

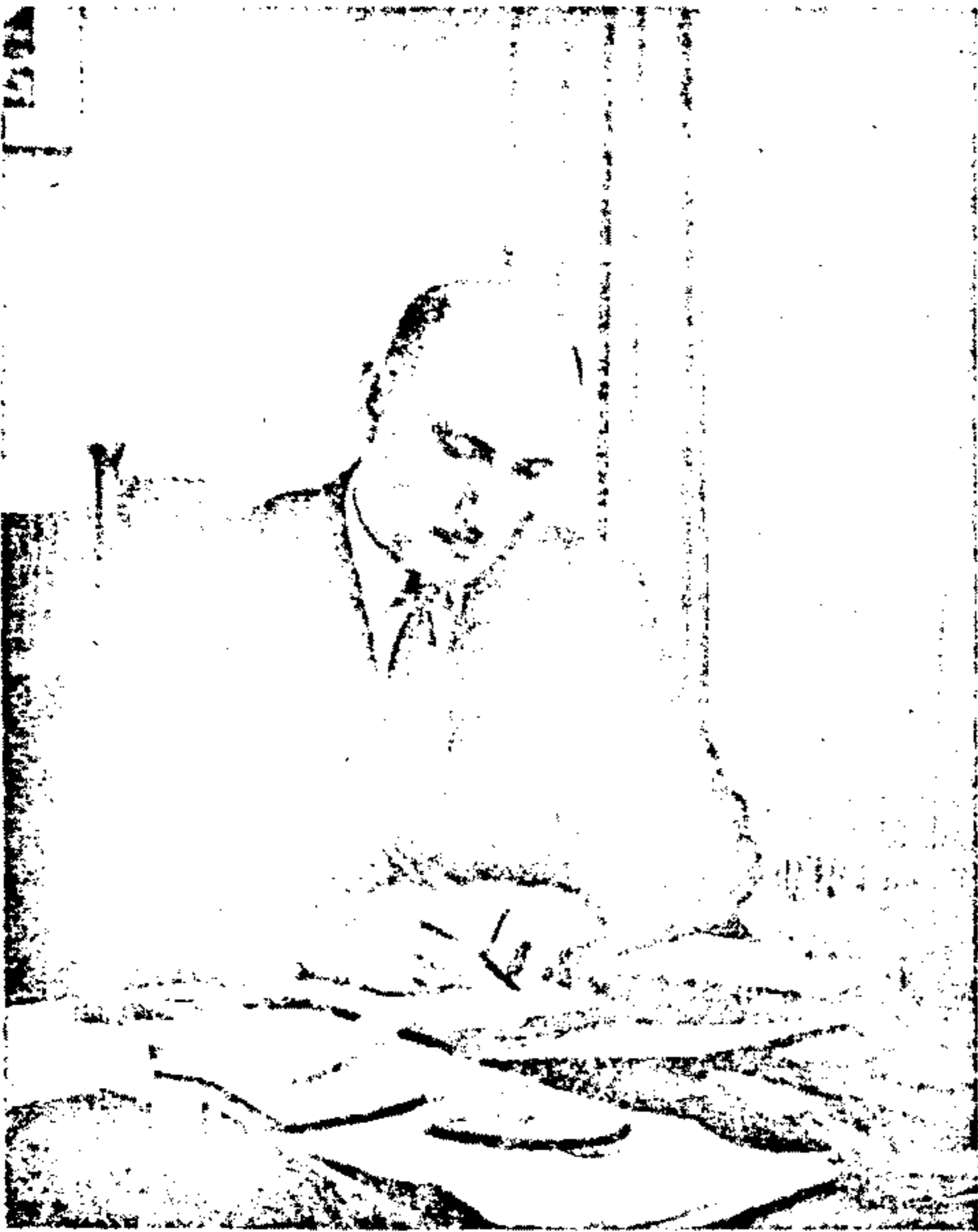
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HOW WE MADE

“QUIET FLOWS THE DON”

(Interview with director SERGEI GERASIMOV)



Director Sergei Gerasimov
in his office

The third and final serial of “Quiet Flows the Don” has reached cinemagoers, marking the completion of an epic film based on Mikhail Sholokhov’s world-famous novel.

It took about a year to write a screen treatment of the novel, which deals with major historical events such as World War I, the overthrow of tsarism, the October Revolution, the Civil War in the south of Russia and the rout of the whiteguard army.

