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The USSR and East-Central European Countries at the Venice International Film Festival (1946–1953)

Scholars have shown that, from the 1930s to the 1960s, a range of cultural, artistic, political, ideological, and economic factors shaped the organization of International Film Festivals.¹⁾ These festivals showcased the output of numerous countries that each boasted distinctly organized film industries, as well as diverse social, economic, and political systems. Born out of one of the tensest periods in twentieth-century geopolitics, the International Film Festivals provided transnational spaces that could be cosmopolitan or exclusionary. Accordingly, it is within such contexts that this essay examines the presence and absence at the Venice International Film Festival of both the Soviet Union and the countries within its sphere of influence.²⁾ In particular, I consider the extent to which Italian critics perceived these national film industries' conduct as driven by national and by supranational concerns.³⁾

The USSR at Venice: A Swinging Presence

During the postwar years, Soviet participation at Venice was at best sporadic. In fact, Soviet films were only screened at Venice in 1946, in 1947, and, after Soviet leader Iosif Stalin died, in 1953.

The decision-making process behind the Soviet Union's participation in the festivals of both 1946 and 1947 reveals the Kremlin's interest in Venice. The Ministry of Foreign Af-

1) See Marijke de Valck, *Film Festivals. From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007); Caroline Moine, 'Les festivals internationaux de cinéma, lieux de rencontre et de confrontation dans l'Europe de la guerre froide', in Anne Dulphy, Robert Frank, Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci, Pascal Ory (eds), *Les relations culturelles internationales au XXe siècle. De la diplomatie culturelle à l'acculturation* (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 299–306; Loredana Latil, *Le Festival de Cannes sur la scène internationale* (Paris: Nouveau Monde Éditions, 2005).

2) The Italian name of the Venice International Film Festival is "Mostra internazionale d'arte cinematografica".

3) On the participant countries, the films that they presented, and the awards that those films received see Ernesto G. Laura (ed.), *Tutti i film di Venezia 1932–1984* (Venezia: La Biennale di Venezia, 1985).

fairs tended to be an initial point of contact with this festival's organizers, and the Ministry of Cinematography played a key role in practical matters, including whether or not to accept an invitation to the festival in the first place and appointing committees to select the films and delegates that would be sent there. Sovexportfilm, the institution that was responsible for motion picture importation and exportation in this country, was also central to the process. Even though it was answerable to the Soviet Ministry of Cinematography, Sovexportfilm liaised with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, acted as a go-between for Moscow and the festival organizers, and sometimes advised on whether to attend at all.⁴⁾ However, any final decision needed to be approved by the Politburo of the Central Committee Communist Party, the Soviet Union's principal decision-making body. In 1947, the Politburo delayed its decision to attend Venice in order to ascertain the political character of the festival's organizers. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Cinematography were ultimately concerned about how best to utilize the festival to promote certain images of the USSR.⁵⁾ Indeed, when authorizing Soviet participation at the 1946 festival, Iosif Stalin himself stressed the potential to "promote Soviet cinema abroad, particularly in those countries where the festivals took place".⁶⁾ The Kremlin therefore endorsed International Film Festivals as important showcases for Soviet cinema. Moscow also recognized that cinema could serve as an instrument of cultural diplomacy at a point in time at which international relations were undergoing profound change.⁷⁾

The Italian press was on the whole excited about the prospect of a Soviet presence at Venice, based on this country's sporadic participation, and a reputation built on 1920s avant-garde.⁸⁾ We need to consider the roles of these critics for a number of reasons. The popular press again became pluralistic in newly democratic Italy, following twenty years of Fascist rule. As the principal vehicle through which the festival was mediated to the Italian public, the press paid close attention to the films that were screened there. Struggles for cultural supremacy were enacted by journalists who were sympathetic to Catholicism and those who were supportive of Socialism and Communism.⁹⁾¹⁰⁾ Some reviews in part reflected national political and ideological tensions that were relevant to the new bipolar geopolitical order; tensions that became increasingly pronounced in May 1947, when Left-wing parties were excluded from a government.¹¹⁾ Critics followed the positions of their

4) Fondo Storico, Serie Cinema, Manifestazione internazionale d'arte cinematografica 1946, CM 12 ter, URSS; CM 12 bis, Consolati, Historical Archives of Contemporary Arts, Venice (hereafter ASAC). For 1947, see f. 2456, op. 4, d. 115, p. 25, Russian State Archives of Literature and Art, Moscow (hereafter RGALI).

5) For 1947, see f. 2456, op. 4, d. 115, RGALI.

6) Ibid., d. 103, p. 3.

