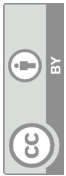




From Moscow to Mainstream. The Soviet Quest for Cinematic Influence in the US

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The distribution of Soviet films in the United States began in 1926 with the screening of Eisenstein's *Potemkin*, managed by Amkino, a company registered in the U.S. but closely aligned with the Soviet government's Sovexportfilm agency. Amkino facilitated the circulation of Soviet films, documentaries, and newsreels, targeting Russian-speaking audiences and American communist sympathisers. This initiative was part of the USSR's broader strategy to spread communist ideology globally by directly engaging with the masses.

Renamed Artkino in 1940, the company sought to penetrate the American film market, which was largely dominated by Hollywood studios until 1948. This essay examines the history of Amkino/Artkino and its role in distributing Soviet films in the U.S. from its origins through the early Cold War, a process that remained on the fringes of the industry. The study also explores the company's decline following the 1958 U.S.-Soviet cultural exchange agreement and the death of its president in 1960. By then, Soviet efforts had shifted towards engaging with the Motion Picture Association of America, having lost faith in Artkino's abilities to access major Hollywood theatres.

Drawing on archival materials from the Artkino collection at the Berkeley Film Archive, the Russian State Archive for Literature and Art (RGALI) and other sources, this research highlights Soviet attempts to challenge Hollywood's dominance and gain access to mainstream American cinema.

INTRODUCTION

Following the October Revolution of 1917, the reorganization of what would, within a few years, officially become the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics had an inevitable impact on the cultural sphere of the nascent country. Indeed, if Lenin—cited by Lunacharsky, the People's Commissar for Education—described cinema as “the most important of the arts,” it was undoubtedly because he recognized its power to reach the masses (Kenez 1985). Through substantial investments by the emerging government and as demonstrated during the civil war (Taylor 1971), cinema proved to be a potent means of communication, capable of penetrating even the most remote areas of that vast, forming state.

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In terms of cinematic internal policy, the post-revolutionary period required not only the reorganisation of industrial infrastructure but also a redefinition of the artistic medium itself. A deliberate effort emerged to distance the populace from pre-revolutionary cinematic tastes—what Lev Kuleshov, in the inaugural issue of the revolutionary film studies journal *Kino-Fot*, termed the American taste, or *amerikanshchina* (Youngblood 1992). The goal was to cultivate a new kind of viewer; the “new Soviet man”, or more precisely, a new Soviet spectator, whose cultural preferences would shift away from “bourgeois entertainment” toward collective, proletarian narratives (Pisu 2018)—a transformation that later evolved and solidified with the implementation of Stalin’s Socialist Realism policies in the 1930s.

On the international front, while the domestic policies led to a systematic purge of Western-origin films from state cinemas (Youngblood 1991), the new regime also recognized the necessity of establishing itself as a prominent cultural epicentre—both within Europe and on the global stage. The USSR aimed to present itself as an ideological bastion of world communism, with the hope of extending its political influence across nations (Gilburd 2018). These efforts expanded—with different degrees of success—from Soviet-aligned Europe to more hostile environments—significantly, also to the US.

While scholarship has extensively charted Hollywood’s influence within the USSR and across the Cold War landscape (e.g., Shaw 2007; Zhuk 2014), the reverse flow—the circulation and reception of Soviet films in the US—remains comparatively underexplored. Recent studies have emphasized the need to reassess Cold War cinema from a transnational perspective, moving beyond an exclusive focus on national cinemas interpreted only as passive recipients within the spheres of influence of the two superpowers (Buffet 2017), and instead reclaiming the agency of national film cultures. Research has concentrated on institutional histories, with the aim of unveiling the Soviet cinematic industry’s internal functioning (Belodubrovskaya 2017; Tcherneva 2018), as well as international dynamics (Lovejoy & Pajala 2022). Other studies have examined independent personalities and organisations that operated across the transnational arena and played an integral part in the cultural Cold War, revisiting not only Europe but also the Global South (Salazkina 2023, Pisu et al. 2025). It is within this evolving scholarly debate, which has increasingly underscored these aspects, that the present article positions itself.

