The Battleship Potemkin: A century since the making of Sergei Eisenstein's masterpiece

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21 October 2025

> The Sevastopol rising has fallen in the same way that the *Potemkin* and Kronstadt risings have fallen. But their fall has shaken the pillars of absolutism like Samson shook the pillars of his prison. We may still need a few more crushed risings, but the whole building of old, tsarist Russia will collapse, in the end, down onto the stupid canaille and their forfeited heads. – Rosa Luxemburg, 1905

The WSWS is posting a series of articles on the artistic achievements of 1925. A recurring theme has been and will be the impact and influence of the 1917 Russian Revolution on international artistic and cultural life. One of the most direct and obvious expressions of that impact and influence is Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein's epic silent *The Battleship Potemkin*. This is the coming together of high art and high politics, as it were.

The film dramatizes a mutiny by sailors against the ship's officers on board one of the crown jewels of the tsarist Black Sea fleet in June 1905, an important episode of the revolutionary events of that year.

In this case, we have a work that would have been entirely unthinkable without the October Revolution. If the Russian proletariat had not been victorious in 1917 and in the ensuing civil war, Eisenstein and his collaborators would not have been writing such a scenario as *Potemkin*, much less seeing it come to fruition with the backing of the workers' state. (The film project was initiated by the All-Russian Central Executive Committee—the governing body of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic in between sessions of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets—on the 20th anniversary of the 1905 Revolution, and assigned to the 27-year-old Eisenstein.)

As a result, for once, the viewer watches a film that is entirely "on our side," one that unequivocally and wholeheartedly celebrates revolution against tyranny and the socialist cause against the ruling classes everywhere. Along those lines, German writer and poet Bertolt Brecht celebrated

That feeling of approval and triumph
That is evoked in us by the film of the mutiny on the battleship Potemkin
That moment when the sailors hurl their torturers into the water

A supreme achievement, *Potemkin* is consistently included on lists of the greatest films ever made. Initially intended as one of a number of sequences within a broader film to mark the anniversary of the 1905 events, the tale of the sailors' revolt against atrocious conditions, the enthusiastic support they receive from the Odessa working class and the vicious reprisals of the tsarist forces came to embody the entire experience of that defeated revolution, the "dress rehearsal" for 1917.

In 1925, Soviet society looked back on 1905 in the light of the experience of a successful revolution. October 1917 unleashed a huge wave of revolutionary energy in all spheres of life, including the arts. As Russian workers attempted to forge the basis for a new society, artists found themselves not only inspired by the achievements of the revolution, but also able to develop new creative techniques to reflect that inspiration.

The Battleship Potemkin was Eisenstein's second feature films (after *Strike*), but it was also the last one made under the conditions of artistic freedom created by the revolution. As the Stalinist bureaucracy tightened its grip on the Soviet Union, Eisenstein came under pressure to adapt his historical epics to the requirements of the ruling caste. His tribute to the revolutionary workers of Petrograd, *October* (1928, also known as *Ten Days That Shook The World*), for example, suffered from having all references to Leon Trotsky removed on orders of the bureaucracy. What he was allowed to show of Lenin in that film was also dictated by the immediate needs of Stalinist policy.

The Battleship Potemkin, the most fully realized of Eisenstein's films, captures the brutality of the regime that the workers and sailors tried unsuccessfully to overthrow in 1905, their heroism in facing down that regime and the savage reprisals unleashed against them. This complex revolutionary process is captured in some of the most stunning and iconic images ever committed to film.

Eisenstein himself regarded *The Battleship Potemkin* as a film that would remain contemporary in character, apparently calling for a new score to be written for it every 10 years.

The story unfolds like this:

Sailors on the battleship *Potemkin* rebel when they are given maggot-infested meat to eat. That, in any case, is the immediate cause. The ship's captain orders those who protest to be shot on deck, but one sailor, Vakulinchuk, appeals to the squad burdened with carrying out the murders, "Brothers! Do you realize who you are shooting?" The squad members lower their rifles, and mutiny on the ship begins. The sailors attack the officers and gain control of the ship, although Vakulinchuk is killed by a senior officer.

