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The present dossier assembles selected German reviews of the Soviet film *The Battleship Potemkin* by Sergei Eisenstein, excerpts from the censor's card with the required cuts, and the invitation to the premiere.

The film about a mutiny on a ship of the tsarist fleet was a state commission for commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the 1905 Russian revolution. Eisenstein captured the revolution as a cinematic, dynamic, and tragic event but painted a highly ambivalent picture of the uprising: violence gives birth to more violence and starts a chain reaction. The photography was influenced by Constructivism, the space of each shot was segmented in a Cubist manner, the narrative was not efficient, time had been drawn out, the actors' eccentricity rivaled Meyerhold's theater, the non actors stunned with raw naturalism, and film's brutality was shocking. Eisenstein's radical montage of 1380 shots ranging in length from 15 frames to 1.5 meters was *the* innovation. All this created an unprecedented effect that Eisenstein wanted to study scientifically using Ivan Pavlov's reflex theory. Though Eisenstein had measured his own work against *The Nibelungen*, he had succeeded in juxtaposing Fritz Lang's static, ornamental mass scenes with the chaotic body of the masses and had <https://www.weimarcinema.org/> not only created the most impressive picture of revolutionary martyrdom but had also shown that political art could be moving and still remain art.

On January 21, three days after the Moscow premiere, there was a closed showing in Berlin's Großes Schauspielhaus in honor of the anniversary of Lenin's death. Willi Münzenberg, the media mogul of the workers' press, immediately recognized the film's potential. When he found out that the German company Lloyd had just signed an agreement to import 13 Russian movies, but had turned down *Potemkin*, he offered to start a new company under the auspices of his International Workers' Aid that would distribute the film in the West. Münzenberg's new 'Prometheus Film GmbH' quickly signed a contract with Sovkino.

On March 18, 1926, Eisenstein and his cameraman Eduard Tissé traveled to Berlin to attend the German premiere of *The Battleship Potemkin*. Maria Andreeva, Maxim Gorky's partner and head of the film division of the Soviet trade mission in Berlin, hired Edmund Meisel to write the musical score. Meisel had collaborated with his close friend Erwin Piscator and with Brecht, he was known for his experiments with jazz and noise-music. Eisenstein discussed the film music with him: he wanted rhythm, rhythm, and more rhythm. Meisel was not allowed to wax melodic.

The premiere was announced but the Ministry of the Reichswehr (the defense ministry of the Weimar Republic) had become alarmed and ordered a closed showing for Admiral Zenker and Generaloberst Hans von Seeckt, 2nd Chief of the German Army Command. He recommended that the film be forbidden because it might threaten public order. On March 24, the 2nd Chamber of Film Censorship followed the recommendation. The Soviet trade mission arranged for Eisenstein to meet

with the influential critic Alfred Kerr. His statement was to be crucial during the second meeting of the Chamber on April 10. Kerr and Erwin Piscator belonged to the censorship committee's group of experts. *Potemkin* received the approval of the censorship by the majority of just one vote and with twenty-two required cuts, which meant 30.15 meters. The film's credits listed Piel Jutzi, a Prometheus employee. The Army leadership still forbade soldiers to see *Potemkin* in a special order of April 15, 1926.

After a month in Berlin, Sovkino called Eisenstein and Tissé back to Moscow. They had already stayed two weeks longer than intended, and hard currency was in short supply. They left for home on April 26 and missed the April 29 premiere. The ambassador Nikolai Krestinsky sent Eisenstein a telegram on April 27 asking him to return to Berlin by plane, but the flight was canceled because of bad weather. Eisenstein had to experience his fame from afar.

The Berlin premiere took place in the Apollo, a former music hall in the Friedrichstrasse 128, because the owners of the big movie theaters were reluctant to show the film. There had been a new attempt to forbid the screening, but the left press led a vehement protest. According to the right-wing press, it was a "bloody film," "a murderous film from Moscow," "the height of brutality and Soviet propaganda"; and it was the duty of every police chief in Europe to prevent people from entering theaters that showed the movie.¹ On the other hand, Berlin's great cultural figures acknowledged that the film had left an unusual, lasting exciting effect. Soon German writers—Bertolt Brecht, Lion Feuchtwanger, Gustav Regler—would mirror this effect in their poems and novels. The communist newspapers attributed the '*Potemkin*-effect' to its ideology. But it soon became clear that *Potemkin*'s attraction infected more than the proletariat. The film's success in bourgeois, Western circles took the Russian filmmakers by complete surprise. Kerr thought that its success lay in Russian culture—Dostoevsky, Stanislavsky, 'frenzies, passions, the abyss'.² Yet in the masses, in their collective body, there was not a single Tolstoyan peasant or Dostoevskian hero to be found. Eisenstein had cast the film with original types and with actors from his troupe. Nonetheless, Siegfried Kracauer curiously ascribed the film's success to the familiar dramatic art of the Moscow Art Theater.³ Herbert Jhering called *Potemkin* a 'people's film'. There was no equivalent in Germany, he claimed, since Germany was politically, spiritually, and artistically torn.⁴ The *Vossische Zeitung* likened the film to UFA's large historical productions but wrote that in comparison the latter were mere pastoral plays.⁵ Oskar A. H. Schmitz denied the film any artistic merit when he measured it against bourgeois novels, since the individual was completely absent. Walter Benjamin replied by offering the most surprising and most accurate comparison of all: American slapstick. Like *Potemkin*, that 'grotesque film' had discovered a new formula that marked progress in art and moved in step with the technological revolution.⁶ Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks saw *Potemkin* in their own private matinée—Meisel conducted the orchestra for just the two of them. Prometheus used their enthusiasm in its advertising campaign. Both stars professed that watching *Potemkin* had been the most profound experience of their lives.⁷

On June 12, 1926, the ministry of Reichswehr attempted once more to have the film's approval revoked. Despite a significant campaign in the press, the approval was withdrawn on July 12, 1926, at the request of the governments of Württemberg, Bavaria, Thuringia, and Hessen. On July 28, 1926, Berlin lifted the film ban by allowing *Potemkin* with some new cuts for adolescents.⁸ On October 2, 1926,

the Chamber of Film Censorship negotiated the release again. Berlin's decision was confirmed, but the admission for adolescents was revoked.

