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Cover page: *Cavalry Battle* (1600s) by Jan Martszen de Jonge, privately held.

Stalinist Visions of Empire: Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan The Terrible*, Part I

N. A. Gourof

'I must be cruel, only to be kind'.
Hamlet, Act III, Scene 4, 179.¹

'You must firmly remember that of all art forms the most important to us is the moving pictures'.² With these words, Vladimir Lenin formulated in 1922 the attitude of the Soviet state towards cinema. Recognised very early on as a powerful tool of propaganda and ideological education, the cinema enjoyed unprecedented support by the ruling Communist Party throughout the Soviet era, and especially in its most turbulent decades, when Joseph Stalin succeeded Lenin at the helm of the young Socialist state. A detailed analysis of early Soviet cinema is outside the scope of the present discussion. We will therefore limit ourselves to examining, specifically within the context of imperial discourse, the ideological trends set by the Party leadership at the height of Stalin's rule, as illustrated by the case of Sergei Eisenstein's epic biography, *Ivan the Terrible*, one of the masterpieces of Soviet and world cinematography.

A film about Ivan the Terrible, the first crowned Russian Tsar, was an idea conceived by Stalin himself, who saw in the history of the medieval monarch's reign a parallel to his own era. At the same time, this idea fitted well within the general attitude of Soviet, Party-defined cinematography towards the Russian past. 'It was precisely in the Middle Ages', writes Evgeny Dobrenko, 'and on its very borders with the New Era that Stalinism sought and found the demanded "analogy with the present" and that Soviet historicising art solved

the main problems – of the State, power and violence'.³ A competent director was requested to breathe life into the project and the Minister of Cinematography, Ivan Bol'shakov, suggested Sergei Eisenstein for the task.

Eisenstein was by then one of the top Soviet directors. Son to a prominent architect, he grew up in the liberal circles of the old Russian *intelligentsia*, forming friendships and collaborating with many of its greatest representatives, like Vladimir Mayakovsky and his circle. Well educated, multi-lingual, a true Renaissance man, a writer, a painter, a poet, an actor, a photographer, a theoretician of the visual, he eventually became a student of the great theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold, many of whose ideas and experimentations he would develop further and apply to the new medium of the age, the cinema. By the beginning of the 1940s, he was already a famous film director, the creator of, among others, such masterpieces as *Stachka* [*The Strike*] (1924), *Bronenosets Potyomkin* [*The Battleship Potemkin*] (1925), and the highly influential *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), the first major attempt of Stalinist cinema to revive images of a glorious medieval Russian past and use them as a statement in contemporary politics.⁴

¹ *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, Wordsworth edns., 1999, p. 697.

² The quote survives in a letter from the first Narkom [People's Commissar] of Enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharsky to the historian Grigory Boltyansky, published in G. M. Boltyansky, *Lenin i Kino* [*Lenin and the Cinema*], Moscow & Leningrad, 1925, p. 19.

³ Evgeny Dobrenko, *Stalinist Cinema and the Production of History: Museum of the Revolution*, Edinburgh University Press, 2008, p. 21.

⁴ Peter Kenez, 'Films of the Second World War', in Anna Lawton, (ed.), *The Red Screen: Politics, Society, Art in Soviet Cinema*, Routledge, 1992, pp. 163-164. In many ways, Eisenstein developed in *Ivan the Terrible* ideas already present in some form or other in *Alexander Nevsky*, whose closing lines – 'Who comes at as with the sword, will die by the sword' – are a statement of power vividly linking the two films.



Fig. 1. *Ivan*, towering through the ages.

Ivan the Terrible, shooting for which began in 1941 in Alma-Ata, was conceived as a massive, three-part epic narration which would unite ideas of past and modernity, empire and rule, vision and the strategy to make it reality. *Part I* would discuss the newly-crowned Tsar's first struggles with the boyars and his first major military victory – the conquest of the Khanate of Kazan⁵. *Part II*, subtitled *The Boyar Conspiracy*, would revolve around the *Oprichnina* and the culmination of the Tsar's fight against the decadent forces seeking to fragment his young empire. Growing increasingly darker as the historical character moves from suspicion to paranoia, the film, in *Part III*, would refocus the action upon a foreign conflict brought about by traitors, the disastrous Livonian war of 1558-1583, before providing a cathartic culmination.⁵

The script was submitted to and personally approved by Stalin, who remained closely connected to the project, discussing it extensively with Eisenstein and Alexander Cherkasov, the lead actor, offering criticism and advice.⁶ Despite this intimate involvement, it is