The sailors take his body to the port city of Odessa (in Ukraine of course!), where it serves as a symbol of those who would give their lives for the revolution. Citizens come out to pay respect and offer their support for the *Potemkin*. Many are gathered on the famed Odessa steps when, suddenly, a tsarist militia arrives and begins firing into the crowd. The battleship responds by firing at the headquarters of the generals located nearby onshore.

A squadron has been sent out against the *Potemkin*, and the sailors decide to sail out and face it. Two battleships approach, and the *Potemkin* readies its cannons but sends up a signal, "Don't fight—join us." On the verge of a battle, a title reads, "Brothers!," and sailors on all of the ships begin celebrating. The *Potemkin* and its jubilant crew pass without being attacked and with added support.

Although angry and agitational to the core, *The Battleship Potemkin* is a work of extraordinary pictorial beauty and great elegance of form. It is broken into five movements or acts. In the first of these, "Men and Maggots," the flagrant mistreatment of the sailors at the hands of their officers is shown, while the second, "Drama on the Quarterdeck," presents the actual mutiny and the ship's arrival in Odessa. "Appeal from the Dead" establishes the solidarity of the citizens of Odessa with the

mutineers.

"The Odessa Steps" incarnates the theory that Eisenstein expounded in his writings. He believed that meaning in motion pictures was principally generated by the collision or juxtaposition of shots, montage. He compared this process in film editing to "the series of explosions of an internal combustion engine, driving forward its automobile or tractor."

In one of the most renowned segments in "The Odessa Steps," one of the most renowned scenes in cinema history, the tsarist troops march mercilessly down the stone steps, firing indiscriminately into crowds of men, women and children. This massacre is a pivotal moment that heightens revolutionary sentiment, clarifying the issues: there will be no compromise with the autocracy.

The force of "The Odessa Steps" arises from the viewer combining in his or her mind a series of brief, independent shots to form a new, distinct conceptual impression that outweighs the individual shots' significance. Through Eisenstein's manipulations of filmic time and space, the slaughter on the steps—where hundreds of citizens find themselves trapped between descending tsarist militia above and Cossacks below—acquires a powerful meaning.

With the addition of a stirring score by German left-wing composer Edmund Meisel, the agitational appeal of *Battleship Potemkin* became nearly irresistible; when the film was exported in early 1926, it made Eisenstein world-famous. Ironically, the film was eventually banned by the dictator Stalin over fears it might incite a riot against his regime.

Eisenstein was born January 23, 1898, to assimilated and baptized Jewish parents in Riga, tsarist Russia. His father was conservative, an architect and civil engineer for the city of Riga. His parents separated in 1905, and Eisenstein spent his childhood in both Riga and St. Petersburg. He received a fine education and learned to speak French, German and English fluently. Under pressure from his father, Eisenstein trained as a civil engineer, but all of his spare moments were spent attending the theater or thinking about it.

The Bolshevik Revolution changed everything for him. At the same time as Eisenstein's father entered the counterrevolutionary White Guards, Eisenstein entered the Red Army. Posted at the front as a civil engineer, he used every opportunity to attach himself to the theater and agitational work being done by the Red Army. The Civil War was the school for many of the great figures of Soviet film. Eisenstein, cinematographer Eduard Tisse, directors Dziga Vertov and Vsevolod Pudovkin all were on the Agit [agitational] trains or shot newsreels at the front. Both the Agit trains, which traveled to critical areas to agitate and educate among troops, workers and peasants; and the newsreels, filmed by Bolsheviks with a camera in one hand and a gun in the other, elevated art to a new level—that of a political and social weapon. It was the cinema that was to prove the most powerful of all.

By the end of the Russian civil war, Eisenstein had abandoned his career as a civil engineer and was seeking a theater group to join. The Bolshevik Revolution had ushered in a veritable golden age of the arts. Myriad schools of aesthetics sprang up, each enthusiastically seeking a way to express the power of the revolution through art and each having its own theater group, magazine, writers' circle, etc.

