

# *What is so (Un)Exceptional About Soviet Cinema? The Pragmatics of Soviet Film Exports to Germany and France in the 1920s*

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The article discusses Soviet efforts to export its cinematic production to Germany and France during the 1920s. Aside from advertising the USSR's achievements abroad, cinema export was an important contribution to early Soviet fund-raising strategies. By examining the opening of the Soviet film industry to international practices and contacts, this article seeks to challenge some assumptions of Soviet particularism in the field of its film export practices. The article begins by exploring the international roots of what was about to become the Soviet film industry and demonstrates how Soviet trade practitioners sought to benefit from them. Then, the article argues that despite several country-specific organisational and material constraints, Soviet strategies and methods of film export to Germany and France paralleled in many ways those of their Western counterparts.

**KEYWORDS:** film export, Soviet cinema, USSR, international cinema network, distribution

At the beginning of the 1920s, the film industry in the Soviet Union was going through a difficult process of post-war reconstruction. Its production and distribution facilities were partially destroyed, its cinemas were lacking new releases and a significant number of its leading producers, actors, directors, cameramen, and decorators fled abroad in search of safer shores. As demonstrated in numerous studies on early Soviet industrial and economic conditions, the restoration of trade routes with West, partially cut off during the years of economic and diplomatic isolation, quickly became a matter of survival for what was to become the Soviet film industry. Technologically, Soviet film practitioners had to find ways to resupply production units with raw stock and film equipment, as the factories inherited from the tsarist period relied entirely on the importation of materials from Western Europe.[1] Economically, the Soviet film industry had to build up subsequent financial assets to put domestic production back on its feet and, in the meantime, fill the gaps in programming.[2] Ultimately, and

[1] V. Kepley Jr, *The origins of Soviet cinema: A study in industry development*, "Quarterly Review of Film Studies" 1985, vol. 10, no. 1, p. 25.

[2] K. Thompson, *Government Policies and Practical Necessities in the Soviet Cinema of the 1920s*, [in:] *The*

*Red Screen: Politics, Society, Art in Soviet Cinema*, ed. A. Lawton, London 1992, pp. 19–42; V. Listov, *Rossiia, Revoliutsiia, Kinematograf*, Moscow 1995, pp. 136–137.

importantly, communicating with the outside world through film sales was consistent with the Soviet cultural diplomacy agenda. Indeed, throughout the 1920s, the Soviets endeavoured to show signals of openness to international cooperation, not exclusively among communists and sympathisers, but also in “bourgeois” circles.[3] Buying films from and selling them to Western markets was of particular importance to the young Soviet state, thus making cinema import-export history a fertile ground for reconnecting the Soviet experience to the global processes.

In the field of Soviet studies, a slow but steady turn from the “top-down” to the “bottom-up” view of the Soviet film industry’s complex development has already brought a better understanding of how contradictory and multi-layered Soviet decision-making was.[4] Recent research on film exports has brought to the fore the frequent institutional clashes between actors involved in the distribution of the Soviet cinema abroad, namely trade bodies, who tended to use films as a source of revenue, and communist agents, for whom film screenings were a valuable influence technique.[5] However, generally focused on Soviet-specific interests and incentives, the scholarly research tends to address the patterns of Soviet import-export practices as the expression of state-specific socio-political and economic constraints.[6] This article’s ambition is to move away from a Soviet-centred approach and discuss the points of intersection between strategies used by Soviet administrations and international trends in film trade.

For the purposes of this article, my primary source of research was the documentation produced by Soviet export practitioners (heads of import-export departments of the cinema administrations as well as employees of Soviet trade missions abroad), for whom trading films and searching for international cooperation was a part of day-to-day activ-

[3] M. David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to Soviet Russia; 1921–1941*, Oxford 2012, p. 62. This paper deliberately focuses on a particular aspect of Soviet film export – selling rights for commercial theatrical distribution – while screenings of Soviet films were also a part of Soviet influence strategies. For a detailed discussion of using cinema as element of cultural diplomacy, see, for example, J.-F. Fayet, *VOKS: le laboratoire helvétique. Histoire de la diplomatie culturelle soviétique durant l’entre-deux-guerres*, Genève 2014.

[4] D. Youngblood, *Movies for the masses: popular cinema and Soviet society in the 1920s*, Cambridge 1992; M. Belodubrovskaya, *Not According to Plan: Filmmaking under Stalin*, Ithaca – London 2017.

[5] See, for example, O. Maistat, “V karmane vosh’ na arkanе”: zadachi i etika sovetskogo kino eksporta v veimarskoi respublike (1926–1932), [in:] *Konstruitiua “Sovetskoe”? Politicheskoe Soznanie, Povsednevnyye*

*Praktiki, Novye Identichnosti. Materialy Desiatoi Mezhdunarodnoi Konferentsii Studentov i Aspirantov 22–23 Aprelia 206 Goda*, Saint-Petersbourg 2016, pp. 75–82; J.-F. Fayet, op.cit., pp. 495–513.

[6] There are, of course, exceptions. See, for example, the essay by Kristin Thompson, where she provides an overview of changes in the film industries in the USSR, Germany and France and their respective strategies of dealing with foreign film trade (K. Thompson, *The Rise and Fall of Film Europe*, [in:] “*Film Europe*” and “*Film America*”, eds. A. Higson, R. Maltby, Exeter 1992, pp. 56–81). For a general historiography perspective on the “particularism vs universalism” conundrum in relation to the Soviet experience, see M. David-Fox, *Multiple Modernities vs. Neo-Traditionalism: On Recent Debates in Russian and Soviet History*, “*Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*” 2006, no. 54(4), pp. 535–555.

ities.[7] Firstly, the article will recall the importance of external factors, such as foreign investment and artistic influence from imported films, to the development of Russian and later Soviet cinema's identity and its industrial condition. Secondly, the article will discuss the tactics used by the Soviet film practitioners in their ambitious attempts to respond to Western market demand and to produce internationally attractive films. Finally, as exporting films integrated the challenge of dealing with country-specific regulations and distribution practices, the third part of this article will deal specifically with Soviet patterns of film export to France and Germany, two significant market places in 1920s Europe.

