one of the first and most prominent historians of Soviet film in the West, took Barry and Abbott to the school, where Leyda was at the time a student under Eisenstein. At VGIK they met Sergei Komarov, the professor who maintained the school's meager cinematheque. Barry assumed that Komarov, as an educator, film collector, and the likely source of the request for American prints, would be more sympathetic to their cause – and while Komarov did, by Barry's account, enthusiastically listen to Barry and Abbott's plans for the MOMA film library, he expressed confusion at the notion that Hollywood studios and private collectors might donate their materials to an archive without an explicit deposit obligation, or that MOMA might in turn seek to make those films available to the public without cost. This was beyond his conception of how cultural institutions operated in his own country, or in the vision of profit-driven capitalist societies he had been provided under twenty years of Bolshevik rule.¹⁰⁰

Barry and Abbott left the USSR without any Soviet films in tow. Through their friendship with Leyda and Eisenstein, they were later able to acquire copies of some of the 1920s works they had been pursuing for MOMA's film library: including Pudovkin's 1925 short film *Chess Fever*, Dovzhenko's *Arsenal* (1929), and *Battleship Potemkin*. However, none of these exchanges appear to have involved the State Film Fond or Belye Stolby: the print of *Arsenal* was received through Amkino, the New-York based Soviet organization responsible for distributing Russian films in America, while MOMA's first print of *Battleship Potemkin* was made at the Reichsfilmarchiv, which by Eisenstein's own initiative

⁹⁹ File 05-12A, Barry Collection, MOMA.

¹⁰⁰ File 05-12A, Barry Collection, MOMA.

actually had the original camera negative of his film.¹⁰¹

When Barry and Abbott, along with representatives from the British Film Institute, Cinémathèque Française and the Reichsfilmarchiv met in Paris in June of 1938 to found the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAPF), the Soviets were not invited.¹⁰² I can only speculate at the reasons for this. Perhaps the chilly reception and disorganization Barry and Abbott had witnessed in Moscow two years previous deterred any practical thought of cooperation with the State Film Fond. Perhaps the strained diplomatic relations between the United States and the USSR (U.S. state department personnel stationed in Moscow were fully aware of and horrified by Stalin's ongoing purges, and actually avoided interacting with Soviet officials as much as possible) discouraged the ability of an American cultural institution to cooperate on an international level with the Soviets.¹⁰³ Perhaps they simply had no contact in the USSR - Leyda had returned to the U.S. in 1936, and even Shumyatsky, unresponsive and disinterested though he had been, wasn't available, having been arrested a few months previous. His successor, Dukelsky, likely would not have known nor cared who Barry and Abbott were.

In any case, even if they had been invited, it is highly probable that the Soviets would have declined to participate in this first FIAPF meeting, especially considering the presence of the Reichsfilmarchiv. For the better part of a decade, the Soviet Union's foreign relations had been defined by attempts to curb the spread of German fascism. Through the Communist International (or Comintern), the Soviet-founded international organization originally founded to organize Communist Party branches in foreign nations, Stalin had increasingly turned away from the revolutionary goal of provoking working-class uprisings in other European nations. Instead, he looked to consolidate his own

¹⁰¹ Letter from Jay Leyda to Iris Barry (undated), File 05-15, Barry Collection, MOMA.

¹⁰² Houston, *Keepers of the Frame*, 60.

¹⁰³ This strain and its affect on MOMA's relations with the Soviet Union in particular is discussed in a letter from Alfred Barr to Jay Leyda, June 20, 1934, found in the Jay Si-Lan Chen Leyda Papers and Photographs, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU.

international influence over that of Hitler's, even if it required political alliance with factions that had been deemed enemies of the cause under hardline Marxism-Leninism. "Class collaboration," a practice explicitly condemned by the Comintern in the years of the First World War, was now encouraged to allow for more moderate leftist elements to be drawn into the Comintern fold. Social democrats, liberal intellectuals, and others who had feared the violent repercussions of the Russian Revolution were now solicited by the Stalinized Party, their often middle-class economic positions overlooked in the name of bolstering an international coalition against Hitler.¹⁰⁴

