

KINO
INTERNATIONAL

PRESENTS



SERGEI EISENSTEIN'S
BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN

1925, Russia, B&W/Color, 69 minutes, 1.33:1

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SYNOPSIS

Part One: People and Worms

Odessa, 1905. On board the armored cruiser *Potemkin*, the ship's sailors – among them Matyushenko and Vakulinchuk – are faced with deplorable conditions, sleeping in cramped quarters, being fed rotten food, and suffering abuse at the hands of officers. The stirrings of revolt run high among the crew. Vakulinchuk calls on his fellow sailors to join the workers of Russia in revolution. The men are nearly pushed to the breaking point when they are served maggot-infested meat, proclaimed healthy by the ship's doctor, and refuse to eat.

Part Two: Drama on the Deck

The sailors are called on deck and addressed by Commander Golikov, who threatens to execute the men who voice their dissatisfaction with the food. When a group of disobedient sailors are to be executed by a firing squad of petty officers, Vakulinchuk calls the entire crew to unite in revolt, and implores the petty officers to join them. The firing squad lower their rifles. The sailors storm the ship, beginning a violent mutiny that results in a number of deaths, including Vakulinchuk, who is shot by an officer.

Part Three: The Dead Man Calls Out

In the early hours of the morning following the mutiny, Vakulinchuk's body is brought to the shore of Odessa. Standing united against their oppressors, the citizens of Odessa are spurred on to revolution, seeking revenge on those responsible for the murder of Vakulinchuk.

Part Four: The Odessa Staircase

From the top of the Odessa Staircase, the citizens watch the battleship *Potemkin* as the red flag is raised by the crew. However, soldiers attack the crowd from the top of the staircase, forcing them to flee for their lives. As they charge down the steps, many are injured, some trampled under the feet of the onrushing mass, while others fall from the soldiers' gunfire. A woman, carrying her badly injured child, approaches the soldiers and is gunned down. In retaliation for this massacre, the sailors on board the battleship fire their artillery upon important targets in Odessa, including the generals' headquarters.

Part Five: Rendezvous with the Squadron

Members of the Russian Army call for the sailors to come ashore and join them in revolution, but they are reluctant to disembark as the ship is being targeted by the admiral's squadron. The sailors finally decide to face the squadron in battle. After a long night, the morning finds the admiral's squadron approaching. The sailors prepare for battle, charging toward the squadron and readying the artillery, but the squadron's crew, having allied themselves with the crew of *Potemkin* in revolution, allow the battleship to pass through without firing so much as a shot.



CAST AND CREW

Grigory Vakulinchuk (Bolshevik Sailor) – Aleksandr Antonov
Commander Golikov – Vladimir Barsky
Chief Officer Giliarovsky – Grigori Aleksandrov
Young Sailor Flogged While Sleeping – Ivan Bobrov
Mikhail Gomorov – Militant Sailor
Petty Officer – Aleksandr Levshin
Woman with Pince-nez – N. Poltavtseva
Student Agitator – Konstantin Feldman
Mother Carrying Wounded Boy – Prokopenko
Wounded Boy – A. Glauberman
Woman With Baby Carriage – Beatrice Vitoldi

Director – Sergei M. Eisenstein
Screenplay – N.F. Agadzhanova-Shutko
Head Cinematographer – Eduard Tisse
Editor – Sergei M. Eisenstein
Original Score – Edmund Meisel
Art Direction – Vasili Rakhals
Second Unit Director – T. Aleksandrov



A REVOLUTION ON SCREEN: FILM NOTES BY BRUCE BENNETT

Since its December 1925 unveiling at Moscow's Bolshoi Theater, *Battleship Potemkin's* shockingly modern and effective form has so far overshadowed its content that instead of fomenting worldwide Socialist revolution it touched off a global revolution in filmmaking. *Potemkin's* debut became an inalterable demarcation point dividing world cinema's aesthetic evolution. Before *Potemkin*, film editing was a necessary technical encumbrance. After *Potemkin*, Sergei Eisenstein's theories of montage and the linkage and collision of shots became practical weapons any filmmaker could use to, in Eisenstein's words, "solve the specific problem of cinema," and challenge an audience to experience ideas, sensations, and emotions at an irresistible level of clarity. The aesthetic trail leading from the dawn of cinema to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* shower scene's relentlessly induced panic, the alternately playful and caustic audience indicting interruptions and intertitles of Godard's *Masculin feminin*, and the climactic bloody ballet of self extinction undertaken by Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*, became a road at the foot of Eisenstein's Odessa Steps.