This article examines the Soviet attempt to export its films to the United States—and to establish a cinematic presence there—through the history of Amkino/Artkino, the dedicated distributor active from 1926 into the 1960s. Building on James Krukones’s foundational study *The Unspooling of Artkino* (2009), which reconstructs the company’s activities from 1940 onward, the article extends the timeline back to its origins as Amkino (1926–1940) and foregrounds the US side of Soviet film export history. Using new sources from the Artkino Collection at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America Digital Archive (Flinders), and contemporary mainstream and trade press (e.g., *The New York Times*, *Motion*

Picture Herald), it sheds light on underexplored mechanisms, intermediaries, and institutional logics that structured the circulation of Soviet features, documentaries, and newsreels in the US. The article argues that Artkino provides a crucial lens on Soviet export policy; despite its marginal market share within an industry dominated by Hollywood's studio oligopoly, at least until the 1948 Paramount antitrust decision (McDonald et al. 2019), the company sought to circumvent that system by targeting a network of independent venues, workers' circles, and Russian-speaking communities. Reconstructing this parallel distribution economy brings further clarity on how the USSR pursued cinematic influence in the US outside—and before—the official exchange framework consolidated with the 1958 Lacy-Zarubin Agreement (Kozovoi 2016; Cambi 2017).

THE ORIGINS OF ARTKINO: AMKINO CORPORATION (1926-1940)

Distributing media abroad—and particularly in the United States—proved to be a significant challenge for the newly established Soviet Union. In the US, foreign cinematic policies were closely monitored by local observers, and Soviet productions faced intense scrutiny. Recognising both the exceptionally high percentage of moviegoers in the USSR and the substantial political—and thus propagandistic—power of cinema over the local population, the circulation of Soviet films in America was subsequently reported as either unappealing to Hollywood audiences or as overt Bolshevik propaganda to be avoided (FD 1927, 949-50).

The Soviet agency responsible for film export with foreign countries in the early 1920s was Sovkino, which had been recognised by the US government since its establishment in 1924 (NYT 1924). Its representative on American soil was Leon Zamkovoy, who had already been active in the US as a director since the mid-1910s. Recognizing the Soviet audience's interest in the American market, he envisioned the production of Hollywood films specifically tailored for Soviet viewers, which he sought to achieve by sending US film industry delegations to Russia "to understand the Russian taste" (NYT 1926b).

Furthermore, he encouraged the production of Hollywood films on Soviet soil—particularly, needless to say, those set in Russia. However, his most challenging task was indeed promoting the dissemination of Soviet pictures in the US, which he attempted by forging relationships with local distributors. To this end, the Amkino Corporation (short for *Amerikanskoe Kino*, "American Cinema") was founded in 1926, of which Zamkovoy became the first president. Amkino was registered as a subsidiary of Amtorg (short for *Amerikanskaya Torgovlya*, "American Trade"), the first trade representation of the Soviet Union in the United States, active since 1924. Throughout its history, Artkino served as the main distributor of Soviet films in the US, establishing a network of relationships with smaller theatres, initially in the New York area, to distribute films sidelining the Hollywood industry.

The first Soviet picture distributed in the US, whose case was closely followed by the American press, was Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potëmkin* (*Bronenosets Potëmkin*, 1925), distributed directly by Amkino at the end of 1926, passing through the New York Censor Office on September 1, 1926, which ordered a partial editing of the picture, such as the removal of violent shots and sequences.¹ The movie, albeit receiving positive reviews from American critics, was considered by US observers,² as well as the press, to have no entertainment potential whatsoever (FD 1926; see also NYT 1926a), and it was expected that interest in the film would quickly wane.

Besides feature films, Amkino's catalogue included short documentaries, usually no longer than three reels, depicting diverse aspects of Soviet life. Educational titles addressed agriculture, art, education, geography, history, health and hygiene, industry, and science.³ While screenings were occasionally noted in *The New York Times*, they were far more frequently advertised in Communist-oriented outlets such as *The Daily Worker* (DW 1932), with the ambition of attracting at least a politically sympathetic audience.

