

THE CONSTRUCTION OF A POLITICAL MEMORY IN *THE PALACE AND THE FORTRESS*: OUTLINING THE USE OF THE ARCHIVE IN MAKING A FILM ON POPULISM IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIA

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As contemporary historians commonly maintain, in post-revolutionary Russia the interpretation of history was crucially important for the Bolshevik Party, as on it would depend the legitimacy of the dictatorship born in October.¹ They did this by assimilating various pre-revolutionary movements, not directly connected with the Bolshevik Party, and trying to place themselves in the mainstream of the revolutionary tradition by locating in the earlier movement the origins of their own political outlook.

What was especially cultivated in the 1920s was the memory of the heroic period of the previous century, distinguished by the punishments (arrests, executions, exiles), which the Tsarist monarchy inflicted on the revolutionaries – from the Decembrist Masons² to the Society of United Slavs³ through to Populists both moderate and radical – whose martyrdom provided a source of inspiration to succeeding generations of Russian dissidents. In this context, that particular current of thought and action, under the name of *Narodničestvo* [Russian Populism], included several underground groups who, in the second half of the 19th century, adhered to the socialist movement by engaging in the struggle to liberate the country from the autocracy and so give power to the people, acquiring the status of an inheritance to be treasured.

However, in the aftermath of the October Revolution, the Populist movement was considered not solely an inheritance to be spent by the Party, but also an object of study for the purpose of telling a multi-voiced story.⁴ The newly founded cinematography of the Soviet Union also paid attention to the above-mentioned past, to such an extent that from the mid-1920s till the early 1930s nearly one third of the long feature films produced by the Soviet studios concerned Russian and European revolutionary history. The majority of these films were made with the help of historians and men of letters, if not actual witnesses of the revolutionary events, as in the case of the very famous long feature film *Battleship Potëmkin* (*Bronenosec Potëmkin*, 1925).⁵ Halfway through the 1920s texts began to be published of what would become, by the end of the following decade, the first, enormous Soviet bibliography dedicated to the Russian Populists, and in particular to those of the extremist section of the “mature Populism” of *Narodnaia Volja* [The People’s Will].⁶

In the first ten years of Soviet Russia, historical-revolutionary films enjoyed a success with young audiences by adapting the genre of the historical melodrama, the plots of which focused on the story of the “important individual,” which the contemporary official historiography eventually rejected.⁷ For instance, *The Palace and the Fortress* (*Dvorec i krepost’*, 1924) and *Stepan Chalturin* (1927) – both directed by Aleksandr Ivanovskij, tutored by the historian Ščëgolev –

presented two stories centered on outstanding figures in the Populist movement who were executed for committing political crimes. The first work dramatizes the vicissitudes of Michajl Bejdeman, a young democrat who forsakes his own class and professional background as a military officer (he is a *junker*, a member of the higher ranks of the Imperial Guard) to become a courier for the intellectual Aleksandr Herzen. The second deals with the deeds of the peasant revolutionary Stepan Chalturin, who was hanged by the Tsar after two failed acts of terrorism. As late as 1929, both films continued to enjoy widespread distribution and popularity despite negative publicity by some Party critics.⁸

The Palace and the Fortress was produced by the State company Sevzapkino – under the direction of the Central Committee of the Party, which at the very beginning of its export activity had invested a large amount of money in its creation. The idea was to produce a grandiose Soviet film to be widely distributed not only at home but also abroad, in Europe in particular. It was stated in a promotional article published in the newspaper *Pravda*, the main organ of the Party, that since the film was a “laying bare [*obnaženie*] of the historical truth,” it perfectly fulfilled the task for which it was sponsored by the State.⁹ Other reviews echoed this opinion, underlining how the drama revealed the most enlightening aspects of the Populists’ heroic commitment; without, however, giving expression to the parallel social protest of the peasants, nor giving a voice to the lower classes, as the State production had initially demanded.¹⁰