Earlier Russian films had never exceeded a maximum distribution of five prints. Soon there were 45, then 50, then 67 prints of *Potemkin* in circulation to meet Germany's great demand. The *Potemkin* negative was sold to Germany in 1926, since Soviet Russia did not have the means to make a duplicate copy. The film brought Prometheus a profit of one million Reichsmark.⁹ *Potemkin* catapulted Russian films out of their marginal status in world cinema, but only made \$108,000 for the Soviet Union. This modest sum was excused by the Soviet film distributors' lack of experience.

On August 18, 1930, *Potemkin* was rereleased in a sound version, 49 minutes long, produced in Berlin without Eisenstein. The sound script was written and realized by Alois Johannes Lippl for Organon Ltd., a company that was creating soundtracks together with Tobis. Lippl used Meisel's music, dialogues, choirs, screams, and noises.¹⁰ It was shown in a double feature with *La romance sentimentale* filmed by Eisenstein, Grigory Alexandrov and Tissé in France and received mostly negative reviews. But *Potemkin* story had a continuation. Joseph Goebbels saw the film three times (first on May 16, 1926, and last on October 6, 1939), as he also saw Eisenstein's *October* and *The General Line (Der Kampf um die Erde)*. He wrote in his diary after the second screening on June 30, 1928; "This film is fabulously done. With splendid mass scenes. Technical and scenic shots are of incisive penetrating power. And the striking slogans were so cleverly formulated that no one could raise any objection. That's what's really dangerous about this film. I wish we had one like that."¹¹ In February 1934 Goebbels demanded of his artists a National Socialist *Potemkin* during a speech at the Berlin Kroll Opera House.¹² Two years later his wish was fulfilled. Carl Anton filmed *Weisse Sklaven* ('White Slaves'), which described the 1905 mutiny of Russian sailors from the point of view of the officers. On March 9, 1934, Eisenstein responded to Goebbels' speech in an open letter to *Literaturnaya gazeta* that was translated and reprinted in *Film Art* and the German émigré newspaper *Pariser Tageblatt*. Eisenstein essentially denied National Socialist art the existential right to call itself art.¹³

Sources

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David Mayer, *Sergei M. Eisenstein's Potemkin: a shot-by-shot Presentation* (New York: Grossmann, 1972)
Richard Taylor, *The Battleship Potemkin: The Film Companion* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000).
Oksana Bulgakowa, *Sergei Eisenstein. A Biography* (Berlin, San Francisco: PotemkinPress 2001) &
Eisenstein [website](#)

Film edition on DVD:

The Battleship Potemkin (The Special Edition *filmmuseum*, 2005) with the restored version (70 min.),
German sound version with Meisel's score (49 min.); extras contain documents and an essay on
Eisenstein's and Meisel's collaboration.

https://www.trigon-film.org/en/shop/DVD_Edition_Filmmuseum/Battleship_Potemkin_October

Streaming

Criterion Chanel and Mosfilm Chanel on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmUef84ybXk&t=1317s>

¹ „Der Mordfilm aus Moskau,“ *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, 8 Mai 1926; Johannes W. Harnisch, „Der Blutfilm,“ *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, 10 Mai 1926; „Protest gegen den Bluttausch-Film,“ *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, 11 Mai 1926.

² Alfred Kerr, 'Der Russenfilm', *Russische Filmkunst* (Berlin: Ernst Pollak, 1927), 14.

³ *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 16 May 1926.

⁴ *Berliner Börsen Courier*, 1 May 1926.

⁵ *Vossische Zeitung*, 1 May 1926.

⁶ *Die literarische Welt*, 10 (Jg. 3, 11 March 1927): 7-8, reprinted in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* Volume II-2 edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhauser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 751-755, 1486-1489.

⁷ *Rote Fahne*, 7 May 1926.

⁸ „Die dritte Fassung von *Potemkin*,“ *LichtBildBühne*, Nr. 174, 23 July 1926; „Potemkin-Film freigegeben in abgekürzter Form“, *Berliner Tageblatt*, 28 July 1926.

⁹ *Völkermagazin* 11, 1927 (March): 55.

¹⁰ „Wenn Eisenstein souffliert...“, *LichtBildBühne*, Nr. 171, 18 Juli 1930; „Potemkin tönend“, *LichtBildBühne*, Nr. 199, 14 August 1930; „Potemkin wird vertont“, *Der Weltspiegel*. N 31,30. Jg., 3 August 1930; „Potemkin wird Tonfilm“, *SFK*. Nr. 8, 25 Juli 1930; Herbert Jhering „Singende Romanze und redender Panzerkreuzer“, *Berliner Börsen Courier*, 24 August 1930.

¹¹ Joseph Goebbels, *Tagebücher 1923-1945*, Band 1/III, edited by Elke Fröhlich (München u.a. : Saur, 1987), S. 28.

¹² *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, 11 February 1934.

¹³ S. Eisenstein, „On Fascism, German Cinema and Real Life. Open Letter to the German Minister of Propaganda, Dr Goebbels,“ *Selected Works: Writings 1922-1934*, volume 1, edited and translated by Richard Taylor (Bloomington, London: BFI, Indiana University Press, 1988), 280-4.