

Essay Six — Alexander Nevsky

“Comrade Alexander”

Russell J Lowke, January 15th, 2002, 8:00pm.

Sergey Mikhailovich Eisenstein was a prominent Russian filmmaker who was active from 1923 to 1948. His early works were criticized by the Soviet Stalinist government, and only after a public expression of contrition was he permitted to continue film making. Governmental policy in the U.S.S.R attacked him for his film *Bezhin Meadow*(1933), calling it "formalistic," due to its poetic interpretation of reality and ordered him to suspend work on it weeks before its completion. His next film, *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), is considered a great masterpiece of its time, but it was created under the watchful and paranoid eye of the Central Executive Committee of the U.S.S.R. Because of this censorship, Eisenstein created a propaganda film which glorifies Russia and Russian heroes, celebrates the defeat of German invaders, and resolves in the triumph of Russian collectivism.¹ This essay will examine closely the Stalinist influences on Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky*, and compare them to historical reality.

In 1239 the Livonian Knights (Orders of the Brothers of the Sword) began a military campaign in northwestern Russia to expand their territory and convert the "schismatic" and "heretical" Greek Orthodox Russians to Roman Catholicism. This opportunity was inspired by a Russia weakened by incursions by the Mongols.² The Teutonic Knights, with whom the Livonian Knights were affiliated, joined the crusade in 1241, capturing Pskov, and in 1242 proceeded against Novgorod. The invasion was stopped by Russian Grand Prince Alexander Nevsky, who decisively defeated the Knights in battle on the frozen Lake Peipus (April 5th, 1242), also known as the battle of Lake Chud, and referred to in Russian historical tradition as the "Battle on the Ice" (*Ledovoye Poboishche*).³ As the Knights retreated, the spring ice broke under them, aiding in their destruction. After this defeat, the Grand Master of the Knights, relinquished all claims on conquered Russian lands. Serge A. Zenkovsky, in his *Tale of the Life of Alexander Nevsky*, describes the battle on the ice, "when the sun rose, the two armies clashed. There was horrible bloodshed and such a noise from the breaking of lances and clanging of swords that one could think that the ice itself on the

¹ Norman Swallow, *Eisenstein a Documentary Portrat*, (New York: Dutton, 1977):111.

² David Nicolle, *Lake Peipus 1242 — Battle of the ice*, (London: Osprey,1996):47.

³ Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia 2nd Ed*, (London: Oxford,1969):87.

lake was breaking. And the ice itself was so covered with blood that it could not be seen... And so the Germans were defeated with the help of God and the enemy fled and they were pursued and cut to pieces by his warriors...”⁴

Alexander was a renowned military commander, protecting the western frontiers of Russia against European invasion during a tragic period of his nation’s history, when the eastern portion was overrun by the Mongols under the Khan Batu. Alexander Nevsky is a figure that has inspired Russians from the thirteenth century to the Second World War, when Stalin pronounced him a national hero and established a military order in his name.⁵ Because of Alexander’s great legacy, and his success defeating the Germanic Teutonic Knights, Eisenstein choose him as the subject around which he could promote Russian nationalism in the face of an expanding Germany. Russia had been forced to sue for peace during the First World War against Germany, and once again the Germans were threatening her borders under the influence of Adolf Hitler, whose policy of *Lebensraum*, as outlined in *Mein Kampf*, expressed the need for Germans to seek living space (*Lebensraum*) in the East, at the expense of the Slavs and hated Marxists of Russia.⁶

This uncompromising German viewpoint is expressed vividly in Eisenstein’s film. “The Germans have taken Pskov and are mounting on you [Novgorod]. All and sundry they slay: him who bears a sword and him who carries bread. They torture women whose men war against them. If any shouts out, they smite him for shouting. If any is silent, they smite him for his silence. Rus they divide among their barons, allotting Pskov to one and Novgorod to another.”⁷ The sack of Pskov is depicted bathed in plumes of black smoke. Babies and children are hurled onto the fire in ritual conducted by large, blond haired, blue eyed German knights while their Teutonic priests bless the slaughter, making the sign of the cross. Aside from the religious admonitions, this behavior

prophesies what would soon befall the Russian people under the forthcoming German invasion

⁴ Serge A. Zenkovsky, “Tale of the Life of Alexander Nevsky,” *Medieval Russia’s Epics, Chronicle and Tales*, translated from *Pskov Second Chronicle*, (New York: Dutton, 1974):231.

