

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Alexander Nevsky 1938 Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948)

STORY

Savior. The story concerns a great hero and saint of thirteenth century Russia, Alexander Nevsky (1221-63). Nevsky was the noted grandson of Vsevolod the Big Nest, and himself acquired legendary fame for the leadership by which he saved Kievan Rus from its most difficult times—Swedish and German invasions from the West and Mongol invasions from the East. It was to this legendary role that the Eastern Orthodox Church had recourse, in canonizing Nevsky (1547), a mainstay of the survival of the Russian Church. Nevsky is still revered in Russia.

Soviets. The Soviets, in 1938 were for a time happy to co-opt the cult of Nevsky, as a symbol of power over Germany—and in the rush of that patriotic mind-set embraced the film of Eisenstein before us. That film, which celebrates both Nevsky's personality and feats, and the 'inevitable' defeat of the Germans by Russians, endured its own ups and downs, within Soviet Russia, according to the degree of contractual alliance of Russia with Germany at any given time. Highly praised in America, where Eisenstein had worked for over a decade, the patriotism of Nevsky made it an occasional great hit. In Russia, especially during the Great Patriotic Struggle with the Germans in 1944. This great patriotic film, in other words, celebrated the greatness of the Soviet experiment, though only in a broad way, by stressing the power of Russian, soil, blood, and power. It is widely considered one of the great propaganda films of all time.

Militant. The narrative centers around Nevsky himself. From the moment we first see him, imperturbably fishing with his buddies, to his final coronation as the savior of Russia from the Germans and Swedes, and on his death throne before his people, we mark him out for great deeds as well as good sense. He is confronted, from the start, with a Mongol invasion, which he smartly refuses to take as a pretext for war, accepting the post of Mongol general, instead. (Especially interesting about Nevsky is his pragmatic attitude toward alliances and strategies of war. But when he is informed by the citizens of Novgorod, that their lands are being invaded by Germans and Swedes from the northwest, he hastens to their defence, agreeing to serve as their military leader. (This time he sees both the morality and the necessity of taking up arms.) Only 19 at the time, Alexander carried the Novgorites to victory over the Swedes, at the River Neva while in 1242, when he was just 21, the same Alexander Nevsky reached hero status by defeating the Germans and Estonians in the illustrious Battle on the Ice, in which—thanks to the melting of the winter precipitation, the Germans find themselves drowning helplessly in a landscape of vanishing blocks.

Romance. The military confrontations which dominate this film, steering the onlooker toward a sense of the unbeatable power of the Rus—and by extension of the Russian Soviets—are paralleled by a symbolic love story designed to humanize what otherwise would be a mammoth Hollywoodesque exercise in heroism and the military movements of masses of warlike men, wrapped in furs and topped with helmets. Two of the leading Novgorod leaders fall for the same blonde woman, and demand that she should choose which one she wants for a husband. The conflict is between massive claimants, and the stakes point toward nothing less than national issues

Resolution. Just as the blonde is demurring, war breaks out against the Germans, and a pitched battle temporarily dominates the narrative. Olga, the maiden in the narration, proclaims that she will marry the most heroic warrior in the battle. In the end she finds her two suitors alive, among the heaps of carcasses, and hobbles away triumphantly with them both. Although she is ultimately the pick of Gavrilo, one of the two heroes, she in fact and in the end melds into a single issue of mother Russia. Nevsky himself pronounces the commencement of victory celebrations, and the orchestral power of Prokofiev's music roars out its discordant patriotic notes.

THEMES

Diplomacy. The film opens on a peaceful fishing scene, in which Alexander and some friends are taking their ease and chatting. Suddenly, on horseback out of the east, appear Mongol cavalry, the Golden Horde, threatening to batter down any resistance. Realizing that he and his men cannot effectively resist, Alexander joins up as general with the Golden Horde. This is the kind of intelligence which leads the Rus to understand that their true enemies are the vast (and to them evil) hordes of Germans and Swedes to the Northwest, and that they should concentrate their strength on defeating these western hordes.

Vastness. It is a truism that Napoleon, in his invasion of Russia, was ultimately defeated by the land of Russia, with its seemingly endless and (in winter) deadly fields of snow stretching to the end of the horizon. Eisenstein is a master of including this natural feature as a character in his presentation. (The lonely atonal notes of Prokofiev's music interweave powerfully with the landscape.) We see great masses of armed men dwindle against horizons which dwarf them, and armies battling as far as the eye can see. After the Battle on the Ice Eisenstein creates for us the impression of an endless extent of cadavers.