Unlike most dramatizations of the period, *The Palace and the Fortress* was a costume melodrama that gave ample space to secondary plot lines, which introduced other conspirators in the pursuit of socialism, such as Dmitrii Karakozov and Sergej Nečaev. These other leading figures eventually enter into secret contact with the protagonist, the young revolutionary Bejdeman, as soon as they too became political convicts in the maximum security prison inside the Alexei barbican on the territory of the Peter and Paul Fortress. At the story’s center is the tragic account of Bejdeman, who has gone down in history as the *mysterious prisoner* of the Peter and Paul Fortress.¹¹

The action of the *The Palace and the Fortress* takes place between 1861 and 1887: Bejdeman loves Vera Lagutin, the heiress of a wealthy landowner who has, however, planned for her a marriage of convenience to a rich old prince. Having given up all hope of Vera, who in the meantime has married into the upper echelons of the nobility, Bejdeman devotes himself to the cause of the annihilation of despotism. He therefore embraces the democratic ideas of the Russian agrarian movement of Petrovšina when he becomes a militant inside one of its cells.

These include radical conspirators fighting for the abolition of serfdom and the immediate repeal of the obligation of payment of labour rent to the landowner. Fleeing to Europe, the revolutionary finds a job in London, thanks to the recommendation of Alexander Herzen, at the printing house of the Russian journal *Kolokol* [The Bell]. This gives him a direct experience of political education, since this organ was part of the Free Russian Press, which was devoted to publishing abroad almost all the texts of socialist propaganda otherwise censored under the Tsar. When in 1861 Bejdeman comes back to Russia to fulfill his new mission in the name of the peasants’ emancipation, on the eve of the Manifesto on the rural reform abolishing serfdom, he has by then acquired a reputation as a political criminal. At the border of the Russian Empire he is arrested and given a life sentence, without even a trial, by direct order of Tsar Alexander II. Being held in solitary confinement in a cell of the Alexei barbican for twenty years, Bejdeman ends up by losing his mind; hence he is committed to the psychiatric hospital of Kazan’ (fig. 1).¹²

Alexander Ivanovskij conceives *The Palace and the Fortress* as a visual transposition of the works of two other authors: the novel *Clad in Stone* (*Odety kamnem*, Ol’ga Forš, 1924-1925) and the historical account *The Mysterious Prisoner* (*Tainstvennyj uzbek*, Pavel E. Ščegolev, 1919-



Fig. 1 – *The Palace and the Fortress* (Aleksandr Ivanovskij, 1924).

1924). *Clad in Stone* was one of the most popular historical novels of the 1920s: after first being published as a *feuilleton* in the journal *Rossija* between 1924 and 1925, it was later printed in a single volume which ran to more than twenty editions, amounting to almost one million copies.¹³ Its author, Ol'ga Forš, made her own use of archival sources that had just become available to the scientific community, by combining them with memoirs so as to work out the language of the dialogues and the psychology behind it.¹⁴ In order to distance the novel from the genre of the historical chronicle, Forš adopted the first-person narrative mode whereby the story of Bejdeman is reconstructed from the memoirs of one of his antagonists: Sergej Rusanin. Once an aristocrat, who graduated with Bejdeman at the Military Academy, and after having “survived four emperors and four great wars,”¹⁵ on 12 March 1923 Rusanin recollects at the end of his life the events of his youth, trying to find his own interpretation of the past of Russia.¹⁶ Having full knowledge of all the events, this type of narrator plays an important role in giving a living voice to archival documents: indeed, he sometimes refers to information supplied by others in order to broaden the point of view in terms of personal memory.

The main protagonist of the novel is Bejdeman. He, together with another terrorist student, Dmitrij Karakozov (the first Russian revolutionary to make an attempt on the life of a Tsar), is presented as a flat character with no other inner drive apart from his political opinion. He is mortally convinced that a unique deed could awaken and rouse the masses to revolt. As Karakozov himself confesses when he is tried and sentenced to death by the Supreme Court, he made an attempt on the life of Alexander II because he wanted to accomplish the plan begun by Bejdeman (not the plan of the Hell group to which, in reality, he had sworn allegiance). Driven by an inner force he deliberately behaves as a martyr. As is clearly stated in the chapter on the trial, both the lives of Bejdeman and Karakozov were made “holy” by the deeds they committed and the death they underwent.¹⁷ In *Clad in Stone* Forš made Bejdeman a solitary hero who acted in the vanguard of history.¹⁸ This aspect of sacralisation appears to be somewhat pronounced in the dialogues invented by Forš and returns to a lesser degree in the film, which was firmly based on the novel.

