HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

The Last Command 1928

Josef von Sternberg (1894-1969)

OVERVIEW

The Last Command (1928) is about a man reaching his zenith and his nadir. The Russian revolution turns a powerful Russian generalissimo into a poverty stricken émigré, who is dependent on unsteady work as an extra in Hollywood. The premise of dealing with a sharp downward spiral evokes Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950); whereas Norma Desmond makes her exit via one last (mock) filmmaking set up, the former Czarist general gets to portray himself in an epic recreation of the tumultuous times.

Source. The success of his previous two films provided von Sternberg a free hand for *The Last Command*. The story was written by Austria-Hungarian novelist Lajos Biró (*Hotel Imperial*, 1927; *The Thief of Baghdad,* 1940). For his story, Biró was nominated for the first ever Academy Award in 1929, but the Oscar went to Ben Hecht for another von Sternberg film, *Underworld* (1927). The title cards of *The Last Command* were written by Herman J. Mankiewicz (*The Wizard of Oz* [1939], *Citizen Kane* [1941]). Some rumors attribute the inspiration for the film to a real life character named "General Lodijensky" who purported to be a former Russian officer and appeared in several Hollywood productions that credited him as Theodore Lodi.

Russian Revolution. "I've made twenty Russian films, you can't tell me anything about Russia" yells the bossy assistant director in *The Last Command*. The film within a film is about the Russian Revolution. The years leading to the Revolution and its immediate aftermath have been a favorite subject for Hollywood and such films were not rare in the 1920s. *The Last Command* is one of films that represented the battles between the loyalist 'whites' and Bolshevik 'reds'; some of the other early titles are *The Cossack Whip* (1916), *The Tempest* (1928), and Cecil B. DeMille's *The Volga Boatman* (1926). This era was depicted in Russian cinema many times, among some of the noteworthy examples are *The Forty-First* (1956), *Two Comrades Served* (1968), *White Sun of the Desert* (1970), *Friends to Foes*, *Foe to Friend* (1974).

Stars. Former Czarist general who barely escapes death at the hand of Bolsheviks and flees to the USA is portrayed by German actor Emil Jennings. A character who falls from grace was no stranger to Jennings. He had played a proud doorman trying to cope with the humiliation of demotion—and loss of his majestic uniform—in *The Last Laugh* (1924, Murnau); he would have a chance to portray the two stages of a schoolteacher's tragic transformation in another von Sternberg film, *The Blue Angel* (1930). Between 1927-1929, Jennings made a number of silent films in Hollywood (some of these were lost). He won the 1929 (first ever) Academy Award for his performance in *The Last Command* (and *The Way of All Flesh* since that year's competition allowed multiple performances to be awarded).

The two revolutionaries are played by Evelyn Brent (the gangster's moll in von Sternberg's *Underworld*) and William Powell (*The Thin Man* [1934], *My Man Godfrey* [1936], *Life with Father* [1947]) as the Russian theatre director who becomes a Hollywood big shot. Reportedly, Powell hated working with von Sternberg and he subsequently made it part of his agreements that he would not be cast in the director's films (von Sternberg, 1965: 127). Jannings apparently had similar feelings but they obviously changed as he pushed for the name of von Sternberg to direct Germany's first major sound film *The Blue Angel* (136).

Unusual and Unsung. It is hard to categorize *The Last Command*. Its diverse themes include power, cinematic production, extras in filmmaking, mass media, representation and authenticity, war, and revolution; it offers an ambiguous perspective on subjects such as militarism, patriotism, love and desire. The main character has lost his status, but just as importantly, he is veteran traumatized by his experience during the war. *The Last Command* is, therefore, a prescient note about the condition that we

today refer to as post-traumatic stress disorder. Further complicating the film's reappraisal is the fact that its Oscar Award winner star's career trajectory ended with the German Denazification.

A contemporary review in 1928's *Photoplay* magazine underscored the film's success in representing filmmaking: "von Sternberg gives us in this picture, the best inside portrayal of studio activity that has ever been put on the screen; also, tremendously realistic background both in studio and behind the scenes on Russian front" (*Silents are Golden*). According to Charles Higham, "it remains the greatest of the late silent films, more sophisticated, daring, and pitiless than any other save [von Stroheim's] *Greed*" (Higham, 1974: 94). *The Last Command* was added to the preservation list of the National Film Registry in 2006 (*Library of Congress*, 2006).

Von Sternberg directed two more films for Paramount Pictures in the 1920s, his masterpiece *The Docks of New York* and his first sound film *Thunderbolt*. Then he went to Germany to direct *The Blue Angel* (1930).