7) On the importance that Soviet officials accorded to Film Festivals in 1946 see the Zhdanov's statements in f. 17, op. 125, d. 469, p. 36, Russian State Archives of Social and Political History, Moscow (hereafter RGASPI). On the cinema as a Cold War instrument, see Tony Shaw, Denise J. Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2013). On the cultural Cold War in a broad sense, see David Cauter, *The Dancer Defects: the Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

8) A. Torresin, 'Due film russi', *Il Gazzettino*, 10 September 1946.

9) They were the members or supporters of the coalition of Italian Communist and Socialist parties.

10) See Gian Piero Brunetta, *Il cinema neorealista italiano. Storia economica, politica e culturale* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2009), pp. 102–149.

11) On the connections between Italian domestic and International politics in the postwar period see Guido

party of choice, with, for example, writers at the Italian Community Party newspaper, *L'Unità*, celebrating Soviet films, and with their peers at the Christian Democrat Party's *Il Popolo* denouncing such fare. On the other hand, critics generally stated their grounds for their negative reviews of Soviet films; at the root of these was a sense of disillusionment over a cinematic potential that had not ultimately been realized. Moreover, the nature of the festival required that critics responded promptly, a situation that often led to the publication of rather impulsive reviews, rather than measured commentary that went beyond "ideologically conditioned reflexes".¹²⁾

The presence of Soviet films at Venice enabled critics to revise the notion that Soviet cinema was the product of formal theoreticians. Although they had some positive things to say about some pictures such as *UNCONQUERED* (1946),¹³⁾ in 1946 and 1947, Italian critics tended to distance themselves from what was seen as a cinema in decline. They often suggested that these films were struggling to bear the weight of politics and ideology, their technical merits notwithstanding.¹⁴⁾ Some went as far as to use these perceived shortcomings to criticize both the Italian Communist Party and East-Central European moviegoers.¹⁵⁾

As correspondence from festival delegates to the Ministry of Cinematography and to the Central Committee Communist Party indicates, Moscow showed an interest in Venice and understood its participation represented a form of political and ideological confrontation. Several important themes emerge from these exchanges. It was felt that a presence at the festival enabled Soviet Cinema to be promoted to Italians, both through the festival itself and through external events such as meetings with the country's intellectuals and workers.¹⁶⁾ Thus, after the 1946 festival had ended, the Soviet delegation remained in Italy for three weeks so that it could make stops in Milan, Florence, and Rome.¹⁷⁾ A key concern related to hostility being directed at the Soviets. Where the leader of the 1946 delegation Sergei Budaev reported that Italian, American, and Vatican anti-Soviet documentaries and newsreels were broadcast, his successor Dimitri Eremin observed that a clique had been recruited to heckle the Soviet film *SPRING* (1947).

Formigoni, *La democrazia cristiana e l'alleanza occidentale (1943–1953)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996); Silvio Pons, *L'impossibile egemonia, L'Urss, il PCI e le origini della guerra fredda (1943–1948)* (Roma: Carocci, 1999).

12) Gian Piero Brunetta (ed.), *Cinetesori della Biennale* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1996), p. 18. For example, in 1947, the Italian Communist Party's and the Vatican's official newspapers used the same terms to praise a retrospective of Sergei Ejzenshtejn work: See Lorenzo Quaglietti, 'Eisenstein trionfa nella "retrospettiva"', *l'Unità*, 4 September 1947; Piero Regnoli, 'All'VIII Mostra internazionale del cinema', *L'Osservatore Romano*, 1–2 September 1947.

13) Gino Visentini, 'Russia vecchia e nuova sullo schermo di Venezia', *Corriere della Sera*, 14 September 1946; Giorgio Prosperi, 'Pessimismo e stanchezza al Festival di Venezia', *Il Nuovo Giornale d'Italia*, 15 September 1946.

14) Gino Visentini, 'Un film russo ed uno inglese', *Corriere della Sera*, 10 September 1946; Giorgio Prosperi, "'C'era una volta una bimba". Gli spettatori tagliano la corda', *Il Nuovo Giornale d'Italia*, 11 September 1946; Arturo Lanocita, 'Debutto del cinema russo alla Mostra di Venezia', *Corriere della Sera*, 3 August 1947; Giorgio Prosperi, 'Fredda accoglienza a Glinka', *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 4 September 1947; Giorgio Prosperi, 'I russi non fanno sorridere', *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 9 September 1947.

15) F. 2456, op. 4, d. 154, RGALI.

16) *Ibid.*, dd. 103, 145, RGALI.

17) *Ibid.*, d. 103.