At the Seventh Congress of the Comintern in July of 1935, there was a noticeable lack of anti-imperialist rhetoric compared to years past, as Stalin courted the favor of imperialist powers like Britain and France. Only a month earlier, Stalin had signed a "mutual security pact" with France, whose government was increasingly concerned about the safety of the territory in the Rhineland they had won in World War I. When the French elections of spring 1936 were won by the Popular Front, a leftist coalition combining the forces of various socialist and working-class groups from radical to bourgeois, they did so on a platform that barely emphasized progressive social issues and instead stressed "collective security," an echo, however intentional, of Stalin's own language from the time. The Comintern encouraged communists in Spain to pursue a similar strategy, toning down revolutionary rhetoric in order to appeal to socialists and centrists. However, the election of a moderate Popular Front government in Spain in 1936 backfired spectacularly, as the previous, ultra-right-wing government had effectively radicalized the working class, leading to strikes and popular violence that continued even after the communist-sympathizing Popular Front was in place; despite the best efforts of the Comintern, Spanish workers remained essentially out of their control. Unable to calm the situation, the Popular Front was overthrown by General Franco's military coup in July of 1936, a major

¹⁰⁴ Duncan Hallas, *The Comintern* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008), 145-146.

victory for the European right wing.¹⁰⁵

Stalin's actions during the ensuing Spanish Civil War indicated the complex depth of the Soviet Union's anti-Hitler efforts. Publicly, the Soviet Union threw its full support behind the Spanish Republic and the many communist partisans fighting against Franco. Indeed, the Soviets were the republic's primary military supplier throughout the war, providing arms, ammunition, and even Comintern "volunteers." However, behind closed doors, Stalin was maneuvering far more cautiously, with a constant eye on Germany. Shortly after his coup, General Franco was heavily relying on troops from Spanish Morocco to fend off Republican forces; meanwhile, the French held in prison a man named Abd-el-Krim, who had inspired rebellions for independence in both French and Spanish Morocco in the 1920s. Had the newly-minted French Popular Front government released Krim, Morocco almost certainly would've declared independence again, and cut off Franco's supply of Moorish soldiers. The French, however, had no interest in losing their own stake in Morocco. Even though an anti-imperialist revolution in Morocco suited traditional Bolshevik ideals, Stalin's long-term plans for security against Hitler required strong relations with both the French and British Empires – and so Stalin never pushed the French to release Krim. Similarly, the Comintern repeatedly urged the Spanish Republicans not to deploy the Spanish Navy, most of which had mutinied against Franco. The British and French had joined a "non-intervention" naval patrol with Italy and Germany around Spain, and a republican naval force would surely have run afoul of these patrols, perhaps drawing Britain or France into the conflict more directly on Franco's side – a risk Stalin was loathe to encourage. A cooperative attitude toward Britain and France, even as they pursued diplomatic tactics of appeasement toward Hitler, was more important for Stalin than protecting communists from violence and suppression worldwide.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis*, 107; Hallas, *The Comintern*, 149-154.

¹⁰⁶ Hallas, *The Comintern*, 155-156.

Stalin's maneuvers in foreign policy are a reflection of the steady contraction of politics and culture in the 1930s from revolutionary internationalism to Soviet nationalism. "Soviet patriotism," or *narodnost'*, became one of the primary tenets of Stalinism, emphasizing loyalty to the Soviet state (and, through the cult of personality that effectively conflated him with the state, Stalin) over abstract class-based affiliations. Even slogans and propaganda still aimed at the world proletariat through the Comintern began to turn more and more to Stalin's policy of "Socialism in One Country:" a position the General Secretary had originally articulated in a 1926 article "On the Question of Leninism," holding that the communist revolution could still be successful in one, internally stable state (such as the Soviet Union) despite the apparent absence of a world revolution to permanently unshackle the working class. While "socialism in one country" had essentially started as an ideological assurance to the working class that Marxism-Leninism had not failed, it increasingly became a tool to push Soviet nationalism: in a large piece in the popular periodical *Bolshevik* from November 1934, an anonymous author called for even members of the working class abroad to consider the Soviet Union their motherland. Within the Party, "internationalism" came to refer more to multiethnic harmony between the different republics of the Soviet Union, rather than cooperation with revolutionary movements in other countries.¹⁰⁷

On the cultural front, *narodnost'* meant the creation and enforcement of a national artistic tradition. Socialist realism served as the template for new, contemporary works, but extending and legitimizing Soviet nationalism required stretching back into pre-revolutionary Russian culture to establish a continuity of national character. Just as Party historians had been encouraged to develop a heroic narrative that culminated in the Stalinist state, artists, writers, filmmakers and other cultural workers were encouraged to incorporate classical motifs and heroes from Russian folklore and history into their work. Pre-revolutionary theatrical productions like those of Chekhov, Gogol and Pushkin