CHARACTERS

Leo Andreyev. In 1917, Andreyev is the director of Kief Imperial Theatre and a revolutionary. Ten years later, he is an eminent director working in Hollywood. He recognizes his former captor and presumably to humiliate him, casts him to play the loyalist general in the epic.
Sergius Alexander. Former Czarist general barely escapes death at the hand of Bolsheviks and flees to the USA. He is reduced to poverty and is dependent on meager income as an occasional Hollywood extra. He gets to play his former self in a film directed by his one-time captive Leo Andreyev.
Natalie Dabrova. Determined and dedicated revolutionary is a theater performer. She plans assassinating General Alexander but falls in love with him when she realizes that he is a true patriot. After he is captured by the Bolsheviks, her ruse allows Alexander escape from torture and execution.

SYNOPSIS

Eminent film director Leo Andreyev browses the files of extras, looking for a fellow Russian émigré to play the part of a general. He has one of them fetched—Sergius Alexander, who happens to be a former Russian general. Flashback takes us to the days of revolution, when Alexander had crossed paths with Andreyev, who was a revolutionary, as well as Natalie Dabrova.

The general's train is ambushed and he is captured by the revolutionaries; Dabrova saves him, she dies when the train falls off the bridge. Alexander is traumatized—and hence ends up as an immigrant and an extra in Hollywood.

Back at the studio, Andreyev wants to reenact the events—he has now recognized Alexander. As the film crew prepares for the trench battle scene, a whip is arranged for Alexander, instructing him to use it on a disobedient soldier. The playing of the Russian anthem exhilarates Alexander and he totally loses his grip on reality. His awe-inspiring battle cry to the soldier/extras is ultimately too straining for his heart. Andreyev embraces Alexander, whose last words are "have we won?" The director assents and remarks solemnly that "he was a great man".

SCENES

1928, Hollywood. Surrounded by his assistants, film director Leo Andreyev browses the files of extras, looking for a fellow Russian émigré to play the part of a general. One of the photos surprises him and he tells his casting assistant to fetch Sergius Alexander. The man who claims to be the former Commanding General of all Russian armies (and Czar's cousin) comes to the set; he gets in line to get his costume and prop ceremonial sword. In the "bread-line," the extras' movement evokes a factory's conveyor belt.



Hollywood mogul (and former revolutionary) Andreyev 'inspects' the extras. Alexander is an odd character, he gets mocked by the other extras, who are amused by the military medal (Order of Saint Alexander Nevsky) he produces from his pocket. One of them is annoyed by Alexander's nervous head shake—a consequence of his war-time experience, he explains, and recollects memories of revolutionary Russia.



1917, Russia. A garrison town is awaiting the arrival of the General. The junior officers hope that he would just drive by, but General Alexander decides to stay and inspect the troops. Such scenes are proof that for this ambitious project, von Sternberg was given a blank check.



When the Czar makes his inspection, Alexander follows him closely as the most senior commander.



A theatrical troupe is in town; his adjutant informs the General that its members are known revolutionaries. Alexander decides to personally interrogate director Leo Andreyev and Natalie Dabrova. When Andreyev talks defiantly, the General slashes his face with his whip. The director is taken to the jail, while the actress accompanies Alexander to the headquarters.



Headquarters. General Alexander is enamored by Dabrova—who is considering assassinating him. His sincere patriotism and compassion for his soldiers impresses her; when an opportunity presents itself, she stops short of shooting him. Later, the General and his staff leave with a train and she joins him as his lover.



Planning at the General Headquarters is out of touch with the reality at the battlefield; while revolution is brewing, Grand Duke Alexander's adjutant and his staff officers eavesdrop on their chief flirting with Dabrova.



Revolution. At some unknown place, an "obscure" committee meets and decides that it is time to abolish the monarchy. A town in the itinerary of General Alexander and his staff is seized by the revolutionaries following a fierce fight with the local troops.



During the revolts, peasants are mowed by the heavy machine guns of the Imperial Army soldiers; Alexander's adjutant and entire entourage are summarily executed by the Bolsheviks. Dabrova takes over the control of the mob that captures Alexander—her ruse to save him by manipulating the mob to keep him alive is successful.



Alexander is dragged out and humiliated. While his entire entourage is summarily executed by the Bolshevics, Dabrova comes up with a ruse that ultimately saves his life.



She coaxes the mob to take Alexander to the city for a public execution. Accordingly, they force him to stoke the locomotive. A little later, when everyone is drunk, she sneaks into the locomotive. Dabrova gives back Alexander the pearl necklace he had gifted her, so that he could finance his escape from Russia. He jumps overboard, just before the train with Dabrova on board enters a collapsing bridge and falls to the canyon. Alexander looks at the wreck with glazed eyes and a head tremor.