From its earliest stage of existence, Russian, and later Soviet cinema was pushed forward by its tight yet complex relationship with foreign influence, coming both from the inside and the outside of the up-and-coming national film industry.[8] Many pioneers of Russian cinema learnt the basics of filmmaking and distribution from foreign companies who had entered – and in a sense created – the Russian cinema market as early as in 1896.[9] The first Russian camera operators learnt their craft by working for French firms.[10] So did the future major studio owners: before opening their own production companies in the early 1910s, Robert Perskii[11] and Paul Thiemann worked for the Gaumont's office in Moscow, while Iosif Ermoliev was in charge of opening Pathé's new branches.[12] The massive presence of foreign films in the cinema market also contributed to shaping the aesthetics of early Russian native production. While some directors were eager to use the standards generated within the European and American industries, others aspired to counter them. As Yuri Tsivian argued, the search for emancipation from foreign clichés inspired the development of some

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of film industry:  
international network  
and export to the  
rescue**

[7] The institutional archives used for this research are kept in the Russian State Archives, namely the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), Russian State Archive of the Economy (RGAE) and The State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF, Moscow).

[8] The issue of “otherness” (not so much in terms of nationality or even ethnicity, but rather referring to social, cultural and religious background) of prominent entrepreneurs, cinematographers and film pioneers in the Russian empire has been addressed in the pre-print of Natasha Drubek's forthcoming monograph published by the “Apparatus” journal. As the author points out, the exploration of non-national contributions is particularly instructive, as most film histories tend to wipe out names and concepts that don't fit the ideologised and nationalised narratives. See N. Drubek, *Hidden Figures: Rewriting the History of Cinema in the Empire of All the Russias*, “Apparatus. Film, Media and Digital Cultures of Central and Eastern Europe” 2021, no. 13, pp. 94–129.

[9] For a detailed discussion of the degree to which foreign expertise contributed to shape early Russian distribution and production patterns, see D. Youngblood, *The Magic Mirror: Moviemaking in Russia 1908–1918*, Wisconsin 1999, pp. 21–32. See also R. Iangirov, *The Lumier Brothers in Russia: 1896, The Year of Glory*, [in:] *L'aventure du Cinématographe: Actes du Congrès mondial Lumiere*, Lyon 1999, pp. 187–193.

[10] Some details on the biographies and career paths of the first Russian cameramen can be found in V.M. Korotkii, *Operatory i rezhissery russkogo igrovo-go kino 1897–1921: biofil'mograficheskii spravochnik*, Moscow 2009.

[11] Here and afterwards, the author uses the Library of Congress system (without diacritical marks) for transliteration of Cyrillic spelling into English, except for well-known figures (e.g., Ehrenburg).

[12] R. Iangirov, *Drugoe kino. Stat'i po istorii otechestvennogo kino pervoi treti veka*, Moscow 2011, pp. 31–43.

specific features that early Russian cinema would later become internationally known for, such as tragic endings and striving to conceive films of great social range.[13]

The outbreak of World War I put access to the Russian market on hold for most foreign companies, which stimulated a significant growth of domestic production. According to Veniamin Vishnevskii's compendium of films produced in the Russian Empire, native studios doubled their output after the outbreak of war, with 230 films released in 1914, 372 films in 1915 and 498 films in 1916, against only 129 films in 1913.[14] However, the prosperity was not to last: having no capacity to manufacture its own film stock and importing most of the basic cinema equipment, the Russian film industry still relied heavily on foreign supplies. The film stock crisis, already apparent by the end of the war, reached its peak in the years that followed the October Revolution. Poorly equipped and undercapitalised, the soon-to-be Soviet production units struggled to release whatever they could - mainly documentary films and a handful of features.[15] Nevertheless, their modest production volume was far from sufficient to accommodate audience demands. To maintain a changing repertory, many theatres replayed worn-out copies of earlier-produced Russian films as well as foreign prints collected from territories occupied by foreign and White armies.[16]

Replenishing the stocks with new imports was problematic. Even though after the war prices on European markets went down due to the high level of inflation, the young Soviet state lacked hard currency to pay for new imports.[17] The high-scaled trade with former foreign partners was also undermined by the Allied economic blockade of the Soviet-controlled territories.[18] In search of alternative options, Leonid Krassin, at the time the head of the People's Commissariat of Foreign Trade (Narkomvneshtorg or NKVT), came up with an original solution, suggesting going through the stock of prints expropriated from former

[13] In 1918, a critic from a major Russian trade journal "Kino-gazeta" wrote: "«All's well that ends well!» This is the guiding principle of foreign cinema. But Russian cinema stubbornly refuses to accept this and goes its own way. Here it's «All's well that ends badly.»" Quoted in Y. Tsivian, *Early Russian cinema: some observations*, [in:] *Inside the Film Factory: New Approaches to Russian and Soviet Cinema*, eds. I. Christie, R. Taylor, London 1991, p. 7.

[14] V. Vishnevskii, *Khudozhestvennye fil'my v dor-evoliutsionnoi Rossii*, Moscow 1945. Anna Kovalova argues, however, that the forced production rates had rather a negative impact on Russian cinema, as it led to a significant deterioration of the quality of films and limited artistic research. See A. Kovalova, *World War I and pre-Revolutionary Russian cinema*, "Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema" 2017, no. 2(11), pp. 96–117.

[15] According to the inventory of films established by Gosfilmofond archivists, around 104 films were produced between 1918 and 1921, and only 30 of them can be considered full features. See A. Macheret (ed.), *Sovetskie khudozhestvennye fil'my. Annotirovannyi katalog. Tom 1. Nemye fil'my (1918–1935)*, Moscow 1961.

[16] V. Listov, *Rossia, Revoliutsiia...*, pp. 136–137.

[17] K. Thompson, *Government Policies...*, pp. 100–104. On the shortage of currency, see, for example, E. Osokina, *Operation Duveen*, [in:] *Treasures into Tractors: The Selling of Russia's Cultural Heritage, 1918–1938*, eds. A. Odom, W.R. Salmond, Washington 2009, pp. 83–107.

[18] A limited number of feature films did continue to come from across the border by means of smuggling, especially through China. V. Listov, *Rossia, Revoliutsiia...*, pp. 136–137.