The second book to act as a basis for *The Palace and the Fortress* was *The Mysterious Prisoner*

written by Pavel E. Ščëgolev. In addition to providing his book, Ščëgolev collaborated in writing the screenplay not only as one of the major experts in the history of the revolutionary movement, and, as the adviser in charge of studying and organizing the fonds contained at the Museum of the Revolution in Petrograd, but also as an executive member of the ISTPART.¹⁹ By the mid-1920s, he composed *The Mysterious Prisoner* for the publishing house Byloe, which he had co-founded and where as chief editor in 1920 he edited, for the first time in Russia, the documents related to the Bejdeman case. Ščëgolev elaborated extensive archival records for *The Mysterious Prisoner*, records which he had originally been compiling as a chapter of a whole monograph designed to retain and transmit a collective memory of the Russian Populism of the 1860s and 1870s.²⁰

There are many departures from Ščëgolev's book in its cinematic adaptation, and among these, the most significant is unquestionably an excision: in the film the leitmotiv of Bejdeman's mysterious identity – a theme taken from Dumas to which the author calls the reader's attention in the opening paragraphs – is totally missing. *The Palace and the Fortress* presented strong solitary personalities, such as the terrorist Sergej Nečaev, who fully embodied political ideals, but it did not describe the social crisis amid, which these personalities made their appearance, nor place them in the revolutionary mainstream. The result was an exaltation of Populist individuals with their own ideals, but not specifically designed to be the precursors of the Bolsheviks. Among these positive heroes is Nečaev, who is treated sympathetically within the subplot. The man, who for more than forty years had been regarded as a mountebank and an impostor, was now praised as a positive revolutionary figure of the highest importance, the one who already in the opening stages of the movement had pointed the way which the revolution had to take. In the 1920s, this reversal of opinion concerning Nečaev was consequent upon the opening of the archives. As Michael Prawdin has well demonstrated in his monograph, *The Unmentionable Nechaev*, there was scarcely an important Bolshevik periodical which did not print some detail about him, his fate, his teachings or at least reminiscences of him by his contemporaries and followers, some of whom were still alive.²¹

Both books played a key role in raising genuine public interest in Populism, precisely because they for the most part novelized unpublished items formerly belonging to the archives of the Tsarist Secret Police. This archival material, indeed, had come into the hands of the Bolsheviks through the process of normalizing the Russian archives that had been ongoing for six years – first under the management of the Central Committee for the Administration of the Archives (TSKUA), chaired by David B. Rjazanov, and later directed by the Main Archive Administration (Glavarchiv) supervised by the historian Michail N. Pokrovskij.²² Less than six months after the October Revolution, the Tsarist archives had finally been opened and centralized, its several fonds reordered and classified according to European criteria critically applied by Soviet scholars. Gradually its documentation came to be an object of study, since it was being made available to the scientific community thanks to printed sources such as those appearing in the journalistic organs of the ISTPART. What had served until the eve of the Revolution as an exclusive storage site of the Tsarist administrative documentation was afterwards gradually transformed into an institution for the production of history: the aim was to find in the recent past living traces of a bloody fight against despotism, demonstrating that the October Revolution had been the final stage of a long-term process in search of its 19th century roots. This aspect is strongly reflected in the seventh of the eight sections into which the newly founded Soviet State archives (Gosarchiv RSFSR) were organized,²³ entitled Section of the Historical Archives of the Revolution. It contained documents of various types (including illegal literature, personal dossiers with biographies, and memoirs of the political prisoners, together with the Acts of the judicial inquiries), which had been either produced by or seized from the dissenters arrested by the Tsarist Secret Police.²⁴