The Soviet correspondence also highlights an interest in devising strategies to ensure that juries awarded prizes to Soviet films. In 1946, the Soviets' managed to increase the number of prizes they received, from seven to nine, by threatening not to vote for Italian films, leading to special mentions for both *THE VOW* (1946) and *UNCONQUERED*.¹⁸⁾ The following year, the Soviets bribed the Italian jury president in an attempt to secure prizes for "progressive films" such as the aforementioned *SPRING*, the Czechoslovak *THE STRIKE*, and Italy's *THE TRAGIC HUNT* (both 1947).¹⁹⁾ Whereas *SPRING*'s entry at the Karlovy Vary Film Festival resulted in its ineligibility, *THE STRIKE* was indeed awarded a top prize. Eremin continued to lobby for special awards to be given to *SPRING* as well as to *ADMIRAL NACHIMOV* (1947) in an atmosphere that he described as "tense".²⁰⁾

The correspondence also highlights a number of steps that delegates took to increase Soviet success at the festival. For example, before the festivals of 1946 and 1947, meetings were held in Rome between the Soviet Embassy and the Italian Communist Party to arrange for groups such as Italy-USSR and the Soviet Consul to promote Soviet cinema in Venice. These plans demonstrate that Moscow did not measure Soviet success in purely cinematic terms, but also in ideological and political terms. Thus in 1946, the Soviets submitted Mikhail Chiaureli's film *THE VOW*, a drama about Stalin's leadership, in which the Soviet premier (Mikhail Gelovani) could address a speech that he delivered following Lenin's death directly to an Italian audience.

In addition to shedding light on Moscow's motivations for attending Venice, the correspondence also explains their reasons for boycotting the festival from 1948 to 1952. The Soviets felt it inappropriate to participate in what they saw as essentially pro-American, pro-Western, anti-Soviet events, particularly as at a time when the Cold War was escalating in Europe. This position was also a product of the regulations that determined the number of films that could be submitted, and the manner in which quality was ascribed thereto.

In 1948, the Soviets were concerned that commerciality was superseding both the artistic and social value of films; they saw the festival as an opportunity to showcase the latter but believed that organizers had hijacked it for the former, a suspicion that seemed to be confirmed by the establishment in 1950 of the first International Film Marketplace within the festival. The principal issues in 1949 concerned the number of films submitted.²¹⁾ Festival regulations linked submissions to national production output, thereby permitting eight American films to be screened compared to just one from the Soviet Union.²²⁾ This issue highlights a tension that existed between the Soviet's crucial role in cold war Europe and its lack of a far-reaching film policy; a tension that derived from

18) Ibid., pp. 20–21. In 1946, Venice did not award prizes, but only gave honourable mentions. The festival was not officially a competition that year. This step was intended to promote the first Cannes International Film Festival.

19) F. 2456, op. 4, d. 145, p. 36, RGALI.

20) Ibid., pp. 37–38.

21) F.17, op. 118, d. 381, RGASPI.

22) The connection between the number of feature films presented at the festival and the annual average output of a particular country had already been introduced into festival regulations at the 1939 Cannes Film Festival. The first Cannes Film Festival was, however, cancelled due to WWII.

Stalin's ambivalence toward cinema.²³⁾ Although festival organizers responded in 1950 to calls that had been made by the Czechoslovak Film Monopoly on behalf of the Soviets to abandon proportional representation in favor of imposing a six-film submission limit on any one nation,²⁴⁾ Moscow elected not to participate in the festival that year as it feared the organizing committee's appointment of an all-Italian jury might lead to Soviet films being rejected on purportedly artistic grounds or because they had already been shown at other festivals.²⁵⁾ The latter was an overriding concern because the paucity of quality films within the already depleted postwar output of the Soviet film industry had already led the Soviets to submit the same films to a number of different festivals. Although festival organizers wanted to ensure the screening of new films, this practice nevertheless fed into Moscow's suspicions of an anticommunist conspiracy. The Soviets did not attend the festival in 1951 and 1952 due to a new stipulation that allowed its organizers to reject "those films that have obvious purposes of ideological and political propaganda."²⁶⁾

Changing cultural conditions prompted Moscow to accept the festival organizers' invitation in 1953.²⁷⁾ Even though the jury remained entirely Italian in composition, and even though the United States would be represented at the festival, Soviet suspicions lessened and they submitted a number of films.²⁸⁾ For example, the Soviet fantasy *SADKO* (1953) was universally applauded by critics, and shared the Silver Lion award with five other pictures.²⁹⁾ By contrast, controversy was provoked by director Vsevolod Pudovkin's final film, *VASILY'S RETURN* (1953), the story of a war veteran who returns to find his wife has remarried after mistakenly believing the man to have fallen in battle. However, Italian critics struggled to come to terms with what they as personal and familial drama being superseded by depictions of agricultural cooperatives that were rich in sociopolitical reso-

