

Eisenstein's "Ivan The Terrible, Part II" as Cultural Artifact

Beverly Blois

In one of the most famous Russian paintings, Ilya Repin's "Ivan the Terrible with his murdered son," an unkempt and wild-eyed tsar clutches his expiring son, from whose forehead blood pours forth. Lying beside the two men is a large staff with which, moments earlier, Ivan had in a fit of rage struck his heir-apparent a mortal blow. This was a poignant, in fact tragic, moment in the history of Russia because from this event of the year 1581, a line of rulers stretching back to the ninth century effectively came to an end, ushering in a few years later the *smutnoe vremia* ("time of trouble") the only social crisis in Russian history that bears comparison with the revolution of 1917.

Contemporary Russians tell an anecdote about this painting in which an Intourist guide, leading a group of Westerners rapidly through the rooms of the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, comes to Repin's canvas, and wishing, as always, to put the best face on things, says, "And here we have famous painting, Ivan the Terrible giving first aid to his son."

The terribilita of the sixteenth century tsar had been modernized to fit the needs of the mid-twentieth century. Ivan had been reinterpreted. In a similar, but not so trifling way, Sergei Eisenstein was expected to translate the outlines of Ivan's accomplishments into the modern language of socialist realism when he was commissioned to produce his Ivan films in 1941. While part one of his film, released in 1945, won the Stalin Prize, First Class, part two, which was very close to release in 1946, was instead withheld. Its director was calumniated in the press, in private wrote a mea culpa, and died less than two years later without having worked again. His last film was finally screened both in the Soviet Union and abroad in 1958, acquiring immediate renown. It is also, I believe, one of the most important documents or artifacts of the 1940s, perhaps of the entire Soviet period, for anyone interested in the transactions of the past and present that we might refer to as the reformation and transmission of culture. After examining this artifact in situ, in the 1940s and 1950s, I shall briefly enumerate some of the reasons I consider it of great utility to the Russians in seeking to understand their own past, present, and future and to ourselves in attempting to gain similar insights.

If Sergei Eisenstein had never made a sound film, and for a long time he resisted doing so, his niche would be secure in the development of cinematic art for the four films he completed in the 1920s, in which he perfected the editing technique of montage. In the 1930s he completed only one film, which though it has its virtues, is rather formulaic and one-dimensional, and was only released in the early 1940s. Alexander Nevsky did, however, score enough points for the previously suspect Eisenstein that he came to be regarded as the appropriate choice to direct a second film concerning medieval Russia. This time the subject was to be Ivan Vasilevich, Ivan the Fourth of Moscow, also known, in his own time and subsequently as *groznyi* ("dread," "awesome," or "terrible").

The project would seem to have originated with Stalin, and was part of an ongoing revival and re-interpretation of the deep past of Russia in service to Soviet motives and ambitions. Ivan, it turned out, was a longtime item of interest to both Stalin and Eisenstein. Both, for instance, were aware of and sympathetic to the works of Sergei Platonov, published in the 1920s, which viewed Ivan as an unusually energetic and well intentioned ruler who, even in undertaking the Oprichnina-his social revolution, was guilty more of excessive means than of incorrect policy. Stricter Marxist views of Ivan, coming in the late twenties and 1930s, relegated the tsar to either unimportance or villainy, seeing in him simply the tool of merchant capital who was, in any event, paranoid. Stalin, who identified strongly with Ivan, was among those who were seeking his rehabilitation. (Stalin's other great hero

from the Russian past was, not unexpectedly, Peter the Great; but in the matter of identifying personally with a predecessor, he would seem to have always felt a closer affinity for Ivan).

By the time Eisenstein set to work, the war was on. Consequently, he, Prokofiev, Cherkasov and the rest of his company made their way to Alma Ata, in Soviet central Asia. In a little over a year, enough footage was shot for part one and part two, and filming for the never-to-be-realized part three was begun. Part one dealt with Ivan's tenure as Russia's first tsar from his coronation at age seventeen until the almost simultaneous death of his beloved wife, Anastasia, and desertion to the Polish enemy of his alter ego, Prince Kurbsky. Ivan emerges as a progressive reformer against whom traitors, including close relations, nonetheless plot.

In part two, Eisenstein portrays the Ivan of the Oprichnina, moved by a volatile combination of reform and revenge, though often vexed by his own misgivings and hesitancy to rule and judge. Part two culminates in the thwarting of a conspiracy by Ivan's aunt to seat the tsar's cousin on the throne. It was while directing the scenes for part two that all of Eisenstein's close associates, perhaps foreseeing the material's unacceptability, either deserted (Tisse, Alexandrov) or distanced themselves from him (Cherkasov, Birman). For this reason, however, the film became almost the exclusive creation of Eisenstein as auteur, and thus his most personal, as well as last, film, which Stan Barkhage calls his "testament."