Russian studios and offering foreign distributors to exchange them for raw stock, new cinematographic equipment or copies of feature films.[19] While there is no archival evidence of this project actually going through, the very idea of using an export-import operation as a means of fund-raising made its way into the heads of Soviet cinema administrators.[20]

By the time Soviet exporters ventured to enter European markets, they were faced with strong competition, not only from local producers, but also from American film companies. It goes without saying that at this time the Soviet film industry was in no position to seriously challenge Hollywood's domination, and to compete with its popular stars, well-established infrastructure of distribution on both national and international levels and its highly rationalized organization of production processes.[21] Yet Soviet exporters had a good reason to believe that a few windows for cooperation would eventually open, especially after the signature of the German-Soviet agreement in April 1922 (The Treaty of Rapallo), which made way for the legal resumption of its import-export operations with one of the leading European markets.

Numerous articles, interviews and reports in French and German trade press uncovered a genuine interest from local film professionals in Soviet film production and distribution. Shortly after the Treaty of Rapallo was signed, reports on the emerging Soviet film industry and its import-export activities appeared in the German film journal "Lichtbild-Bühne." [22] In France, "Le Ciné-Journal" and "La Cinématographie française," two major trade journals, also regularly informed their readership of the latest updates to Soviet patterns of film production and distribution.[23] Popular magazines, such as "Mon Ciné" and "Cinémagazine," expressed interest in Soviet cinematography as well. "Cinémagazine" even had a special correspondent in Russia, whose regular reports were published between 1924 and 1925.[24] In 1926, "Mon Ciné" published a series of articles under the title "L'art cinématographique en Russie." [25]

[19] A note sent by Krassin to the Petrograd Film Committee on August 12, 1921. The Russian State Archive of Economics (RGAE, Moscow), f. 413, op. 2, d. 714, l. 18.

[20] It is worth noting that this pragmatic approach to the artistic legacy of the Russian Empire was not limited to films. On turning art and antiquities inherited from the Old Regime into resources for a newly-formed state, see, for example, E. Osokina, *op.cit.*, pp. 83–107.

[21] Throughout the 1920s, America's interests in the international markets were also backed by administrative and diplomatic support from the US government, namely the State and Commerce Departments. For a comprehensive account of the strategies used in the framework of the US's cinematic expansion to Europe, see K. Thompson, *Exporting entertainment:*

*America in the world film market, 1907–34*, London 1985.

[22] K. Thompson, *Government Policies...*, p. 30.

[23] For example, "Ciné-Journal" no. 822, May 29, 1925, p. 12, "La Cinématographie française" no. 423, December 11, 1926, p. 16. Aside from the reports on the state of Russian post-revolutionary filmmaking, some news also came from the Ukrainian film industry, mainly due to the efforts of the Ukraine-born artist and filmmaker Eugène Deslaw (Evgenii Slavchenko) who regularly contributed to these two trade journals.

[24] See issues of "Cinémagazine" from July 4, 1924 till September 18, 1925.

[25] "Mon Ciné" no. 239 to no. 242, from September 16 till October 7, 1926.

Among film professionals that used to form the core of the Russian international film network, a few entrepreneurs also showed signs of eagerness to re-active their involvement in the industry they had left after the October Revolution. In the early 1920s, when the Soviet government attempted to attract foreign capital to rebuild its film industry, it received a number of offers for cooperation, including the one from Maurice Hache, former director of Pathé's Russian branches.[26] Letters also came from Ermoliev and Thiemann, ex-owners of major Russian film studios, who had settled in Germany after emigrating.[27] Even though none of these proposals came to fruition, mainly due to the lack of proper funding from both sides,[28] their existence showed the signs of interest for co-operation between film practitioners on both sides of the border. In the mid-1920s, when the Soviet production sector began to show signs of recovery, the Soviet's push into foreign markets began.

### Going West: high ambitions challenged by low resources

From 1924 until 1930, the main coordinator of Soviet film export, with the exception of films produced in Ukraine, was Sovkino, the major state-run cinema organisation, based in Moscow, which combined production and distribution activities.[29] Narkompros and Narkomvneshtorg, Soviet equivalents of ministries of Enlightenment and of Foreign Trade were among Sovkino's stakeholders.[30] However, as studies on Soviet film history showed, despite Sovkino's direct affiliation with the Bolshevik authorities, its production and distribution policy was hardly different from the profit-seeking approach of Western private companies.[31]

Sovkino's attitude to foreign markets followed a similar path, as international sales were not only meant for showcasing Soviet's achievements abroad, but first and foremost were expected to become a valuable revenue-maker for the growing film industry. Throughout the mid-1920s, Sovkino worked to sell abroad as many films as possible and regularly brought the financial goals of film trade to the attention of the political leadership of the country. For instance, during a meeting on export goals called by the Agitprop department of the Communist Party in July 1927, Konstantin Shvedchikov, Sovkino's chairperson, prepared a long speech on the importance of the "commercial basis" of this activity and insisted on adding this mention to the minutes of the meeting.[32]

[26] A letter from Maurice Hache to Boris Ryndzinski, August 10, 1921. RGALI, f. 989, op. 1, d. 246, l. 9–10.

[27] VFKO's memo to Narkompros, July 18, 1922. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 60, d. 259, l. 24–34.

[28] Ibidem.

[29] For the specifics of film exports from Ukraine, which was managed independently by the local film administration, VUFKU, see V. Mislavskii, *Eksportno-importnaia deiatel'nost' VUFKU v 1920-e gody*,

"Traditsii ta novatsii u vishii arhitekturno-hudozhnii-osviti" 2016, no. 1, pp. 72–82.

[30] Respectively People's Commissariat of Enlightenment and People's Commissariat of Foreign Trade.

[31] See, for example, D. Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses...*, pp. 35–49.

[32] Minutes of the meeting held at the Central Committee's Agitprop Department, July 8, 1927. RGASPI, f. 538, op. 3, d. 94, l. 6.

What were the reasons that pushed Sovkino, a state-owned film organisation, to pay so much attention to the financial aspects of its activity? A key to understanding can be found in the highly pragmatic attitude of the Soviet government to its film industry under the New Economic Policy (1921–1928). By providing production units with long-term loans rather than direct subsidies, the Soviet government expected its film industry to pay for itself. As a result, Soviet cinema organisations, including Sovkino, worked mostly as self-financing entities and actively searched for methods and strategies that would allow them to be as cost-efficient as possible.