23) From 1946 to 1953, the average annual feature film output of the Soviet filmmaking industry was around twenty. See Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society from Revolution to the Death of Stalin* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). For a discussion of Stalin's pragmatic policy of not seeking to match American filmic output see *Kultura i vlast' ot Stalina do Gorbacheva. Kremlevskij kinoteatr. 1928–1953. Dokumenty* (Moskva: Rosspen, 2005), pp. 798–799; Dmitrij Shepilov, *Neprimknuvshij* (Moskva: Vagrius, 2001), pp. 116–117. On 14 June 1948, the Communist Party defeated a proposal to produce sixty movies annually, which had been presented by the Ministry of Cinematography, in favour of producing only fifty-three per annum. This decision changed the almost thirty-year-long Soviet policy of promoting the output of its own film industry. See Natacha Laurent, *L'Œil du Kremlin. Cinéma et censure en Urss sous Staline (1928–1953)* (Toulouse: Edition Privat, 2000), p. 232.

24) Fondo Storico, Serie Cinema, X Mostra internazionale d'arte cinematografica 1949, CM 15/8, 1949, ASAC.

25) F. 2456, op. 4, d. 253, RGALI.

26) Fondo Storico, Serie Cinema, XIII Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica, 1952, CM 18/10, URSS. Mostrad'Arte, ASAC; Fondo Storico, Serie Cinema, XII Mostra internazionale d'arte cinematografica 1951, CM 17/9, URSSI, ASAC.

27) Correspondence between the festival's director and the Italian government reveals the main diplomatic and commercial reasons driving such behaviour. See Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (1948–1950), ctg. 14/1, fasc.: 12471-1/1, 12447/8-2; 12447/8-3, ACS.

28) Fondo Storico, Serie Cinema, XIV Mostra internazionale d'arte cinematografica 1953, CM 19/6, URSS. Mostra d'arte, ASAC; Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, ctg. 14/1, fasc.: 12447/8-2, ACS; f. 5, op. 17, d. 449, p. 128, RGASPI.

29) The other films were *MOULIN ROUGE* (1952), *I VITELLONI*, *THE ADULTERESS*, *UGETSU MONOGATARI*, *LITTLE FUGITIVE* (all 1953).

nance.³⁰⁾ The attention of the press was once again directed to the Soviet delegation,³¹⁾ whose leader Nikolai Semenov was asked to give several interviews³²⁾. The press also reported the the delegation had hosted a reception at the Hotel Excelsior for over five hundred people, including members of the Italian government and the American delegation.³³⁾ The Soviets' satisfaction at their return to Venice was exemplified by an article that Semenov published in the Soviet magazine *Iskusstvo Kino*.³⁴⁾ Although he complained about the supposed anti-Soviet bias of the jury, Semenov nevertheless struck a reconciliatory tone when evaluating the festival as a whole.³⁵⁾ As a gesture of international outreach, the return to Venice was largely seen as a step in the right direction both by the Italian and the Soviet press. The 1953 festival thus marked not only a showcase for cinema but also a thaw in East-West relations.

Venice? No, Italy? Yes

In October of 1948, the cultural body Italy-USSR organized the first Soviet Film Festival both as part of the “month of Italian-Soviet friendship” and to compensate for the Soviet absence at Venice that year. Comprised of a series of events that was intended to promote cultural relations between the two countries, this festival came at a difficult time for Italian communism, following the defeat of the left-wing Popular Democratic Front in the nation's first postwar parliamentary elections. An invitation to attend the opening ceremony that was sent to Aleksandr Fadeev and Ilya Erenburg — two key Soviet literary figures — by the secretary of Italy-USSR, Giuseppe Berti, gives us a sense of the tension that characterized this period:

Our organization, [...], which has the purpose of fighting Anti-Sovietism in order to improve political, economic, and cultural relations with the USSR, and which se-

30) See Arturo Lanocita, 'L'ultimo film di Pudovkin applaudito dal pubblico del Lido', *Corriere della Sera*, 23 August 1953; Ugo Zafferin, "'Terroni" e "polentoni" tutti d'accordo in "Napoletani a Milano" di De Filippo', *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 25 August 1953.

31) Arturo Lanocita, 'Dopo sei anni di assenza la Russia partecipa al Festival', *Corriere della Sera*, 21 August 1953; Mario Gromo, 'Serata sovietica', *La Nuova Stampa*, 23 August 1953.

