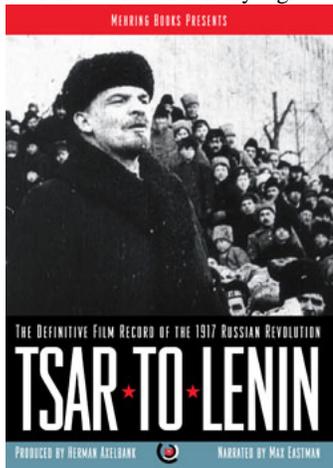


The definitive film record of the 1917 Russian Revolution

Mehring Books announces release of *Tsar to Lenin* in DVD format

5 July 2012

Mehring Books is proud to announce the DVD-release of *Tsar to Lenin*, one of the twentieth century's greatest film documentaries.



Based on archival footage assembled over more than a decade by the legendary Herman Axelbank (1900-1979), *Tsar to Lenin* provides an unparalleled film record of a revolutionary movement, embracing millions, which “shook the world” and changed the course of history. The narration by Max Eastman (1883-1969), the pioneer American radical, conveys with emotion and humanity the drama and pathos of the revolution.

Tsar to Lenin, first released in 1937, presents an extraordinary cinematic account of the Russian Revolution—from the mass uprising which overthrew the centuries-old Tsarist regime in February 1917, to the Bolshevik-led insurrection eight months later that established the first socialist workers’ state, to the final victory in 1921 of the new Soviet regime over counterrevolutionary forces after a three-year-long civil war.

Order your advance copy, for delivery at the end of July, from Mehring Books today.

We publish below an introductory essay included in the DVD, by David North, chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site* international editorial board.

Tsar to Lenin is one of the most important films made in the 20th century. Its subject is the Russian Revolution of 1917. The viewer never loses his sense of astonishment at being witness to events that altered the course of human history. Before the age of television with its ubiquitous 24-hour instant coverage, there seemed something miraculous about history being captured and preserved on film.

This extraordinary documentary was the product of a complex and contentious collaboration between Max Eastman (1883-1969), the famed American radical and socialist, and Herman Axelbank (1900-1979), a Russian-born immigrant who assembled the greatest cinematic record of a seminal event in world history.

In his memoir, *Love and Revolution: My Journey through an Epoch*, Eastman provided a lively account of the origins and creative process out of which the film emerged.

In the late autumn of 1928, a young man named Herman Axelbank came to see me—a persuasive young man. He was broad and short, hairy enough so that his chin was always blue, and his skull, which he kept close-cropped, was so shaped as to give him—but for his eyes—a rather formidable appearance. His eyes were deep blue and warm, and could be very convincing of his nobility of spirit. And he had in his possession a thing of great value to mankind: a collection of all the important films, or most of them, that had been taken of momentous events and personalities in the Russian revolution ... He had a ray of imagination and a stubbornness of purpose which, if combined with an adult regard for the purposes of others, would comport with the idea of genius. Ever since 1920 he had been collecting these pictures with unflagging energy, ingenuity, a shrewd sense of historic values, and a matchless skill in getting what he wanted without losing anything he already had.

Axelbank asked Eastman to assist in editing the film, writing captions that would explain the scenes, and raising money to finance the project. Axelbank’s choice of Eastman was inspired. An early American supporter of the Bolshevik revolution, Eastman had traveled to the Soviet Union in the 1920s, where he formed close political and personal relations with many of the leaders of the Soviet regime—above all, Leon Trotsky. In the mid-1920s, Eastman not only had written the biography *The Young Trotsky*, but also had provided the first detailed account to an international audience of the political struggle being waged by Trotsky against the increasingly powerful Soviet bureaucracy and its leader, Josef Stalin.

Eastman agreed to the proposal and threw himself into the project. In late 1929, during a trip to Europe, he augmented Axelbank’s film archive with additional footage. This included an astonishing sequence of the tsar, some years before the revolution, swimming with his courtiers in the nude. (In the finished documentary, this scene provides the occasion for Eastman’s wry observation, “This is the first time the world has seen a king as he really is!”)

Eastman also managed to convince Alexander Kerensky, the exiled leader of the Provisional Government overthrown by the Bolsheviks, to pose for several seconds of film footage, which was shot by the American photographer, Man Ray. Eastman was unable, however, to locate any cinematic record of Stalin during the critical revolutionary years between 1917 and 1921. The reason for the absence of such a record was simply

that Stalin's role in the Bolshevik conquest of power had not been sufficiently significant to attract the attention of the revolution's photographers.

The film was completed in January 1931. Eastman was confident that *Tsar to Lenin* would attract a large audience. As he recalled in his memoir:

Interest in the revolution was intense and still largely free-minded—not yet channeled and controlled by the remakers of history in the Kremlin. I mean that intelligent Americans were still permitted to remember that Trotsky organized the October insurrection and led the Red Army to victory, and that Lenin was able to cross the street without help from Stalin.

