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A Catalogue of Russian Documentaries, 1907-1916

1997

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/15892>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Taylor, Richard: A Catalogue of Russian Documentaries, 1907-1916. In: Frank Kessler, Sabine Lenk, Martin Loiperdinger (Hg.): *Aktualitäten*. Basel: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern 1997 (KINtop. Jahrbuch zur Erforschung des frühen Films 6), S. 206–207. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/15892>.

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A Catalogue of Russian Documentaries 1907-1916

As part of the celebrations of the centenary of cinema, the Moscow based Museum of Cinema has collaborated with the Gosfilmofond Russian State Film Archive and the Russian State Archive of Cinema and Photographic Documents in Krasnogorsk to produce this catalogue of pre-Revolutionary Russian Documentary cinema.¹

The editors, Nikolai Izvolov and Galina Malysheva, are to be congratulated on producing such a scholarly work in such useful and accessible form. Each of the 2,689 entries gives the fullest details that can now be retrieved of title, genre, length, authorship, provenance, release date and place, contemporary press reviews, archival survival. The entries are arranged alphabetically year by year, which makes it easy for the historical researcher to locate materials that might be useful.

The catalogue was completed by the veteran Russian cinema historian Veniamin E. Vishnevskii (1898-1952) in 1947 and is here published for the first time. The editors have provided the reader with a clear account of the provenance and the history of the catalogue, its strengths and weaknesses, and of their own scholarly approach to their editorial task. Unenviable though that task may have been, Vishnevskii's must have been Herculean, not only for the 'normal' historical reasons, but also because in the Soviet period in general and the Stalinist in particular, research into pre-Revolutionary Russian cinema was actively discouraged, undermining as it did the propagandist Soviet notion that Soviet cinema came, as it were, like a bolt from the blue in 1917, and displayed no elements of continuity with the tsarist period whatsoever. It is small wonder that two of Vishnevskii's other catalogues, *25 Years of Soviet Cine-*

ma in Dates and Facts, and *The Fiction Films of Pre-Revolutionary Russia*, were, when published in 1945, both severely abridged but nonetheless remain vital historical sourcebooks.

It has for some years now been obvious that in the field of fiction film this view of pre-revolutionary cinema was wide off the mark. Thanks almost entirely to the pioneering research of the team led by the Latvian scholar Yuri Tsivian and published in English in his edited collection *Silent Witnesses: Russian Film 1908-1919* and his monograph *Early Cinema in Russia and Its Cultural Reception*², we now have a much fuller picture of cinema in tsarist Russia, and we have been able to rediscover the genius of Bauer, the flavour of early Protazanov and a host of other delights.

It is to be hoped that the Vishnevskii volume will mark the beginning of a similar rediscovery of the range of early film documents. In truth most of the films catalogued in this work are film documents, such as newsreel coverage of current events, rather than documentary films. The contemporary newsreel coverage of everyday events here brought to light can, of course, illuminate the historian's understanding of the everyday, but also of the way in which those mundane and trivial events impacted upon broader economic, social and political concerns. In particular the social history of Russia before the 1917 Revolution is now made more broadly accessible and comes to life.

This volume is to be warmly welcomed as a door opening onto a new field of cultural and specifically cinema history, and, on a broader canvas, to a new area of Russian social and political history.

Notes

1 Veniamin E. Vishnevskii, *Dokumental'nye fil'my dorevoliutsionnoi Rossii 1907-1916* [Documentary Films of pre-Revolutionary Russia, 1907-1916], edited by Nikolai A. Izvolov and Galina E. Malysheva, Muzei kino, Moscow 1996, pp. 288.

2 Yuri Tsivian et al. (ed.) *Silent Witnesses: Russian Films 1908-1919/Testimoni Silenziosi. Film russi 1908-1919*, BFI/Edizioni Bilioteca dell'Immagine, London/Pordenone 1989; and Yuri Tsivian, *Early Cinema in Russia and Its Cultural Reception*, Routledge, London 1994. For the latter see the review in *KINtop* 4, 1995, pp. 187-189.