IMAGES OF POWER AND THE POWER OF IMAGES: EISENSTEIN'S **ALEXANDER NEVSKY**

> "Sights and sounds pointed the way to God, not philosophical speculation or literary subtlety."
> Billington, **The Icon and the Axe**

Embedded in the title of this conference, "imagining Russia," are two vantage points from which the gaze, and the imagination, proceed. One is Russia as imagined by those outside her borders; the other is Russia as imagined by Russians. The constructs differ, at times significantly, and perhaps some of the confusion to which Mark Von Hagen alluded when he spoke of our often frustrated desire to believe that Russia is like us and will, when it changes, change toward us, derives from the our failure to understand Russia as Russians imagine her.

Unlike many of the speakers at this conference, who construed its title broadly, I chose to confine myself to a narrower focus, and to consider images, specifically the images Sergei Eisenstein created in ***Alexander Nevsky***, and how he used the capabilities of cinema to portray power. In the Soviet Union of the 1930s, as indeed before and long after, cinema's unique combination of mass medium, art form, propaganda mechanism and entertainment industry made it a continuing battlefield for conflicts of major ideological and artistic significance. ***Nevsky*** holds particular interest because of its accessibility and genuine popularity: it alone, of all Eisenstein's films, achieved widespread success. To be sure, much of the reason for its popularity was circumstantial: if the Nazi-Soviet Pact took it off screens shortly after it first appeared, the Nazi invasion guaranteed not only its distribution but also its acute relevance.

I would suggest, however, that an additional reason for its appeal to a mass audience rests on the impact of Eisenstein's images, especially in combination with

Prokofiev' s music. Movies influence viewers on several levels, not all of them rational or intellectual. The angles from which characters are lit and shot, the clothing they wear, what actors look like and their body language, the spaces they inhabit, and the composition of frames all influence audiences as much as, if not more than, dialogue. In the case of ***Alexander Nevsky*** Eisenstein relied not only on politically-mapped ideological narrative patterns, the dominant Stalinist myths of the 1930s, but more significantly on multiple visual traditions to portray his heroes and his villains. As a result, he spoke to mass audiences in a film language that - perhaps for the first time - they understood, and to which they responded with enthusiasm. [David Brandenburger has data on audience response to the film, which I will append.]

Eisenstein came to the making of ***Nevsky*** reluctantly, after his disastrous failure with ,***Bezhin Meadow***, the film about Pavlik Morozov that was banned and then destroyed. On offer in 1938 were two biographical subjects, the 13th century prince Nevsky or the 17th century peasant Ivan Susanin, who gave his life for tsar Mikhail Romanov. Eisenstein preferred Nevsky: the less documentation, the more freedom he would have to create his own Nevsky, his own Tatars, his own Teutonic knights, and his own "narod." Fully alive to the growing threat of Nazi Germany, Eisenstein's intention was explicitly political: "We want our film not only to mobilize . . . those who are in the very thick of the world-wide struggle against Fascism, but to bring spirit, courage and confidence to those parts of the world where Fascism seems as indestructible as the Order of Knights appeared in the 13th century." [Cited by Taylor 86]

History suited his purposes, and where it did not, he ignored or revised it. Certainly by the time Eisenstein shot ***Alexander Nevsky***, in the summer of 1938, the Stalinist restoration of Russian national heritage and powerful autocrats had been going on for several years, rescuing them from the obscurity post-revolutionary historiography reserved for individual leaders and restoring them to celebrity and positions of honor. Stalin, in arrogating Nevsky as patriot and military leader, emulated a long tsarist

tradition of appropriating Russian history. Peter the Great himself extended the cult of Nevsky by planting wooden crosses near the Neva to commemorate Nevsky's defeat of the Swedes, by founding the Alexander Nevsky monastery in 1710, by transporting Nevsky's relics from Vladimir to Petersburg in a ceremony attended by the royal family, one thousand monks, priests and pilgrims, and six thousand spectators. Peter's chief ideologist Feofan Prokopovich called Peter a "living mirror of Alexander. . . . Where Alexander planted a small seed, Peter has cultivated a great meadow." [Cited by Hughes 276] Catherine the Great followed suit. And so did Stalin. In many ways Eisenstein's "devotional treatment of the past" [Goodwin 157] conformed to that tradition.