In the scenario we strove to preserve the structure of the novel, both with regard to the story line and to the character portrayal and in our choice of episodes and directorial interpretation we followed the plot faithfully. The sequence of the film revolves round the story of Grigori Melekhov, the novel’s principal character, his search for truth in a period of the break-up of the old world and the tragedy of his and Aksinia’s love.

Selecting a cast for this unusually peopled scenario and film (as many as 30 important characters and about 150 minor characters) presented great difficulties. We looked for suitable actors among the companies of numerous theatres and amateur dramatic groups and made our selections as the result of a rather unusual competition.

It was particularly difficult to find someone entirely suitable for the leading part. When we had almost decided the matter, literally just before shooting was to begin, my attention was drawn to Pyotr Glebov, a Moscow stage actor who had been given a small part as an officer. Glebov’s appearance and carriage impressed me as more expressive and closer to the image of Grigori than those of the actor we had chosen. The next day, after a very thorough session in the make-up department, Pyotr Glebov got the part of Grigori. I never regretted our choice.

It took us quite some time to find an actress for the part of Aksinia. We rejected dozens of candidates, finding in none of them the traits of character and special beauty of Grigori’s beloved. At last, on Sholokhov’s advice, we chose Elina Bystritskaya, who had given an outstanding performance in the leading role of “An Unfinished Story”.

The cast includes both experienced screen actors like Daniil Ilchenko (Grigori Melekhov’s father) and newcomers to the films like Zinaida Kirienko (Natalia). In many episodes the actors were not professionals but Cossacks from the villages and hamlets where the film was shot.

On Sholokhov’s advice the location chosen for shooting the film was the former village of Kamenskaya and the surrounding hamlets where the first silent version of “Quiet Flows the Don” was made 20 years ago. In the autumn of 1956 the cast and crew, numbering about 100 people of various professions, arrived there.

We found ourselves in the heart of the region described in Sholokhov’s book. But how things had changed since the days of “Quiet Flows the Don”! The village of Kamenskaya is now a town. We had to remove telegraph poles, which Kamenskaya

did not have before the Revolution, just as it did not possess buildings with signs reading “Club”, “School”, “Soviet”. Designer Boris Dulenkov had to camouflage whole groups of modern buildings with his sets, to replace new fences with old, dilapidated ones and in some cases reproduce old streets that had disappeared.

To get the feel of their parts the actors began to live like ordinary Cossack peasants, learning their customs, habits, mannerisms, dialect. Elina Bystritskaya learned to make hay, milk cows, heat a country stove and carry pails on a yoke. Composer Yuri Levitin transcribed Cossack songs with their distinctive and complex part arrangement.

I have said that our group consisted of about 100. That is not quite true. To it should be added our numerous voluntary helpers, the Don collective farmers. Indeed, there is not a soul in the Don region who has not read Sholokhov’s novel: many know it in great detail and can quote entire excerpts from it by heart. People read and re-read their favourite novel, recognizing familiar places and people and recalling memorable historical events.

It is not surprising therefore that we received a most cordial welcome and valuable assistance. Trunks were opened for us, old uniforms and dresses of styles no longer worn taken out of moth-balls. Housewives willingly loaned us old household utensils and furnishings of kinds no longer made.

The wedding scenes in the Melekhov house were produced not by me but by a group of local old men who reconstructed the entire ceremony with preciseness to the subtlest detail.

Entire Cossack villages took part in the mass scenes. We had to revive the Cossack cavalry. This was done under the direction of General Oslikovskiy.

Among our advisers was Semyon Ivanovich Kudinov, a 75-year old Cossack, who participated in the events portrayed in Sholokhov’s novel. In fact, Kudinov was one of the characters in the novel and his valuable advice was a great help to us. He himself chose a young Cossack to play his part, told him about his militant youth and gave him numerous pointers.

Now our film, which could with justice be called a joint production, by professionals and Don Cossacks, is finished. The welcome it received in the Don region was tremendous. Cinema theatres, village club-houses and recreation centres could not hold all who wished to see it. Mikhail Sholokhov told us that in some villages the audience posted guards outside the projection booths and refused to let the mechanic go until he had shown the film as many times as necessary for the entire population to see the screen story of their own historic past, of the cruel struggle in which a new and better life was born.

Sergei Gerasimov and Cameraman Vladimir Rapoport (left)
on the set of “QUIET FLOWS THE DON”

