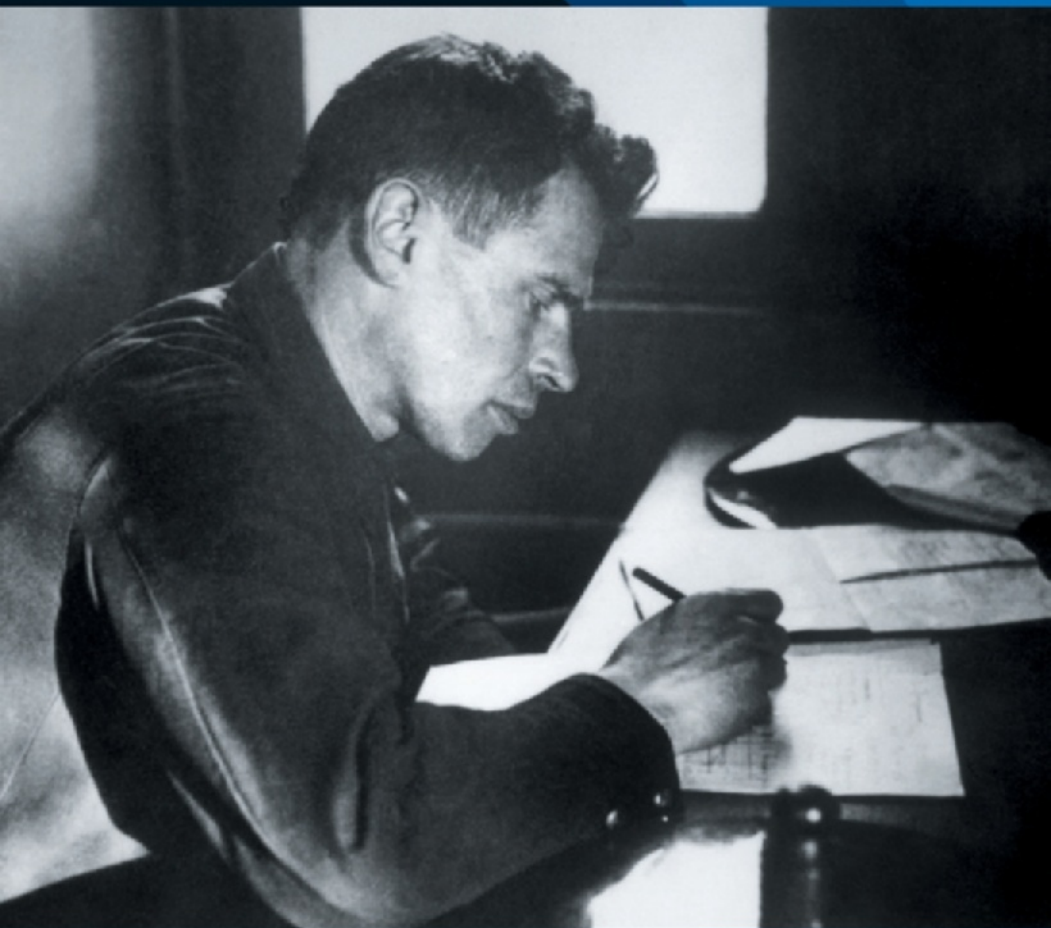


KINOFILES

THE FILMMAKERS' COMPANION



ALEXANDER MEDVEDKIN

EMMA WIDDIS

I.B.TAURIS

Alexander Medvedkin

KINOfiles Filmmakers' Companions

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ALEXANDER MEDVEDKIN

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I.B. TAURIS

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I dedicate this book to my husband Jason, as a souvenir of the year in which it was finished.

Note on Transliteration

Transliteration from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet is a perennial problem for writers on Russian subjects. I have opted for a dual system: in the text I have used the Library of Congress system (without diacritics), but I have broken away from this system (a) when a Russian name has a clear English version (e.g. Maria instead of Mariia, Alexander instead of Aleksandr); (b) when a Russian name has an accepted English spelling, or when Russian names are of Germanic origin (e.g. Meyerhold instead of Meierkhol'd; Eisenstein instead of Eizenshtein); (c) when a Russian name ends in –ii or –yi, this is replaced by a single –y (e.g. Dostoevsky) for a surname and a single –i for a first name (e.g. Grigori, Sergei). In the scholarly apparatus I have adhered to the Library of Congress system (with diacritics) for the specialist.