32) See Arturo Lanocita, 'L'ultimo film di Pudovkin applaudito dal pubblico del Lido', *Corriere della Sera*, 23 August 1953; Mario Gromo, 'Bisogna fare la coda per parlare coi Russi', *La Nuova Stampa*, 23 August 1953; Giulio Cesare Castello, 'Intervista con Wyler e Semenov', *Cinema*, no. 115 (1953), pp. 69–71.

33) See Ugo Zafferin, 'L'inutile follia di un superuomo e l'amara satira di un ventennio', *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 1 September 1953; Arturo Lanocita, 'Un leggendario Ulisse d'Oriente eroe di un festoso film russo', *Corriere della Sera*, 30 August 1953; Mario Gromo, 'Opinioni di Semionoff sul cinema e il Festival', *La Nuova Stampa*, 5 September 1953.

34) See Nikolaj Semenov, 'Na mezhdunarodnom kinofestivale v Venecii', *Iskusstvo Kino*, no. 11 (1953), pp. 101–107.

35) It is significant that the Italian daily communist newspaper *l'Unità* criticized the verdict more than Semenov, who rather diplomatically suggested that “San Marco's Lion is not golden. The silence is golden: do not make me say more”. Mario Gromo, 'Opinioni di Semionoff sul cinema e il Festival', *La Nuova Stampa*, 5 September 1953. The main Italian film magazines also expressed disappointment at the award. See Gavin Lambert, 'O giudici, o diplomatici', *Cinema*, no. 117 (1953), pp. 125–126; Jaime Potenze, 'Il Festival delle disillusioni', *Ibid.*, p. 134; Giovan Battista Cavallaro, 'Festival della burocrazia', *Cinema nuovo*, no. 19 (1953), p. 178; Tommaso Chiaretti, 'Lo smoking delle coscienze', *Ibid.*, p. 179.

eks to bring peace as the imperialist and reactionary forces are trying to create a fog of hate against the Soviet Union and are preparing the field for an even more terrible war, has decided to set aside a month devoted to friendship with the USSR: it will start on 17 October.³⁶⁾

In light of the assumed “Anti-Sovietism” of the day, the Soviet Film Festival provided something of a safe-space in which Moscow did not need to fear smear campaigns. As such, this festival played host to several new Soviet productions: *AN OLD VAUDEVIL* (1946), *CRUISER “VARYAG”*, *PIROGOV*, *SECRET AGENT*, *THE TEACHER FROM SHATRYJ* (all 1947), *THE BALLAD OF SIBERIA*, and *THE RUSSIAN QUESTION* (both 1948).³⁷⁾ The decision to screen these films, instead of respected older works, represented an attempt to showcase the nation’s contemporaneous cinematic output to overseas audiences and critics. The times at which they were screened also boasted an ideological dimension that Moscow would have found impossible to engineer at Venice. For example, selecting Mikhail Romm’s *THE RUSSIAN QUESTION* — the first Soviet film about the Cold War — as the closing film of the festival represented the height of a week in which there were boundaries between art and politics were torn down. After all, this was a period in which rhetoric gave way to action, as the Soviet blockade of West Berlin set in motion a series of events that would ultimately lead to Germany being split into two.

From September to October 1949, Italy-USSR and Soviet Export Film organized Soviet Film Festivals in different Italian provinces, drawing over 80,000 moviegoers.³⁸⁾ That year also saw the USSR take part in the International Conference of Progressive Cinema Filmmakers, which was held in Perugia from 24 to 27 September, less than a month after Venice. Organized by leading figures in Italian cinema and culture,³⁹⁾ this event was offered an opportunity for discussions among parties who supported different forms of cinema to those associated with Hollywood. Its promotional brochure set out the driving forces behind the event:

At a time when the Venice, Cannes, [...] and Locarno Film Festivals have lost all signs of artistic meaning in favor of commercial interests, it is the burning desire of our artists to organize a broad discussion among the masters of world cinema to call for a deeper, a more artistic, and a moral and social understanding of, cinema.⁴⁰⁾

The main theme of the conference was: “Are modern man’s problems represented in today’s cinema?”⁴¹⁾ Participants came not only from Italy, but also from the USSR, the Netherlands, the USA, France, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland. The Soviet delega-

36) ‘F. 5283, op. 16, d. 230, pp. 55, 58’, GARF.

37) *Ibid.*, d. 218, p. 9.

38) ‘F. 82, op. 2, d. 958, p. 82’, RGASPI.

39) The members of the organizing committee were Corrado Alvaro, Giuseppe De Santis, Vittorio De Sica, Pietro Germi, Alberto Lattuada, Alberto Moravia, Antonio Pietrangeli, Roberto Rossellini, Mario Soldati, Luchino Visconti, Luigi Zampa, and Cesare Zavattini. ‘F. 2456, op. 4, d. 198, p. 5’, RGALI.