Yet almost from the very beginning, *Potemkin's* seismic artistic impact has been paralleled by an unsystematic but nevertheless destructive censorship, editorial winnowing, and alteration at odds with Eisenstein's vision. By 1969, *Potemkin's* post-premiere life had grown so convoluted that Soviet film historians declared, "the screen history of *Potemkin* and the fate of its original negative still hold many secrets and need painstaking and large scale research." Decades of re-cuts, re-translations and public domain reissues have distorted and diluted *Potemkin's* intensity, energy, and originality.

A Tale of Two Premieres

Potemkin's Bolshoi premier in December of 1925 (the first time a film was ever shown in Moscow's famed Opera and Ballet venue) was an unqualified success. An invited audience of party officials and veterans of the failed 1905 revolution during which the real *Potemkin* revolt took place broke into spontaneous applause throughout the film, particularly when the *Potemkin's* crew raised the red Communist flag (shot with a white flag and hand tinted on the print itself). Eisenstein, his cinematographer Eduard Tisse, and his core "Iron Five" assistants took the stage at the screening's conclusion to a thunderous ovation. When the film received its public premiere on January 19, 1926, the response was no less enthusiastic. "Everything is alive in the hands of these superb masters of the screen," wrote one Moscow paper, "here is something to show in the near and far West."

Potemkin's fortunes both at home and abroad would remain inexorably tied not to its Moscow debut, but to its premiere in Berlin in April of 1926. Sensitive to Germany's post-war political and economic ill health, the Weimar Government feared that *Potemkin* might create an ideological foothold for Bolshevism in Germany. German military and police officials fought particularly vigorously to have the film banned in the months prior to its scheduled premiere in the German capital. *Potemkin* was, in the words of one high-ranking officer, "directed for the most part toward the personnel of the armed forces and police, and excites them toward a breach of discipline and revolt." The film's left-leaning German distributor Prometheus hired writer, director, and editor Phil Jutzi to supervise a German



retitling and restructuring of *Potemkin* that Prometheus hoped might help the film avoid some of the cuts it was almost guaranteed to endure. (Jutzi would go on to direct 1929's *Mother Krause's Journey to Happiness* and 1931's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, two highly influential social realist films championed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder four decades later.) Despite Jutzi's efforts, Prometheus's version was indeed banned outright by the German censors on March 24th. But it was passed two weeks later after Prometheus agreed to eliminate one title and some 52 more shots totaling nearly 100 feet of film.

Battleship Potemkin premiered at the Apollo Theater in Berlin in April 1926 to enthusiastic acclaim and record crowds – minus members of Germany's police and armed forces who were forbidden to see the film by the German Defense Ministry. Eisenstein was pleased by the film's reception but chafed at Jutzi's reworking and the cuts that Weimar censors had demanded and received. He was particularly annoyed that Jutzi changed the tragic martyrdom of the Potemkin crew's beloved comrade Vakulinchuk from a thoughtless act of vengeance at the conclusion of the sailor's rebellion, to just another battle casualty by moving Vakulinchuk's assassination into the uprising sequence itself. The mutiny became, he wrote later, "a somehow random, atypical rebellion against a historically neutral background." Nevertheless, German tastemakers from theater pioneer Max Reinhardt to future Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels praised the film extravagantly.

Eisenstein was considerably more satisfied with the opportunity Prometheus gave him to create a definitive accompanying musical score for the German premiere. *Potemkin's* Bolshoi premiere had been so rushed that the first night's Russian audience experienced the film accompanied by a hastily assembled pastiche of pre-existing orchestral cues. For *Potemkin's* Berlin debut Eisenstein auspiciously selected Brecht collaborator Edmund Meisel to create an ambitious and ultimately highly influential score for the film. "I told Meisel I wanted the score to be rhythm, rhythm and above all pure rhythm," Eisenstein wrote. Heeding the director's instructions, in just 12 days the composer created a spectacular accompaniment that the New York Herald Tribune later declared "as powerful, as vital, as galvanic, and electrifying as the film." The score proved so effective that it was singled out for criticism in Germany's virulent right wing press. "This, generally speaking," Meisel dryly responded, "is the first time that political charges have been brought against a musical composition."