Camera! Back to 1928's Hollywood. Leo Andreyev struts before a legion of extras dressed as WWI-era Russian soldiers. He spots Alexander among them and lets him know that he remembers the whipping incident from a decade ago. Andreyev plans to reenact the past for his own satisfaction and to mock the once-powerful generalissimo. As the film crew prepares for the trench battle scene, a whip is arranged for Alexander, instructing him to use it on a disobedient soldier.



Alexander is instructed by Andreyev before the shooting of the scene at the trenches; Alexander loses his grip on reality and thinks he is back in 1917— His awe-inspiring and patriotic battle cry to the soldier/extras is ultimately too straining for his heart.



The playing of the Russian anthem exhilarates Alexander and he totally loses his grip on reality. His awe-inspiring battle cry to the soldier/extras is ultimately too straining for his heart. Andreyev embraces Alexander, whose last words are "have we won?" The director assents and remarks solemnly that "he was a great man".

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Sergius Alexander – **Closed** (Imperious, Eagle-eyed, Bleary-eyed)
Natalie Dabrova – **Conscientious** (Determined and Shrewd, Selfless, Manipulative)

SERGIUS ALEXANDER

Former Imperial Russian army general is an aristocrat (a grand duke and the cousin of the Czar). Momentous events transform him from eagle-eyed to bleary-eyed.

Illustrative moments

Imperious. Imperious of necessity; after all, Alexander is the commander of Russian armies. In a scene, his orderly puts on the general's great coat and smokes his cigars; Alexander personally scolds and disciplines the envious private.

Compassionate. A key moment is the Grand Duke refusing to follow the orders of the Czar to carry out a suicidal attack. His determination to protect his soldiers impresses Natalie and she realizes that he is a true patriot.

Eagle-eyed. As a general, Alexander's penetrating eyes terrify his inferiors. Obviously nothing escapes him and his inspections are a nightmare for the troops. This is one facet of the dual nature of the character Emil Jennings plays.

Bleary-eyed. In 1917, Alexander was watchful and domineering; nothing of that remains a decade later, as he is humble, weary, and insecure. He walks around with a head tremor and bleary eyes. This second character is the polar opposite of his previous self. The fascinating aspect of *The Last Command* is that, the bleary-eyed Alexander gets to portray the eagle-eyed version of himself.

NATALIE DABROVA

Member of the Kief Imperial Theatre is a revolutionary. Initially, she plans to assassinate Grand Duke Alexander but eventually falls in love with him. Ultimately, she selflessly saves his life.

Illustrative moments

Determined and Shrewd. Dabrova's first scene is with Andreyev, they are looking at Alexander—at the height of his glory—inspecting the troops. "His days are numbered", Andreyev remarks with contempt and Dabrova affirms, "same as everyone dragging Russia down". She also tells him that they don't have the "luxury to be impatient" for revolution. They appear to hold equivalent positions as revolutionaries, but she is the more intelligent and level-headed one.

Selfless. Once she realizes that Sergius Alexander is truly patriotic, Dabrova not only falls in love with him, but goes above and beyond to save him from certain death at the hands of Bolsheviks.

Manipulative. Dabrova easily makes Alexander believe that she is genuinely interested in him. When he impresses her with his patriotism, she abandons the manipulative tactics. Later, when there is nothing to stop the Bolsheviks from lynching Alexander (they execute his staff officers right away), she single handedly devises a ruse to save him. Dabrova first seduces one of the local leaders of the revolt (who is important enough to carry a firearm) and then, the sentinel at the locomotive, whose duty is to keep an eye on the captive general.

THEMES

Politics – (Revolution, Power, Militarism)
Psychology – (PTSD)
Quest – (Representation and Authenticity, Filmmaking and Labor)
Appearance – (Identity and Deception)

POLITICS

Revolution. Russian Revolution is an important part of the plot and its representation is arguably ambiguous. A scene shows an "obscure" group of people, a revolutionary committee which has members that resemble Leon Trotsky and Joseph Stalin. The short meeting held in an unspecified location leads to a decision to start the revolution. The top cadre of revolutionaries is composed of shady figures and the whole setting looks rather sinister. They operate at a safe distance from the strife and signify puppet masters. The brief spotlight on the committee and its unidentified members implies revolution from above; then again, there are instances that provide an image of a widely popular revolt; these scenes show ordinary people who resent the monarchy and wholeheartedly embrace the revolution. Among examples are the locomotive drivers of the General's train that cheer the revolutionaries and the guard at the jail that saves Leo Andreyev from a brutal officer. It should be noted that these are common people, but not necessarily positive characters. These characters often willingly partake in the violence.