⁵ Sergi A. Zenkovsky, 224.

⁶ William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960):82-83.

⁷ Sergi Eisenstein, *Alexander Nevsky*, (USSR: Mosfilm, 1938).

during the Second World War. Such premonitions, along with the depiction of Alexander repulsing the invaders, ensured the film's popularity when Hitler did attack in 1941.

Eisenstein goes to great lengths to portray the invaders as strictly Germanic, and, though this is effective considering events to come, it should be remembered that the knights were part of a Crusade spearheaded initially by the Swedes and Finno-Ugic peoples.⁸ Similarly, the Teutonic army at the battle of lake Pepsi was aided by a large contingent of Danes, and by no means purely German. The Swedes and the Teutonic Knights "regarded the Russian Greek Orthodox as being as much in need of 'salvation' as the pagans."⁹ Eisenstein does accurately portray the aggressive spirit of the Roman Catholic Church. For instance, the bishop of Winchester, before embarking on Crusade against Novogod, states, "when we proceed against the enemies of Christ... [we] will slay them, and cleanse the face of the earth, so that all the world will be subject to the one Catholic Church ...there will be one shepherd and one fold."¹⁰

However, Eisenstein has ulterior motives for portraying the Roman Catholics as evil. The Soviets wanted to totally exterminate the church and replace religion (which was outlawed), with nationalism. Stalin vandalized Russian religious monuments, and was personally responsible for the destruction of some of Moscow's finest cathedrals. Eisenstein endorses Stalinist pro-atheist sentiment when he sheds such fiercely negative light on Catholicism. The knights robes are all adorned with white crosses, their great helms have cross-like visors. The priest is most sinister, holding a gruesome crucifix with a nailed Jesus, he plays an ominous portable grand organ. Before commencing battle the bishop blesses his knights in a ritual resembling a gathering of the Ku Klux Klan.

The Russians, in true Soviet style, are portrayed as non-religious; they were in fact highly pious. Eisenstein over emphasizes the religious aspects of the Germans, while playing down ardent

⁸ "From the Year 1241 to 1381," *The Nikonian Chronicle*: vol. 3: trans. Sergi A. and Betty Jean Zenkovsky, (Princeton: Kingston Press, 1986):4.

⁹ George Vernadsky, "The Mongols and Russia," *A History of Russia*, vol. 3, (New Haven: Yale, 1953):55.

¹⁰ George Vernadsky, 54.

Russian Greek Orthodoxy. The Livonian crusade was responded to with a Greek Orthodox counter crusade, beginning with Alexander humbling himself in the cathedral of Saint Sophia and receiving the benediction of the Archbishop Spiridion.¹¹ Similarly, both sides blessed their troops in the name of God, and before going into battle Alexander “strengthened his spirit with the sign of the Cross and marched into [icy] lake Chudskoe,”¹² then he “raised his arms to heaven and said: ‘Judge me, my God, help me in my discord with this proud people, and help me, my Lord, as in the ancient times thou helped Moses defeat the Amalekites, and thou helpedst my forefather, Yaroslav, against the accursed Sviatoplk.’”¹³

An example of Russian piety is clear when the Mongols demanded the Russian princes to visit the Khan and pay homage to him. Two Russian princes, Mikhail and his grandson Boris Vasil’kovich, martyred themselves by refusing to bow to the Mongol idols. Mikhail said to the Khan: “It does not become Christians to go through fire and to bow to the idols... such is the Christian religion... to bow to the Trinity: to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.”¹⁴ The Khan warned them, “choose for thyself life or death; if thou keepest my command thou shalt both live and receive all thy pryncedom, but if though wilt not go through the fire, nor bow to the bush and to the idols then thou shalt die by a cruel death.” Mikhail responded, “To thee... I bow... but to the things to which these bow I shall not bow.”¹⁵ Their reward was to be beaten, struck repeatedly over the heart, and then beheaded, though they proved themselves Christians. Eisenstein’s portrayals of the Russians omits the reality that they were as committed to their faith as the Germans.