Thus, Amkino established itself within the US film industry as a small, independent enterprise, operating outside the circuit of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA)—the association encompassing the major Hollywood studios, namely the "Big Five" (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Paramount Pictures, RKO Pictures, Warner Brothers, and Twentieth Century Fox) and the "Little Three" (Columbia Pictures, United Artists, and Universal Pictures). As is well-known, the Hollywood studios maintained an oligopoly over American theatres—many of which were owned by the studios themselves—until the landmark 1948 *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.* decision, in which the Supreme Court ruled against the eight studios and compelled them to divest their theatre holdings (Borneman 1985). Amkino's initial main issue, therefore, was securing theatres to showcase its films and circumvent Hollywood's oligopoly. In addition to privately held screenings in workers' circles and independent venues, among the main theatres that distributed Amkino's films in the New York area were the Acme Theatre, the Cameo—which would later become an erotic film cinema after Artkino's activities ended—the Eighth Street Playhouse, the Europa Theatre, the Roxy Theatre, and the Stanley Theatre. The number of venues showing Soviet films in the US grew exponentially in subsequent years,

1 "This Is a Summary of the Eliminations Required in Potemkin for Showing in New York," September 1, 1926, Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America Digital Archive, Record ID: 295.

https://funders.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/61FUL_INST/6lrc5h/alma997361456801771

2 "This, and a Follow-up Letter Written the Following Day, Express Concern about the Admission of Russian Films to the US," September 22, 1926, Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America Digital Archive, Record ID: 296.

https://funders.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/61FUL_INST/6lrc5h/alma997361456301771

3 Educational Film Subject Catalogue. Artkino Fund. Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA).

reaching the highest number of 450 in 1937-38, allegedly the peak of Soviet film popularity in the US, with distribution extending to Los Angeles (Babitsky 1955). From 1935, Amkino's market had already expanded to Canada, Mexico, and South America (FD 1937, 1170-1171), where distribution was supported by other companies, such as Worldkino Corporation.⁴

By the mid-1930s, eventually, after about ten years of activity, Amkino had finally set foot in the American market. The company released several films during these years, resulting from greater production efforts by Soviet studios, including the popular biopic *Chapaiev* by the Vasilev brothers (*Chapaev*, 1934) and the renowned successes *Lenin in October* by Mikhail Romm (*Lenin v Oktyabre*, 1937), *Alexander Nevsky* by Sergei Eisenstein (*Aleksandr Nevskiy*, 1938), *Lenin in 1918* by Mikhail Romm (*Lenin v 1918 Godu*, 1939), and *Professor Mamlock* (1938), directed by Herbert Rappaport and Adolf Minkin.⁵

Amkino experienced a series of rapid changes of heads throughout its history. Zamkovoy, the first president appointed at the company's founding, was succeeded in 1927 by Leon Monosson (MPW 1927), who oversaw the production of Sergei Eisenstein's film *¡Que viva México!* (1931). Following the well-known difficulties with the film's production (MPH 1931), Monosson was later removed in 1931 and replaced by Viktor Smirnov, allegedly "a lackey of Shumyatsky" (Gottesman & Geduld 1970), the new head of the Soviet film industry and a strict adherent to Stalin's film policies. Smirnov was then replaced in 1934 by Vladimir Verlinskiy, who led the company almost until its unexpected dissolution; in 1939, a severe setback struck the company just when stability seemed assured, ultimately leading to its sudden closure.

In order to understand the causes behind Amkino's closure, it is crucial to focus on the period leading up to its termination in February 1940. The reasons behind it can be traced both to internal conditions within the Soviet Union and to changes in US-USSR relations. Indeed, Soviet film production had evolved significantly since Amkino's founding, starting with the All-Union Conference on Cinema Affairs of the Communist Party of the USSR in 1928, followed by the collectivization of cinematic means of production, and Shumyatsky's appointment as head of the Soviet film industry in 1930. Under Shumyatsky's leadership, the enforcement of Socialist Realism in cinema intensified, as seen in the All-Union Creative Conference of Workers in Soviet Cinematography in 1935. The initial reorganization of the film industry had yielded positive results, with a rapid improvement in production; before the revolution, there had been only 1,412 theatres in the territory, but by 1928 that number had grown fivefold, serving an annual audience of 200 million people. Additionally, the number of feature films released had increased from 12 in the years 1922-23 to over ten times that

4 "Contract for the Selling of Distribution Rights of the Film 'Jewish Luck' to Worldkino Corporation for US, Canada, Central America and Cuba," May 28, 1935, Artkino Collection. Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA).