Power. Both the filmmaker Leo Andreyev and the Grand Duke Sergius Alexander are characters with tyrannical traits. Andreyev maintains absolute control at the set via his underlings. A hilarious scene shows him denying all but one of his assistants (evidently the designated and senior one) the privilege to light his cigarette. Similarly, the General is domineering and watchful. Then, there are the petty tyrants; in the 1928 episode, the director's assistant who bullies the extras provides an example and in 1917, members of the revolutionary mob obviously revel in their new-found power.

Militarism. The staff officers who are seen planning before a huge map appear to be indifferent about the conditions and problems at the front. Strict discipline and adherence to hierarchy causes farcical scenes, such as the garrison preparing for the General's arrival, or Alexander's staff officers eavesdropping on him flirting with Dabrova in the next room. The film within a film in *The Last Command* is an epic, but von Sternberg's film is not one—discipline and hierarchy are ridiculed; war and revolution emerge as gloomy subjects. Alexander himself is frustrated with the Czar's pointless warmongering and superficial demonstrations of power. He is a highly decorated veteran, but a decade later, his prestigious medal (Order of Saint Alexander Nevsky) is regarded as a piece of junk and makes him the object of ridicule.

PSYCHOLOGY

PTSD. With his glazed eyes, hesitancy, confused demeanor, and constant head tremor, Sergius Alexander is a decorated combat veteran who is suffering from trauma. Post-traumatic stress disorder has become a familiar term in the last few decades; in the 1920s, shellshock and war neurosis were corresponding concepts. The flashback sequence points to the train accident—and the loss Natalie Dabrova—as the most important cause of his trauma.

QUEST

Representation and Authenticity. The film that Leo Andreyev directs is about the last moments of the Czarist regime; it covers the same moment in history as the long flashback sequence of *The Last Command*. The scene that we get to see being filmed is the one that takes place at the trenches. Alexander plays himself as the Grand Duke; he is expected to react to discontent among the troops and restore fighting spirit. His performance mesmerizes the film crew because they consider it to be great acting. They neither believe that Alexander is (or was) the man himself—nor do they care. Representations need to conform to a certain standard of authenticity, which is not necessarily historically accurate. His fellow extras suspect that Alexander's own war medal (Order of Saint Alexander Nevsky) would be a pawn shop purchase. The assistant director arrogantly insists on having it displayed on the wrong section of the uniform—confident of his knowledge of authenticity because he "made twenty Russian pictures". The same assistant director is also not pleased with the fake beard of an extra playing a Russian soldier. "Looks like a cough syrup ad" he scorns the make-up artist. This domineering minor character serves as comic relief, but he also gives voice to a misplaced and meaningless concept of authenticity—which von Sternberg obviously finds ridiculous.

Filmmaking and Labor. The film opens with a title card introducing Hollywood as the modern Mecca. *The Last Command* is one of the first films about filmmaking and presents a detailed and accurate picture of the process. Numerous extras rush through the studio gate (dubbed "the bread-line of Hollywood" with a title card) and collect their costume and props; they are like factory workers and at the same time, items that are manufactured on an assembly line. Indeed, the depiction of Hollywood in *The Last Command* offers is of a factory (von Sternberg, 131). Efficiency is the main concern, functionaries are ruthless, and working conditions are oppressive.

APPEARANCE

Identity and Deception. All characters are acting in *The Last Command*: Dabrova appears to be interested in Alexander while she plans his assassination, he feigns being fooled and tests her resolve; junior officers try to sweep their mistakes under the rug, the watchful General puts on an imperious mask; Dabrova ultimately pretends to betray Alexander and then seduces a couple of Bolsheviks as part of her ruse to save his life.

There is a witty scene involving Alexander's orderly, which vaguely refers to Hans Christian Andersen's "The Emperor's New Clothes". This man has a habit of putting on the General's greatcoat and smoking his cigars. He is often caught and reprimanded. The revolution provides him an opportunity to settle scores with his commander (and grab the coat). Evidently, the orderly assumes that Alexander's imposing demeanor originates from his appearance (i.e. his majestic coat); it intimidates people and makes him

powerful. So he snatches the coat and wears it; next, he sets his eyes on the general's lover, Dabrova. To get to her, he attempts to bully one of the local revolutionaries. This man is unimpressed by the sight of the comic figure wearing a fancy uniform. The former orderly is shot right away and the coat is taken by his killer, who has a more realistic conception of power.

Discussion questions

At the finale, Alexander dies and Andreyev—who previously hated him—remarks that "he was a great man". What causes this transformation?

How would you characterize the representation of revolution and revolutionaries in *The Last Command*?

Is *The Last Command* anti-militarist and/or anti-war?

Why does director Andreyev pick and cast Alexander in the first place?

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