Eastman's plan was to sell the film and secure a wide distribution through professional channels. Among those to whom he previewed the film was Charlie Chaplin, who responded with enthusiasm. However, at this point, relations between Eastman and Axelbank fell apart. Having devoted his entire adult life to the creation of *Tsar to Lenin*, and acutely aware of the immense historical and political significance of the film, Axelbank feared the consequences of the film's sale to a powerful Hollywood corporation, such as Columbia Pictures. As subsequent events were to show, Axelbank's fears were well justified, even if his suspicions of Eastman's motivations were not. He accused Eastman of attempting to steal the film, and the conflict between the two men delayed the release of *Tsar to Lenin* for six years!

The delay was not entirely in vain. By the time the legal dispute between Eastman and Axelbank was partially resolved, the development of sound technology was so far advanced that the captions originally written for the documentary were inadequate. Eastman provided *Tsar to Lenin* with a masterful narration which he delivered with genuine passion and an actor's sense of timing.

And so the film was premiered on March 6, 1937, at the Filmarte Theatre on Fifty-Eighth Street in New York City. It had taken nine years to bring the film to the public, and the critical and popular response was overwhelming. The *New York Times* praised *Tsar to Lenin* as "an important work ... a complete, impartial and intelligent film history of the Russian revolution." The critic of the *New York Post* described the film as the "most important moving picture I ever saw in my life ... The most vital and absorbing film, to my mind, in the history of the movies."

Huge crowds turned out to view the film. But it did not take long before a massive campaign to discredit the film and block its showing was organized by the Soviet government and the totally Stalinized American Communist Party. The film, which appeared in the midst of the Moscow Trials and the blood purge of the Old Bolsheviks, was seen by the Stalinist regime as a dangerous obstacle to its efforts to falsify history. As Eastman recalled:

Trotsky had led the October insurrection and organized the Red army—the films said so—but Stalin was now in total power. *Tsar to Lenin* never got the distance of a few dollars beyond the Filmarte Theatre. Five days after the outpouring of praise [from the New York press], a big-headlined article appeared in the *Daily Worker* [newspaper of the Communist Party]:

"Max Eastman, chief apologist for the Trotsky band of traitors to the Soviet Socialist land, has assembled news-reels and documentary clips. This man is an expert in distortion, chicanery, trickery,

innuendo, and *Tzaroutrighto Lenines* must ... be Protest to the management of the Filmarte Theatre ... Make it clear to other theatres that *Tzar to Lenin* is unadulterated Trotskyist propaganda, and as such cannot be tolerated by the friends of freedom. ...Boycott *Tzar to Lenin!*"

More insidious than the anti-Trotsky rantings of the *Daily Worker* was the behind the scenes campaign organized by the Soviet regime, threatening distributors that they would not be allowed to market Soviet films—such as those of the popular Sergei Eisenstein—if they placed *Tsar to Lenin* in movie theaters. This campaign proved highly effective. *Tsar to Lenin*, recalled Eastman, "never had any run at all. Its triumph at the Filmarte was, for all present purposes, the end of it."

There is a saying: Books have their own fate. The same is true of movies. *Tsar to Lenin* was the victim of its own artistic and historical integrity. It was first blackguarded by the Stalinists and liberal-left, which could not stomach its factually accurate portrayal of the Revolution and Trotsky's role in it.

With the onset of the Cold War, new problems arose for Herman Axelbank and his documentary. Even limited showing of a film that presented the October Revolution and the Bolsheviks in a favorable light became all but impossible. Eastman himself had moved far to the right and sought to prevent showings of the film whose narration expressed a radical viewpoint that he had long since repudiated. Axelbank tried to save his film by having another narration dubbed in, and in this form the film was occasionally screened in small theaters and university campuses. But the narration was an anti-Communist travesty of the original Eastman narration and made a mockery of the images that had been assembled by Axelbank.

Eastman died in 1969 at the age of 86. By then Axelbank's film had been largely forgotten. It was not until the mid-1970s that the Workers League, forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, established contact with Herman Axelbank, who in his mid-seventies was still as combative as he had ever been.

I informed Axelbank that the Workers League was anxious to purchase the film, if only to ensure that it was never lost. Axelbank's initial demands could not be met. "Beg, borrow or steal" was his response to my pleas for more lenient terms. But after lengthy negotiations, an agreement was reached and Axelbank transferred ownership of *Tsar to Lenin* to the Workers League in January 1978. Vigorous to the end, Axelbank died suddenly a year and a half later, in July 1979.

In the years that followed, the Workers League and its successor organization, the Socialist Equality Party, organized numerous showings of the film. Showings of *Tsar to Lenin* have also been sponsored throughout the world by the political co-thinkers of the SEP in the International Committee of the Fourth International. But as the centenary of the October Revolution approaches, the time has come to make copies of this extraordinary film, as a DVD, available to all those who want to understand the October Revolution.

Seventy-five years after its premiere, the importance of *Tsar to Lenin* remains undiminished. Indeed, the fresh wave of historical falsification provoked by the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 lends to this film exceptional relevance. In a new period of global capitalist crisis—amidst economic breakdown, rampant social inequality and escalating militarism—*Tsar to Lenin* bears witness to a moment in history when socialist ideals inspired the greatest revolutionary movement in world history.

David North

July 5, 2012

*To order your advance copy of *Tsar to Lenin*, [click here](#).*

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>