¹⁰⁷ Brandenberger, 98, 107.

were revived; new works that made light of Russian tradition were soundly repressed, as happened with Demian Bedny's comic opera *The Bogatyr's*. As Evgeny Dobrenko writes, “Bedny wrongly assumed that one could mock the Russian past in 1936 as he had in 1919, or even 1929.”¹⁰⁸

Shumyatsky's push for individual heroism on the screen may have been a result of his focus on Hollywood methodology, but it was also ideologically in keeping with *narodnost'*. Single men and women who accomplished monumental tasks were often put forward to bolster certain qualities of the “Soviet” national character. Military figures like Chapaev, or the seven air force pilots who rescued the Arctic-stranded research vessel “Cheliuskin” in Oct. 1933, were praised for their bravery and unflinching commitment to the Soviet state in the face of death. In fact, Stalin created a new military honor, called the Order of the Hero of the Soviet Union, specifically to reward the “Cheliuskin” pilots; and Shumyatsky sponsored a film, *Cheliuskin* (1934) to further mythologize their efforts.¹⁰⁹ In August 1935, a coal miner named Andrei Stakhanov reputedly mined over 102 metric tons of coal in a six-hour shift – over fourteen times his quota – becoming an instant celebrity and role model for Soviet diligence and productivity. The ensuing “Stakhanovite” movement, bolstered by countless newsreels and propaganda films detailing similar feats of individual over-achievement, became a cultural touchstone of Soviet patriotism through economic efficiency, an ideological windfall for Stalin.¹¹⁰

With *narodnost'* in full swing, even cultural efforts that appeared an attempt at international collaboration were manipulated to the favor of Soviet nationalism. For instance, the first-ever Moscow International Film Festival, held in March 1935 was mostly “international” in the sense that it attempted, quite transparently, to legitimize the aesthetic of socialist realism on the world stage. The entire festival was posited by the state press as a celebration, not of international cinema, but of the fifteenth anniversary of the official nationalization of the Soviet film industry in August 1919.

¹⁰⁸ Clark and Dobrenko, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 250.

¹⁰⁹ Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis*, 72-74.

¹¹⁰ Beumers, *A History of Russian Cinema*, 76.

Eisenstein was installed as the festival's jury president, despite having been viciously attacked by Leonid Trauberg, the Vasilyevs and other Party-favored filmmakers at the All-Union Creative Conference of Workers in Soviet Cinema only two months previous – as the symbolic head of the artistic old guard, his (almost certainly coerced) endorsement of the new guard would validate the industry's transition to socialist realism to film enthusiasts and artists abroad. In the end, the festival's first prize was jointly awarded to three home-grown submissions from Lenfilm: Shumyatsky-favorite Fredrikh Ermler's *Peasants*, Trauberg's *Maxim's Youth*, and, of course, *Chapaev*.¹¹¹ The festival wouldn't be held again until 1959.

Even as Stalin attempted to court Western anti-fascists on the political front, rallying his own people together under the banner of *narodnost'* necessitated a distancing from Western culture. Foreign writers and intellectuals were only useful so long as they explicitly supported the Soviet cause. For instance, in 1937, Stalin invited Lion Feuchtwanger, a prominent German-Jewish writer who had been fiercely critical of the Nazi Party, to tour the Soviet Union. Feuchtwanger's published account of his journey, *Moscow 1937*, essentially ignored the brutality of Stalin's state, even excusing the purges and the Moscow show trials as necessary for the Soviet Union's new age of “rebuilding.” Many of Feuchtwanger's quotes were prominently circulated in the state press – however, in a problematic portion of his book, the writer had high praise for *Bezhin Meadow*, still under production at the time, pieces of which Eisenstein had showed the visiting writer. Despite Feuchtwanger's overall support (even apologia) for the Soviet state, this mistake could not be tolerated: in an article for *Izvestiya*, Shumyatsky wrote that Feuchtwanger's statements about *Bezhin Meadow* were “a disgraceful attempt to appeal to foreign public opinion regarding our assessments of Soviet films.”¹¹²

¹¹¹ Second prize went to René Clair's *Le dernier milliardaire* and third prize to Walt Disney, for his contribution to animation – likely an effort by Eisenstein, who had befriended Disney during his years in the West, to assert at least some of his own taste into the Party-monitored proceedings. See Taylor and Christie, *The Film Factory*, 346.