What indeed distinguished this archival reform from the previous European ones was the tendency to enhance a piece by claiming for its absolute truth, in order to facilitate the politicization of the masses. Bolsheviks would attempt to retain, preserve and celebrate the “collective memories”²⁵ of revolt, contained in the documents of the Section of the Historical Archives of the Revolution, as part of a political memory under construction in many cultural spheres. There are extensive studies supporting such a thesis.²⁶ Here I have attempted to show that as far as the case of *The Palace and the Fortress* is concerned, all those who took advantage of the archival reform, whether the historian, the novelist, the screen-writer, the film-maker, or the Party itself, did so to pursue and realize their own particular ends. The Party funded the film substantially in order to transmit to a large public an image of Populism that would redound to their own credit. Ivanovskij, through the medium of film, dramatized and exalted the account that Ščëgolev gave, by incorporating the archival material he had by hand, into a pre-planned scheme for attaining a certain cinematic result, namely the martyrdom of the populist hero set in an historical context revealed publicly for the first time, as he was in charge of the Seventh Section. However, neither Ščëgolev nor Ivanovskij even attempted to satisfy the political purpose of the Bolsheviks, since they did not insert into the melodrama any connection – whether visual, such as a flash-forward to the 1917 Revolution, or conceptual, such as a propaganda caption – between the glorious fight of the *Narodnaja Volja* and the recent uprising of the Bolshevik Party, such as happens for example in the propaganda feature film *Veterans of the Russian Revolution* (*Veterany russkoj revoliucii*, Semën Posel’skij, 1924) screened in the same year. Given this argument, I can come to the conclusion that in *The Palace and the Fortress* the heroism of the populists rests upon their unique passionate tragedy as the idealists and revolutionaries of their day, without any overt parallelism with the Soviet present.

- 1 Among a number of historians (John Barber, Marc Ferro, Maria Ferretti) who in their works have paid attention to the role of history in the newly founded Soviet regime, Frederick C. Corney draws on a wide range of sources – archives, published works, films – to explore the potent foundation narrative of Russia’s Great October Socialist Revolution. See Frederick C. Corney, *Telling October. Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution*, Cornell University Press, London 2004. In 1920 a Commission was founded in the RSFSR for the gathering, processing and editing of the materials concerning the history of the story of the October Revolution and of the Communist Party (ISTPART). See Tat’jana Chorchordina, *Centralisacija upravljenija archivnym delom (sentjabr’ 1920-1928 g.)*, in Id., *Istorija i Archivy*, Rossiskij Gosudarstvennyj Gumanitarnyj Universitet, Moscow 1994, pp. 90-142.
- 2 The Decembrists were a small group of Russian conspirators, who led an unsuccessful uprising to obtain a Constitution by persuading troops in St. Petersburg to refuse to take an oath of loyalty to Nicholas I on 14 December (26 December, New Style) 1825. Many of them were from the nobility and had a military background, some even having served as officers in Europe during and after the Napoleonic campaign.
- 3 The secret Society of United Slavs was established at the beginning of 1823 in Novgograd Volinskij by the officers Andrej and Petro Borisov and the Polish revolutionary J. Lubliński. One of the main immediate aims of this society was to demolish serfdom and overthrow Tsarist despotism in Russia. A large part of the Society took active part the Decembrist uprising led by the Černigov regiment on 29 December (10 January, New Style)-3 December (15 January, New Style) 1826, and most of them were then sentenced by the Tsarist court to hard labor in Siberia. See Hugh Seton-Watson, *Storia dell’impero russo (1801-1917)*, Einaudi, Torino 1971, pp. 171-172.
- 4 Cfr. V.V. Zverev, *Russkoe narodničestvo. Učebnoe posobie*, RAGS, Moscow 2009, pp. 5-31; Franco Venturi, *Il populismo russo*, Einaudi, Torino 1972, vol. 1, pp. VII-CXII.

