

EISENSTEIN'S RUSSIA



by Ralph Berry

Nobody knows anything about Russia. This truism has the additional virtue of being true. Churchill said it best: 'Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.' But even Churchill suggested that the key to the mystery was Russia's national interest. That cannot be wholly right, since all nations make a similar claim which is as liable to be disproven by events. One has to search deeper for the key to Russian policy, and I prefer to take my bearings from Sergei Eisenstein. His films dramatize most memorably certain events in Russian history, but also point to motifs and themes that are easily recognizable today. We cannot expect exact analogues, but when Ivan the Terrible has trouble with the Boyars' Plot it is not difficult to see them as wealthy Russians today that have to be kept in some kind of order by the Tsar. This must take forms that are punitive.

Ivan deals with the problem by burning the houses of his enemies, the boyars, with Prokoviev's repeated 'burn' IF! IF! IFI Putin must make do with strangling the income of those dwelling abroad, especially in the fleshpots of London, where they are fixed by the need to give their children an education that guarantees them a high-level future.

It is now I am reliably informed, exceptionally difficult for well-placed Russians to get into Harrow, and all but impossible to Eton. The money is no object. The competition is.

Ivan strikes a great chord with Russia's eternal drive for territorial expansion. The Kazan ambassador is insulting to Russia, and the Tsar's response is 'Na Kazan!' There follows a sequence of toilsome advances by the Russian guns, with the music underscoring how grindingly difficult it is, until they reach the walls of Kazan. They shatter the walls and under Prince Kubsky the Russians charge the city and subjugate it. Kazan is today the capital of Tatarstan and part of the Russian union: The Tsar got there.

The larger political scene is filled in with Poland. Prince Kubsky is defeated by the Poles, and has to make humiliating oblations to their king. The Tsar has had to leave Moscow, and the Polish king sees a great opportunity.

'We will drive Russia out of Europe and into Asia.'

That is not a bad statement of Western policy today. The Poland-Ukraine axis is striving to make a difference. However, it turns out that Russia is far from unhappy with Asia and Africa. New friends, new economic opportunities, new political relationships—and yet the conventional wisdom still makes Europe the hinge of politics, with the EU an object of yearning adoration. The vanished world of 1947 holds its place in the minds of Europeans.

I turn to security. Ivan the Great discovered that he needed

a force that would do his bidding against the boyars, an insurgent group led by the Metropolitan. They are the oprichnina, a bodyguard devoted to the protection of the Tsar. In the film they show their worth by hustling away a small group threatening the Tsar. The oprichnina then put on a brilliant dance, in colour, before foiling a foolishly misjudged attempt at assassinating Ivan.

The enmity between Tsar and Metropolitan makes easy sense. It is Church versus State, the same conflict that cost Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, his life. That took just four knights, the same number that made it clear to the Metropolitan that his life would be over if he persisted in his defiance. 'Abolish the oprichniya!' he cries in vain. Tsar Ivan has the last word. Whatever his age, he is the paramount ruler who must never be checked or thwarted. He is Russia. And this is the situation today. Those who call for Vladimir Putin to be removed are dreaming. I have never seen the words 'oprichniya' in today's media, but a bodyguard devoted to Putin must exist and carries out the same tasks, with great competence. For understanding of Russia today, I would rather turn to a great cineaste than to correspondents filing reports from Moscow.