5 Amkino Film Releases (Undated). Artkino Collection. Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA).

figure in 1926-27 (Taylor 1986). However, the ideological tightening of the late 1930s heavily impacted film production, consequently reducing the number of Soviet films that could be distributed in the US.

Amkino's crisis was primarily driven by the shifting political relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, rather than by a decline in the availability of suitable films for American distribution. Prior to the Stalin-Hitler Pact, Amkino had cultivated a stable audience, composed both of Russian-speaking *émigrés* and local viewers drawn to the USSR for political or other reasons. However, the signing of the non-aggression treaty during World War II had a profound impact on American public opinion, leading to a decline in attendance at theatres that had established themselves as Amkino's key exhibitors. A particularly striking example of this backlash appeared in *The New York Times* on September 24, 1939, which openly denounced the company. The article alleged that nine-tenths of Amkino's profits—claimed to be "millions of dollars a year"—were funnelled into the United States to disseminate communist propaganda, suggesting that American audiences were, in effect, financing Soviet ideological influence through their moviegoing habits. These accusations, however, were purely speculative, as Amkino often struggled to generate revenue at all, in fact progressively accumulating debts with the Soviet Union, its sole stakeholder.

Reportedly, the last Amkino film screened at the Cameo was *The Great Dawn*, aka *They Wanted Peace* by Mikheil Chiaureli (*Velikoe Zarevo*, 1938) (NYT 1940b), another exemplary film of advanced Socialist Realism, featuring Mikheil Gelovani as Iosif Stalin.⁶ The film, which was discussed in the American press, accused "Anglo-French imperialists" of obstructing German-Soviet friendship after 1917, retrospectively emphasizing the importance of the new alliance against Western imperialism; as *The New York Times* remarked on January 8, 1940, "It's odd what a pact will do". Although the company's closure was considered final by the American press, its story, however, was far from over.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF ARTKINO (1941-1945)

It is clear that the Soviet interest in maintaining a US outpost for film outreach was stronger than bankruptcy, as Artkino was founded only a month after Amkino's closure, at the same address (NYT 1940c). Its first release was a film with a particularly evocative title in its English-language distribution: *The Great Beginning* by Iosif Kheifits and Aleksandr Zarkhi (*Chlen pravitelstva*, 1939) (MPH 1940). However, the first year was especially tough for Artkino, with the company releasing only two films (Krukones 2009).

Amkino had previously been led exclusively by Soviet directors, with its last president, Verlinskiy, eventually replaced by his assistant, Nicholas Napoli (MPH 1935)—the first American to assume leadership of the company. In the

⁶ *The Great Dawn* was the first film in which Gelovani starred as the Soviet dictator, marking the beginning of his impersonation career.

early stages of Artkino's direction, Napoli could not have anticipated the drastic shift in cinematic relations between the United States and the Soviet Union that would soon unfold with the outbreak of World War II and the US entry into the Allied forces following the attack on Pearl Harbor. Just over a year after Artkino's founding, Napoli found himself overseeing what was likely the company's most prolific period. As Hollywood, operating under State Department directives, and Soviet studios documented the war effort, a cultural alliance emerged. This period of exchange temporarily cast the former political adversaries in a favourable light, setting aside ideological divisions to unite against Nazi-Fascism. During these years, Napoli's company effectively served as the sole bridge between the two cinematic spheres.

Starting in 1941, with Germany's attack on the USSR on June 22, the importation of Soviet films to the United States increased; in the six months separating the USSR's entry into the war and the Japanese attack on the United States on December 7, 1941, 12 feature films, 16 short films, and 40,000 feet of newsreels on the Soviet-Nazi war were sent from Russia to the United States. The State Department's shift in perspective was evident; whereas Zamkovoy's earlier attempts to distribute Soviet films in the US had been closely monitored and caused concern, by the end of 1942 the distribution of Soviet war newsreels was managed so that they could be seen by the American public shortly after being filmed, with distribution within a month or six weeks at most. The films were transported swiftly by air, from Moscow to London and then to New York for theatrical distribution (MPH 1942c). These materials, however, exclusively focused on the Soviet war effort; earlier newsreels were out of the distribution circuit. Indeed, in an interview published on the *Motion Picture Herald* Napoli stated that the type of films distributed by Artkino from June 22 were "acceptable to American audiences. They are entertainment films and have patriotic and war-defence themes which are of interest to Americans at this time" (MPH 1941). He further added that by 1942 Artkino had widely extended its distribution reach, operating in cities such as Washington, New York, Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, New Orleans, Portland, San Francisco, and other cities in Texas and Florida, reaching areas in the southern United States where they had never been shown before.

