

ISSE meetings in Britain to screen *Tsar to Lenin*

Documenting the last days of Tsarist Russia and the birth of the new Soviet Union

Richard Tyler
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This week the International Students for Socialist Equality are organising a series of meetings on campuses in Glasgow, Cardiff, Manchester and Brighton to mark the 90th anniversary of the Russian Revolution with a special showing of Herman Axelbank's film, Tsar to Lenin. The following is a review of this remarkable documentary.

Tsar to Lenin documents the end of Imperial Russia, the October Revolution led by Lenin and Trotsky, and the emergence of the new Soviet government headed by the Bolsheviks.

The following is the introduction to *Tsar to Lenin*, with text and narration by Max Eastman:

"This picture has taken 13 years to prepare. The films come from the ends of the earth. They were made by over a hundred different cameramen during the revolution from one hundred different angles.

"Some were taken by the Tsar's royal photographer, some by the Tsar himself, some by the Soviet photographer, some by the German General Staff, some by the staff photographers with the French, English and Japanese armies of Occupation. Others were taken by American War Correspondents and still others by private adventurers.

"Some of the pictures were designed to be used as propaganda for the White Armies, others for the Red. Every event recorded in this film is authentic and has been placed in the correct chronological sequence, without any attempt to take sides in that bloody conflict, or defend any man or any class of men."

The striving for an objective portrayal of one of the most significant events of the twentieth century—the

first time the working class had conquered power—meant that Axelbank's film showed the central role played by Leon Trotsky, as co-leader of the revolution and head of the Red Army.

This earned the film and its maker the hatred of Stalin and the bureaucracy he headed, with Axelbank suffering intimidation and thefts from his archive, and a later fire at his film storage facility.

At a time when official Soviet historiography had eliminated all references to Trotsky, Axelbank had assembled a documentary that provided incontrovertible proof of his essential role in the revolution and its subsequent defence against counter-revolutionary White armies and the six imperialist armies of intervention that tried to strangle the revolution at birth.

First shown at the height of the purges, in which hundreds and thousands of socialists who opposed Stalin were being liquidated, the film's premier at the Filmarte Theater in New York on March 6, 1937, was met by pickets from the pro-Stalin American Communist Party.

Herman Axelbank diligently applied his fascination with the ability of film to document great historical experiences, finding inspiration in the events of 1917 in Russia and their aftermath.

He came from the village of Novokonstantinov, which today is in the Ukraine, but in 1900, when he was born, was part of the Imperial Russian Empire of Tsar Nicholas II. The small village had a predominantly Jewish population. According to an 1899 record, of some 2,855 inhabitants more than 1,800 were Jews.

In 1909, Axelbank's father moved the family to New York, like many Russian émigrés seeking a better life in the United States.

Since childhood, Axelbank had been fascinated by filmmaking, and this passionate interest was to mark his adult life. In 1916, the young Axelbank started working as an office boy for the Goldwyn Picture Corporation.

In 1917, when news of the February Revolution reached New York, Axelbank recalled telling a co-worker, "I wish I could take moving pictures over there; we don't have any of our own [American Revolution] in 1775."

In 1918, Axelbank listened to a lecture given by the American journalist John Reed, whose first-hand account of the revolution was later portrayed in his book, *Ten Days that Shook the World*. Axelbank's film also includes footage of Reed attending a meeting of the Communist International.

Luckily, Axelbank had made the acquaintance of a cameraman who had been commissioned to travel to eastern Europe. Scraping together money he borrowed from friends and pawning some of his most treasured possessions, he hired the cameraman to travel to Russia and film the unfolding events and their leading figures.

When the cameraman returned in 1922, Axelbank took possession of film showing Lenin and Trotsky speaking. He also now had footage from the Kronstadt Rebellion of March 1921 and the trial of the Socialist Revolutionaries of 1922. This formed the first reels of what was to become an extensive archive of film material documenting the last days of Tsarist Russia and the birth of the new Soviet Union.

Axelbank went on to acquire film that had been taken from the fronts of the various contending powers in World War I, as well as obtaining footage showing the Provisional Government that took office on the abdication of Tsar Nicholas. He was also able to purchase contemporary material shot during the October Revolution itself and from the funeral of Lenin in 1924.

In 1928, Axelbank contacted the eminent American socialist Max Eastman, hiring him to write and narrate the text to accompany the film. Eastman, who translated Trotsky's seminal *History of the Russian Revolution*, travelled to the Turkish island of Prinkipo, where he filmed Trotsky in exile with his family.

Axelbank and Eastman then worked together for more than a year editing and refining the footage.

Throughout his life, Axelbank continued to collect footage documenting the Soviet Union, his archive finally encompassing some 266 reels containing more than 250,000 feet of film. The first 40 reels, covering a span from 1901 to 1937, contain material that is extremely rare and some that is unique.

Incorporating this footage into *Tsar to Lenin* has produced an exceptional film. It provides eyewitness testimony to the greatest event of the last century.

University of Sussex

Wednesday, November 28, 5:30 p.m.

University Conference Centre,
Level Three Bramber House,
Brighton

University of Glasgow

Thursday, November 29, 5:30 p.m.

Room 507 (Lecture Room C) Boyd Orr Building
Glasgow

University of Manchester

Friday, November 30, 6 p.m.

The International Society (opposite UMSU)
327 Oxford Road
Manchester



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact