

Tsar to Lenin shown at UK's National Media Museum and the Cornerhouse

Our reporters
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Showings in Britain of Herman Axelbank's *Tsar to Lenin*, at the Cornerhouse cinema in Manchester May 27 and the National Media Museum in Bradford on June 1, attracted a combined audience of over 200.

Open since 1985, the Cornerhouse is Manchester's international centre for contemporary visual arts and independent film. On average, 30 titles are screened on its three screens every month.

Public demand saw the showing of *Tsar to Lenin* sold out within days of its being advertised—with demand for seats growing even after the Cornerhouse announced the performance was sold out on its website. To accommodate the 130 people who eventually attended, the showing was moved to a larger theatre.

Due to the film being shown on a public Bank Holiday, it was not possible for the cinema to host an introduction to the film or a question-and-answer session. The Socialist Equality Party and Mehring Books, owners and distributors of the film, organised a post-screening event in a nearby venue attended by some of those who attended the Cornerhouse showing.

A Saturday afternoon screening at the National Media Museum in Bradford, England, currently the UNESCO City of Film, attracted an audience of around 70 people, who afterwards participated in a wide-ranging question and answer session led by Paul Bond, an arts correspondent for the *World Socialist Web Site*.

In a short introduction to the film, Bond explained, "This is a cinematic record of one of the most important events in modern history; the Russian Revolution of 1917. Over the course of nearly 20 years (1919 to 1937), the film's producer, Herman Axelbank, collected nearly every important foot of newsreel relating to that first socialist revolution."

First released in 1937, *Tsar to Lenin* ranks among the greatest documentary films of the twentieth century,

Bond said. Narrated by the US radical intellectual Max Eastman, it presents an extraordinary cinematic account of the Russian Revolution—from the mass uprising that overthrew the centuries-old tsarist regime in February 1917, to the Bolshevik-led insurrection eight months later that established the first socialist workers' state, and the final victory in 1921 of the new Soviet regime over counterrevolutionary forces after a three-year-long civil war.

Axelbank was "driven by his conviction that the Russian Revolution, which began when he was just 17, was among the greatest events in world history. And further, there was his conviction that the two men who were its principal leaders, Lenin and Trotsky, were the political titans of the twentieth century."

"Today, under conditions where capitalism confronts its greatest crisis since the 1930s, the events of 1917 assume immense contemporary significance. *Tsar to Lenin* provides an unparalleled film record of a revolutionary movement, embracing millions, which 'shook the world' and changed the course of history," he concluded.

Following the screening of the film, members of a very attentive audience asked a diverse series of questions, as well as raising points concerning the technical aspects of the film itself.

Responding to one question concerning Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein's film *October* (1928) and explaining the impact of Stalinist falsifications, Bond said, "If you look at *October*—which is in many ways a magnificent film—it was dedicated to the workers of Petrograd. It's about the revolution in Petrograd. It's about the Petrograd soviet. Nowhere does it mention Leon Trotsky; the head of the Petrograd soviet.

"Even by 1928, it was becoming impossible to discuss Trotsky's role in the revolution. And I think

that also contributes to why Eastman narrates the film the way he does. It is an attempt at outlining what took place under conditions where it's already apparent that there's a falsification going on."

In response to a question comparing the Russian Revolution and events in Syria, Bond traced the unfolding of the so-called "Arab spring" and the efforts of the imperialist powers, following the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, to arm and train reactionary forces in the region to promote their own interests.

Speaking from the audience, SEP National Secretary Chris Marsden said, "If you look at *Tsar to Lenin*, you see a revolution. It's a mass movement of the proletariat, supported by the peasantry, which organised itself for the overthrow of the regime and dictated its own government in its own interests.

"And if you look at what's taking place in Syria, you see an operation largely organised by Washington to overthrow the Assad regime to install a client regime that will serve its interests, just as they did in Libya...

"It's an imperialist operation backed by the Saudi and Qatari monarchies, supported by Turkey and largely proceeding on sectarian lines—whipping up antagonisms between Sunni and Shia Muslims, which has a potentially devastating impact throughout the Middle East, not just in Syria but in Lebanon, in Iraq. And it should be opposed by the working class.

"The use of a term like 'revolution' in this context is a misnomer and only serves to confuse people. The Assad regime deserves to fall. But if the tsar had been overthrown by the German General Staff, you wouldn't have called it a revolution in Russia and you can't call this a revolution in Syria... The processes taking place in the Middle East represent the beginning of a revolutionary movement, but it is one that has so far run up against the absence of a socialist leadership... You have to look at what took place in Russia as an example of what should be done, as opposed to what is being done today."

One audience member thanked the SEP for "bringing this wonderful film to public attention."

Helen Goodway, English editor of Tadeeb International, an English-Urdu literary and cultural journal, described *Tsar to Lenin* as "a unique enterprise. Really, I have never seen anything like it. It had great clarity, and gives a clear exposition, blow by

blow, of what happened during the Russian Revolution—the whole sequence of events.

"What was so important was that Leon Trotsky was not air-brushed out of the film, which as the speaker pointed out, was what happened very soon afterwards. Here you have the completeness of his role... The purpose of the film was to tell the working class in the United States and the rest of the world the truth about these great events."

"It is important that this film is shown as widely as possible today," she added. "Knowledge of the world-transforming nature of that revolution, in the struggle for freedom and equality, should not be forgotten."

Riswana, a student, told the WSWS, "It was amazing of Axelbank to go through so much to get a film that perfectly explained the history of the Russian revolution in depth and was very exciting and to the point. What I understood was an eye-opener, a true picture. It was amazing what was going on."

Jonathan, an unemployed graduate, said, "It is clearly a masterful piece of filmmaking, still capable of captivating and inspiring an audience. Its contemporary relevance is inescapable at a time when class divides are coming ever more clearly in to focus. Witnessing a moment in history when the working masses rose up and took power strengthens my belief in the possibility of such an uprising in the future."



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