Wide distribution of foreign films was one of the early Soviet fundraising strategies. In terms of costs, buying a foreign print was on average five times less expensive than producing a domestic feature, whereas its programming was usually more profitable, in spite of extra taxation on foreign programs.<sup>[33]</sup> From 1922 to the end of the decade, foreign titles were dominant in Soviet cinemas, with a particularly strong presence of American features, which accounted for up to 35 percent of the total number of films screened.<sup>[34]</sup> Unlike Germany, where multiple legal barriers on foreign imports were erected throughout the 1920s, the Soviet government did not intervene much with this foreign invasion until the end of the decade, when the growing needs of the Soviet industrialisation program and a turn to a more conservative ideological agenda led to drastic restrictions on several non-essential imports, cinema included.<sup>[35]</sup>

Soviet exposure to foreign cinema served its film industry in multiple ways. Numerous Soviet filmmakers, later internationally acclaimed for their montage theories, got their first experience of editing from tailoring foreign prints for the Soviet censors to accept them.<sup>[36]</sup> The popularity of Western films among Soviet cinemagoers made a case for those Soviet film practitioners who were in favour of implementing “bourgeois” entertainment standards.<sup>[37]</sup> Finally, and importantly, the revenue from their more-than-profitable distribution allowed Soviet cinema organisations to inject funds into domestic productions, including experimental and educational ones.

[33] The average budget to purchase a license fee for a foreign print, plus the cost of printing, was estimated as an equivalent to 15 000 roubles, whereas the production of a Soviet film amounted for at least 70 and 75 000 roubles. See B. Ol'hovoi (ed.), *Puti kino. 1-oe Vsesoiuznoe partiinoe soveshchanie po kinematografii*, Moscow 1929, p. 237.

[34] A detailed account of Soviet strategy on soaking profits from mass-imported foreign features can be found in V. Kepley Jr, B. Kepley, *Foreign films on Soviet screens, 1922-1931*, “Quarterly Review of Film Studies” 1979, no. 4(4), pp. 429–442.

[35] Later on, as Maria Belodubrovskaya points out, foreign titles did not necessarily disappear from

Soviet screens; quite to the contrary; as the domestic output was still not sufficient to accommodate the exhibition needs, many theatres continued to fill the programs with foreign films left from previous imports. See M. Belodubrovskaya, *Soviet Hollywood: The Culture Industry That Wasn't*, “Cinema Journal” Spring 2014, vol. 53, no. 3, p. 118.

[36] Y. Tsivian, *The Wise and Wicked Game: Re-Editing and Soviet Film Culture of the 1920s*, “Film History” 1996, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 327–343.

[37] For a detailed discussion of debates between supporters and opponents of foreign film culture among Soviet filmmakers, critics and film practitioners, see D. Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses...*, pp. 54–67.

While this fundraising strategy was regularly subject to criticism from Sovkino's opponents, it was also a leading factor in the continuous reinforcement of the commercial agenda of film export. As the Soviet rouble was unconvertible, Sovkino and other organisations were unable to pay for imports simply by using their earnings from the domestic distribution. International sales of Soviet films, usually made in US dollars (see Table 1), came in handy to earn some foreign currency and use it to purchase new releases in foreign markets.

Table 1. Statistics on film export by production unit in US dollars (exported via Sovkino, Ukraine excluded), 1921–1927<sup>[38]</sup>

Production Unit	Production period and earnings in US dollars				
	1925/26	1926/27	1927/28	1928/29 (5 months)	TOTAL
Sovkino	91 700	241 882	172 183	82 698	586 363
Mezhrabpom Film	53 650	42 211	159 225	22 892 (incomplete data)	277 978
Goskinoprom Grouzii	–	7 350	6 150	7 015	20 515
Gosvoenkino	–	4 822	3 099	14 000	21 921

To some extent, as the final purpose of this export-import pattern was to raise revenue and inject it into domestic production, the Soviet approach to film exports echoed American fund-raising patterns, where the expected revenue from foreign sales began to be integrated into the calculations of production budgets from about 1917.<sup>[39]</sup> Yet a distinctive feature of the Soviet organisation was Sovkino's obligation to ensure the regular releases of films serving educational and political purposes, such as agitprop-films, cultural and scientific shorts. Even though their production costs were generally lower than those of a standard feature, most of these films were difficult to make pay off, even on the domestic market, let alone foreign ones.<sup>[40]</sup> Indirectly, export revenues were supposed to compensate for those losses, too.

Soviet bureaucracy added another specific motivation for Sovkino to push its international sales. In the Soviet Union, the film trade was part of the state monopoly. From 1923, all import-export transactions became subject to approval by the Soviet authorities via a complex system of import licenses (also called quotas, as they meant to set the maximum amount of currency to be used for each import purpose)

[38] Proceedings to the import-export department's annual report, 1928. RGALI, f. 2496, op. 2, d. 1.

[39] R. Vasey, *The world according to Hollywood, 1918–1939*, Wisconsin 1997, pp. 14–16.

[40] A major exception from the general unprofitability of agit-films was Eisenstein's *Battleship*

*Potemkin*, commissioned to commemorate the revolutionary events of 1905. According to the Sovkino's calculation, although the film was banned in many countries, *Potemkin* became a Soviet best-seller, with 101 000 dollars' worth of license. RGALI, f. 2496, op. 2, d. 1, l. 29.

and export tasks (the desired amount of currency outcome from international sales) distributed between the export and import agents. In theory, the appointment of import quotas was based on requests made by each film organisation according to their production needs. In practice, to reduce the constant deficit in the trade balance, Gosplan (the Soviet central agency for economic planning), rarely satisfied the appetites of Soviet film practitioners and even made additional cuts in quotas already granted, which put production units in a particularly precarious position.<sup>[41]</sup> Furthermore, export tasks on film sales and currency revenues, provisioned by planning authorities as well, were usually much higher than the actual capacity of the Soviet film industry to produce and sell abroad, which also put extra pressure on Soviet film practitioners.<sup>[42]</sup> Indeed, the export tasks were usually based on production plans and did not necessarily take into account delays related directly or indirectly to censorship, unexpected complications during shootings and other unforeseen circumstances that prevented the Soviet film industry from releasing all the planned films in a timely manner. Struggling to fulfil its production and, subsequently, its export plans, Sovkino was more than eager to implement strategies that would boost the chances of the few Soviet films actually released to be sold abroad.