Introduction

... the gaze of a man who had seen vast spaces, but who – even across them – had not stopped seeing his childhood.¹

Beginning in Penza in 1900, and ending in Moscow in 1989, the life story of Alexander Ivanovich Medvedkin echoes the story of the Russian Revolution, and of the Soviet dream itself. It is a story of social transformation: of how an uneducated young man was turned into a soldier, thence into a man of culture, and eventually into one of the most respected film-makers of his generation. It is a story of a complex and fluctuating relationship with the political ideals and realities of the age, of a creative life both nurtured and damaged by politics. As such, it is an archetypal story of its time.

The son of a railwayman, of peasant stock, Medvedkin began his career in cinema within the political and cultural ferment of the 1920s. He made his best-known feature films during the Stalin years, and was honoured as a ‘People’s Artist’ of the USSR in 1969, yet he described his creative life as ‘driven by the hate, or simply the enmity, of the leadership’.² Despite this, he continued to make films and to write screenplays into his final years; he was feted on all his birthdays by the Union of Cinematographers, and he died before the collapse of the state to which he had dedicated his life.

Medvedkin’s career, and his life, run in parallel with the life and death of the USSR, and mirror the complexities and moral ambiguities of that ill-fated experiment. His major works stand as testament to the tensions and creativity of the years between 1917 and 1940, at once conforming to the political imperatives of the age and subverting them. His creative life is emblematic of the difficult trajectory of an artist committed to that most capricious of regimes.

2 Alexander Medvedkin

There can be little doubt about Medvedkin's ideological commitment to communism – or about his desire to use cinema to serve that end. Nor, however, can there be any doubt about the difficulties that he encountered. As he wrote in 1963, 'If you commit yourself once and for all to the great Soviet Cinema, then you have to find the strength for great argument and profound reflection'.³ By temperament, Medvedkin was something of a fighter: 'I have never avoided polemic,' he wrote: 'and an absence of creative disagreement in cinema has never seemed to me to be a sign of creativity or well-being.'⁴ For him, art could be – indeed, must be – propaganda, an expression of the artist's 'inner commitment to the Party' (*partiinnost'*), and 'although this is not, of course, the only path in art, once I had chosen it for myself I tried to be faithful to it to the end'.⁵ His creative life was marked by the search for a cinematic form that would meet the demands of that difficult path.

* * *

In this book, I attempt to tell the story of that search. This is the first English-language monograph on this most neglected of directors. Although the French director Chris Marker made an extraordinary film, *Le Tombeau d'Alexandre* [*The Last Bolshevik*, 1993], about Medvedkin's life and art, he remains little known. Scholarly research on Medvedkin's work is still in its infancy, in Russia as in the West. There is still only one monograph on the director in Russian, and that was written during the Soviet period.⁶ Things are changing, however. A recent issue of the academic cinema journal *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* published a full filmography of the director's works, together with much of his unpublished correspondence with Chris Marker.⁷ The film historian Nikolai Izvolov, whose work on the director and his films has been of immense importance, has recently published a chapter on Medvedkin's work in which he raises a number of vital new questions.⁸

For a Western audience, however, Medvedkin's work is still mysterious. Apart from *Happiness* [Schast'e, 1935], few of his films have yet had the impact on the history of world cinema that they perhaps deserve. Even *Happiness* – acclaimed by Sergei Eisenstein as early as 1935 as a classic of Soviet cinema – rarely forms part of the canon of Soviet films familiar to an international audience. This situation is beginning to change. The French–German television channel ARTE has just produced a new print of *Happiness*, and a DVD version of the film is to be released over the next few years.⁹ It is to be hoped that Medvedkin's other early feature films – *The Miracle Worker* [Chudesnitsa, 1936] and *New Moscow* [Novaia Moskva, 1938] – may soon find wider exposure.

For pragmatic reasons, therefore, this study of Medvedkin is weighted towards these three early films, the works most likely to be available to my

reader. There is another, more significant, reason for this, however. The years between 1920 and 1940 represent the most creatively productive and exciting period of Medvedkin's career. These first films represent the pinnacle of his cinematic achievement. They trace the evolution of his unique dream to create a new kind of political satire, and its frustration.

