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In A Lean Year, Soviets Dust Off Eisenstein Epic For Fest Circuit

Berlin, Feb. 27.

In what appears to be a rather lean year, the Soviet Cinema is relying principally on a classic to win laurels abroad: Grigori Alexandrov's re-edited and "official" version of Eisenstein's "Que Viva Mexico." Where this pic will turn up first — at the Cannes, Moscow or other festival — seems to be the big question (Moscow, of course, has the inside track), but afterwards it could tour the world and probably with Grigori Alexandrov (Eisenstein's friend and companion in Mexico) in tow.

"Que Viva Mexico" (also edited into another version known as "Thunder over Mexico") was finished with lensing (save for a few scenes) in 1932; then the pic's backer, writer Upton Sinclair, withdrew support in the eighth month of shooting. Eisenstein packed the uncut film into his baggage and headed back for Moscow — he got as far as Le Havre, where the film was confiscated upon demand by Sinclair, who requested that Eisenstein edit the pic in Hollywood. Eisenstein refused.

Since then the film has existed in a kind of limbo. Apparently Alexandrov — after three years work on the project — feels he has found the authoritative answer to a problem that has plagued more than one expert. And he has done it with all the original footage returned (after years of negotiations) by the Sinclair estate.

A second Soviet epic is also ripe for fest exposure: Andrei Mikhalkov-Konchalovsky's "Siberiada," a four-part, six-and-a-half-hour Soviet answer to Bertolucci's "1900," this one set in a fishing village on the Siberian coast. Part one takes place at the turn-of-the-century and is rooted to a traditional way-of-life; Part Two looks at the Revolution and Civil War, when foreign troops passed through these parts; Part Three centers on collectivization and economic growth; and Part Four tells the story of the oil boom.

Berlin, Cannes, and Moscow are possible choices for "Siberiada" on the festival circuit — in fact, Konchalovsky has three different cuts prepared for whichever way the gods decide.

As for other coveted Soviet feature pix — Elem Klimov's "Agonia" (ready in 1975), Otar Yoseliani's "Pastorale" (ready in 1977), and Anatoli Efros's "Thursdays Never Again," or "Forest Preserve" (ready in 1978) — these could be ace festival attractions anywhere, but pix still are undergoing reassessment and may be released one day without fest hoopla, as was Andrei Tarkovsky's "The Mirror" (ready in 1975, released in the West in 1978) following much discussion in the press.

Other new films are Ilya Averbach's "Confession of Love," based on a script by veteran Yevgeni Gabrilovich, Nikita Mikhalkov's "Five Evenings," and Lana Gogoberidze's "Some Interviews on Personal Questions" from the Georgian republic.