In the field of fitting Soviet production into competitive Western markets, Sovkino's trade practitioners disposed of numerous instruments: exchanges with actual and potential buyers, personal contacts and networking, surveys of trade press. Throughout the mid-1920s, Konstantin Shvedchikov, the head of Sovkino, made several trips to Germany and France, where he met representatives of local cinema markets and advertised the openness of the Soviet film industry to the West.<sup>[43]</sup> In addition, Sovkino's export practitioners kept an eye on international trends in filmmaking and film distribution by monitoring the major European cinematic trade papers, such as German "Film-Kurier" or "Lichtbild-Bühne."<sup>[44]</sup> The regular correspondence with Soviet Trade Missions, the main intermediaries between Sovkino and foreign companies in the European countries, also offered some insights into what type of content could be acceptable (or not) for Western cinematic markets (see Graph 1).

[41] According to Sovkino's report, at the end of 1925, the Soviet film industry was granted with an import quota of 12 840 000 roubles, which was later downsized to 2 600 000 roubles. Import-export department of Sovkino's annual report, 1926. RGALI, f. 2496, op. 2, d. 1, l. 4.

[42] Extract from the minutes of the meeting on film export organised by Narkomvneshtorg, October 11, 1927. RGALI f. 962, p. 10, d. 3, l. 47.

[43] Shvedchikov regularly visited the Soviet Trade Mission in Berlin and travelled to Paris at least twice,

in 1925 and in 1929. In April, 1929 Shvedchikov gave an extensive interview to the French cinema magazine "Cinéma" ("Cinéma" no. 24, April 4, 1929).

[44] A compilation of articles from these journals was thoroughly translated into Russian and published in a newsletter issued by the import-export department of Sovkino. An incomplete collection of these newsletters can be found in the archives of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (VTsSPS). GARE, f. 5451, op. 9, d. 4560, l. 228–247.

Graph 1. Overview of film export's infrastructure from the Russian Soviet Republic in the 1920s



To make films more exportable, Sovkino's executives were willing to cater for foreign audiences. Surprisingly as it might seem, the efforts to bring films closer to what-they-considered-to-be Western tastes had little consideration of ideological and artistic integrity of Soviet cinema production and included the attempts to re-edit the existing prints.[45]

In 1927, in his letter to Gosvoenkino, one of the Soviet production units, Evgenii Kaufman,[46] the chief of Sovkino's import-export department, provided a detailed account of changes to be made in *His Majesty's Soloist* (*Solistka ego velichestva*), a historical melodrama directed by Mikhail Verner.[47] According to Kaufman, an unnamed German company was interested in its distribution, but some sequences of the film were a deal-breaker, especially the suicide of the female protagonist, as well as the opening scenes showing a political demonstration. Gosvoenkino seemed to be quite open to accepting cuts in the existing version and allowing additional footage to be shot, but the Soviet censor blocked the project. Denisov, a chief of Glavrepertkom (the Soviet administration in charge of issuing distribution permits both for the territory of Russia and for international sales), took a firm stand against the changes.[48] Unfortunately, there is no clear evidence whether the changes were carried out or not. Still, there are some known

[45] It is worth noting, however, that alternative endings were hardly a Sovkino invention. The first Russian film studios were already producing two different versions of the same film, one for the domestic, and one for the international market. According to Anna Strauss's research, the same practices were seemingly used in Danish film marketing. See A. Strauss, *Alternative endings in Russian and Danish silent film*, <[http://www.academia.edu/2041911/Alternative\\_Endings\\_in\\_Danish\\_and\\_Russian\\_Silent\\_Film](http://www.academia.edu/2041911/Alternative_Endings_in_Danish_and_Russian_Silent_Film)>, accessed: 30.01.2022.

[46] The son of a tradesman, in the 1910s Evgenii Kaufman graduated from Kharkiv University with

a degree in economics and administrative management. He began working in the film industry in 1922, in charge of foreign operations. In the early 1930s, when the Soviet authorities conducted a massive purge among its administrations, Kaufman, alongside with many other specialists, was arrested and charged with "sabotage."

[47] Correspondence between Sovkino, Gosvoenkino and Glavrepertkom, October–November 1927. RGALI, f. 962, p. 10, d. 3, l. 56.

[48] A note from Glavrepertkom, December 3, 1927. RGALI f. 962, p. 10, d. 3, l. 53–54.

cases when projects aimed at tailoring films for foreign audiences were carried out despite Glavrepertkom's reluctance: for example, according to Yuri Tsivian's research, an alternative "happy" ending was shot for the film *SVD* (1927) by Leonid Trauberg and Grigorii Kozintsev.[49] After all, in a closed session on export held on January 3, 1928, Narkompros (the Commissariat of Enlightenment) and Narkomvneshtorg (the Commissariat of Foreign Trade) did accept the very idea of producing "second versions of Soviet films" [...] as long as their ideological message is preserved."[50]

As Denise Youngblood's research pointed out, Sovkino also ambitiously sought to create so-called "export" films; features that took inspiration in the twists-and-turns of foreign features designed for mass entertainment that were widely screened in Soviet movie theatres at that time.[51] The success of such strategies appeared to be, however, only relative. Sovkino's list of the highest revenue-earners from international sales (as of May, 1928) comprised several films identified by Youngblood as "export": 50 000 dollars for *The Wing of a Serf* (*Krylia Kholopa*, Iu. Tarich, 1926), 32 000 dollars for *The Bear's Wedding* (*Medvezhya svad'ba*, K. Eggert, V. Gardin, 1925), 20 000 dollars for *The Decembrists* (*Dekabristy*, A. Ivanovskii, 1927), 28 000 dollars for *The Station master* (*Kollezhskii Registrator*, I. Moskvina, Iu. Zheliabouzhskii, 1925), 17 000 dollars for *The Forty-First* (*Sorok Pervyi*, Ia. Protazanov, 1926).[52] Still, their sales figures were far behind those of Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (101 000 dollars) and comparable to those not especially meant for export, for example, Lev Kuleshov's *Dura Lex / Po Zakonu* (37 000 dollars).

