

Tsar to Lenin premiered in Berlin

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An audience of well over a hundred attended the first public screening in Germany of the film *Tsar to Lenin* in Berlin on Saturday. The film is a unique document of the Russian Revolution of 1917, consisting of historical archive material assembled over years by the legendary film producer Herman Axelbank (1900-1979).

When the film was premiered in New York in 1937, the *New York Post*'s film critic called it "the most important and intriguing film in history." Soon after, however, the film fell into oblivion: the Stalinists sought to prevent showings of a film that truthfully depicted the role of Leon Trotsky and other leaders of the October Revolution, whom Stalin had exiled or murdered in the Great Purges. Later, the anti-communism of the McCarthy era and the Cold War kept the film out of theaters.

Christoph Dreier of the IYSSE (International Youth and Students for Social Equality), which organised the screening, opened the event in Berlin. David North, chairman of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site*, introduced the film.

North began by referring to the tragic shootings the day before at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut. The massacre claimed 28 victims, including 20 young children. North said that a society in which such massacres occur regularly is seriously ill. He pointed to the deep tensions and social divisions in American society, which find no progressive political outlet in the official two-party system.

North addressed the decline of political life in the United States, citing the drone war that has killed thousands, including women and children. Never before has an American president so openly ordered the killing of people, including American citizens.

Political decay is not confined to the US, North continued. He addressed the "Freedom Needs Assistance" appeal for intervention in Syria, supported by German celebrities and politicians, including leading

members of the Left Party, the Greens, the Social Democratic Party and the Christian Democratic Union.

"The level of political life in Germany must be very low if such a thing is possible in light of German history," North commented. He recalled how Hitler justified seizing Czechoslovakia by claiming he was defending the rights of the Sudeten-German population. "All those who call themselves leftists must ask: How many wars in the name of human rights are they prepared to assist? Next time round, a war with Iran? Afterwards, a war against China?"

These developments made it all the more appropriate to show *Tsar to Lenin*, North said. He noted that he first saw the film in 1974 in a small room with just a few audience members. He was immediately concerned about the fate of its irreplaceable footage. "It is a great movie," he said, "because it documents a great event. Axelbank depicts in the film the greatest event in world history."

Herman Axelbank had worked on the film for almost 20 years, from 1919 to 1937. "He was convinced throughout his life that Lenin and Trotsky were the major personalities and key leaders of the Russian revolution," North said.

Max Eastman wrote the film's outstanding commentary and provided the narration. The famous American revolutionary and socialist was a close friend of Trotsky. He had met Trotsky in Russia in 1922, was one of the first to defend him against Stalinist attacks and slander, and translated several of his works into English.

The film, North explained, commences with what seemed to be the unshakable power of Tsar Nicholas II and the 300-year-old Romanov dynasty. It goes on to show mass suffering and privation during World War I and the outbreak of the February 1917 revolution that overthrew the autocracy.

The film shows how the masses repeatedly came

onto the streets and ultimately brought Lenin and the Bolsheviks to power after Kerensky's provisional government proved incapable of meeting their demands. A juxtaposition of the first and final scenes of the film highlights the greatest social upheaval in history.

The film documents Trotsky's central role as a revolutionary leader of the masses, as the head of the Russian delegation in the peace negotiations at Brest-Litovsk, and as leader of the Red Army in the civil war. The film graphically shows the violence of the counterrevolutionary White forces against Red Army prisoners and civilians.

"There is no other film that shows the essential feature of a revolution as clearly as this," North said. "The revolution was, as they say in America, the real thing. It was a genuine social explosion which brought together all progressive elements of society under the farsighted Marxist leadership of the Bolshevik Party. This combination enabled the success of the Russian Revolution."

North concluded his introduction by recalling that a century ago the world was heading into a three-decade period, from 1914 to 1945, marked by war, revolution, counterrevolution, fascism, and monstrous human suffering. "Today," he declared, "we are moving again into such a period, and this time it must have a different outcome!"

A lively discussion followed the showing of the film. Many audience members purchased literature on the Russian revolution and copies of North's book, *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*.

Several of those in attendance expressed support for the film. One declared: "It is a good thing the film is being shown to inform people of what really happened. Many people think a revolution is not possible, but such notions are nurtured by historical falsifications. The actual course of events has been forgotten."



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