- 5 Naum Klejman, K.B. Levina (eds.), *Bronenosec Potëmkin*, Iskusstvo, Moscow 1969, pp. 46-54.
- 6 The People's Will was the most radical of the two groups that were born in 1879 of a split inside the populist party Zemlja i Volja [Land and Freedom]. The political aim of this organisation was to eliminate the autocracy and establish in Russia a government of the people. After some of its members assassinated Alexander II in 1881, the organisation disintegrated due to Tsarist repression.
- 7 Denise J. Youngblood, "History on Film: the historical melodrama in early Soviet cinema," in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1991, p. 174.
- 8 *Idem*, pp. 175-176.
- 9 Boris Gusman, "Dvorets i krepost," in *Pravda*, 16 February 1924, no. 38, p. 6.
- 10 L. Nikulin, "Dvorets i krepost' i sovetskoe kino," in *Izvestja*, 20 February 1924, no. 42; Ju. S., "Krupnoe dostizhenie našego kino," in *Izvestja*, 12 February 1924, no. 35, p. 6. See also V. Vladimirov, "Budut fil'my (Po povodu kartiny Sevzapkino dvorets i krepost')," in *Chudožnik i zritel'*, nos. 2-3, February-March 1924, pp. 132-134. Concerning the remarks expressed by the representatives of Sevzapkino on the screenplay of the film, see the original documents at the Institute of Russian Literature (Puškin House), Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg (IRLI), f. 627, op. 3, d. 61, ll. 27-28.
- 11 This epithet had a rather wide resonance in the press thanks to the article of A.S. Prugavina, "Tainstvennyj uznik," in *Tovariš*, 13 May 1907, in which the author called for contributors to shed light on the dossier of this unidentified prisoner
- 12 This synopsis corresponds to the subject of the film *The Palace and the Fortress* as it is presented in the new edition of the film released in 1937 and whose 35mm print is available for screening at the Russian State Film Archive (Gosfil'mofond).
- 13 Anna Tamarčenko, "Primečanija," in Ol'ga Forš, *Sobranie Sočinenij*, Gos. Izd. Chudožestvennaja Literatura, Moscow 1962, vol. 1, pp. 319, 329.
- 14 For her novel Forš studied both original items from the archive and secondary literature on the story of Karakozov. See Anna Tamarčenko, "Pervyj istoričeskij roman," in *Ol'ga Forš, Sovetskij Pisatel'*, Leningrado 1974, pp. 262-263.
- 15 Ol'ga Forš, "Odety kamnem," in *Id.*, *Sobranie Sočinenij*, cit., p. 39.
- 16 *Idem*, pp. 39-40.
- 17 See the paragraph dealing with the trial against Karakozov for having made an attempt on the life of the Tsar, in Ol'ga Forš, "Odety kamnem," cit., pp. 260-266.
- 18 On this specific topic concerning an aspect of the lives of the populists see James H. Billington, *Mikhailovsky and Russian Populism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1958, pp. 133-185.
- 19 Jurij Emeljanov, *P.E. Ščëgolev – istorik russkogo revoljucionnogo dviženija*, Nauka, Moscow 1990, p. 58.
- 20 See Aleksandr Ivanovskij, *Vospominania kinorežissëra*, Iskusstvo, Moscow 1967, p. 177; Jurij N. Emeljanov, *P.E. Ščëgolev – istorik russkogo revoljucionnogo dviženija*, cit., pp. 245-246. For an introduction to the ample literature produced by Ščëgolev see A.G. Cherešnja, *Ob archivnom nasledii P.E. Ščëgoleva*, in *Arheografičeskii ežegodnik za 1979*, Nauka, Moscow 1981, pp. 284-291.
- 21 Michael Prawdın, *The Unmentionable Nechaev*, Roy Publishers, New York 1961, pp. 13-22.
- 22 Tat'jana Chorchordina, *Istorija i Archivy*, cit., pp. 1-142.
- 23 Jurij Emeljanov, *P.E. Ščëgolev – istorik russkogo revoljucionnogo dviženija*, cit., p. 33.
- 24 Tat'jana Chorchordina, *Istorija i Archivy*, cit., pp. 70-71.
- 25 In the interwar years, Maurice Halbwachs introduced the expression "collective memory" to explain how each group ceaselessly selected and reorganised the images of the past, interpreting it in relation to the predominating interests and projects of the present. See Maurice Halbwachs, *La Mémoire collective*, PUF, Paris 1950; see also Gérard Namer, *Mémoire et société*, Klincksieck, Paris 1987.
- 26 For an introduction to the studies on the reform of the Russian archives, see Antonella Salomoni, "Révolution russe et les archives. Un savoir historique d'état: les archives soviétiques," in *Annales, Histoire, Science Sociales*, vol. 1, no. 5, 1995, pp. 3-10.