⁵ *Ivan Grozny: Boyarskij zagovor [Ivan the Terrible. Part II: The Boyar Conspiracy]*, dir. by Sergei Eisenstein, Mosfilm/TsOKS, 1944/45. *Part II* was intensely disliked by Stalin and was released only in 1958, during the de-Stalinisation years of the Khrushchev era, the so-called Khrushchev Thaw. *Part III* remained unfinished, and most of the reels were destroyed. The surviving excerpts were included in the documentary *Neizvesnyj Ivan Grozny [The Unknown Ivan the Terrible]*, dir. by Naum Kleiman et al., Gosfilmofond Rossii, 1998.

⁶ For example, see the discussion between Stalin, Zhdanov and Molotov with Eisenstein and Cherkassov in 1947, surviving in transcript in I. V. Stalin,

perhaps too hasty to judge the film as a purely Stalinist creation. Indeed, the director managed often to express his own interpretation and critique, especially in *Parts II* and *III*, which is the reason they were ultimately suppressed. But in all, *Ivan the Terrible*, especially *Part I*, still remains a vivid portrayal of the Stalinist vision of empire at a time when Russia was moving west, and already considering a post-war reconstruction on the inside and a diplomatic repositioning on the outside.⁷



Fig. 2. *Ivan the Terrible* poster with the three 'ages' of Ivan representing the three parts of the trilogy (GOSKINOIZDAT, 1944)

Central to the ideas of empire in *Ivan the Terrible* is the extended introductory sequence depicting a milestone event, both for the film and for Russian history: Ivan's coronation as Tsar.⁸ Interestingly, the coronation scene was not intended to form the film's beginning. Eisenstein wanted to start with Ivan's childhood, a brief portrayal of the Boyar regency, bloody and traitorous to himself and the interests of Muscovy, and the young prince's first rebellion against the boyars. However, the image of weakness the boy-Tsar projected was deemed inappropriate. Accordingly, the action was decided to begin

Sochineniya [Writings], vol. XVIII, Tver': Soyuz, 2006, pp. 433-440. See also G. Maryamov, *Kremlyovski tsenzor. Stalin smotrit kino [The Kremlin Censor. Stalin Watches Movies]*, Kinotsentr, 1992, pp. 84-92.

⁷ See the comments in Lev Loseff, *On the Beneficence of Censorship: Aesopian Language in Modern Russian Literature*, Verlag Otto Sagner, 1984, pp. 63-5.

⁸ For a brief overview of the actual event see Isabel de Madariaga, *Ivan the Terrible, First Tsar of Russia*, Yale University Press, 2005, pp. 49-53.

with Ivan's coronation, introduced by fanfare and shots of text, the latter especially vivid in the parallels it draws between Ivan and Stalin: 'This film is about the man, who in the XVI century for the first time unified our country; about that Prince of Moscow, who from separate, and fragmented, and individualistic principalities created a unified, powerful state; about a military leader who elevated the military glory of our homeland in the East and in the West; about a sovereign, who for the resolution of these great tasks for the first time placed upon his head the Crown of All Russia'.⁹



Fig. 3. Nikolai Cherkassov as Ivan in the coronation scene

The theme of the individual in the film is a recurring one, both a hymn and an allusion to the Stalinist cult of personality. In 1940, some time before beginning to work on *Ivan the Terrible*, Eisenstein wrote: 'If we take the majority of successful films, we see that the most successful images (...) occur when there are literary prototypes available'.¹⁰ It is plausible to assume that Eisenstein was on some level creating exactly such a literary figure in his Ivan, a figure much more symbolically and ideologically expanded than the hero of his *Alexandr Nevsky* epic, a complex historical and literary prototype for a successful contemporary ruler. Such a ruler, almost like the glorious medieval hero reborn, would surely have a lasting imperial vision to offer, the strength to build on it, and the power to sustain it.¹¹

⁹ All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.

¹⁰ S. Eisenstein, 'The problem of the soviet historical film', in Richard Taylor (ed.), *The Eisenstein Reader*, British Film Institute, 1998, p. 151.