Among the films that reached American shores during this period, besides the newsreels, were entertainment films, sent to the US as an attempt to approach the new Western ally with non-political products, taking advantage of the current favourable climate. An example is the musical comedy *Musical Story* by Aleksandr Ivanovsky and Gerbert Rappaport (*Muzykal'naya Istoriya*, 1940), whose plot revolves around a taxi driver who dreams of becoming an opera singer. The majority of films, anyhow, focused on supporting the war effort, such as the documentary *One Day in Soviet Russia* by Roman Karmen and Mikhail Slutsky (*Den' Novogo Mira*, 1941), which reportedly, according to Napoli, was particularly successful and played for three weeks at the Esquire Theatre in Los Angeles. Fiction films with war-related themes included biopics like *Wings*

of victory by Mikhail Kalatozov (*Valerily Chkalov*, 1941),⁷ centred on a Red Army test pilot, awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union, who tragically died in 1938 while piloting a military aircraft prototype. Furthermore, biopics of historical figures aimed at boosting the local population's morale by glorifying Russian honour and military strength also reached US theatres, such as *General Suvorov* by Vsevolod Pudovkin and Mikhail Doller (*General Suvorov*, 1941), centred on the eponymous general of the Russian Empire. Moreover, among the fiction films worth noting is *The Girl from Leningrad* by Viktor Eisymont (*Frontovye Podrugii*, 1941), the story, set during the Finnish war, of three young women working for the Soviet Red Cross. After traveling to Hollywood in 1942 to establish contacts with the major studios,⁸ Napoli secured the rights for a remake, which was distributed in 1943 by United Artists under the title *Three Russian Girls*, directed by Fëdor Ozep and Henry S. Kesler. The setting of the movie was changed to the 1941 Battle of Stalingrad, where the protagonist—Natasha, portrayed by Anna Stern and played by Zoya Fëdorova in the Soviet original—is depicted as a volunteer nurse aiding the allied forces.

In February 1942, Soviet film distribution in the US increased by 60%, involving studios like Warner Bros. that booked the documentary *One Day in Soviet Russia* at the Capitol Theatre in Philadelphia, where it played for two weeks. Similarly, *The Girl from Leningrad* set a record at the Stanley Theatre, the historic Amkino/Artkino cinema in New York, running for eleven weeks (MPH 1942b) and even surpassing *Ciapaiev*, which had held the record at the Cameo Theatre in 1935 (MPH 1942a). February 1942 saw a 500% distribution increase compared to the same month the previous year (FD 1942). This growing demand for Soviet films also extended to 16mm prints, which rose from a low of 300 in 1940 to 4,000 in 1942, as reported by Thomas Brandon, owner of Brandon Films, a non-theatrical distributor of Soviet films in the US since 1936. Brandon Films initially contracted with Amkino, distributing their films in small art theatres that showcased foreign or independent films, as well as in clubs, schools, and private venues. This partnership peaked with Artkino, allowing the films to reach an audience of 1.3 million in 1943; the demand grew so high that Brandon had to re-release classic Soviet films, which had already been in their catalogue for several years (NYT 1944).

The war years marked an undoubtedly prosperous period for Artkino. With the conflict's end and the Allies' victory over Nazi Germany, Napoli viewed the continuation of collaboration and film exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union as a tangible possibility, approaching the future with optimism. Despite the setback caused by Roosevelt's death and the subsequent tightening of the foreign policies toward the USSR under President Harry Truman, the end of 1945 and the beginning of 1946 were marked by enthusiastic positivity from the president of Artkino regarding the future of his company. In March 1946, he

⁷ It is, once again, a film featuring Mikheil Gelovani as Iosif Stalin.