Interestingly enough, the resemblance of "export" films to the Western filmmaking style was rather a negative factor for their critical reception, at least as far as the French and German press was concerned. Indeed, as a number of early books on Soviet cinema and articles in the French press reveal, Soviet cinema was expected to stand against the ongoing standardisation of screenwriting, filming and editing, rather than copycatting them, especially in the context of a growing fear of Hollywood's worldwide domination.[53] From *Polikushka*, whose unintentional defects were commented by German critics as an original photography technique,[54] to *Women of Ryazan* (*Baby riazanskie*, 1928), praised in the French press for its unconventional use of

[49] Y. Tsivian, *The Wise and Wicked Game...*, pp. 327–330.

[50] Extract from the minutes of the closed meeting of the Narkompros board, January 3, 1928. RGALI, f. 962, op. 10, d. 3, l. 19.

[51] D. Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses...*, pp. 50–67.

[52] A list of Soviet films sold abroad with an indication of their sales as of May 15, 1928. RGALI, f. 2496, op. 2, d. 1, l. 28.

[53] For a detailed account of the concerns discussed in relation to Hollywood's commercial domination in Europe, see Richard Maltby's introduction to the volume dedicated to the reception of Hollywood movies outside the United States. R. Maltby, *The Americanisation of the World*, [in:] *Hollywood abroad: audiences and cultural exchange*, eds. R. Maltby, M. Stokes, London 2004.

[54] For example, due to the extreme shortage of raw stock, *Polikushka*, the first feature film to appear on

non-professional actors, the critical reception of Soviet films seemed to be frequently constructed in relation to their presumed difference to the Western filmmaking style and modes of production.[55]

This gap between export ambitions and Western reception patterns could result from Sovkino's limited ability to assess correctly the attractiveness and the reception of its productions abroad, despite numerous above-mentioned instruments used by its export practitioners. Indeed, the latter were rarely involved in direct sales: even though most of the import-export transactions were centralised within Soviet trade missions (see Graph 1), most films imported to and exported from the Soviet Union were sold through agents and distribution firms.[56]

### Proletarian circles and Russian immigrants: Soviet cinema networking abroad

In Germany as well as in France, the very first screenings of Soviet films were organised by Willy Münzenberg, the head of Workers' International Relief (IAH). At first, they were mostly documentaries shot in regions that were suffering from the devastating famine of 1920–1921. Those films had limited circulation, as they were mostly screened at charity events organised in the framework of an international relief program. In 1922–1925, Soviet films reached commercial exhibition, also by the intermediary of Münzenberg and IAH, who released several feature productions from Soviet Russia in Berlin cinemas: *Polikushka* (A. Sanin, 1919), *The Miracle-Worker* (*Chudotvoretz*, A. Panteleev, 1922) and *His Call* (*Ego prizyv*, Ia. Protazanov, 1925).[57] As these experiences proved rather successful, Münzenberg's involvement in Soviet cinema grew and expanded to both production and distribution sectors. In 1924, IAH invested into the creation of a joint German-Soviet film studio (Mezhrabpom-Rus), which later became a major Soviet exporter, working with top-ranked and internationally acclaimed directors such as Vsevolod Pudovkin, Iakov Protazanov and Fedor Ozep. In 1926, a year after Mezhrabpom-Rus started to produce films on a regular basis, a company named Prometheus-Film was founded in Berlin in order to release its production in Germany and neighbouring countries.[58]

Another major initiative specifically dedicated to Soviet film distribution in Germany was Derussa (Deutsch-Russische Film-Allianz),

European screens, was shot on a partially exposed film. This technical flaw did not prevent the film from getting enthusiastic reviews in German press. On the contrary, a few critics praised the effect of "fogginess." See Y. Tsivian, *Early cinema in Russia and its cultural reception*, London 1994, pp. 107–108.

[55] For a discussion of the critical reception of Soviet cinema in France from the perspective of its antagonism with Western practices, see N. Puchenkina, *Une leçon de cinéma ou une rencontre manquée ? L'exportation du cinéma soviétique et sa réception en France dans l'entre-deux-guerres*, PhD's dissertation, University of Caen, 2021, pp. 378–400.

[56] The situation was quite different in the North America, where Soviet cinema distribution was handled exclusively by Amkino, a New York-based company founded in 1926 and affiliated with Sovkino, Mezhrabpom, VUKFU and other Soviet production units. *Sovetskaia fil'ma na amerikanskom rynke*, "Zhizn' iskusstva" no. 40, October 6, 1929.

[57] On Münzenberg's projects to use cinema as a means of mass mobilisation see, for example, K. Brasken, *The International Workers' Relief, Communism, and Transnational Solidarity*, New York 2015.

[58] A comprehensive account of the ties between the two organisations can be found in G. Agde,

a joint German-Soviet venture that started its activities in late 1927. Like Prometheus, Derussa was originally created with the intention to release feature and documentary films from a specific production unit, namely Sovkino, a state-owned film organisation operating in Soviet Russia.[59] At least three other German film companies were involved in the distribution of Soviet cinema in Germany (Lloyd films, Sidfilm, Hirschel-Sofar), but their market shares remained limited compared to Derussa and Prometheus.[60]

In France, where the sales of Soviet films were less systematic in the 1920s, no major partnership was made. From the first commercial release of a Soviet film in Paris (*Polikushka*, in 1924) to the end of the decade, six different companies were involved in the distribution of Soviet cinema: Phocéa location, Alex Nalpas, Pathé Consortium, Aubert, Pax-Film and Luna-Film. Their commercial and financial profiles were strikingly different: Phocéa-location, a small venture, was involved in Soviet cinema distribution only once, as the firm mainly focused on films produced by its parent company Phocéa-Films; Pax-Film and Luna-Film were medium-sized firms, previously specialised in imports from Germany, whereas Aubert and Pathé Consortium represented two major vertically integrated companies.[61] Only a few Soviet films were rented directly to exhibitors: *Bed and Sofa* (*Tretia Meshanskaia*, A. Room, 1927), released under the title *Trois dans un sous-sol* and *Wind* (*Veter*, L. Sheffer, 1926), renamed *Démon des Steppes*. The first was released by Studio 28 and the second was screened in the Théâtre du Vieux Colombier, two avant-garde Parisian cinemas run by Jean-Placide Mauclair and Jean Tedesco, respectively.