During the mid-thirteenth century, the Mongol empire had reached its height, an empire larger than the Roman empire at its zenith. Most of the civilized lands adjacent to the steppe were conquered, from Vietnam and Korea to the Adriatic Sea, including all of China, most of the Middle

¹¹ Alfred Rambaud, *A Popular History of Russia*, (U.S.A: Boston,1886):160.

¹² *The Nikonian Chronicle*,11.

¹³ Sergi A. Zenkovsky, 31.

¹⁴ *The Chronicle of Novgorod 1016-1471*, trans. Robert Michell and Nevill Forbes, (London:1914):89.

¹⁵ *The Chronicle of Novgorod*, 90.

East, and all of the Russian principalities, except Novgorod. The powerful Khan Batu was ruler of the Eastern country, and his clan was known as the Golden Horde. He enacted wholesale slaughter upon whoever dared to oppose them, inspiring horror in both Moslems and Christians alike.¹⁶ All of Europe was terrified, saying of the Mongol invasion that it “may be truly described as one of the most dreadful calamities which ever befell the human race.”¹⁷ So terrified were they that when Emperor Frederick II sent a letter calling for a crusade against the Mongols, he was shunned and accused of treason against Rome.¹⁸

Grand Prince Alexander Nevsky perceived that in the presence of the immense and brutal force of the Mongols, all resistance was useless and all pride ruin. Any attempt to brave them would result in the complete overthrow of Russia. The conduct of Alexander Nevsky towards the Mongols may not have been chivalrous, but it was wise and humane.¹⁹ He appealed to the new rulers of Russia, and he was the only prince who kept his independence. “God has subjected many peoples to me,” wrote the Khan to him, “will you alone refuse to recognize my power? If you wish to keep your land, come to me; you will see the splendor and the glory of my sway.” When Alexander went to the Khan he, unlike Mikhail, bowed to their idols, and Batu declared that fame had not exaggerated the merit of Alexander, and that he far excelled the common run of Russian princes.²⁰

Stalin encouraged Russian history, Russian language, and Russian national and cultural heroes. It would not have been nationalistic for Eisenstein to promote the fact that the great Russian hero, Alexander Nevsky, for the good of the Russian people, bowed to the power of the Khan. In his film, a comrade reflects “They are strong [the Mongols]. Hard will it be to fight them... it is time to avenge our fathers’ blood,” to this Alexander replies, “The Mongols can wait, methinks, we

¹⁶ Sergi A. Zenkovsky, 233.

¹⁷ George Vernadsky, 1.

¹⁸ George Vernadsky, 57.

¹⁹ Alfred Rambaud, 161-162.

²⁰ Ibid.

face more dangerous foes, closer at hand are they and fiercer, and will not be paid off... the Germans! First we must crush them, then fight the Tartars.” Dealing with Mongol presence is postponed, after which, the issue ceases to be mentioned, and one is left to speculate the outcome. As the Mongols depart, the Russians sing, “Never will we surrender the Russian land. He who dares attack us will be crushed, Rise O mighty Rus, Rise against the foe, Rise and wage battle, O Novgorod!” Eisenstein clings to Russian nationalism, regardless of the reality that Russia was a vassal state to the Mongols.

During the opening scenes of Eisenstein’s film, the Mongols request Alexander to “join the Horde, there will you be a person of importance. We need commanders.” Typically, in Soviet retort, Alexander’s reply is defiant, “we [the Russians] have a saying, better to die in your own land than to leave it.” Historically, Alexander did everything in his power to appease the Horde, short of fighting within its ranks. As mentioned, he left Russia to visit the Khan and his obedience to them was put to the test when the Mongols demanded that Russia submit to a census and pay the tamga (a customs tax). When the officers of the Khan began taking the census, some of the population revolted. Alexander drove his defiant son Vasli, out of Pleskov, and punished those who refused to pay the Mongol tithe. He cut off the noses of some, and took out the eyes of others.²¹ In Novgorod, people assembled around the chapel of Saint Sophia, declaring that they would rather die for liberty and honor than to submit to this. Alexander then threatened to quit the city and abandon it to the vengeance of the Khan. The people of Novgorod relented, and the agents of the Mongols were allowed to go, register in hand, from house to house in the humiliated and silent city, to make the list of its inhabitants.²²

Alexander’s policy of humble submission and co-operation towards the Mongols, kept him in good favor with the Khan, thereby maintaining his title of grand prince, and consequently allowed him to preserve the principality of Novgorod, as well as other Russian lands from ruin. Mongol

²¹ *The Chronicle of Novgorod*, 96.

