

David Brandenberger

Interpreting Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible**

Joan Neuberger's book on Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* is something that I've been waiting to read for a long time — about 20 years, to be precise, as it was in 1998 or 1999 that Kevin M. F. Platt and I entered into a long-running debate with Neuberger over how best to understand this film¹. And I'm very pleased to say that it was worth the wait — *This Thing of Darkness* is a tour de force. It's probably the most thought-provoking book I've read in the past five years.

Aside from being original, dynamic and authoritative, Neuberger's book hints at a creative process much like that of her hero, Eisenstein, while at work between 1941 and 1947. First, like Eisenstein, Neuberger appears to have read almost everything available to her on the subject, not only regarding Eisenstein himself, but in regard to both the Stalin period and medieval Muscovy as well. Second, like Eisenstein, Neuberger refused to be rushed and has produced on her own timetable a work of art that that is as beautifully organized, emplotted and written as it is cogently argued and documented. Third, like Eisenstein, Neuberger has whet her audience's appetite for this work by slowly publishing elements of her larger vision of this epic, testing various interpretations while taking care not to release too many spoilers that might ruin the dramatic ending². Fourth, like Eisenstein, Neuberger appears to have come to closely identify with her protagonist,

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becoming personally engaged with what is at its core a lonely, sad and tragic biography. To Neuberger's credit, she hasn't tried to conceal this emotional engagement, frequently framing her commentary in the first person and often appealing directly to the reader. Although I've worked on Eisenstein and *Ivan the Terrible* for almost as long as Neuberger has, and although I would like to think that I know the subject matter pretty well, I'll admit that I found many elements of Neuberger's commentary to be not intellectually compelling, but personally moving as well.

Having waxed rhapsodic about Neuberger's art, let me now say something about her Eisenstein. In many ways, Neuberger's book persuades me that I've been thinking about Eisenstein rather simplistically for the past 20 years. Neuberger challenges me as a Soviet historian (rather than a historian of film, for instance), to accept Eisenstein in all his complexity and exceptionality. This requirement takes me back to 1997–1998, when Platt and I began our work on Eisenstein. At the time, I found Eisenstein and his image in the scholarly literature to be confoundingly hagiographic. I looked in vain across the Soviet cultural scene to identify any member of the creative intelligentsia who was able to match Eisenstein's independence and self-indulgence, resist the demands of authority, conformity and compromise, and yet “die his own death”, as one says in Russian³.

Uncomfortable with the idea of Eisenstein's exceptionality, I've spent years trying to accommodate him within the context of Soviet culture and the arts. Neuberger suggests that such efforts are a fool's errand. Eisenstein stands out in the pages of *This Thing of Darkness* as the quintessential non-conformist — an exception to everything we know about Soviet subjectivity. Neuberger argues that the question of whether Eisenstein was pro-Soviet or anti-Soviet is effectively a reductionist dead end. Eisenstein, she suggests, was an exception — someone who defied categorization, whether by his cinematographer contemporaries or by Stalin himself, for that matter. In Neuberger's analysis, Eisenstein defied what Michel Foucault would call Soviet society's “regime of truth”; he operated outside of what Pierre Bourdieu would call the habitus of the Stalin period⁴.

Perhaps in this case, one can only conclude that it is the exception that proves the rule. I suppose the only consolation that Neuberger's book offers me on this account is that I'm not the only one who has found Eisenstein's behavior perplexing. Eisenstein's own friends and colleagues, it turns out, also regarded him as strangely alien and forever at odds with the Stalin-era's social and professional norms. According to Neuberger, a whole array of members of the Soviet creative intelligentsia, from A. E. Korneichuk and I. E. Grabar to V. I. Mukhina, V. V. Vishnevskii, A. P. Dovzhenko and P. A. Pavlenko, all found Eisenstein's behavior bizarre. In the end, the confusion that these Stalin-era artists experienced in regard to Eisenstein makes me feel better about my own difficulty in understanding him as a product of his times.

