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# ALEXANDER NEVSKY<sup>LA</sup>

*Under Stalin's influence, works of history and art glorified many other tsars and princes, portrayed in an extremely distorted fashion. Thus the legend of Aleksandr Nevsky was revived... hushing up the fact that he called the Tartars into Novgorod to suppress a popular rebellion.*

Roy Medvedev, LET HISTORY JUDGE (New York, 1971), p. 519.

*Reading at one and the same time the 13th century chronicles and the newspapers of today, one loses the sense of a difference of time, because that bloody horror, which in the 13th century was loosed by the attacking knightly orders, is hardly distinguished from that which is done today in some countries of the world.*

Sergei Eisenstein, 1938

*... military defensive in its content, heroic in spirit, party-line in its direction and epic in style.*

Nicholai Cherkassov on ALEXANDER NEVSKY, 1953

*It was on Saturday, at sunrise, that the two armies met, and there was terrible carnage, and the crash of spears and their breaking and the clash of swords smiting as they moved over the frozen sea; and you could not see the ice, it was so covered with blood.*

Description of the battle on the ice from a late 13th or early 14th century LIFE OF ALEXANDER NEVSKY

What time was it in the world? Twelve-forty-two A.D. — or as the Byzantine and early Russian calendars reckoned in those days — the year 6750 since the creation of the world. Early Russian civilization had need for the reassurance that they still lived in a created universe and that the God of Eastern Orthodoxy had not forgotten them. For Russia was besieged — as Russian civilization was so often destined to be in later times — by enemies on two sides. The Mongol or Tartar horde, under Ghengis Khan and his successors, had overrun most of the cities of the Russian steppe, leaving only a few cities to the north and west like Novgorod and Pskov free of the Mongol yoke. These cities in turn were threatened by a second menace: the Teutonic and Livonian knights, Baltic warriors who were continuing the Western assault against Eastern Christendom which had recently caused crusades to humiliate fellow Christians and occupy the Eastern Christian empire at Constantinople. Now crusading knights were occupying Pskov in the North — and heading for a showdown in a battle fought on ice with the forces of Russian Novgorod under the prince they summoned to lead them from the wooded interior: ALEXANDER NEVSKY.

This saga of national resistance and epic battle is the subject of Sergei Eisenstein's great patriotic film ALEXANDER NEVSKY. Completed at the height of the Stalin era on the eve of World War II, this film tells us as much about the period in which it was made as it does about the period it describes. Harassed by Japan on its Manchurian border, Russia was even more worried by the rise of Hitler's Germany. Russia's greatest film director, Sergei Eisenstein, had been in disgrace with the regime for his earlier artistic experiments. He won his way back into official favor by producing this classic statement of official patriotism that Stalin was then encouraging.

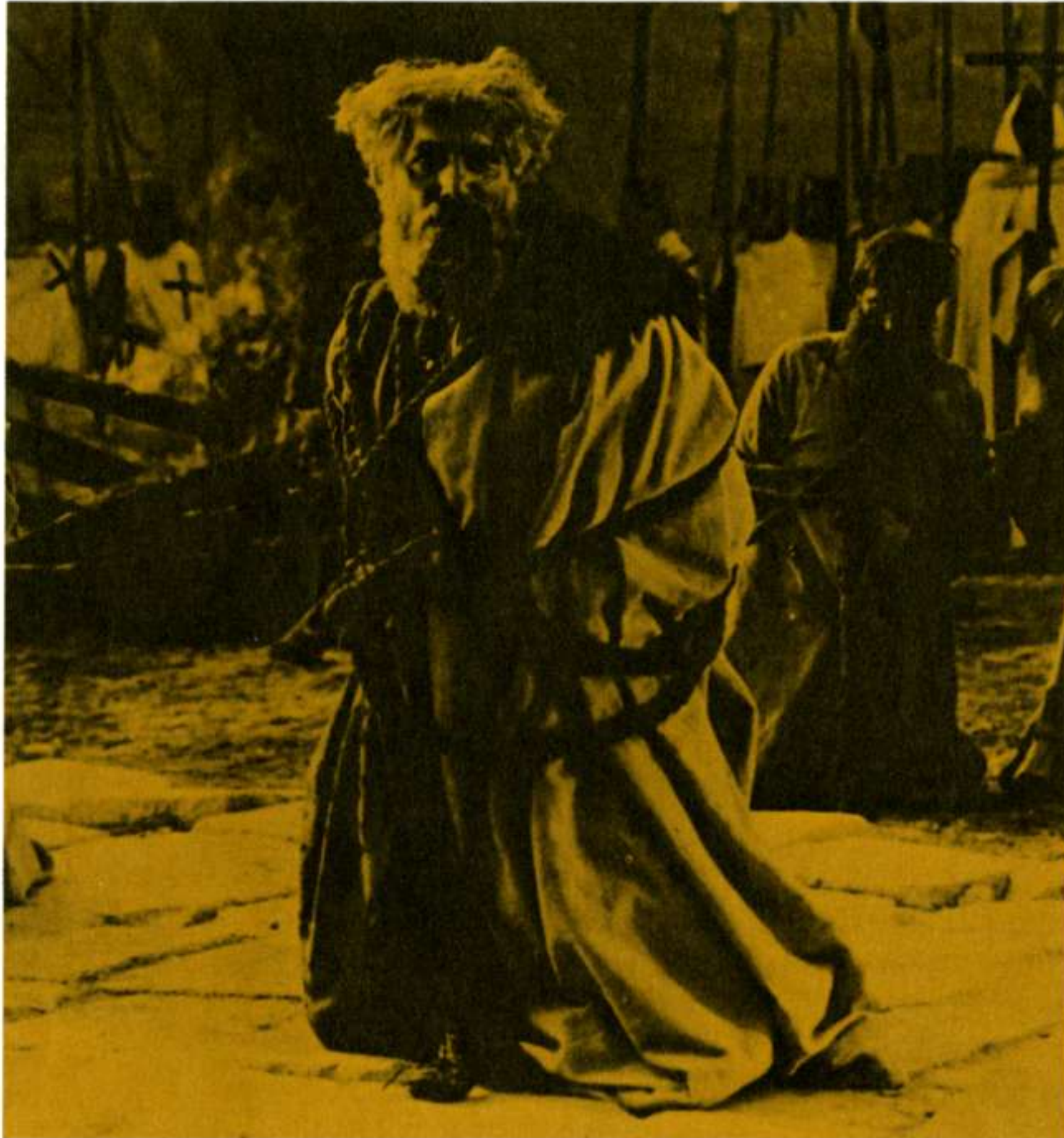
In the call for strong, central leadership to rally a quarrelsome people, Stalin apparently saw something of the image of himself as the new absolute dictator after the purge period. In the pointed warning to warlike Western invaders at the end, worried Russian officials sought to convince themselves and impress resurgent Germany (whose ambassador was at one point invited to see the film).