²² Alfred Rambaud, 163.

religious policy puzzled both Christian and Muslim believers alike, as the Khan encouraged rival faiths, Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist, to coexist. The Orthodox Church thrived under Mongol protection and tax exemption, fearing the anti-Mongol princes who negotiated with the papacy. For these reasons, Alexander, by 1381, was elevated to the status of a local saint, and was canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church in 1547.²³ Understandably, Eisenstein makes no indication of this in his movie, yet this is a principle reason Alexander managed to secure such renown amongst the Russian peoples. His victories over the Swedes and the largely German Crusaders on Lake Peipus could be considered relatively minor affairs of local significance. For example, the *Hypatius Chronicle*, from southern Russia, states that “Nothing Happened” in the year 1242—the year of the Battle on the Ice.²⁴

During the battle of Lake Peipus, the Tunic order exhibited extreme overconfidence. The very fact that they were willing to charge over the slippery, frozen ice, on heavily armored chargers, to wage battle *on the lake*, is tantamount to folly. Eisenstein emphasizes this when the Grand Master utters, “The man has not been born who can crush us!” Similarly the Tunic priest says, “There is but one God in Heaven. And one deputy God on earth. One sun lights up the universe... there can be but one Roman Emperor on earth... All who refuse to bow to Rome must be destroyed.” Counterpart to this is the Russian retort, “Never will Rus submit to the Germans... I [Alexander] will stand up for Rus... I know naught of defense. We will attack! Rouse must we the peasants.” These situations are all highly reflective of the impending Second World War. The official Nazi designation for the regime in Germany from January 1933 to May 1945 was the Third Reich, the presumed successor of the medieval and early modern Holy Roman Empire of 800 to 1806 (the First Reich) and the German Empire from 1871 to 1918 (the Second Reich). When the priest exclaims, “there can be but one Roman Emperor on earth,” there is direct correlation with Nazi Germany. Similarly, Alexander rousing the peasants is comparable to Stalin rousing the

²³ Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, 88.

²⁴ David Nicolle, 83.

peasants during the Second World War. Remarkably, he would use Eisenstein's film to do so.

Another very Soviet viewpoint of the film is the endorsement of women fighting in combat. The Soviet Union drafted unmarried women during the Second World War. Over eight hundred thousand women served in the Soviet army at the front, comprising eight percent of their troops.²⁵ This principle is attested to with the female character of Vasilisa who fights by Vasli's side. She is in the center of the battle, where the fiercest fighting was, and where the Russians suffered the most losses. "[The Tunic Knights] rode at them [Russians] driving themselves like a wedge through their army [center]; and there was a great slaughter of Nemtsy and Chud men."²⁶ In the film, the Russians use a barricade of sledges to reinforce their center against the Tunic knights charge. Vasli is told to, "Stand fast... chain the sledges and put them behind you. That will help you hold the Germans." Later in the fighting Vasilisa asks Vasli "shall we move back the sledges!" she is told, "Die where you stand!" During the conclusion of the film, it is declared that Vasilisa was the bravest Russian ("none fought more bravely") and she gains marriage to Prince Vasli. This depiction of female combatants is a Soviet invention, and is unrelated to the historical realities of the battle.

A glaring omission by Eisenstein is the absence from the battle of Alexander's allied Mongol or Turkish horse-archers who were likely present on his armies northern flank (right wing), and who routed the Crusader's Danish vassals.²⁷ That Alexander enlisted Asiatic horse archers to defeat the Crusaders, and that these played a decisive role in the battle, is intentionally ignored by the writers of Soviet propaganda films. Their shower shooting archery tactics, would have been a complete surprise to the Crusaders. These tactics are described by Friar Carpini as such, "[the Mongols], each supplied with several quivers... began to shoot... as soon as their arrows can reach the mark... owing to the density of their shooting, to rain arrows rather than to shoot

²⁵ Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War*, (New York: Basic Books, 1987):178.