Interestingly enough, in their search for partners in France, Soviet exporters seem to have benefited directly from the networks developed in Tsarist Russia.[62] Arnold Bystritskii, an ex-owner of the cinema attractions in Russia, ran Luna-Film and the couple Iossif and Nadejda Zalshupina-Daniloff, born in Saint Petersburg, managed Pax-Film. Ilya Ehrenburg, a Kiev-born writer and a prominent figure of intellectual mediation between East and West, acted as intermediary and translator for Jean Tedesco's negotiations with Soviet trade practitioners. Last but not least, according to the Soviet documentation, the collaboration with Aubert was triggered by no other than Iosif Ermoliev, a prominent figure in early Russian cinema during the Tsarist era.[63]

A. Schwarz (eds.), *Die rote Traumfabrik : Meschrabpom-Film und Prometheus (1921–1936)*, Berlin 2012.

[59] For a detailed account of Derussa, see T. Saunders, *The German-Russian Film (Mis)Alliance (DERUSSA): Commerce & Politics in German-Soviet Cinema Ties*, "Film History" 1997, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 168–188.

[60] *Ibidem*, p. 184.

[61] See Puchenkina, *op. cit.*, pp. 250–338.

[62] *Ibidem*, *op.cit.*, pp. 108, 123–124. On the itineraries of film professionals after their emigration from the Russian Empire, see N. Noussinova, *Kogda my v Rossiiu vernemsia: russkoe kinematograficheskoe zarubezh'e, 1918–1939*, Moscow 2003.

[63] Ermoliev had developed a strong connection with the French film industry, first as a tradesman for Pathé in 1907–1911, then, after this emigration to Europe in 1918, as the founder of prominent production companies in France and Germany.

As far as Germany and France are concerned, these different patterns of dealing with local markets can be explained by at least two factors. First, Germany was the key area for Soviet exporters' interests in Europe, judging by the volume of exports made to this country, but also by the size of the administrative apparatus deployed by the Soviets in each respective country. According to Sovkino's documentation, in 1928, Germany occupied the first position within Soviet international film sales, with 131 750 dollars' worth of distribution licenses, while the French market brought only 38 000 dollars.[64] Germany, and especially Berlin, was also the major hub of international film trade in Europe. Conveniently located a few blocks away from the famous Friedrichstrasse, Europe's main cinema artery, the Soviet Trade Mission in Berlin was the first Soviet institution to open a department specifically dedicated to film and photo trade with European firms. In the course of 1920s, a team of a dozen people worked there under the supervision of Edmund Zöhner.[65]

In Paris, human resources devoted to the film trade were much more modest. Only one employee, later assisted by a secretary and a projectionist, ran the local film department.[66] As described by Natan Grinfeld, the head of the Parisian photo-cinema department between 1925 and 1927, his mission was "to organise the marketing of Soviet film production in the most efficient way possible by seeking maximum profit for Sovkino without endangering the artistic and ideological content of films." [67] These ambitious projects were frequently undermined by the lack of time and resources: judging by its documentation, the Parisian department acted throughout the 1920s mostly as a front desk for *ad hoc* requests for Soviet cinema programming, while major deals and contracts for commercial distribution of Soviet films were concluded in Berlin.[68]

The second factor explaining the difference between Soviet export strategies for and Germany might be linked to the specific legislation of the latter. To curb the number of foreign films in its movie theatres, Germany had introduced a system of quotas on imports, which basically required that for every foreign film released on its market, a German film had to be produced domestically. To some extent, the Soviet strategy in dealing with German import regulations used a path similar to the one used by Hollywood's producers. Like Parufament, a German-American film company founded in 1925 and co-financed by UFA, Paramount and MGM,[69] Derussa and Prometheus were

[64] Proceedings to the import-export department's annual report, 1928. RGALI, f. 2496, op. 2, d. 1, l. 28.

[65] The Austrian-born Edmund Zöhner had been captured in Russia during World War I and joined the ranks of Bolsheviks shortly after his liberation. T. Saunders, *op.cit.*, pp. 178–179.

[66] Letter of Natan Grinfeld to Sovkino, October 6, 1926. RGALI, f.2496, op.2, d.3, l. 249–251.

[67] *Ibidem.*

[68] Letter of K. Shvedchikov to the Soviet Trade Mission in Paris, *circa* 1927. RGALI, f. 2496, op. 2, d. 3, l. 50.

[69] See K. Thompson, *Government Policies...*, pp. 107–111.

supposed not only to develop a distribution network within the competitive German market, but also to produce so-called “quotas” films, with German actors and technical teams, which would allow Soviet exporters to obtain the precious import permits.

These differences in approaching the local markets led to different export results. In Germany, according to Oksana Bulgakowa’s research, at least 54 feature and 13 documentary films produced within the Soviet Union were distributed between 1922 and 1929, whereas in France, only a dozen Soviet features reached commercial exhibition.[70] These figures surely do not reflect the symbolic impact Soviet cinema might have had on local filmmakers nor give any clear idea of its popular reception, which are both difficult to measure in any tangible statistics. However, even though the programming data suggests that some Soviet films enjoyed long-runs in local cinemas,[71] the overall results of their commercialisation were frequently reported as disappointing. In France, none of the distribution companies developed sustainable ties with Soviet cinema in the 1920s. After buying a handful of films, and launching into markets, on average, three or four, all of the firms involved with the Soviet cinema distribution in the 1920s either stopped conducting business with the Soviets (Aubert, Phocéa, Pathé Consortium), or went into bankruptcy (Pax-Film, Luna-Film). In Germany as well, both Prometheus and Derussa failed after a series of unsuccessful attempts to use the profits generated by the distribution of Soviet films to compensate for the losses of costly “quotas” production.

The failure of Soviet film distributors to settle permanently within the German and French cinema markets can undoubtedly be linked to the local political conjuncture, highly unwelcoming for Soviet cultural production. Like *Battleship Potemkin*, released in Germany only after a series of mutilating cuts and forbidden during three decades in France, many Soviet films had a hard time getting permits for commercial screenings.[72] However, the obstruction of local censorship can only partially explain the precarious situation of Soviet cinema abroad and the subsequent companies’ bankruptcies, since Soviet films were obviously not the only productions that were subject to bans and cuts.