40) *Ibid.*

41) *Ibid.*, p. 6.

tion was made up of the Vice-Minister of Cinematography Nikolaj Sakontikov, director Vsevolod Pudovkin, the screenwriter M. Mamav, and the actor Boris Chirkov.⁴²⁾ They set out the conceptual cornerstones of their own vision of cinema, as approved by the Foreign Policy Commission of the Central Committee.⁴³⁾ The Vice-Minister of Cinematography broached the issue of Venice, stating that the Soviet absence was a result of plots on the part of Americans, who were intimidated by the prospect of coming off second best in a confrontation between their films and Soviet ones: “Not by chance at the last Venice Film Festival, the American wheeler-dealers did everything so that Soviet films would not be allowed to participate in the competition. They were afraid of them as the bat is afraid of light”, he claimed.⁴⁴⁾ In other words, Sakontikov posited the idea that Moscow had had little choice but to boycott Venice given the questionable American influence over the event, thereby sidestepping the dearth of Soviet films that had contributed to his nation’s absence.

East-Central European Countries at Venice: From Autonomy to Alignment

Poland was the only country in the Soviet Sphere of Influence to attend the 1946 Venice International Film Festival. It submitted two short films: *WARSAW REBUILDS* (1945) and *NEWSREEL* (1946), both of which had been produced by the Cinematography Department of the Polish Army. The low levels of regional representation at this event were a product of both the limited number of countries that had been invited to the 1946 Venice exhibition,⁴⁵⁾ and of the slow pace at which Eastern European film industries were being rebuilt following their devastation during the war.⁴⁶⁾

East-Central European countries were more visible at the 1947 festival due to a greater number of countries being invited to attend.⁴⁷⁾ In that year, relations between East and West had become frostier due to the Soviet refusal to sign up to the Marshall Plan, and due to the formation of Cominform (Information Bureau of the Communist and Workers’ Parties). Indeed, the award of the best film prize to Czechoslovakia’s *THE STRIKE* was in some part a result of the presence on the jury of the Czechoslovak film official Antonin

42) Ibid., pp. 9, 19–21.

43) Ibid., p. 25. These cornerstones were summarized in the delegation’s report thus: 1) the substance of social realism; 2) the socio-philosophical foundations of our art and its pioneering role in world art; 3) unmasking the corrupting role of reactionary cinema (mainly American) and its link with the direct instigators of the new imperialist war; 4) the appeal to the union of the forces of the progressive intellectual class in the general fight for peace; 5) a note on the meaning of Soviet cinematography as the most advanced in matters of the content of ideological commitment. Ibid., pp. 24–25.

44) Ibid., p. 58.

45) The participating countries were the Vatican City, France, Great Britain, Italy, Poland, Switzerland, Turkey, the USSR, and the USA.

46) On the low capacity of Polish film industry in the first post-war decade, see Małgorzata Hendrykowska, Marek Hendrykowski, ‘Cinema polacco’, in Gian Piero Brunetta (ed.), *Storia del cinema mondiale. Vol. III. L’Europa. Le cinematografie nazionali, Tomo II* (Torino: Einaudi, 2000), p. 1399.

47) The participating countries were Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France, Germany (Soviet occupied area), Great Britain, India, Italy, Yugoslavia, Mexico, Spain, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, Hungary, the USSR, and the USA.

Brousil and of the aforementioned pro-Soviet constitution in the jury. Seen as “an example of a mature style of social realism,”⁴⁸⁾ this film also received an award for best soundtrack that went to Emil František Burian. Czechoslovak films fared just as well in the short film and animated film categories, with *THE REVOLT OF TOYS* (1946) winning the award of the Festival Board for Best Short Film for Children, *ATOM AT THE CROSSROADS* (1947) for Best Short Animated Film, *FESTIVAL* (1947) for Best Short Puppet Film, and with *PÍSEŇ MÍRU* (1947) receiving an honorable mention.