If I have any other major reservations about *This Thing of Darkness*, they relate to the book's final chapter on the official reception of *Ivan the Terrible*. Specifically, I am referring to Neuberger's claim that Stalin condemned the second part of the film due to the dictator's heretofore underappreciated dislike of its homoeroticism⁵. Neuberger herself concedes that Stalin presents a paradox in this sense — on one hand, Stalin is revealed by a handful of archival documents to have embraced a set of

sensibilities that today would be labeled “homophobia”. On the other hand, it is well-known that Stalin lived in an almost exclusively homosocial community, characterized by close male relationships, comradeship and an almost total absence of women.

So was Stalin’s reaction to the film governed at least in part by his reaction to its inclusion of homoerotic imagery, subtexts and court practices? Neuberger notes that there are three sources that can inform Stalin’s explosive reaction to *Ivan the Terrible*, pt. 2: I. G. Bolshakov’s reminiscences of Stalin’s dismissal of the film on March 2, 1946, the transcript of Stalin’s speech to the Central Committee Orgburo on August 9, and the incomplete transcript of Eisenstein and N. K. Cherkasov’s summary of their meeting with Stalin, V. M. Molotov and A. A. Zhdanov on February 26, 1947.

Of these sources, Neuberger spends the least time on Bolshakov’s reminiscences, as they are only fragmentary. In her analysis of Stalin’s speech to the Central Committee Orgburo, Neuberger dwells on the terms that Stalin used extemporaneously to denounce Ivan’s personal guard, the oprichniki, whose depiction he objected to. Here, Neuberger views Stalin’s choice of vocabulary — “filth” [паршивец] and “degenerate” [дегенерат] — to be more than just generic terms of abuse. They are, for Neuberger, code words for “homosexual”, despite their proximity to another unrelated insult — “something like the American Ku Klux Klan” — and the fact that both of these terms have many different meanings⁶. In her analysis of the incomplete transcript to Eisenstein and Cherkasov’s discussion with Stalin, Molotov and Zhdanov, Neuberger again draws attention to use of the term “degenerate” and then attempts to tease meaning out of a number of other ambiguous statements, adding that Eisenstein and Cherkasov may have omitted still others from their transcript⁷.

While Neuberger concludes that the extant evidence is ultimately inconclusive, I suppose I disagree. Neuberger’s sources are perfectly clear about the objections that Stalin raised in regard to the film — its historical inaccuracies, its departure from the official line on Ivan as a progressive ruler, its depiction of Ivan as a weak, Hamlet-like character, and its mischaracterization of the oprichnina. I see no reason to conclude that Stalin either hesitated to clearly articulate his objections to the film’s homoeroticism or did so only in coded language. This conclusion is borne out in the sources. Little-known is the fact that there are not just three sources that can inform Stalin’s evaluation of *Ivan the Terrible*, pt. 2 — there are actually five. Like other members of Stalin’s inner circle, Zhdanov carried a little pocket notebook with him within which he graphomaniacally kept a shorthand record of all of his important conversations with Stalin. Predictably, Zhdanov jotted brief records into his notebooks about Stalin’s contributions to the Central Committee Secretariat’s March 5, 1946 resolution on *Ivan the Terrible*, as well as about the dictator’s conversation with Molotov, Eisenstein and Cherkasov on February 26, 1947.

As is fairly well known, the Central Committee Secretariat passed a resolution banning *Ivan the Terrible* at Stalin’s initiative on March 5, 1946, just days after Bolshakov showed the film to the Politburo⁸. This decision set the stage for the better-known Central Committee Orgburo resolution later that August that Neuberger analyzes in her book. Zhdanov turns out to have drafted the March resolution in one of his notebooks — something that he typically did in consultation with Stalin. For