⁸ Artkino Press Release, May 7, 1942. Artkino Collection. Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA).

returned from a six-week trip to the USSR with good news; the end of the war had brought, in Napoli's words, a "renaissance in Soviet film production", which was evident both in the continued production of films in the USSR, despite the severe shortage of resources due to wartime bombings, and in the intention to produce between 50 and 60 films in 1946. Among these pictures was the recently completed second part of Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (*Ivan Groznyi*, 1958), which Napoli praised for its technical qualities. He also noted the emergence of new technologies, such as the invention of the Stereokino by Soviet engineer Semyon Ivanov, a multi-lens filming system that added greater depth and three-dimensionality to shots (DW 1946). In his personal writings, Napoli, at the end of his fruitful trip to Russia concluded: "I left Moscow with the feeling that the Soviet film industry has come out of this war with undiminished vitality and creative power. The country that gave the world such masterpieces as *Potemkin*, *Storm Over Asia*, *Road to Life*, and *Ciapaiev* cannot take a back seat in the Cinema of Tomorrow".⁹ Unaware that he was already standing on the threshold of the Cold War, Napoli seemed to have complete faith in a positive future for his company.

DECLINE AND BANKRUPTCY (1946-1960S)

After the end of World War II, Napoli's expectations were indeed not met. Notoriously, with the change in direction under the rise of President Truman following Roosevelt's death in 1945, US foreign policy shifted its focus from identifying Nazi Germany as the enemy to regarding the Soviet Union—and, consequently, the spread of Communist ideology in America—as the principal threat to the US population, thus marking the return of the Red Scare, reminiscent of the pre-war years.

It is important to note, however, that US suspicion toward Artkino as a vessel for Communism in America had never been entirely dispelled. The wartime period, which coincided with the company's peak success, also saw Nicholas Napoli come under FBI scrutiny as part of the COMRAP ("Comintern Apparatus") investigation. This inquiry, which began in 1943 and was allegedly triggered by an anonymous letter in Russian sent to FBI headquarters, accused more than ten Soviet officials residing legally in the US of acting as communist spies. The investigation aimed to probe the connections between the Soviet government, the Comintern, and the Communist Party USA in order to safeguard national security. Although Napoli was never formally charged as a spy, his name was mentioned in the investigation reports.¹⁰

Napoli's optimism regarding the future of Soviet cinema in the US was further undermined by the state of the Soviet film industry itself. Artkino's president could not have anticipated that the immediate postwar years would be charac-

⁹ Nicholas Napoli. Film Notes on a Trip to the Soviet Union (1946?). Artkino Collection. Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA).

¹⁰ Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Comintern Apparatus (COMRAP) FBI Files*, <http://archive.org/details/FBIFileCOMRAP>

terised by the infamous film shortage known as *malokartin'e*—a period during which film production in the last years of Stalin's regime was increasingly subject to censorship, compounded by the slow recovery of the film industry following the devastation of war (Dobrenko 2003). Moreover, as is well known, the second part of Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* — whose production was enthusiastically brought to the US press by Artkino's president—was harshly criticised by the Party at the end of 1946 for its negative portrayal of Ivan IV, equated with a criticism of Stalin's dictatorial figure. The film was eventually released only in 1958, under Khrushchev's de-Stalinization.

However, the officials at Sovexportfilm, perhaps recalling the prosperous years of Artkino during the wartime alliance, continued to hold Napoli and his company in high regard for several years after the war. Artkino remained a key distributor of Soviet films in the US even during the initial negotiations for film exchanges that commenced in 1948 with Eric Johnston, president of the Motion Picture Export Association¹¹ and its European representative Louis Kanturek. These negotiations eventually culminated, albeit with considerable difficulty and prolonged timelines, in the historic 1958 cultural exchange agreement between the two superpowers, known as the Lacy-Zarubin Agreement, which, in the words of Andrei Kozovoi (2016), allowed the Soviet entity to set "a foot in the door" of Hollywood's studio distribution system.