The weak presence of Soviet films on the German and the French markets was also consistent with poor means granted to Soviet film practitioners and their limited knowledge of international markets’ tendencies and specific features. Throughout the 1920s, in Germany as in France, Soviet exporters took little advantage of being the sole vendors of URSS’s cinematic production, as the state monopoly on film

[70] O. Bulgakowa et al. (eds.), *Die ungewöhnlichen Abenteuer des Dr. Mabuse im Lande der Bolschewiki: Das Buch zur Filmreihe ‘Moskau– Berlin’*, Berlin 1995, p. 278. See also Puchenkina, addendum no. 2 to the PhD dissertation.

[71] For example, the historical drama by Iurii Tarich, *Ivan The Terrible (Krylia kholopa, 1926)* was pro-

grammed for five weeks straight in a first-run cinema Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, then ran for another five weeks in a prestigious Aubert Palace.

[72] In France, for instance, at least twenty-three films had limited commercial circulation or were not distributed at all because of the censorship bans or cuts between 1924 and 1939.

distribution and foreign trade would allow them to. By delegating the distribution of Soviet films to local firms rather than risking dealing directly with exhibitors, Soviet exporters lost control over their releases and limited the opportunities to become familiar with local tastes that they desperately sought to conform to. The coordination of film exports also suffered from the internal competition between the Soviet production units. According to Valerie Pozner's research, Sovkino played an important role in the failure of Prometheus, which mostly distributed the production of Mezhrabpom, Sovkino's main rival on domestic and international markets.[73]

In the late 1920, when the introduction of the sound cinema to commercial distribution shook up the international cinema trade, rivalries between Sovkino and Mezhrabpom also contributed to a major setback for Soviet film exports. To prevent the Soviet film production from being even more dependent on costly foreign imports, both Sovkino and Mezhrabpom endeavoured to develop their own system of sound reproduction. Even though two domestic sound technologies were created in the framework of this project, their development took more time than expected, due to an unproductive split of funding between the two research groups and the general atmosphere of competition and secrecy that surrounded their work.[74] As a result, Soviet studios fell behind international trends, as in the crucial period of 1929–1932, when the talkies became increasingly popular in Europe, Soviet production remained predominantly silent. In 1932, when the first few Soviet sound features reached European screens, they enjoyed critical and public acclaim,[75] but in the meantime, the export output had fallen dramatically. Indeed, if for the 1927/28 and 1928/29 operational years,[76] the export results were evaluated to 343 007 and 503 818 dollars respectively, the following year export output was lower by two thirds, falling to an equivalent of 134 913 dollars.[77]

## Conclusion

In the 1920s, most film industries in Europe were faced with the challenge of post-war reconstruction, and the Soviet one was not

[73] V. Pozner, *Drôle de guerre: comment la rivalité entre Sovkino et Mezhrabpom conduisit à la faillite de Prometheus*, [in:] *Linkes Kino. Von Prometheus zu Hitler*, ed. T. Tode, Vienne 2019, forthcoming.

[74] For a detailed discussion of the conflicted origins of Soviet sound development, see, for example, V. Pozner, *To Catch Up and Overtake Hollywood: Early Talking Pictures in the Soviet Union*, [in:] *Sound, Speech, Music in Soviet and Post-Soviet Cinema*, eds. L. Kaganovsky, M. Salazkina, Bloomington 2014.

[75] See J. Hicks, *Lost in Translation? Early Soviet Sound Film Abroad*, [in:] *Russia and the other(s) on film. Screening Intercultural Dialog*, ed. S. Hutchings, New York 2008, pp. 113–129.

[76] The term “operational year” refers to the Soviet accounting system used until the early 1930s, which reported and planned activities from October to September of each year.

[77] In 1931, Intorgkino, the central Soviet administration for import-export of film and film materials created in 1930, underwent inspection and subsequent purges. The diminishing figures of film exports were listed among the charges against Intorgkino's executives, including Evgeni Kaufman, the head of its import-export department who was arrested and sentenced to several years of imprisonment for “sabotage.” GARF, f. P8341, op. 1, d. 1121, n.p.

an exception. Its nationalised status did not make a major difference, since the Soviet government had little to offer to support the film industry during its first years of rule. A challenge to rebuild itself from a nearly ruined state while being heavily dependent on imports cultivated within the Soviet film industry a much closer connection with international trends as one would have imagined. Indeed, as can be seen from the example of film exports to Germany and France, Soviet trade practitioners seemed to be moving a path in many ways similar to its counterparts from the capitalistic West, albeit with specific Soviet connotations. To counter the import regulations of the protective German market, they established subsidiary firms in similar manner American companies did. To maximise the number of Soviet films released abroad, for ideological as well as for financial purposes, Sovkino and other production units were ready to tailor films to satisfy what-they-considered-to be bourgeois tastes and foreign distributors' recommendations. In their search for commercial partners, Soviet exporters did not hesitate to benefit from international networks developed before the October Revolution by Russian entrepreneurs and their foreign counterparts. Finally, even though the nationalisation of the branch was in theory supposed to rule out uncooperative attitudes between production units, in practice, two major Soviet cinema organisations, Sovkino and Mezhrabpom, were engaged in a not-so-socialist competition over the resources.

Should we therefore come to the conclusion that film exports were deprived of all intentions linked to the Soviet project of turning the cinema into a powerful tool of education and propaganda? Not just yet. For one thing, film exports helped inject finances into domestic productions, which were all supposed, in a more or less obvious manner, to deliver ideological messages both inside and outside the Soviet Union. In addition, Soviet attempts to keep its film trade open to commercially oriented Western partners corresponded to the more general logic of bringing Soviet cultural production to broader audiences, beyond the limited circles of connoisseurs and sympathisers to the communist socio-political agenda.

The part of Soviet export history briefly discussed in this article showed that a comparative perspective could be useful to avoid thinking of the Soviet film industry as a fundamental outsider of global cinema processes. However, the scope of this article, primarily focused on the Soviet efforts to export to Germany and France during the 1920s, does not allow an assessment whether these practices persisted throughout the next decades. For instance, it might be instructive to understand how Stalin's conservative turn of the 1930s did or did not undermine the internationalism of Soviet film policy. The further look at the history of Soviet film exports from a transnational perspective, investigating other territories of export or different historical contexts, could be also fruitful in order to understand how systematic or, on the contrary, how country- and period-specific this approach was.

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