¹¹ The parallel was recognised by Stalin himself. Kevin Moss, 'A Russian Munchausen: Aesopian translation', in Andrew Horton (ed.), *Inside Soviet Film Satire*:

Be that as it may, both the introductory text and the imagery succeeding it project power as the core element of the Eisensteinian/Stalinist imperial discourse. Power is the most important legitimising factor for the new empire, as attested by the commentary provided by the foreign dignitaries attending. When several of them murmur that Ivan has no right to the imperial title and that Europe will not recognise him as Tsar, the Livonian ambassador turns to his secretary and delivers a key phrase: 'If he be powerful, they will recognise him'. The parallel is obvious. After struggles to be accepted as an equal on the European diplomatic arena, the newly-formed Soviet State is largely recognised only when becoming powerful enough to potentially project its force outside its boundaries. To assure the viewer of the certainty of this eventual recognition, a background dialogue is used almost surreptitiously: when discussing the attending boyars, one of the foreigners keeps referring to Ivan as the Grand Prince. Suddenly another voice corrects him, rephrasing his last words: '...not of the Grand Prince, but of the Tsar!'



Fig. 4. 'Europe will not allow it!' Alexander Rumnev as the disgruntled Polish ambassador

The coronation scene, which sets the tone for the whole narration, is both a visual and a textual statement. The visual part, which comes first, gives us immediately recognisable elements of historicity and historical continuity: the imperial regalia, especially the crown, the so-called cap of Monomach, allegedly given to Ivan's ancestors by the Byzantine Emperor

Laughter with a Lash, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 23.

thus nicknamed; the Byzantine ceremony itself, a further symbol of legitimizing continuity; the interior of the Cathedral of the Dormition in the Moscow Kremlin, as well as Orthodox music. It also gives a first glimpse of the national element of Eisenstein's empire, by providing a clear divide between 'us' and 'them', placing the Russian interiors and the distinct appearance of the Muscovites *vis-à-vis* the faces and fashion of the foreign dignitaries attending. Here Eisenstein uses the variety in art forms, placing elements of traditional Russian folk and Church imagery (national dress, Orthodox iconography, distinct architecture) next to the so-called Dutch portrait tradition – unbent ruffs, ascetic faces, and black garments.



Fig. 5. 'Them'. Foreign dignitaries at Ivan's coronation

The shots of Ivan receiving the imperial *regalia* form the visual prologue to his vocal assertion of power, his coronation speech. This contains a coherent political program, mirroring the priorities of the historical Ivan,¹² as well as the interests of the Stalinist régime itself, and of Soviet policy since the Bolsheviks' rise to power in general. Unity is the new empire's main structural characteristic, both for Ivan and for the Soviet state, a federation of many smaller republics - fragments united under a single political formation. Ivan proclaims, that by crowning himself Tsar he puts an end 'now and for ever to the evil fragmentation of rule', perpetrated by the power *élites* of the past, personified here by the boyars. He proclaims

¹² In traditional historiography Ivan was seen as the ideological predecessor of Peter the Great, a ruler concerned with centralisation, modernity, secularisation, expansion towards the sea.

unequivocally: 'From now on the Russian land will be one and united!', and gives a clear justification of this soon thereafter: 'Because only in a unified, strong empire, amalgamated [into one] on the inside, one can be strong on the outside'.



Fig. 6. The imperial regalia: The Cap of Monomakh provides the Russian element, the sceptre with the double-headed eagle – the ancient tradition of Byzantium, with the orb symbolising global rule

Another identification between ruler and state follows, again similar to the contemporary realities of Stalinist Russia, but enriched by elements of legitimizing historical continuity. Ivan is crowned Emperor [*Tsar*] as the successor of the Byzantine tradition, one and supreme ruler of the 'Third Rome': 'Two Romes fell', he proclaims, 'while the Third, Moscow, stands. And there will be no Fourth Rome. And of that Third Rome, the Moscow dominion, from now on the only master will be I. Alone!' A powerful visual illustration here is the shot of Ivan's face with the shadow of the symbol of the empire, the two-headed eagle, falling on it. With these textual and visual elements the individual - a ruler, a visionary, a moderniser - is placed at the centre of the Russian imperial experience.

What are then the means for securing and preserving this Third Rome, which still stands in the 1940s, but is now confronting a foreign enemy? Power, specifically military might, a permanent, state-controlled, modernised force: 'But for the Russian land to continue to be united under one hand, power is needed. And for this reason we establish an army, a serving,

gun-bearing, permanent [army].¹³ This idea of the loyal host will again emerge, in a slightly different context, in the end of *Part I*, and more vividly in *Part II*, with the *oprichniki*, the Tsar's bodyguard established to protect him from treacherous boyars and acting as the army of interior stabilisation. But for the moment, in the speech, the element of power and powerful rule comes back again and again, hammering the idea into the mind of the viewer: 'We need powerful rule! In order to break the backs of all those who are hostile to the unity of the Russian State.'