Although the heroes of 1930s films were relatively diverse compared with those of the post-war years, when every cinematic historical protagonist, whatever his vocation, signified an idealized Stalin, Eisenstein's Nevsky bears a resemblance to other historical heroes of the late 1930s. The noble hero of Pudovkin's 1939 ***Minin and Pozharsky*** , for instance, is a progressive and patriotic prince who makes common cause with a commoner to fight the Poles in the 17th century; he acts on behalf of the masses. Like ***Nevsky***, Petrov's 1937 ***Peter the First*** and Dovzhenko's 1939 ***Shchors*** feature powerful, charismatic protagonists.

Nor was ***Alexander Nevsky*** the only Soviet film specifically concerned with fascism: five in addition to ***Nevsky*** appeared between September 1938 and March 1939. The others, however, dealt with the struggle against Naziism within Germany itself; they were intended for export, and either made no mention of the possibility of a German invasion of the USSR or dismissed it as an act of aggression Soviet forces could easily repel.

Eisenstein conceived ***Alexander Nevsky*** within the context of what Kate Clark called the "pseudofolk" forms characteristic of the 1930s, when folklore was incorporated in the myths of the "great family" in order to legitimize the Stalinist leadership. He situated Nevsky within the "two dominant analogies" of Soviet culture of the decade, the

family - Stakhanovites as loyal scions - and tribe - Russian unity based on long established bonds. As David Bordwell notes, Nevsky functions as both father-figure and tribal chieftain. [Bordwell 211]

Yet Eisenstein's Nevsky is distinct from the other film heroes of the day, as he is distinct from any of Eisenstein's other cinematic protagonists. And his distinction stems from Eisenstein's cooptation of Russian orthodox iconography into the princely portrait. While the Orthodox church began to observe Nevsky's death-day as a saint's day in the late 14th century, and canonized Nevsky in 1547, the autocratic tradition from Peter the Great to Stalin had minimized Nevsky's piety in favor of emphasizing his military dynamism and power. (Peter, for example, shifted Alexander's feast-day from the date of his burial to the date of the Treaty of Nystad.)

Eisenstein's Nevsky is as much Christ as Cesar. He is ascetic and stern, shown within a democratic brotherhood of fishermen against a background of natural elements: water, land and skies. (The Mongol warlord who tries to entice him into alliance stands against bleak, featureless backgrounds.) He rules a community of young and old men, yet he is, as Goodwin writes, "above carnality," which is reserved for the footsoldiers who laugh at the story of the hare who traps and deflowers the fox. He is above romance, which is reserved for the two bogatyr/soldiers, Buslai and Oleksich.

"If the icon gave divine sanction to human authority," Billington writes, "it also served to humanize divine authority." (31) In the film as completed, Nevsky has no biological family. (Eisenstein originally planned to end with Nevsky dying, surrounded by wife and offspring; after Stalin's reproving comment, "Such a good prince must not die," Eisenstein scrapped his plan.) But as he rides, triumphant, into Novgorod, he is happily encumbered by three clinging children, scions of his national family, recipients of the same paternal concern and affection so often project in the pictures of Stalin, friend of Soviet children.

This is not meant to suggest that Eisenstein lost his dislike of clericalism, and of the institutions of religion. The traitor monk Ananias is as loathsome and as slyly self-protective as the tsarist priest aboard the battleship Potemkin, and Eisenstein fiercely mocks both the rituals and the personnel of Teutonic Catholicism. But the visualization of the film's protagonists - the wounded citizen of Pskov, the women seeking their men on the battlefield, and above all Nevsky - overwhelmingly refers to and reflects the dematerialized, stylized, flattened imagery of the Russian Orthodox Church, with its "controlled emotional intensity." (Billington 30). James Goodwin writes that Nevsky's "saintliness represented no obstacle for Soviet audiences, since adoration toward Stalin was beocming common in the media" (159). Rather, Eisenstein taps into the specific Orthodox traditions of worship and veneration that the cult of personality itself exploited and relied upon.