²⁶ *The Chronicle of Novgorod*, 87.

²⁷ David Nicolle, 75.

them.”²⁸ These tactics may have still been a novelty to the supposed Russian eye-witness author in *Life of Alexandre Nevskii*, who, in describing the battle, mentions God’s Host coming through the air to help Alexander. This description could well have been an echo of the whistling rain of arrows that fell upon the surprised Danes.²⁹

A smaller inconsistency in the film places Alexander commanding the victorious right wing, “You, Gaurilo, will command the left flank. I’ll [Alexander] command the right one. The Germans will try to drive a wedge into our vanguard. You! [to Vasily]... Stay put now until Gavriilo and I close in from both sides.” As mentioned, the right flank is where the Mongols would have been. Some historians suggest it is more likely that Alexander was in the center, where it is easier to command the army.³⁰ Another fallacy created by Eisenstein is that the battle climaxed with a combat between Alexander and the Tutoic Grand Master in which Alexander captures the Grand Master and it is stated, “We have won the day.” In reality, the Grand Master (the Bishop Hermann of Tartu) escaped from the battle, as did much of the Crusader army.³¹

The movie concludes with a speech, supporting Marxist ideals of collectivism, where peasant individuals are forced to subordinate to a national collectivity. Alexander says, smiling into the camera, “Had we lost the battle on the ice, never would Rus have forgiven us! That you must remember and pass on to your children. If you forget it — you will be as Judases all, traitors to the Russian land. If trouble comes, all of Rus will I call to arms. If aside you stand, *punished will you be*. While I live, *I shall myself punish you*. *When I die my sons will*.” This speech panders to the dictatorship of Stalin and Soviet ideals; it might as well have been spoken by Stalin himself.

Although Sergey Eisenstein’s film, *Alexander Nevsky*, is a phenomenal work for its time, its creation was highly controlled by governmental Soviet policy, and as such, historical realities are intentionally and frequently distorted for propaganda purposes. The Russians are portrayed as

²⁸ David Nicolle, 40.

²⁹ David Nicolle, 74-75.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ David Nicolle, 85.

non-religious instead of Greek Orthodox; the Crusaders are strictly blond haired, blue-eyed Germanic Roman Catholic invaders; Russian women are seen actively participating in battle; Alexander is shown as resistant to the Mongols; the crucial participation of Asiatic horse archers in the battle of lake Peipus is omitted. Finally, the film ends with a speech by Alexander himself demanding Russian collectivism. Because of these distortions *Alexander Nevsky* proved itself a very successful and effective piece of Soviet propaganda that was remarkably prescient of the impending conflict between the U.S.S.R and the Third Reich.

Bibliography

The Chronicle of Novgorod 1016-1471, trans. Robert Michell and Nevill Forbes, (London:1914).

Eisenstein, Sergi. *Alexander Nevsky*, (USSR: Mosfilm,1938).

Elshtain, Jean Bethke. *Women and War*, (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

Nicolle, David. *Lake Peipus 1242 — Battle of the ice*, (London: Osprey,1996).

The Nikonian Chronicle: vol. 3: “From the Year 1241 to 1381,” trans. Sergi A. and Betty Jean Zenkovsky, (Princeton: Kingston Press,1986).

Rambaud, Alfred. *A Popular History of Russia*, (U.S.A: Boston,1886).

Riasanovsky, Nicholas V. *A History of Russia 2nd Ed*, (London: Oxford,1969).

Shirer, William L. *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960).

Swallow, Norman. *Eisenstein a Documentary Portrat*, (New York: Dutton, 1977).

Vernadsky, George. “The Mongols and Russia,” *A History of Russia*, vol. 3, (New Haven: Yale,1953).

Zenkovsky, Serge A. *Medieval Russia’s Epics, Chronicle and Tales*, translated from *Pskov Second Chronicle*, “Tale of the Life of Alexander Nevsky,” (New York: Dutton,1974).