Решение Ста
 ЦК. 43

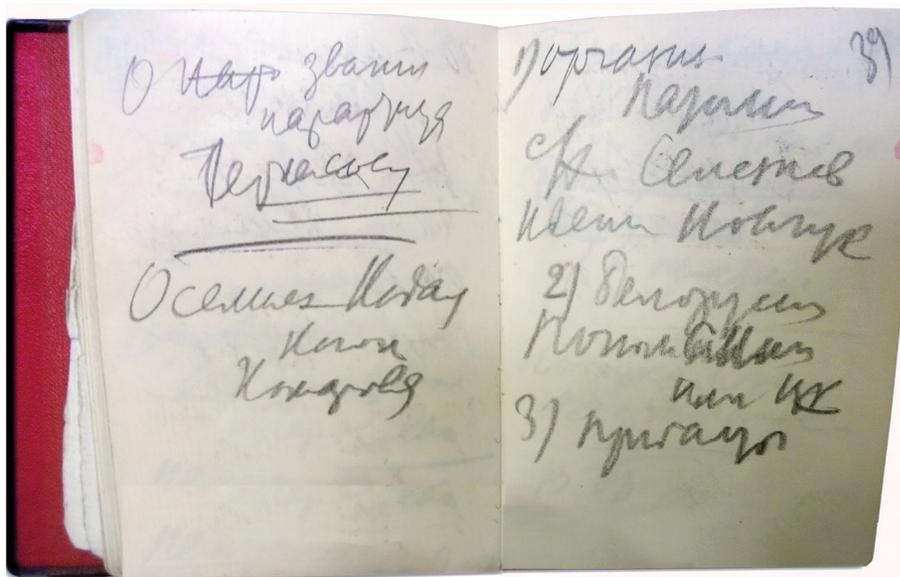
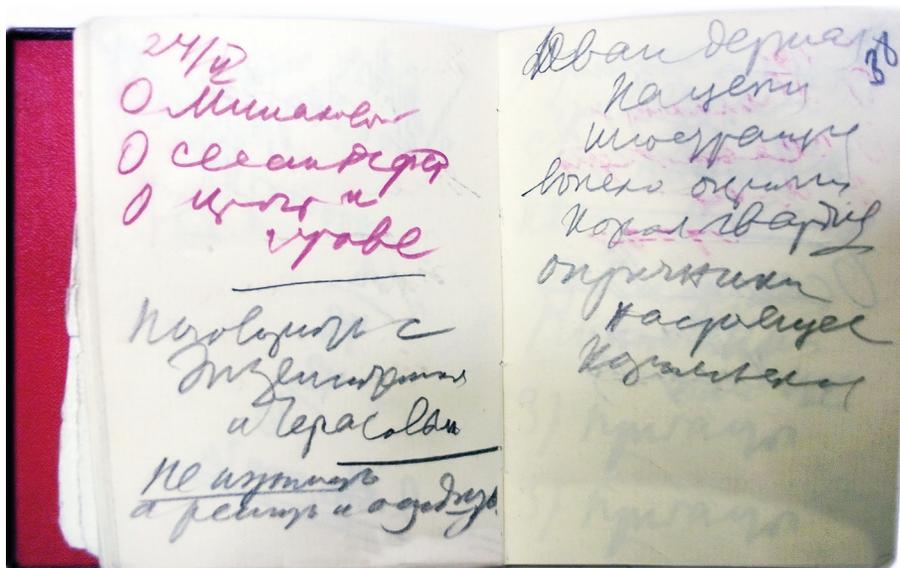
1) Прислать, что
 экран серии фильмов
 "Иван Грозный"
 (постановка Эй-
 зенштейна) не
 выдерживает ни-
 как критики
 в виду своей акти-
 вистичности и

антихудожествен-
 ности.

2) Воспретить
 выпуск фильма
 на экран.

Сергеевич
 Цукерман

Zhdanov's notes. RGASPI, f. 77, op. 3, d. 179, l. 73-74 (booklet 1).



Zhdanov's notes. RGASPI, f. 77, op. 3, d. 179, l. 37 ob–39.

this reason, the text of Zhdanov's draft resolution — “the second part of the film *Ivan the Terrible* (directed by Eisenstein) cannot withstand criticism in terms of its anti-historical and anti-artistic nature” — ought to be read as a verbatim record of Stalin's verdict on the film⁹.

