

Tsar to Lenin screens to sold out audiences in London and Manchester

Our reporters
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Cinemas in London and Manchester recently showed *Tsar to Lenin*—one of the most important documentaries ever made—to sold out audiences.

The documentary was shown on October 14 at HOME, Manchester’s centre for international contemporary art, theatre and film and at the Barbican Centre in London on October 22. The Barbican performing arts centre, which includes its cinema, is the largest of its kind in Europe.

In Manchester, Chris Marsden, the National Secretary of the Socialist Equality Party was invited to make a 10-minute introduction to the film. At the Barbican, veteran Trotskyist Barbara Slaughter gave an introduction.

Marsden said, “It is a testament to the enduring significance of this work that it features today in the HOME Cinema’s centenary commemoration of the October Revolution, alongside classic works such as Eisenstein’s *October*.

“Politically, it stands to this day as one of the most important documentaries ever made. And perhaps more so than ever, given the ahistoric or even nakedly anti-communist propaganda that has characterised the efforts of the BBC and so many others to mark the centenary.

“None of you would be here if you did not have strong feelings about the October Revolution—most, I hope, sympathy or possibly active support for the anti-war, socialist and internationalist perspective and vision that guided those who made that revolution. But even if your views are shaped by official political discourse, that the Russian Revolution was a tragic mistake, the intellectual, emotional and artistic pull of a heroic mass movement encompassing millions that altered the course of human history has brought you here.

“I will venture to suggest that, having seen *Tsar to Lenin*, any mistaken belief that October was somehow a putsch carried out by the Bolsheviks that scuppered a hitherto promising democratic overthrow of Tsarism, will

have been challenged, if not dispelled.”

Marsden explained that the film is the product of an extraordinary collaboration between two individuals: Herman Axelbank who, inspired by these historic events, set out to gather, by hook or by crook, footage of the events of 1917; and Max Eastman, at the time a supporter of the Bolshevik revolution.

Eastman had travelled to the Soviet Union in the 1920s and formed close political and personal relations with many of the leaders of the Soviet regime—above all, Leon Trotsky. Marsden noted, “Eastman is the narrator of *Tsar to Lenin*, and he does a superb job. But it must be stressed that the analysis that shapes the film’s structure belongs to Leon Trotsky. Co-leader with Lenin of October and leader of the Red Army during the events depicted, he went on to head the struggle to defend the programme of socialist internationalism against the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin. The film was completed in January 1931, one year after the publication of Trotsky’s monumental *History of the Russian Revolution*, which Eastman had translated.”

Tsar to Lenin’s subsequent fate was bound up with the growth of Stalinism. The documentary enjoyed a hugely successful opening on March 6, 1937, at the Filmarte Theatre on Fifty-Eighth Street in New York City. But it did so against the background of the Moscow Trials—the systematic frame-up and murder of Lenin’s closest collaborators by the Stalinist bureaucracy, centred on a frenzied campaign against Trotsky and the Left Opposition.

A massive campaign was launched to discredit the film and block its showing. This included threatening distributors that they would not be allowed to market Soviet films—such as those of Eisenstein—if they showed *Tsar to Lenin*. The film was killed dead and never had any run after that successful opening.

Marsden concluded his remarks saying, “*Tsar to Lenin*

makes no pretence of standing above the events it depicts, of a studied and invariably false impartiality. It is partisan, a socialist film. But it is not mere propaganda.

“Because it tells the truth, it is objective in a real sense. It has no reason to lie because, as Lenin insisted, nothing in politics, or art for that matter, is as powerful as the truth.

“And the truth *Tsar to Lenin* chronicles is how millions of workers, led by the Bolsheviks, responded to the carnage of war by overthrowing one of the most repressive regimes in the world, and how in the process they proved that socialism was no mere utopia, but a practical project to be realised through revolutionary class struggle.”

In her remarks in London, Barbara Slaughter explained:

“Not everyone may know that there were in fact two revolutions in Russia in 1917. By the time the first revolution overthrew the Tsarist autocracy in February, Russia had lost two and a half million lives in the Great War and millions more were starving. Eastman’s commentary points out that in this desperate situation, the February Revolution gave birth to twins.

“On the one side, there was the self-appointed Provisional Government of landlords and capitalists, who wanted to restore order, defend private property and win the war. The Allied Powers tolerated this government because they thought it would prosecute the war against Germany more effectively than the Tsar had done.

“On the other side, were the soldiers, workers and peasants, organised in the soviets, who wanted to stop the war, confiscate the landlords’ estates and have peace, bread and land.

“These two opposing forces could not coexist for long. The decision of Kerensky, the effective leader of the Provisional Government, to launch a new offensive against Germany on June 18th sounded the death knell for his regime.

“You will see in the film that, from the moment both Lenin and Trotsky arrived in Russia, they called for a second revolution, a proletarian revolution, to overthrow the provisional government and establish the first workers’ state. This second revolution took place in October under the leadership of the Bolshevik party.”

She concluded, “Today, the world economy is dominated by a handful of big banks and transnational corporations. We are living in a period of unprecedented inequality. Governments are adopting autocratic methods of rule to keep control. And the threat of nuclear annihilation hangs over us all.

Tsar to Lenin bears witness to the time when socialist ideals inspired the greatest revolutionary movement in world history. We must learn from it.”

The remarks of Marsden and Slaughter received applause from the audience, as did the film itself. A number of people in the audiences spoke to Marsden and Slaughter praising the film, leading to requests for further showings at other institutions.

After the showing of *Tsar to Lenin*, film director Barry Bliss spoke to Barbara Slaughter. He said, “What a remarkable achievement it was to produce that film. It is the classic documentary of the period—thoughtful, dynamic and partisan, which I am all for. There is no point in being neutral. The passion to make the film clearly came from his commitment to the revolution itself.

He continued, “In around 1982/83 I first saw the Soviet film *New Babylon* directed by Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg. Shostakovich composed the orchestral score to accompany the film. A simpler score for piano and a few other instruments was used for general distribution. But a musicologist had discovered and re-assembled the original score, and it was performed at the Southbank with full orchestral accompaniment.

“It was a very exciting occasion, and before it began film historian Ken Brownlow came on stage and said that he wanted to introduce a ‘very special person’. That ‘special person’ was the director of *New Babylon*, Leonid Trauberg. There was a gasp in the audience, and I am sure everyone thought, ‘But isn’t he dead?’ I was very young at the time, but I was determined to meet him, which I managed to do, twice. It was wonderful to speak to him.

“Trauberg was only fifteen years old in 1917. He was in St Petersburg when it was under siege. He painted a picture of walking down the Nievsky Prospect, when General Wrangel’s army was only ten miles away. But they knew they were creating a new world. Nothing felt impossible. Every new day held out new possibilities. There was a powerful sense of achievement and of wonder.

“As Trauberg spoke he gave a sense of excitement that a new world was being forged. He said, ‘There was nothing we felt we couldn’t do’. And that’s what I felt as I watched *Tsar to Lenin* this evening.”



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