Interestingly, during the prolonged negotiations with the Hollywood studios, Sovexportfilm maintained parallel relationships with both the independent distribution company and the MPEA, ensuring that representatives from the two organisations did not meet. For instance, during Napoli's visit to Moscow in May 1950, Kanturek's visit was postponed to accommodate Artkino's president,¹² who stayed from the 12th to the 30th of the month.¹³

On May 20, during a meeting with Sovexportfilm representatives and their chief accountant, a confidential document was produced outlining the relationship between the two companies. Artkino was registered as a joint-stock company in the US, with all revenues and expenses attributed to Artkino, whose role was to purchase films from Sovexportfilm. Unofficially—yet in reality—Artkino functioned as Sovexportfilm's representative in the US, with all revenues and expenses accounted for by Sovexportfilm, while Artkino's balance sheet reflected Sovexportfilm funds as working capital. Indeed, Artkino's only stakeholder was the Soviet Union. By January 1, 1950, the company had accumulated a debt of \$55,683.98 to Sovexportfilm, based on the available funds in its US bank accounts, and had recorded an overall loss of \$23,292.39. The May 20 meeting resolved that the debt should gradually decrease to between \$30,000 and \$35,000 through transfers to

11 The Motion Picture Export Association (MPEA) was established in the immediate aftermath of World War II as an entity dedicated to the exportation of films by the Motion Pictures Association of America (MPAA), itself an evolution of the MPPDA under the reorganization implemented by the newly appointed president Eric Johnston, formerly the president of the United States Chamber of Commerce. See Jarvie (1990, 277–288).

12 RGALI f. 2456, op. 4, ed. khr. 267, l. 11.

13 RGALI f. 2456, op. 4, ed. khr. 268, l. 6.

Moscow over the following quarters, while the loss should be liquidated and ultimately converted into a modest profit.¹⁴ This resolution—eliminating Artkino's losses and its debt to Sovexportfilm—underscores the continued confidence that the Soviet entity placed in Napoli's company during the postwar years.

Furthermore, during that same meeting, Napoli was shown a new batch of films for distribution in the US. In addition to various documentary, scientific, and animated titles, the fiction films included the two parts of *The Fall of Berlin* by Mikheil Chiaureli (*Padenie Berlina*, 1949),¹⁵ *Conspiracy of the Doomed* by Mikhail Kalatozov (*Zagovor Obrechennykh*, 1950), *Cossacks of the Kuban* by Ivan Pyr'ev (*Kubanskie Kazaki*, 1950), *The Faraway Bride* by Evgeniy Ivanov-Barkov (*Dalëkaya Nevesta*, 1948), by *The Russian Question* Mikhail Romm (*Russkiy Vopros*, 1947), and *Alexander Popov* by Herbert Rappaport (*Aleksandr Popov*, 1949).¹⁶ Demonstrating Napoli's significant influence in the film selection phase, a Sovexportfilm document detailed all the cuts recommended by the Artkino president to be made in the Soviet studios before exporting the film to the United States.¹⁷

It was only a matter of a few years, however, before Sovexportfilm's dissatisfaction became evident. Artkino's business seemed unable to maintain the standards of the war years, and Soviet cultural diplomacy was eager to spread its films in what were considered top-tier theatres. This possibility appeared more feasible with Khrushchev's rise in 1956 and his policies of "peaceful co-existence" with the West. The decline of the company, which existed on paper until the 1980s but lost relevance in the American landscape by the mid-1960s, was therefore due to a combination of factors. The Lacy-Zarubin Agreement in 1958 formally established Sovexportfilm's exclusive dealings with the studios represented by the MPEA, but Sovexportfilm increasingly looked beyond, losing confidence in Napoli and seeking to cover the independent market as well. One notable instance involved J. Jay Frankel, the founder of the distribution company MJP Enterprises. After successfully obtaining the feature animated film *The Snow Queen* (*Snezhnaya Korolëva*) from Soyuzmultfilm in 1957 and selling it to Universal for distribution in US theatres, Frankel gained favour with Sovexportfilm. At just 21 years old, he signed a contract in 1959 to sell four American films coming from the circuits of three major Hollywood studios: the romantic comedy *Knock on Wood* by Melvin Frank and Norman Panama (1954), distributed by Paramount Pictures; *Little Boy Lost* by George Seaton (1953), a drama starring Bing Crosby set during World War II; the drama *The Brave One* by Irving Rapper

14 RGALI f. 2456, op. 4, ed. khr. 268, l. 1.

15 Despite the film's prominent portrayal of Stalin during a period of strained US-USSR relations, *Padenie Berlina* was released at the Stanley Theatre in the summer of 1952 with English superimposed titles. *The New York Times* described it as a World War II film focused on the "capitulation of the German capital" (NYT 1952).