Certainly Eisenstein chose his image-patterns consciously. In his 1939 essay on ***Alexander Nevsky***, "The Structure of the Film," he replaced the vocabulary of earlier theoretical writings, discarding concepts of conflict, discontinuity and collective pathos, with an emphasis on organic structure, unity and ecstasy. Gone was the active dialectic that shaped structure and composition in ***Strike***, ***Potemkin*** and ***October***, that exploited above all dramatic montage to produce an ideological effect of shock at the cognitive level. In ***Nevsky***, Eisenstein's goal had become "ecstasy at a level of depth psychology." Writing about El Greco and the Mexican muralists, Eisenstein identified ecstasy with frontality, "a burning look" and "hysterical" bodily consolutions (cited by Bordwell 215); shooting ***Nevsky***, he repeats again and again that same configuration of stance and gaze, of stable frame composition, of static solidity of pose.

Thus the class conflict so prominent in Eisenstein's earlier films here plays third or fourth fiddle, embodied only in the merchants who think they can buy off the Teutonic knights and ensure trade continuity. They are out of step with their environment, as much

visually as spiritually, dwarfed by the cathedral that "broods over" the proceedings (Taylor 90).

Alexander Nevsky sustains the premise that only a strong leader can defend the nation against enemies, enemies from without and - worse - from within. The Teutons wear fearsome masks but their bared faces are weak, dissolute and cowardly. The domestic traitors - Tverdilo, Pskov's mayor, and the monk Ananias - are much more dangerous and contemptible, in keeping with the mythology of the 1930s.

Eisenstein himself explained the success of ***Nevsky*** as "a matter of shamanism," by which he meant the hypnotic impact produced by its unity of action, with each part of the film concerned with "the enemy and the need to beat him." I would argue, however, that its hypnotic effect derives more from its visual images and its music than from its script, dialogue and structure. The script, coauthored by Eisenstein and Petr Pavlenko, a literary apparatchik who later wrote the script for ***The Fall of Berlin***, suppresses the actual historic bond between Russian orthodoxy and Russian nationalism. But the two-dimension figures, shot frontally, reenforce it, confirming Billington's explanation that "each icon offered not a message for thought but an illustration for reassurance of God' s power in and over history, for men who might otherwise have been completely mired in adversity and despair." (35)

The realistic mold of socialist realism, which determined the aesthetics of most 1930s cinema and within which mythology disguised itself as fact, hardly fit Eisenstein's cinematic style. In ***Bezhin Meadow***, a film dealing with contemporary Soviet life, Eisenstein's Pavlik Morozov looks like a saint, his hair floating nimbus-like around his head. The state reacted immediately and vicious to Eisenstein's sharp tilt away from socialist realist ***byt*** toward what Maia Turovskaia calls "sacral subject:" it prohibited release of a film that exposed the mythological bases of Soviet power. But three years later the system required historical legend, and gladly accepted Eisenstein's mythology of that merging of saint and caesar, Alexander Nevsky.

Conference post-scripts: David B. raised the question of how much access to iconic imagery Soviet citizens had by the mid 1930s': i.e., given the strenuous attempts to keep people, young ones especially, out of churches, would these images (and also the bells, closely associated with church tradition) still resonate among them as Eisenstein clearly hoped they would. He mentioned that in the viewer responses to the film which he read, no one mentioned this dimension or aspect of the film - though that scarcely surprises me, it would be much more startling if they did articulate such reactions. There is also the complex question of the degree to which Stalin himself coopted that tradition of imagery; certainly the shot of Nevsky with the kids looks like many of the photographs of Stalin with kids on his knee.