Such propagandistic purpose in 1938 did not, of course, prevent the sudden return to pro-German subjects, once the Nazi-Soviet pact was concluded the following year; and in 1940 Eisenstein found himself staging a production of Wagner's "Die Walküre" in the Bolshoi Theatre.

Yet Eisenstein's film did prove prophetic of the popular resistance which eventually stopped the mechanized German advance once the Germans advanced with the sword in 1941. Eisenstein's artistic genius proved, in any case, capable of rising above all conditions of servitude; and in ALEXANDER NEVSKY, the remarkable camera shots of Tisse fused in counterpoint with the score of Prokofiev provide an unforgettable illustration of the elements of old Russia in the service of the new Soviet state.

For old Russia was not primarily a verbal culture so much as a culture of sights and sounds. Icons and music were more important than words for old Russia, much as Eisenstein's epic is built on a kind of symphonic interaction of powerful pictures and magnificent music





## CAST

**Alexander Nevsky**  
Nikolai Cherkassov  
**Vassily Buslai**  
N. P. Okhiopkov  
**Gavrillo Olexich**  
A. L. Agrikossov  
**Ignat, the Armorer**  
D. N. Orlov  
**Olga**  
V. S. Ivasheva  
**Vasilissa**  
A. S. Danilova  
**Master of the Teutonic Order**  
V. L. Ershov

## CREDITS

Directed by Sergei M. Eisenstein, Assisted by D. M. Vasiliev  
Written by Sergei M. Eisenstein and Peter Pavlenko  
Photographed by Edward Tisse  
Musical Score by Sergei Prokofiev  
A Mosfilm Production  
105 minutes.  
Black and white.  
U.S.S.R. 1938.

ALEXANDER NEVSKY stands in the middle ground of Eisenstein's career in film, separating his bold experiments in silent film of the Twenties, from the later, intricate, operatic design of the multi-part IVAN THE TERRIBLE. It is the only completed film to come from the many projects Eisenstein began in the decade from 1930 to 1940. In many ways, NEVSKY is uncharacteristic of Eisenstein —there is a straight dramatic story-line, an exalted hero figure, even a secondary "love interest." It is perhaps the closest that the great film innovator ever came to making a conventional movie.

He had come to film from the ferment of experimental theater. Under the influence of Meyerhold, he had integrated brief film sequences into one play, staged another in a real chemical factory. His first feature STRIKE (1925) was a bold poster-like experiment, almost a live-action satirical cartoon, filled with grotesque images of pre-revolutionary Russia. That same year, at the age of twenty-seven, Eisenstein made his most famous film, POTEMKIN. This story of revolt on a Czarist battleship during the struggles of 1905 became the controversial symbol of the new art of cinema. It was followed by OCTOBER (TEN DAYS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD) in 1928, and OLD AND NEW, on the subject of collective farming, in 1929. Each of these films represented a highly individual exploration of the power of film; rejecting the imitation of traditional forms from other arts in favor of the cinema where the combination of images, their order and duration, would carry the meaning in forceful terms. Eisenstein aimed for a way of portraying history and events with the "mass" as hero, rather than developing standard heroic figures.

During the Thirties, the goals of the Soviet cinema changed and free experiment was no longer as encouraged. Old forms seemed to work better to convey the message of the new Russia. ALEXANDER NEVSKY was developed as a clear historical parallel to the Nazi threat, as a call to defense of homeland under the banner of a great leader. It is Eisenstein's first completed sound film, and special care was taken, in collaboration with the composer Prokofiev, to develop a strong and active interrelation between image and music. The film was shot on a rushed schedule—the original plan had been to mount the spectacular "Battle On the Ice" in winter, but plans were changed to get the message out sooner, and the scene was shot on a artificially prepared field in July of 1938. It premiered in Moscow on November 23 of the same year, and restored Eisenstein for a brief period to official favor.

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