¹¹² Clark and Dobrenko, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 244.

Participation in an international cultural organization that tolerated the Nazis in any form, as FIAF essentially did, ran counter to the very idea of *narodnost'*. International collaboration with institutions who were associating with Germans, wasn't just a practical, political nuisance – it may very well have been taken as a traitorous and unpatriotic act, in exceedingly dangerous times. Rather than taking this isolationism as a hindrance, *narodnost'* further encouraged the separation as a sign of national superiority: the State Film Fond didn't need to communicate with Western archives, because of course its operations were already, in the hands of Soviet workers, bigger, better, the most advanced they could possibly be – even if the archive barely existed yet. It would take two decades, and Stalin's death, before international relations would thaw to the point that Gosfilmofond joined FIAF, in 1957. By that point, the lingering effects of *narodnost'* had already instilled a sense of independence at Belye Stolby.

VII. Conclusion

As dictators often are, Stalin was all too keen on how he would be perceived by history. When given unprecedented access to post-Soviet Russian archives in the early 1990s, Jonathan Brent, director of Yale University Press' *Annals of Communism* series, noted Stalin's obsession with making comments on the margins of official documents, personal papers, and even philosophical texts. The response from a Moscow archivist, when Brent asked about these annotations, astutely spots the scribbles as just a piece of Stalin's long con:

Stalin didn't think his colleagues would read [his notes]. But he thought history would. Even from before the Revolution. He lived for history. He saw himself as a historical actor.¹¹³

The latter metaphor, of history as theater, is effective. Under Stalin's totalitarian society, every individual and institution had a part to play. That extended even to film preservation: the task to be performed at Belye Stolby was as carefully scripted as the movies the archive was intended to house. In its little corner of the stage, the facility later to become Gosfilmofond would centralize the nation's scattered collections and store the cinema for the millions, while carefully and intentionally separating that cinema from the millions.

Archival practice does not emerge in a vacuum. The questions I have tried to address of the

¹¹³ Brent, *Inside the Stalin Archives*, 302.

historical, cultural and political circumstances behind the creation of a major film archive remain topical because their results can linger, in ways both obvious and not. Phenomenal work has been done by Russian archivists to reverse the covert, closed nature of Soviet-era archives and increase international access to the Russian historical record. Still, for those outside of Russia, complications may yet arise – obscure cataloging that precludes subject or keyword searching, content damaged from physical deterioration or censorship, entrenched, decades-old habits of reference and description that are not conducive to long-distance digital access, interference from officials in the Ministry of Culture – that are alien to our experience elsewhere.

But this is part of the smokescreen that Stalin invented for history: crafting a society in which isolationism lingered. Increased communication, collaboration, and understanding of Soviet operations and the motivations behind them can help push through that veil. Understanding the role Belye Stolby played in Stalinist society will only help us to see further through the fiction that Stalin purposefully set up for the future.

Author's note on sources: In my paper, particularly in Chapter II, “A Dark Cellar on Sergeivsky Street,” I have drawn heavily from Vladimir Malyshev's *Gosfil'mofond: zemlianichnaia poliana*, the only readily available, comprehensive written history of Gosfilmofond. Malyshev is a former director of the archive and as such had access to Soviet-era records beyond my practical reach at the time of this writing; but that position also makes him perhaps not the most neutral source regarding the archive's past operations. For instance, he makes the somewhat dubious claim that not a single reel of film (among tens of thousands) was lost in the entire, massively disruptive process of evacuating Belye Stolby and returning from Central Asia during WWII (see pp. 72-73). I have attempted to only quote facts that Malyshev in turn cites from specific documents, and avoided his more colorful commentary.

Author's note on transliteration and translation: In transliterating names and certain words from Cyrillic to Roman lettering, I have attempted to remain both consistent and as accurate as possible to pronunciation, while hewing to commonly accepted spellings of prominent figures (e.g. “Eisenstein” instead of “Eizenshtein,” “Shumyatsky” instead of “Shumiatskii”). Any quotes from Vladimir Malyshev's *Gosfil'mofond: zemlianichnaia poliana* are my own translation from the original Russian.

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