Bulgaria and Hungary only submitted short films that either promoted the ongoing reconstruction of their respective countries or their tourist attractions. Bulgaria received two Awards for films produced by the State-controlled Bulgarskoe Delo: *PEOPLE IN THE CLOUDS* (1946), which won an Award in the Short Film category, and *VILLAGE WEDDING* (1946), which received a Special Mention. Hungary submitted *BUDAPEST: DESTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF A CITY* (1946). Finally, the Soviet zone of occupied Germany presented *THE MURDERS ARE AMONG US* (1946). This project had initially been rejected by the allied administration of Berlin's Western sectors before it was greenlighted by the Soviets. It was not only the first feature to be made in the Soviet zone of occupied Germany, but the first fiction film to confront the German people with the idea that they were culpable in the violence of the war, thus initiating what came to be known as *Trümmerfilme* or “Rubble Films.”⁴⁹⁾

The East-Central European countries in the Soviet Sphere of influence did not always follow the course of action taken by the USSR, especially not in the late 1940s. When in 1948 the Soviet Union started to decline invitations to come to Venice, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet zone of occupied Germany all accepted. Czechoslovakia built upon its success the previous year. The animated feature film *THE CZECH YEAR* (1947) won the Biennale Medal for Best Puppet Film. and several short films were also given awards: *LULLABY* (1947) received the Gold Medal for Best Film for Children up to Seven Years of Age, *ONE THOUSAND MILLION* (1948) received the Silver Medal for Sports Films, and *MEN AROUND PRAGUE* (1948) won the Silver Medal in the Technology, Industry, and Labor category. What is more, *ABOUT A MILLIONAIRE WHO STOLE THE SUN* (1948) was awarded the Bronze Medal for Technical Innovation in Animation, while another animated film, *ANGELIC COAT* (1948), received an honorary award. Poland presented the feature films *THE LAST STAGE* (1947) and *BORDER STREET* (1948): the latter won a medal from the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. Produced during the first postwar phase of Polish Cinema, from 1945 to 1948, both *THE LAST STAGE* and *BORDER STREET* were anti-Nazi films that drew a connection between the atrocities of the Third Reich and the shift to Communism in Poland.⁵⁰⁾ *THE LAST STAGE* featured a cast and crew of Auschwitz survi-

48) Mario Verdone, ‘La Mostra del dopoguerra’, in Ernesto G. Laura (ed.), *Tutti i film di Venezia 1932–1984*, p. 13.

49) See Christina Schmidt, *Al di là del Muro. Cinema e società nella Germania Est 1945–1990* (Bologna: Clueb, 2009), pp. 22–24. Imbert Schenk, ‘Cinema tedesco (occidentale), 1945–60’, in Gian Piero Brunetta (ed.), *Storia del cinema mondiale. Vol. III. L'Europa. Le cinematografie nazionali. Tomo I* (Torino: Einaudi, 2000), pp. 654–655. In Italy this film was considered “tendentious and ruthless.” Verdone, ‘La Mostra del dopoguerra’, p. 13.

50) Cfr. Hendrykowska, Hendrykowski, ‘Cinema polacco’, p. 1398.

vors,⁵¹⁾ and was shot at the camp itself:⁵²⁾ its Venice screening helped to make visible the conditions that had existed in Nazi death camps.⁵³⁾

Except for Poland, none of the countries in the Soviet Sphere of Influence attended Venice in 1949. The Polish Embassy in Moscow requested information from the head of the fourth European Sector of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Stepan Kirsanov, about Soviet participation at various European International Film Festivals in Brussels, and Cannes.⁵⁴⁾ In his initial reply, dated 6 April 1949, the Soviet Minister of Cinematography, Ivan Bolshakov, stated that the Soviet Union would not be attending either Cannes or Venice, and had not even been invited to Locarno and Brussels.⁵⁵⁾ Within a week, the Romanian Embassy in Moscow had also asked to be advised on whether to accept an invitation to Cannes,⁵⁶⁾ and three months later the Czechoslovak Minister of Information and Culture, Václav Kopeckij, withdrew Czechoslovakia from both Cannes and Venice, after learning of Moscow's decision not to attend. According to a high ranking official at the Soviet Ministry of Cinema, Nikolaj Sakontikov, the actions of the Czechoslovak film industry had served to elevate a forthcoming film festival in the Czechoslovak town of Mariánské Lázně to the status of a genuine alternative to Cannes and Venice.⁵⁷⁾ Sakontikov's statement indicates that the division of Europe had also spread to the arena of the film festival.

The available documentation tells us something of the interaction of the Soviet Union and its satellites. Some of these satellites not only followed Moscow, but, on occasion, changed tack in order to do so, such as Czechoslovakia's u-turn on Cannes and Venice. This decision — coming as it did in the wake of success at Venice in 1947 and in 1948 — was in part down to the changing character of the International Film Festival at the Czechoslovak town of Karlovy Vary, which had shifted from promoting Czech nationalism toward pan-Slavism.⁵⁸⁾ By contrast, countries such as Poland chose to attend Venice in spite of their knowledge of the Soviet boycott.⁵⁹⁾ In the absence of documentary evidence it is difficult to explain why Poland attended this event in both 1948 and 1949. In the light of

51) See Stuart Liebman, 'Les premières constellations du discours sur l'Holocauste dans le cinéma polonais', in Antoine de Baecque, Christian Delage (eds), *De l'histoire au cinéma* (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 2008), pp. 193–216.