16 *Spisok fil'mov, pokazannykh Gospodinu Napoli* ("List of films shown to Mr. Napoli"). RGALI f. 2456, op. 4, ed. khr. 268, l. 9.

17 *Perechen' stsen i kadrov* ("List of scenes and shots"). RGALI f. 2456, op. 4, ed. khr. 268, l. 10.

(1956), and a fourth one to be purchased from Warner Bros., yet to be specified (NYT 1960). The sale produced an overall revenue of \$254,000.

Even more impressively, the following year, Frankel acquired the distribution rights¹⁸ for *Ballad of a Soldier* (*Ballada o Soldate*, 1959) by Grigory Chukhray, a “thaw film” which was acclaimed in the US for its critique of Stalin’s regime. The film won the Special Jury Prize at the 1960 Cannes Film Festival, garnered awards at the San Francisco Film Festival, and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay in 1961. By 1962, the year of Nicholas Napoli’s death, Frankel reportedly concluded additional deals with the USSR for nine more films (NYT 1961).

Sovexportfilm’s confidence in MJP Enterprises, and later in Frankel’s second company, Accord International Corporation, persisted throughout much of the 1960s. Meanwhile, Artkino—now managed by the new president Rosa Madell from 1962 until her own death in 1970—sparsely continued its activities, having lost its monopoly over the Soviet pictures. Indeed, the surge in film production during the Thaw years included not only an increase in quantity, compared to the years of *malokartin’e*, but also an improvement in quality, featuring themes that reflected the greater artistic freedom gained under Khrushchev’s policies. These new films were considered more appealing to US audiences and attracted the interest of more independent American distributors, who saw business opportunities in establishing contacts with Sovexportfilm, Soviet studios, and their directors, to release such films in theatres outside the MPEA circuit, or to resell them to the major Hollywood studios, as Frankel had done for *The Snow Queen*. Artkino’s dominance over Soviet film distribution was by then lost, along with the very rationale for the company’s existence. Its activities persisted only sporadically, absorbed into an independent cinema system that became increasingly prominent in the 1960s as Hollywood’s control over exhibitors declined. Artkino itself lingered into the 1980s, but by then the USSR had long since withdrawn its support.

CONCLUSIONS

The history of Amkino/Artkino can be considered unexpectedly long-lived despite the evident challenges encountered during its evolution. However decisively mitigated by the support of the Soviet government and Sovexportfilm, which provided ongoing financial backing to prevent the company’s bankruptcy until interest in its distribution channels waned—supplanted by the historic 1958 agreement with the MPEA/MPAA—the phases of success and decline traversed by the company were primarily shaped by the evolving relations between the United States and the USSR from the latter’s foundation and throughout the harsher years of the Cold War.

However, although the trajectory of Amkino/Artkino reached its zenith during

18 RGALI f. 2914, op. 4, ed. khr. 268, l. 10.

the years of World War II—facilitated by the exceptional temporary alliance between the two superpowers—its role in the cultural relations between the two nations during the Cold War was by no means marginal. The company managed to establish itself right after the inception of the USSR and even maintained its authority during negotiations with the MPEA/MPAA, asserting itself as a key player in the unofficial transnational circulation of Soviet films—to the extent that archival resources indicate it suggested modifications and cuts to pictures prior to their release in the United States, thereby circumventing Hollywood channels at least until the signing of the agreement between Sovexportfilm and the MPAA in 1958.

Thus, the history of this relatively minor distribution network—whose agents were eventually abandoned by the USSR in favour of institutional relations with the US film industry—proves to have played a remarkably significant role in shaping the cinematic relations between the two countries. For nearly four decades, despite the ostensible ideological opposition between the two superpowers, this company effectively facilitated the circulation of Soviet audiovisual productions outside official diplomatic channels. Through its distribution activities, it successfully circumvented Hollywood's hegemony in a context that, first during the pre-war hostilities and later throughout the Cold War, appeared otherwise impenetrable.

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