Medvedkin's first feature films have an important story to tell. They may seem at times to be ambivalent, or even ambiguous, in relation to the dominant ideology of the age. Yet his commitment to the ideals of Bolshevism, and of the Soviet Union, is indisputable. His Party card is preserved in the archive alongside his most cherished papers. And, until his very last days in 1989, he was a celebrated survivor and soldier of the regime that was beginning to disintegrate around him.

Thus, the principal challenge facing any research on Medvedkin lies in the discrepancy between the director's ideological commitment to the regime and the apparent subversiveness of the film texts themselves. For Medvedkin is not an artist who can be conscripted to an anti-Soviet cause. While he may have had a complex and fluctuating relationship with the Soviet regime, he was bred – and remained – a committed Bolshevik. My intent is not to resolve these contradictions. They are, after all, to be found in many such men and women of his time, caught between the political ideals of Bolshevism and its practical manifestation as Soviet communism, faced with the pragmatic and very real imperative of survival at a dangerous time.

Any study of Medvedkin's work has a rich body of resources on which to rely. At the very beginning of his career he began keeping extensive diaries and working notebooks, in which he would record his ideas, keep records of his impressions from films or performances that he had seen, sketch out frame-by-frame plans for future productions, etc. He continued to write such diaries throughout his life, and – with a consciousness of his own historical significance for which we can now be grateful – he preserved the majority of them, and of his notebooks.

This vast archive is now kept in the Moscow Museum of Cinema, providing an invaluable source for the biographer and film historian alike. It is testament, above all, to the director's ongoing quest for a 'new way' of communicating, a new cinematic genre, that occupied his entire life.

For me, then, this study of Medvedkin has two stories to tell. The first is that of a remarkable film-maker. This is a timeless story, told through the analysis of films that stand the test of time. The second is that of a film-maker Revolutionary, and a regime. It is, in a sense, a story of the Soviet century. And it too, I believe, can be told through Medvedkin's films.

There is another narrative on the shelves of that cupboard in the Museum of Cinema, however. And that is the story of a man's sense of personal

4 Alexander Medvedkin

significance – a man who saw himself through the prism of his age. Medvedkin's absolute confidence in the value of these documents is testament to his confidence in his history as one that mattered. Whether it does – whether Medvedkin's legacy, cinematic or personal, is an important one – is a question that I leave it to the reader to answer.

Curriculum Vitae

- 1900 Born in Penza, son of a railway worker.
- 1919 Joined the Red Army as adjutant in Budenny's 'Red Cavalry'.
- 1921 Moved to the Propaganda Sector of the same cavalry, as head of regimental 'club'.
- 1922 Moved to Propaganda Division of Western Front.
- 1925 Promoted to become 'instructor' in the Central (State) Propaganda Division of the Red Army.
- 1927–1929 Moved to the military film organisation 'Gosvoenkino' and qualified as a film director.
- 1930–1931 Together with a small working group, Medvedkin made five short experimental, satirical films, which provoked significant debate in the cinematographic community.
- 1931–1932 Set up and headed the 'film-train,' a travelling film studio that journeyed across the Soviet Union during the First Five-Year Plan.
- 1933 Became a salaried employee of the central film studio, Mosfilm.

6 Alexander Medvedkin

- 1934 Produced his best-known feature film, *Happiness*.
- 1935–1936 Began production of *The Accursed Force*, but was forbidden to continue.
- 1936–1937 Produced *The Miracle Worker*.
- 1939 *New Moscow* was finished, but was withdrawn from distribution.
- 1941–1942 Head of film studio in Baku (Azerbaijan), when the making of feature films was evacuated out of the capital during the Second World War.
- 1943–1945 Worked on the ‘3rd Belorussian Front’ as head of a group of film-makers, recording material at the front line.
- 1946 Produced an animated feature, *Emergency Service*, which was banned before release.
- 1954–1958 Worked in Kazakhstan filming Khrushchev’s ‘Virgin Lands’ campaigns for land reclamation. Produced a feature film, *The Liberated Land*.
- 1959–1989 Produced a series of documentary film ‘pamphlets’, generally attacking ‘international imperialism’.
- 1968 Met Chris Marker in Leipzig.
- 1969 Awarded the honour of ‘People’s Artist of the USSR’.
- 1970 Premiere of *Happiness* in Paris, organised by Chris Marker.
- 1977 Premiere of *The Miracle Worker* in Paris.
- 1979 Awarded the honour of ‘People’s Artist’ for the second time.
- 1989 Died in Moscow.