Zhdanov's notes about Stalin's exchange with Molotov, Eisenstein and Cherkasov a year later are similarly short and telegraphic. That said, they indicate several things. First, Stalin felt that the film didn't need to be permanently banned and instead ought to be merely censured and corrected¹⁰. Second, Stalin wanted to underscore the importance of how Ivan had kept foreigners in Muscovy under control¹¹. Third, Stalin felt it necessary to stress the fact that the oprichnina was a progressive institution — it was, in his mind, a disciplined royal guard rather than a more informal feudal retinue¹². Finally, Stalin had enjoyed Cherkasov's performance as Ivan so much that he believed that the actor ought to be awarded the title of People's Artist of the USSR — an honor that was officially bestowed upon him the very next day¹³.

And that is all. Zhdanov's notebooks contain absolutely no mention of Stalin's objections — whether explicit or oblique — to the film's homoeroticism. Instead, these previously unknown sources confirm what we knew already: that Stalin's chief objection to *Ivan the Terrible* was to its non-canonical depiction of the history of the period. Zhdanov's notebooks do not mention Stalin's use of terms like "filth" and "degenerate" — something that indicates that Zhdanov understood Stalin to have used these words as generic terms of abuse rather than as more suggestive euphemisms or double-entendres.

Ultimately, then, Neuberger's book leads me to ask a different but related question: why *didn't* Stalin react more explicitly to the film's homoeroticism? I suppose I'd hazard three guesses in this regard. First, Stalin saw the film only once. Perhaps he simply missed many of the film's provocative homoerotic elements that are revealed in their full glory when one watches it multiple times. Second, perhaps Stalin — whose personal library does not appear to have contained any kind of erotica at all — either didn't grasp what he was seeing or lacked the vocabulary to express it¹⁴. Or third, perhaps Stalin recognized the homoeroticism for what it was and merely regarded it as one more example of what he found to be the film's anti-historical and anti-artistic failings.

In any case, in so far as there is no reason to think that Stalin would have hesitated to articulate to Zhdanov or to Eisenstein and Cherkasov any specific objections he had to the film's homoeroticism, I suspect that the best explanation for the dictator's banning of the film remains the historical license that Eisenstein had taken with the official Stalinist line on the terrible tsar. And there are few better pieces of scholarship cataloguing the myriad of liberties that Eisenstein took with this historical epic than Neuberger's encyclopedic *This Thing of Darkness*.

* The author would like to express his gratitude to K. A. Boldovskiy, A. S. Konokhova and M. V. Zelenov for their help in the analysis of the documents referred to herein.

¹ This debate gave rise to several articles, including: Platt K., Brandenberger D. "Terribly Romantic, Terribly Progressive or Terribly Tragic? Rehabilitating Ivan IV Under I. V. Stalin, 1937–1953", *Russian Review*, vol. 58, no. 4, 1999, pp. 635–654; Brandenberger D., Platt K. "Terribly Pragmatic: Rewriting the History of Ivan IV's Reign", *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda*, eds Kevin M. F. Platt, David Brandenberger (Madison, 2006), pp. 157–178.

² Neuberger J. "The Politics of Bewilderment: Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible in 1945", *Eisenstein at 100: A Reconsideration*, eds Al Lavalley, Barry P. Scherr (New Brunswick, 2001), pp. 227–252; Neuberger J. *Ivan the Terrible: The Film Companion* (London, 2003); Neuberger J. "Eisenstein's

Angel”, *Russian Review*, vol. 63, no. 3, 2004, pp. 374–406; Neuberger J. “Eisenstein’s Cosmopolitan Kremlin: Drag Queens, Circus Clowns, Slugs, and Foreigners in Ivan the Terrible”, *Insiders and Outsiders in Russian Cinema*, eds Stephen M. Norris, Zara M. Torlone (Bloomington, 2008), pp. 81–95; Neuberger J. “Strange Circus: Eisenstein’s Sex Drawings”, *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2012, pp. 5–62; Neuberger J. “Ivan the Terrible as History”, *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 86, no. 2, 2014, pp. 295–334; Neuberger J. “The Music of Landscape: Eisenstein, Prokofiev, and the Uses of Music in Ivan the Terrible”, *Sound, Speech, Music in Soviet Cinema*, eds Lilya Kaganovsky, Masha Salazkina (Bloomington, 2014), pp. 212–229.

³ There were obviously many members of the artistic intelligentsia that defied Stalinist norms and paid the ultimate price, e.g. V. E. Meyerhold.