Methodologically, the film is Eisenstein's summa. It constitutes, on the one hand, his most skillful use of montage since *Potemkin* (in the cathedral sequence), and on the other a wholly new movement by the director into character development (the figure of Ivan). Eisenstein, whose previous best work came before the doctrine of socialist realism had become dogma, departed from its dictates of clarity, simplicity, and didacticism. He had moved from the sharpness of mosaic to the ambiguity of chiaroscuro in the portrayal of his central character. In many ways, impossible to detail here, Eisenstein was advancing his art, raising, refining, and sometimes resolving symbols, motives, and themes. The film's most notable quality is its almost total integration of the aural and the visual which Eisenstein, in **Film Form**, calls the "monistic ensemble." As early as his enchantment with Kabuki in the 1920s, Eisenstein seemed to be striving for an immediacy and plasticity of film perhaps best described in Walter Pater's essay on Giorgione (in **The Renaissance**) in the injunction that "all art should aspire to the condition of music." In the last sequence of his last film Eisenstein was even integrating color footage (thanks to the capture of Agfa film from the retreating Wehrmacht) into this vision, inspired, it would seem by Scriabin and Wagner (perhaps not coincidentally Eisenstein, in a rare return to stagecraft, had directed a production of *Die Walkure* at the Bolshoi Theater in 1940).

The central theme of the film concerns *vozhd' i narod*, leader and people, and though "the people" are not an obtrusive element in the two films as a whole, they do enter in the last frames of part one and first ones of part two, in the intervening moment between the tsar's "good" and "bad" periods, to form the central and most memorable visual image in the film, and one of the most dramatic "stills" in the entire oeuvre of a director known for them. The tsar has retired to the monastery of Alexandrovsk to "sulk in his tent" and the people, in a procession stretching to the horizon, have come out from Moscow to beg for his return. From far above, inside the monastery, Ivan peers out at the advancing people, chanting and bearing icons. The tsar's brooding profile fills the entire right side of the frame, the procession, shaped in a perfect question mark, the entire left half. The tsar, looking down on the people, contemplates his resolution from above. Eisenstein's Ivan, like Repin's, brutalizes the people, but must be approached reverently and seen as a savior. Other visual elements in the film constitute a reprise of some of the director's best compositional techniques, but again there is no time for details (except, perhaps, to add that the scene described above represents a refinement of the quay-side

procession from Potemkin, and that the cathedral sequence is in several ways analogous to the Odessa steps sequence).

The story of the suppression and ultimate release of Eisenstein's film twelve years later is, in itself, a chapter in the history of the arts under Soviet tutelage. Despite his attention to detail in historical films (he could be ranked with Rossen and Rossellini in this regard), Eisenstein, perhaps for this very reason, ran afoul of Stalin's sensibilities in the case of *Ivan*, with whom the dictator felt a very great camaraderie. So quickly and completely was part two of Eisenstein's film suppressed, that, ironically, it has survived intact. This anomaly stems from two facts: in this particular film, Eisenstein had complete control and the end result was never cut, except by the director, before it went to Goskino and the central committee of the communist party; and when it reemerged, in 1958, it remained unaltered for the very reason it had been "canned" (literally) in the mid-1940s--because it appeared to be an allegory on the tyranny of Stalin, the demolition of whose cult was then proceeding apace under the direction of Nikita Khrushchev. Eisenstein was rehabilitated as one who had, almost alone, struggled against Stalin's megalomania and suppression of the arts. The film, premiering in the West at the Brussels World Fair, immediately came to be regarded by some as one of the great cinematic works of all time (so voted in the 1961 Sight and Sound poll), though others saw it as lugubrious and arcane (Pauline Kael, insightfully, but not intending any kind of compliment, called it "opera without the singers."). With the retreat from Khrushchev's "thaw," the film has largely gone back into the cans in the Soviet Union, in favor of a bland film of a ballet performed to Prokofiev's musical suite from the original 1940s' films.

Two things make this particular film valuable as a cultural document. First, its wholeness, which, as mentioned above, was ironically the result of extremes of censorship. Second, its ambiguity in portraying tsar Ivan, who thus becomes a mirror into which we, or anyone, may look in order to discover insights concerning the sixteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries. Additionally, Eisenstein's **Ivan** has become a yardstick for measuring subsequent Soviet films. According to J. Hoverman, writing in **American Film** (November 1983) the "audacity" seen in Eisenstein's last film was not again evident in the Soviet Union until Andrei Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublyov*, a mid-sixties film that, in its handling by Soviet authorities as well as its subjective and technical aspects bears great resemblance to *Ivan*.

Eisenstein's **Ivan**, though one need not (and certainly Stalin did not) agree with its interpretation, offers a resolution or explanation of the sixteenth century for the twentieth, which, because it undeniably alludes to the purges, also resolved the 1930s for the 1940s. Moreover, in 1958 it resolved the entire Stalin era for that of Khrushchev. Because of what Eisenstein makes clear and because of what he leaves ambiguous, Eisenstein would, appear to still serve this function for directors such as Tarkovsky. In doing so, Eisenstein's art can be seen to share at least one quality with that of Tolstoy, and quality that the author counted as most important of all: his art is nutritional or curative.

In the document, or artifact, afforded us by Eisenstein, we see a nation struggling simultaneously with its past and present, as if caught in some undescribed psychological complex or condition. The years immediately before the scripting and shooting of the film had witnessed the transition from the acceptable, if uncongenial, Stalin of collectivization and the five-year plans to the tyrannical Stalin of the purges. In his films Eisenstein presented both the constructive and the abusive phases of one man's tyrannical behavior, and thereby fell victim to another's, which was, in fact, being allegorized. This is the ultimate sense in which the film is an artifact--not about Ivan, less so about Stalin, but about the torment of a nation struggling to resolve a difficult episode of its past with a similar, and

similarly vexing, circumstance of the present. We see, too, that even during the establishment of Stalin's totalitarian absolutism, there was an ironic representation of this process in the art of Sergei Eisenstein, who refused to portray the ministrations of Stalin/Ivan to the Russian people as "first aid."