In the midst of this vast, seething laboratory of the arts, Eisenstein applied to the theater group and school led by the great and controversial director, Vsevelod Meyerhold, and was accepted.

In 1924, Eisenstein directed *Strike* (released in April 1925), also a remarkable work, helping to change the direction of Soviet cinema. *Strike* treats the development and defeat of a strike by industrial workers in pre-revolutionary Russia. It shows the tremendous strength and energy of the working class as well as the use of agents provocateurs and armed troops by the ruling class. It ends with the superimposition of a cow being slaughtered over shots of massacred workers.

After the difficulties associated with the production and release of *October*, including sharp criticisms from both fellow artists (the poet Mayakovsky said the actor portraying Lenin "resembled not Lenin but a statue of him") and the now-Stalinist authorities, in August 1929, Eisenstein and his collaborators Grigori Alexandrov and Tisse set off for a trip to Europe and North America. They arrived in the United States in 1930 to work and to study modern film techniques. Various projects were proposed and worked on, including a version of Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* and a film history of Mexico, but they all ended in failure.

After returning to the Soviet Union in 1933, he retreated to the Caucasus in extreme depression. The spirited and industrious Eisenstein, in a career spanning 25 years, was able to complete only six films, including the titanic but national-patriotic *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) and the two parts of *Ivan the Terrible* (1944 and 1946)—and most of these with major revisions and under the eyes of the Stalinist censors. After 1925, his life became primarily a series of unrealized projects. On February 11, 1948, Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein died of a heart attack at the age of fifty.

There is a significant footnote to the *Potemkin* story. In his book *The Battleship Potemkin: The Greatest Film Ever Made* (1978), British writer Herbert Marshall revealed that his research indicated that the original version of *The Battleship Potemkin*

> contained an epigraph which came immediately *after* the act-title "1. Men and Maggots." It was worded as follows: "The spirit of insurrection hovered over the Russian land. Some enormous and mysterious process was taking place in countless hearts. The individual was dissolving in the mass, and the mass was dissolving in the outburst."

Marshall explained that the epigraph came from Leon Trotsky's well-known article, "The Red Navy" (or "The Red Fleet," depending on the translation), which was included in his brilliant commentary on the 1905 Revolution, *1905* (published in 1907). The essay is "an analysis," writes Marshall, "of the various mutinies which wracked the Czarist navy in 1905."

This is Trotsky's entire original paragraph:

> The spirit of insurrection hovered over the Russian land. Some enormous and mysterious process was taking place in countless hearts: The bonds of fear were being broken; the individual, just after managing to become aware of himself, was dissolving in the mass, and the mass was dissolving in the outburst. Liberated from inherited terrors and imagined obstacles, the mass was unwilling and unable to see obstacles that were real. That was its weakness and that was its strength. It was borne ahead like a wave of the sea driven by a storm. Each day brought to their feet new strata [of society] and gave birth to new opportunities [for revolution]. As if some gigantic pestle were stirring a social cauldron down to the very bottom.

According to Marshall, the process of expurgating Trotsky's epigraph from *Potemkin* began around the time of his "fall from grace" in early 1929, when he and his family were exiled from the Soviet Union by the Stalinist regime. Marshall writes that "official records began to be changed to accommodate the ruin of reputations," adding, however, that various "rogue" copies of the film containing Trotsky's quotation continued to circulate. Hence Marshall's discovery. The impact of Stalinism has been incalculable.

In his autobiography, *Immoral Memories*, Eisenstein wrote:

> Without being conceited, I can say that many millions of people have seen *Potemkin*. The most varied nationalities, races, and parts of the world….
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> An explosion in art, especially a passionate explosion of feelings, is constructed according to the same formula as an explosion in the field of explosive substances. At one time I studied land mines at the School for Ensigns. In that case, as in this, at first an increasing force compresses (though, of course, the actual means and overall set-up are quite different!). Then the containing frame bursts. And the shock scatters myriads of fragments.

Anyone who has not seen *The Battleship Potemkin* should make it his or her business to do so. Anyone who watched it decades ago, truly ought to watch it again.