Faith We know of course of the religious validation that awaits Alexander Nevsky, at the conclusion of the present set of struggles, of which it is a subtheme that the Roman Catholic Church is a mainstay of the enemy, and the Russian Orthodox Church the standard bearer for victory in the name of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, there is a powerful diffuse faith—in mother Russia, in her land and people—which sustains the Kievan Rus at this most difficult period in their development. The last shots of the film are accompanied with the heralding: 'Go and say to all, Russia stands.'

Patriotism. Given the geopolitical world in which it was --created, it is no wonder that Nevsky breathes an uncompromising and unobtrusive air of patriotism. Prior to shooting the present film, his first in sound, Eisenstein had worked on contract with Hollywood studios, and upon return to the Soviet Union he was closely monitored—co writers were assigned to him, to assure the purity of his Communism—and responded appropriately, with the ideologically vigorous film before us. That the patriotism of Nevsky targeted the holiness of Mother Russia, while the sponsoring Soviet Agencies, in 1939, were officially atheist, seems to make no difference to Eisenstein, as he blurs these distinctions In the powerful praise songs of Prokofiev.

CHARACTERS

Alexander Nevsky. The heroic central figure of the film. From the time we first see him, Alexander breathes a palpable self-confidence, and throughout the film's depictions, of Alexander's struggle on behalf of Mother Russia, we find him serenely confident of his motherland's ability to drive away the western foe.

Olga. The beautiful blonde woman, over whom two brawny military men dispute, in Novgorod, and who in the end walks away from the Battle of Ice, supporting both of her wounded suitors. A symbol of patriotic and resourceful Mother Russia.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

ALEXANDER NEVSKY (extravert)

Character Alexander first appears to us as a princely but relaxed country resident, fishing at leisure with his buddies. We would say that he is a figure without a care in the world, though in fact he is a person of destiny. He becomes Nevsky only after his initial victory at the Neva River, near Novgorod, the locale for which he is named. Alexander was in fact the son of Kievan Rus princes, and was eventually

installed as the Grand Prince of Vladimir in 1252, evidence that in him lineage and prowess went together. He was a pious man, as well as a gifted military leader, and after numerous salient victories, both on the battlefield and in statesmanship, departed earth in the town of Gorodets-on-the-Volga, as he was returning from the capitol of the Mongol Golden Horde. Before his death he entered a monastic order, and died with the monastic name of Alexis. His principal feast day is May 23.

Parallels. The concept of the national hero is universal: Aeneas; Simon Bolivar; Kemal Attaturk; George Washington; Kwame Nkrumah; Charlemagne; Fidel Castro; Pericles...and on and on, in a sequence so extensive that we must ask ourselves why such an 'honored concept' is of such importance to national formation. Must it not be that a personal father—yes, these are all male models—is essential to the coalescence of a sentiment of national unity?

Illustrative moments

Relaxed. When first we see Alexander he is at ease with some of his friends, fishing in a local pond. A horde of Mongol horsemen gallop up, threaten Nevsky with a military attack, and yet he sends them off with a relaxed agreement that he will serve as a General in the Mongol army but has no interest in fighting the group. His relaxed and conciliatory ploy carries the day.

Chosen. In the city of Novgorod, after the call to battle against the Teutonic Knights, the merchants protest that fighting against the Germans would at that time be ruinous for business, and that it should be avoided. Ultimately, however, it is the citizen choice, that Alexander was the only individual with the power of leadership, and that it should be turned over to him.

Victorious. In single combat, during the Battle on the Ice, Nevsky unseats the Master of the Teutonic forces, and watches him be dragged away in ropes. Nevsky stands surveying the carnage, which is all that remains of the battle, while the women of the community venture out to find their loved ones, alive or dead.

Eloquent. After a celebratory speech, Nevsky drinks down a goblet of wine, urges the festivities to commence, but only after having declared that 'whosoever comes against us with the sword, shall perish by the sword.' By this time he has seen to it that the enemy foot soldiers have been freed, the enemy nobles have been set aside for ransoming, and the top brass have been torn to bits. He has definitively established himself, as the hero and spiritual guide of the Kievan Rus.

Discussion Questions

Do propaganda and great cinema go together? Or does the 'purity' of art suffer too greatly from the often clumsy need to 'make a point'?

What connection do you see between Nevsky the war hero and Nevsky the saint? Is it that they are both fighting for the same mother, Russia?

Are the goals for which Nevsky fought the same as were the goals of the Soviet Union? Or was Nevsky simply 'appropriated' by this film?