52) *THE LAST STAGE* is the first Polish film made after the war to be distributed internationally. It won the Crystal Globe at Karlovy Vary in 1948, and was nominated for a Best Film BAFTA in 1950. See Pierre Sorlin, 'La Shoah: une représentation impossible?', in Jean-Pierre Bertin-Maghit, Béatrice Fleury-Vilatte (eds), *Les institutions de l'image* (Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2001), pp. 184–185.

53) Germany under Soviet occupation presented *MARRIAGE IN THE SHADOWS* (1947), which is considered to be the first German film to examine the Nazi persecution of the Jews.

54) F. 2456, op. 4, d. 146, p. 110, RGALI.

55) *Ibid.*, p. 111.

56) *Ibid.*, p. 119.

57) F. 2456, op. 4, d. 146, p. 217, RGALI.

58) See Jindřiška Bláhová, 'National, Socialist, Global: The Changing Roles of the Czechoslovak Film Festival, 1946–1956', in Lars Karl, Pavel Skopal (eds), *Sovietisation and Planning in the Film Industries of Soviet Bloc Countries. A Comparative Perspective on East Germany and Czechoslovakia, 1945–1960* (New York: Berghahn Books, forthcoming 2013). I thank the author for allowing me to read this chapter in advance of publication.

59) Poland presented the feature film *THE LONELY HOUSE* (1949) and the short film *BISKUPIN-WYKOPALISKA* (1947).

the films presented, this country's participation can be seen as a celebration of the left-wing Polish underground movement of WWII. It is also possible that the will to build a new Polish "imagined community" based on communists' contributions to the liberation of the country, may have led the authorities to utilize the Venice Film Festival at this time.⁶⁰⁾

The responses of these nations demonstrate that the Soviet Union did not forbid its satellites from attending the festival. In fact, until 1949, Moscow allowed the governments of these countries to decide for themselves. These circumstances bring into question György Péteri's concept of Soviet "offensive integrationism" into East-Central Europe from 1947 to 1952.⁶¹⁾ In this sense, the International Film Festivals remind us of the extent to which the so-called Iron Curtain could at times also be described as nylon,⁶²⁾ thereby inviting us to think more closely about the nature of Moscow's influence over its satellites' film industries.⁶³⁾

From 1950 to 1952, none of the Soviet satellites attended Venice. However, it remains unclear as to whether their absence was a result of orders from Moscow or whether they made this decision independently. In 1953, a number of these countries — the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary — returned to Venice. Czechoslovakia presented the features *OLD CZECH LEGENDS* (1953) and *THE SECRET OF BLOOD* (1953), and several shorts, including the animated film *FREE ADVICE* (1953), which won the Grand Prize in the children's film section. Poland submitted a single feature, *CHOPIN'S YOUTH* (1952), and Hungary presented *THE RISING SEA* (1953) as well as three shorts. Italian critics were, however, drawn to the return of the Soviet Union, which ensured that scant attention was paid to its satellites' contributions to the festival. What is more, critics tended to group these films and those of the USSR into a single category derived from the educational motives that underwrote their production.

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60) See Dina Iordanova, Ruby Cheung (eds), *Film Festival Yearbook 2: Film Festivals and Imagined Communities* (St. Andrews: St. Andrews Film Studies, 2010).

61) György Péteri, 'Nylon Curtain — Transnational and Transsystemic Tendencies in the Cultural Life of State-socialist Russia and East-Central Europe', *Slavonica*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2004), p. 120.

62) *Ibid.*, pp. 113–123.

63) See Lars Karl, Pavel Skopal (eds), *Sovietisation and Planning in the Film Industries of Soviet Bloc Countries*. I thank the editors for permitting me to read this volume prior to publication.

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SUMMARY**The USSR and East-Central European Countries
at the Venice International Film Festival, 1946–53****Stefano Pisu**

This essay offers an historical reconstruction of the presence of the USSR and its East-Central European satellites at the Venice International Film Festival between 1946 and 1953. Venice provided an exemplary space for transnational negotiation in the bipolar Europe of the immediate postwar years. The Soviet Union perceiving this festival as a stage for political and ideological competition rather than one based on artistic and cultural merit. The dynamics of this relationship largely reflected East-West relations of the early Cold War albeit with some notable discrepancies, such as when the USSR, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary, and the Germany under Soviet occupation attended the festival in 1947. The 1953 return of the USSR and its satellites transformed Venice into an international space in which the first tentative steps toward peaceful coexistence could be observed.