

THESE RUSSIANS CAN CERTAINLY MAKE FILMS



(Above) *The 13th century meets the 20th in a Moscow studio: mailed warriors of the "Alexander Nevsky" cast read the morning edition of "Pravda"!* (Right) *This striking study of Prince Nevsky on his war-horse is a good example of Eisenstein "composition"*



ALEXANDER NEVSKY

(Artkino)

SOME of my readers may think there is an unnecessary note of surprise in the heading at the top of this page but, after all, we are making a number of surprising discoveries about Russia these days, and not the least of them is that the Soviet, when it comes to producing certain types of film, is several miles ahead of countries which started earlier. This is particularly true of the historical picture and the propaganda picture. In the first case the Soviet studios can provide mass spectacles which make those of Cecil B. De Mille's Hollywooden "epics" look like a street corner meeting alongside a May Day rally in Red Square, and at the same time they give us the dirt and realism of the past and not merely its tinsel and glamour. In the second case they can usually make propaganda seem adventurous and emotionally exciting.

Two Soviet films which I have seen recently, *Alexander Nevsky* and *Shchors*, are notable because they combine and reconcile these qualities of the historical and the propaganda picture and include other qualities as well. They are persuasive and exciting (and therefore good propaganda): they are also artistic, absorbing, and painstaking in historical detail (and therefore good entertainment). In all these aspects *Alexander Nevsky* is, I think, the greater picture, though I shouldn't be surprised if more politically-minded admirers of the U.S.S.R. prefer *Shchors*, because it has a closer bearing on the present.

But not much closer. Though it deals with events 700 years ago, and though it was produced in 1938, *Alexander Nevsky* is amazingly relevant to current history, perhaps even prophetic. In the year 1242, the Knights of the Teutonic

Order ("German cur knights," Karl Marx called them) were sweeping into Russia from the west. And from the east came the threat of invading Tartar and Mongol hordes. In this crisis, Prince Alexander Nevsky of the city-state of Novgorod stood forth to rally and lead the men of Rus. "The threat from the west is more immediate: let us first drive out the Germans and then we shall deal with the yellow men," said Nevsky (much as Stalin might have said 700 years later, though the producers of the film could not have known that when they made Nevsky say it). In the Battle of Lake Peipus on April 5, 1242, the Russians met the heavily-armoured German knights and their men-at-arms, on the frozen lake, broke their charge, hurled them back in disorder—and then the ice collapsed under the weight of the retreating German army, and the water engulfed thousands.

This famous "Battle on the Ice" is the climax of *Alexander Nevsky*, and with Sergei Eisenstein's direction and Edward Tisse's camera-work it provides spectacle de luxe, such as I have never seen before. But it is also something more than mere spectacle. While the whole sequence flows forward in a crescendo of movement and sound (Sergei Prokofieff, by the way, wrote the picture's special symphonic background), you could take almost any single frame of film and it would be a separate, complete, and composed picture. Look at that "still" of Nikolai Cherkasov as Nevsky on his rearing charger at the top of this page. Poor as the reproduction may be, it is a striking example of the Eisenstein technique of "composition." It is a scene that exists by itself without reference to its context. And scene after scene in *Alexander Nevsky* is like that, as Eisenstein the artist, using massed clouds above and white

snow below for a background, fills his screen—and the word "fills" is to be taken literally—with masses of battling, charging foot-soldiers and mounted knights, and as the camera records at one moment the weird effect of the fantastic Teutonic helmets tossing like stags' antlers, at another the oncoming enemy glimpsed through a forest of spear-staves, and at yet another the grim beauty of a knight's outspread cloak slowly disappearing beneath the ice-filled water.

Watching this battle I had only one critical spasm: why did soldiers, locked in such close combat that they could hardly move their arms, continue to hack futilely at helmets and opposing swords when they might have done so much more damage with short-arm jabs below the unarmoured waist? Still, I suppose it's a bit late to teach medieval swordsmen the advantage of the point over the edge!

The battle in *Alexander Nevsky* is not the whole picture, but what goes before is mainly preparation for it, showing the brutalities of the invaders in conquered towns and the gathering and arming of the defenders, and establishing the heroic qualities of Nevsky and his lieutenants, with a sop of romance and humour occasionally thrown in. And what comes after the battle is in the nature of anti-climax—a kind of mopping up and bestowing of rewards. It does, however, contain some of the most telling dialogue in a film that fortunately manages to get along without very much talk. In the liberated city of Pskov, Nevsky addresses both victors and vanquished. The remaining Teutonic knights and their satellite priests he condemns to be sold back to the West "for soap," but the German serf soldiers he sets free because they were not responsible for the invasion. And finally:

"Go home and tell all in foreign lands that Russia lives. Let them come to us as guests without fear. But if anyone comes to us with the sword he shall perish by the sword. On this the land of Russia stands and will stand."

Now whether you approve of that or not, you have to admit, when you reach it, that it is pretty effective propaganda.

SHCHORS

(Kiev Film Studios)

HERE again is Russian history-cum-propaganda, but it is much more recent history, and for that reason perhaps the propaganda seems rather more obvious and more politically-conscious. In other words, it is more likely to be a Red rag to some John Bulls than *Alexander Nevsky* could ever be, though these days I suppose the chance is fairly slight.

In theme and execution, *Shchors* is reminiscent of *Chapayev*, a Soviet film released here some months ago. Like Chapayev, Nikolai Shchors was a guerilla hero of the Revolution. The son of a railway worker, he led the Ukrainian people in their long struggle, first to throw out the German army of occupation in 1917-1918, and then to beat off the attacks of the White Armies and their allies. The grim events of this epoch turned Shchors from a junior medical officer into a commander, a strategist, and the founder of a military school for the Red Army, using as a basis of instruction those Tsarist officers who were willing to co-operate with the Revolution.

If you enjoy fights on the screen, whether on a large or small scale—guerilla sorties or mass battles—you should enjoy *Shchors*, though you will see nothing as exciting or spectacular

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