⁴ Foucault M. *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (New York, 1977). Bourdieu has argued that the “social order is progressively inscribed in people’s minds’ through ‘cultural products’ including systems of education, language, judgements, values, methods of classification and activities of everyday life”. This leads to acceptance of social norms, conformity and an “sense of one’s place”. See: Bourdieu P. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London, 1986), pp. 471, 141.

⁵ That’s not to say that the notion that Stalin condemned the film on account of its depiction of homosexual themes is entirely unprecedented. Other critics have speculated on the topic before — see, for instance: MacDonald D. *On Movies* (New York, 1969), p. 290.

⁶ Stalin used the word «дегенерат» frequently to express his disdain for people he found inadequate in ideological, ethical, moral and physical terms. No less than 88 instances are found within the documents in the Stalin Digital Archive database. See: <https://www.stalindigitalarchive.com/frontend/search> (accessed: 10.06.2020).

⁷ In this analysis, Neuberger refers to a little-known note written by Eisenstein or Cherkasov after their meeting with Stalin that quotes the dictator as saying in regard to the oprichniki that «если [слово зачеркнуто] и гуляли — а гуляли они наверно — то наверно по тьме». For Neuberger, this statement is clear evidence that Stalin recognized the film’s depiction of the oprichniki to be “explicitly sexual and implicitly homosexual” (331). I’m less convinced, as the verb «гулять» in this context may also refer more generally to late night carousing and drunken merrymaking.

⁸ ACP(b) Central Committee Secretariat resolution of 5 March 1946 “O vtoroi serii kino ‘Ivan Groznyi’” (Povestka No. 249, punkt 541g), RGASPI, f. 17, op. 116, d. 249, l. 101.

⁹ See: RGASPI, f. 77, op. 3, d. 179, ll. 73–74 (booklet 1). This loose leaf page is not part of the booklet. Stalin’s verdict («1) Признать, что вторая серия фильма «Иван Грозный» не выдерживает никакой критики в виду своей ее антиисторичности и антихудожественности. 2) Воспретить выпуск фильма на экран») was incorporated directly into the ACP(b) Secretariat’s resolution.

¹⁰ «не изымать а решить и осудить». *Ibid.*, l. 37 ob.

¹¹ «Иван держал на цепи иностранцев». *Ibid.*, l. 38.

¹² «Войско оприч[ины —] корол[евская] гвардия. Опричники [—] настоящее королевское [войско]». *Ibid.*

¹³ «О нар звании нар[одного] артиста Черкасову». *Ibid.*, l. 38 ob.

¹⁴ Pizarov B. S. «Stalin. Strokes for the portrait against the background of his library and archive», *Noviaia i noveishaia istoriia*, no. 3, 2000, pp. 182–205; Medvedev R. *What Stalin Read* (Moscow, 2005).

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Abstract: This critical analysis of Joan Neuberger’s book *This Thing of Darkness* (Cornell University Press, 2019) hails the monograph for its exhaustive research and thorough analysis. Eisenstein stands out in the pages of *This Thing of Darkness* as the quintessential non-conformist — an exception to everything we know about Soviet

subjectivity. Neuberger argues that the question of whether Eisenstein was pro-Soviet or anti-Soviet is effectively a reductionist dead end. Eisenstein, she suggests, was an exception — someone who defied categorization, whether by his cinematographer contemporaries or by Stalin himself, for that matter. The article contends that Neuberger's reading of Eisenstein as an imaginative, stubborn, risk-taking and subversive director challenges recent scholarship on the restrictive nature of Stalinist subjectivity. The author also investigates Neuberger's contention that Stalin banned the second part of *Ivan the Terrible* in part because of the film's homoeroticism by reexamining the fragmentary historical record. In so far as there is no reason to think that Stalin would have hesitated to articulate to Zhdanov or to Eisenstein and Cherkasov any specific objections he had to the film's homoeroticism, the author suspects that the best explanation for the dictator's banning of the film remains the historical license that Eisenstein took with the official Stalinist line on the terrible tsar.

Keywords: Eisenstein, Ivan the Terrible, Stalin, homoeroticism, homophobia, Zhdanov.

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