

Herman Axelbank, Max Eastman, and the Documentary “Tsar to Lenin”

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The Russian Revolution, the only—if only briefly—successful workers’ revolution took place in the era of photography and film, consequently thousands of hours of film footage from the revolutionary period existed. In the late 1920s, as the revolution’s red star was fading, a Russian-born man decided to collect as much as possible of the existing film—some of it shot by individuals, some by governments, some by new agencies, some by who-knows-who. Eventually, over 50 years this man collected some 271 motion picture film reels. He was a fanatic. Glad he was.



Herman Axelbank, who had been born in 1900 in Nowo Konstantinow, Ukraine (at the time part of the Russian empire) later moved to the Bronx in New York City. In 1920 he began collecting film footage of the Russian Revolution; gradually this became his personal calling, his obsession. Eventually he compiled and edited the film into a roughly chronological account. Then in 1928 he contacted the writer Max Eastman to ask his help in producing an actual film. Eastman described his first impression of Axelbank:

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 come down from the Bronx merely to ask me whether I thought a consecutive narrative could be made of them, but before we parted he had offered to give me complete editorial control, and split the profits fifty-fifty, if I could convert hem into a “visible history” of the revolution.[1]

Eastman agreed to take on the job.

Axelbank had come to the right man. Max Eastman had been a socialist virtually all of his adult life, editor of *The Masses* and later of *The Liberator*. It was Eastman who raised the money to send John Reed to Russia where Reed wrote *Ten Days that Shook the World*, first published serially in Eastman’s magazine. In 1922 Eastman went to Russia to see the revolution for himself, spending a year and nine months there. In 1928 a Russian Communist named Eleazar Solnetsev passed on to Eastman a bundle of political papers written by Leon Trotsky, leader of the opposition to Joseph Stalin in Russia. At about the same time, Eastman was contacted by James Cannon, a longtime Communist who has just become a supporter Trotsky and his opposition group in Russia. Eastman edited the papers Solnetsev had given him into a book eventually titled *The Real Situation in Russia* by Leon Trotsky and gave the proceeds to Cannon’s Trotskyist organization, though Eastman himself never joined the group.[2] At about the same time that Eastman agreed to undertake the editing of Axelbank’s film, he was also working on the translation of Trotsky’s monumental three-volume *History of the Russian Revolution*. Perhaps no man in America knew more or had thought more deeply about the Russian Revolution. A Trotskyist, Eastman was not uncritical of Trotsky; a supporter of the Russian Revolution, he was willing to discuss its failings and the disastrous turn it

appeared to be taking.

Eastman threw himself into the film project. He traveled to Paris to get film from Pathé and Gaumont, and while there he got Alexander Kerensky, whose government Vladimir Lenin and Trotsky had overthrown, to give him permission to use photos of Kerensky made by the surrealist photographer Man Ray. In Berlin Eastman got photos of the Tsar swimming naked (Russian men then didn't wear bathing suits) and of the Russian royal family: his wife the Tsarina and his son the Tsarevitch feeding his pony. He had trouble finding film of Stalin, who was not prominent before or even during the Revolution, but eventually found one short piece of Stalin shifting his weight back and forth from foot to foot. Eastman finished "Tsar to Lenin" in January of 1931. Charlie Chaplin, the star of *Modern Times*, took a look at it; he thought it was good.

Post-production work with Axelbank proved to be difficult. He was understandably extremely possessive of the film that he had birthed and which Eastman had midwived. Axelbank kept it in a vault, in strongboxes to which only he had a key; he made access difficult by mysteriously disappearing for long periods of time. Axelbank felt persecuted and misused and his cranky behavior destroyed relations with potential financial backers and promoters. Axelbank proved to be not only difficult but also litigious. Eastman found himself embroiled in a series of court cases over the finished film, which ended up in the possession of court-appointed receivers. The receivers leased the movie to the Lenauer Film Company in 1936, but the printed captions still had to be replaced by a vocal narrative before it was finally ready. The film was finally released in theaters on March 6, 1937, first playing in the Filmarte Theater on West Fifty-eighth street in New York City.

The New York newspaper reviewers praised the film and the public flocked to the theater to see it. By then, however, Stalin had come to power in Russia, took over the Communist International, and determined the policy of the Communist Parties worldwide. Stalin wanted no mention of his adversary Trotsky, who he had exiled, whom he was hunting-killing family, friends, and comrades—and whose assassination he would arrange a few years later. The Communist Party in the United States, consequently, called for a boycott "Tsar to Russia" and the Soviet Union's film industry made clear to film distributors and theaters in America that if they showed Axelbank's and Eastman's film they would never receive any Soviet films ever, this at a time when the films of the Russian Sergei Eisenstein were tremendously popular among the avant garde. So "Tsar to Lenin," blacklisted by the Stalinists, never had a run in American theaters, though Axelbank put out another version that reached a small audience. Eastman placed a copy of his film in the Library of Congress where it was preserved, but languished.[3] A few years later, Eastman, deeply disappointed by the Russian Revolution, gave up his leftist politics and became an editor of the conservative *Readers Digest*, a disappointing and profoundly sad end to a brilliant literary and political career. For decades those interested in viewing "Tsar to Lenin" had to satisfied with a much cut version made available through the Library of Congress and the film in its entirety was not made available to the public generally until released by the Socialist Equality Party, a small Trotskyist group, in 2012.

"Tsar to Lenin" is now available on YouTube and well worth watching though it deals only with the revolution in the most narrow sense of the word, that is the upheaval that brought the *soviets* (workers, peasants, and soldiers councils) to power under the leadership of the Bolsheviks and the bloody civil war that followed. We have no great film of the Russian social revolution, the functioning of the *soviets*, the workers seizing of the factories, the peasant land seizures, no film of the struggle between democracy from below and what eventually became bureaucratic rule from above—though we have right-wing films of the rise of Stalin. Tremendous film archives exist in Russia and some are available online, though whether or not they contain the filming of everyday working class life and workers' struggles to preserve and exert their power as the Communist bureaucracy and the state together hardened into a new ruling class and a new state is doubtful. We can only hope that some other fanatic like Axelbank has preserved such film somewhere and somehow, and that some new

Eastman (would that be China Miéville, author of *October*?) would come along to write the narrative.

[1] Max Eastman, *Love and Revolution: My Journey through an Epoch* (New York: Random House, 1964), Chapter 77, "My Career in the Movies," p. 57.

[2] Eastman, *Love and Revolution*, Chapter 75, "A Taste of Rehabilitation," pp. 510-16.

[3] Eastman, *Love and Revolution*, Chapter 89, "A Triumph and a Defeat," pp. 615-17.