Into the West

Though *Potemkin's* aesthetic step forward rivaled, if not trumped, anything coming out of Germany's fabled UFA studios, the Soviet film industry of the late 20's was still too small and insular to have developed any international distribution clout of its own. Germany's film industry was however second only to the US. German film exports dominated Europe, and had made substantial inroads into many other international film markets. In deference to Germany's market supremacy, Goskino's deal with Prometheus allowed the German company to oversee the film's retitling and distribution throughout the world. In deference to Germany's superior laboratory facilities Goskino exported *Potemkin's* original edited negative to Germany as well. Under the terms of the Prometheus agreement, Goskino would have access to the negative for additional Russian prints.

Bolstered by its German success, *Potemkin* began to perform well at home and would eventually even surpass Douglas Fairbanks's enormously popular import *Robin Hood* in



Moscow theaters. But the Prometheus deal ultimately proved to be a problematic one for *Potemkin's* domestic fate. "Success abroad so turned the head of our film dealers that, with only the briefest consideration, they sold the negative to Germany, keeping only the right to retain copies," sniffed a Russian journalist. Only a handful of prints of the film were made available to Russian audiences. "The promised copies are not here," the incensed journalist wrote. "To think that we wait for copies of the best Soviet film from abroad!"

It was Douglas Fairbanks himself who shepherded *Potemkin* to its US theatrical debut. "The *Battleship Potemkin* was the most powerful and the most profound emotional experience in my life," the star said after attending the Berlin premiere with Mary Pickford. Fairbanks personally imported a print of Jutzi's *Potemkin* cut, which legend has it was first shown in a private screening projected on a sheet in Gloria Swanson's home in New York. When *Potemkin* subsequently made the rounds in Hollywood studio screening rooms, "nobody went Bolshevik," wrote a Photoplay Magazine columnist, "but a lot of people left with some revolutionary ideas of filmmaking."

Eisenstein's Odessa Steps sequence astonished Hollywood's creative inner circles in much the same way that Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending A Staircase No. 12* challenged the American fine arts establishment when it was unveiled at the 1913 New York Armory show. In a memo to his MGM superiors, young associate producer David O. Selznick judged *Potemkin*, "unquestionably one of the greatest motion pictures ever made," and recommended that his colleagues all, "view it in the same way that a group of artists might study a Rubens or a Raphael."

It's unknown whether the print that elicited such extravagant admiration from Hollywood professionals on the West Coast was the same as the 1926 version retitled and recut under the supervision of Canadian documentary pioneer John Grierson for the film's official US distribution. Prior to its American theatrical debut at the Biltmore Theater in December of 1926, the New York State Censorship Board demanded and received substantial cuts in Grierson's *Potemkin* that were different from those the film had already undergone in Germany. Much to Eisenstein's bemusement his cast of non-actors and vehemently anti-Stanislavsky Proletkult Theater colleagues were incorrectly identified in the credits and in the film's US reviews as members of Stanislavsky's Moscow Arts Theater. No copies of the Grierson cut have been discovered in the decades since the Biltmore debut and subsequent limited US release.

A print that was according to its titles "acquired through the courtesy of the Scientific Research Institute, Moscow and the Reichsfilmarchiv, Berlin," and most likely was the Jutzi cut shorn of German intertitles was given to the Museum of Modern Art sometime in 1938. Rather than merely putting words in the characters mouths or exposition on screen, *Potemkin's* titles were, in the words of Eisenstein's widow, "a visual and significant element of the montage. When they are removed, a rhythm is lost." The MoMA print was itself inaccurately translated into English with little regard for Eisenstein and his collaborators Nikolai Aseyev's and Sergei Tretyakov's carefully designed and unique original titles. The nitrate MoMA print would eventually wind up at the British Film Institute, along with prints and materials that London Film Society founder and Observer film critic Ivor Montague acquired from Eisenstein in the late 20's.