Fig. 7. 'I. Alone.' The new Caesar (Tsar) is 'branded' with the Byzantine double-headed eagle

Expansionist and imperialist tendencies are given a patrimonial justification that is both historically accurate and contemporarily useful in light of the Soviet interests in the war-torn Baltic, the Crimea, and the remote Pacific coast: 'The coastal possessions of our forefathers are separated forcefully from our own land... And for this reason, on this day We crown ourself master [also] of those lands, which for the moment are under other rulers.' The sea is a traditional feature in Russian literature, historiography and political discourse, remaining an important ideological symbol of Russia's entry into modernity. However, the first step towards realising a new modernising vision is to resolve the issues within the existing sphere of influence. Accordingly, soon after the coronation, the Kazan' plotline becomes the focal point of the narration, showing the ruler acting upon his political promises and

¹³ *Streletskoye vojsko* is a term describing permanent harquebusier and musketeer formations established by Ivan. *Strel'tsy*-lit. gunners.

declarations.

The sequences dedicated to the conquest of Kazan' provide interesting material for the reconstruction of the film's imperial theme. Empire here is a vibrant and expanding organism which uses its power and superiority in military technology to establish supremacy over its enemies and to grow to accommodate its strategic and even ideological goals. It is an empire of modernity, bombarding the antiquated feudal walls with its cannons, positioned on screen in such a way as to resemble the tanks spearheading at that very time the Soviet offensives against another foreign enemy.¹⁴ The empire's morality is here simple and accessible to the viewer. The radiant sun on Ivan's chainmail is a symbol of light, a symbol of day, of dawn, a symbol of his vision, a force of light battling the forces of darkness under the symbol of the crescent moon, an incomprehensible foe who kills his own kind (the captured Tatars who are tied before the city's walls are killed by the defenders' arrows).

The Kazan' sequence however, is used as an opportunity to contrast the foreign foe with the enemy who is to strike from within. The theme of an internal 'other' is vividly illustrated by the first appearance of Prince Andrey Kurbsky on the field. His clearly Western military attire only features briefly, as Kurbsky is from then on seen in the traditional Russian chainmail and helmet. As Eisenstein made extensive preliminary sketches of the entire film, it is highly unlikely that this scene was a chance mistake. To a viewer carrying fresh memories of Stalin's purge of the Red Army high command in 1938, which culminated in the arrest and execution of Marshal Tukhachevsky, Eisenstein is loudly announcing the traitor who will challenge the Tsar's authority. The following scenes, which demonstrate the changing attitudes between Kurbsky and Ivan, is concluded with words which shift the focus of the viewer's antipathy from the foreign foe to the internal one. 'The Boyars' hatred is worse than Tatar arrows', Ivan is told by Basmanov as

¹⁴ Such contemporary references are not new to Eisenstein, who, in his *Alexander Nevsky*, included swastikas and Nazi-like helmets among the attributes of the invading German knights.

he introduces himself, and the Tsar immediately retorts: 'I will remember the name of the boyar-hater'. 'New people' like Basmanov will be instrumental in crushing the internal 'other' who challenges the Tsar's authority. Kurbsky, a friend from the past, a boyar, a remnant of the old state of things will soon betray Ivan - the Tsar by joining the Polish King, and Ivan - the man, by attempting to seduce his wife Anastasia.



Fig. 8. The 'Russian Sun-King' and the traitor. Ivan and Kurbsky at the siege of Kazan'

It is interesting to note here, that the conquest of Kazan' bore many of the characteristics of a crusade, and its history always contained powerful religious connotations.¹⁵ Yet Eisenstein's empire, the protagonist in this event, has little to do with religion. This is evident already from the first scenes of the film, and can be traced throughout the trilogy. Images of religion, the Church and churchmen had to be retained for the sake of historicity, but it is clear that the Church was portrayed with hostility, and pushed artificially to the background. The almost contemptuous tone with which Ivan says during his coronation 'Also the monasteries...' is a clear indication of that, especially followed by the expression of shock and surprise on the faces of the Metropolitan and the other churchmen when the Tsar announces his intention to use Church wealth for state purposes, specifically to fund his wars. It is also attested by their portrayal as traitors, and as collaborators in the minor

¹⁵ To commemorate his victory and the conquest of Kazan', Ivan commissioned a majestic icon, *The Church Militant*, and the magnificent Cathedral of the Holy Mother of Kazan'.

conspiracy during Ivan's illness. The issue of religion in general, even simple faith is left uncommented. The Church remains the sole target of the politico-spiritual world of the empire. Accordingly, the religious element is completely omitted in the Kazan' war plotline. The Tatars are represented as a national enemy, not a religious one. The call to arms upon the appearance of the Khanate's envoy, and the people's reaction to it, are both religiously neutral (if not entirely mute). They are, however, nationally and politically passionate. Eliminating the religious theme entirely, Eisenstein offers no crosses to juxtapose the shadows of the Muslim crescents on the walls, only *berdish* [pole-axes] and the beards of the Ivan-led Russian *muzhiki*. It is the latter, not the boyars or churchmen, but the plebeian *muzhiki*, who will ultimately support his ventures, become his soldiers, protect his life and share his vision. Not God's will, not the decadent nobles, but the force of the humble proletariat, the low-born *pushkari* [cannoneers] and *oprichniki*, led by their *vozhd*¹⁶ are to be the architects of the new empire.

An interesting element in the context of this secular vision is the *like* [face in Russian iconographic tradition] of Christ on the wall before which the vacillating Kurbsky thinks, prays, and later attempts to seduce Ivan's wife. Though drawn as an icon, it obviously represents not Christ, but Ivan himself, and it is Ivan's ever-seeing eye which hints at the omnipresence of the ruler, his supreme knowledge, and prepares the viewer for the protagonist's final judgement. The all-seeing eye, one of the most vivid examples of Meyerholdian and Eisensteinian visual and montage technique, is here not a religious or mystical symbol, but rather a vivid visual representation of the power of the absolute ruler.¹⁷

¹⁶ Lit. 'leader' in Russian, but in Soviet common parlance denoted the leader of the Party and the government, much like the German word 'führer'.

¹⁷ For a brief example see Jonathan Pitches, *Vsevolod Meyerhold*, Routledge, 2003, p. 74. For Eisenstein's own views on montage, its goal and techniques see Sergei Eisenstein, *Selected Works, vol. II: Towards a Theory of Montage*, I.B. Tauris/ Tauris Academic Studies, 2010; also, Robert Robertson, *Eisenstein on the Audiovisual: The Montage of Music, Image and Sound in Cinema*, I.B. Tauris/ Tauris Academic Studies, 2009.



Fig. 9. The ruler's omnipresence suggested during the seduction scene

This near-omnipotence of the ruler is also alluded to in another scene, which takes us into a discussion of foreign policy, the audience of the Tsar's emissary Iosip Nepeya regarding an alliance with Elizabethan England. The Tsar is represented here as two entities, a man, and a head, in the form of Ivan's shadow, literally the head of the state, dominating both the room and the discussion about to begin. The individual character of the ruler keeps central stage, here not in juxtaposition with boyars, churchmen or other contestants for power, but alone, the supreme decision-maker in the act of policymaking. Seemingly what the scene hints at is that an empire can not exist in isolation, at least for the moment. But the 'collaborative' character of the discussion is soon transformed by the powerful, clearly theatrical image of the Tsar's shadow leaning forward and spreading itself over the globe, revealing, one could say, the true face of diplomacy, the ruthless, Machiavellian character of foreign policy dominated by a modern *realpolitik* approach. Less ominously read this vision of world domination is perhaps a visual expression of a core ideological point of the Soviet communist doctrine, the ideal *finale* of the socialist effort, its ideological climax - the global establishment of communism. It is not far-fetched to see in this the transformation of Russia into an empire with an important role, a distinct, and distinctly positive global mission, to remake the future.



Fig. 10. The global vision of empire. The Nepeya scene

The theme of state, statehood and empire is thus central to the film. Eisenstein's empire is presented as a creature of the new, industrial century - modern, secular, 'of the people', aggressive in foreign policy, imposing in its interior control, concerned with centralised administrative monopoly, with expansion and domination, founded on the politics of common sense, on *realpolitik*. Legitimacy is a major element. Formal legitimacy, however, asserted through ritual, regalia, titlature and connections to a glorious past, Byzantine, Christian or other, is spiritless, all these elements remaining a mere *façade*, a courteous bow of sorts towards tradition. The true legitimising factor, the core essence of the Eisensteinian/Stalinist empire is supreme power, and superiority asserted by force of arms (*vojsko*), by a unifying rule, by aggressively realised geopolitical goals. At the centre of this imperial ideal stands a great personality, a leader imposing in presence and ideas, a man of strength, a man of vision, one who can make this vision a reality.

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