The Sound Era

In Germany, meanwhile, the film had endured another ban in 1928, followed by six more censor-mandated cuts. In 1930, Prometheus supervised two different sound versions (one for German audiences and one for Russian audiences) of *Potemkin* utilizing mechanically synchronized audio discs containing sound effects, Edmund Meisel conducting his own score, and dubbed dialogue. The MoMA print itself became the source for a sound version of sorts when lengthy sections of the film were cut into a Hollywood sound film, 1943's *Seeds of Freedom*. Written by future blacklistee Albert Maltz, *Seeds of Freedom* cast actor Henry Hull as a *Potemkin* survivor recalling the mutiny in flashback.

Sometime after WWII, the repeatedly cut and re-cut Prometheus negative was returned to the USSR. Director Sergei Kazakov received the assignment of creating what was to be the definitive post-war export version of the film in 1949. Kazakov supervised a laboratory reprinting that multiplied the film's original frames so that it could be run at sound speed and stretched, and thereby distorted Eisenstein and Tisse's brilliant compositions so that they would fill sound gauge print stock frames. He also extensively retitled the film and removed material that the vicissitudes of Soviet politics had rendered objectionable since 1926. The expunging and replacing of an opening quote from Leon Trotsky with an appropriately PC quote from Lenin that was performed on the 1930 synchronized version was augmented by placing the Lenin quote over an image of books by Marx, Lenin, and Engels alongside a bust of Lenin. With the Soviet people still reeling from their epic repulsion of the Nazi invaders, excerpts from Shostakovich filled in for German composer Meisel's definitive score.

The resulting film was released internationally in 1950 and until the 70's remained the least accurate, yet most heavily distributed version of Eisenstein's film in the US via the circulation of 16mm versions and public domain video copies.

Raising Potemkin

In 1976, Eisenstein scholar Naum Kleinman attempted to rectify some of *Potemkin's* extensive, convoluted, and arbitrary re-ordering of shots and intertitles from known negative and print materials he was able to assemble. Unfortunately, Kleinman had to make due with stretched frames from post war sound print stock versions of *Potemkin* for his ambitious but nevertheless incomplete assembly.

In 1986, Enno Patalas, then working at the Munich Filmmuseum, made an initial attempt at reassembling *Potemkin* from prints held by MoMA and BFI. For the first time since the 1920's, *Potemkin's* flag was hand-colored back to its original red and the film was accompanied by a performance of Meisel's score. Emboldened by the results, Patalas, later joined by film scholar Anna Bohn, began combing FIAF member archives for fuller materials with which to attempt a truly definitive new version of Eisenstein's film. First at the Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv and then under the auspices of the Filmmuseum Berlin-Deutsche Kinematek, in association with the BFI and Gosfilmkino in Russia, Patalas began righting 80 years of wrongs once and for all and creating what is believed to be the definitive restoration of *Battleship Potemkin*.

This new version's 1,374 shots include all the material that was cut at the German censor's



behest in 1926 and 1928 and was in turn missing from the MoMA and BFI prints and each iteration since. Unlike the Kleinman reconstruction, no liberties have been taken with the film's frame size. "I find it horrible to see a film of Eisenstein where titles are missing," the director's late widow once observed. Kino's new restoration also features the most comprehensive, complete, and accurate re-ordering, rendering, and replacing of *Potemkin's* groundbreaking stylized titles since its premiere. All of Eisenstein's 146 shots of text have been restored along with the frames of film and accompanying rhythm that were lost when the titles were excised.

New Restoration Unveiled

When the new restoration premiered at the Berlin Film Festival on February 12, 2005, the 100th anniversary of the original historical Potemkin mutiny and the 80th anniversary of the film's Russian opening, it was accompanied by a live performance of Edmund Meisel's score, itself restored and re-orchestrated in harmony with what French novelist Colette called *Potemkin's* "irreproachably clear-cut tempo." Composer and conductor Helmut Imig has researched, arranged, and expanded Meisel's themes for a 45 piece orchestra at the Berlinale premier and for 55 players for this re-issue.

Thanks to the efforts of Enno Patalas and Filmmuseum Berlin-Deutsche Kinematek, Helmut Imig and the Babelsberg Orchestra, the British Film Institute and Goskino, *Battleship Potemkin's* secret history has at last been revealed and Eisenstein's undisputed masterpiece has at last been restored to a version that is as close to its director's intentions as it is ever likely to be.