

Commissar

ALEKSANDR ASKOLDOV

1967

Aleksandr Askoldov thought that his film had been destroyed. He found it in a pile of rotting reels, in a bin. He told the New York Times in 1998, 'A woman said that she had been ordered to burn the film, but she decided it might be useful one day. I knelt and kissed her feet.' Fundamentally both the film and production of *Commissar* (1967) tells a tale of principle, idealism and sacrifice. Nonna Mordyukova, the film's lead actress, in a burst of emotion, described him as a genius. Mordyukova described his mental health struggles after his exile from Moscow and the film world, and outlined the tragedy of a genius traumatised. Unbeknownst to Askoldov at the time of filming *Commissar*, in strange ways, his own life would parallel that of his film's heroine.

In the first scene we meet her, Klavdia Vavilova shoots a deserter. Pregnant and indomitable, she defies the Madonna myth immediately. Respected by her troops, she swears, stomps and kills with the best of them. The idealisation of motherhood as something gentle, something that instantly defines a woman primarily as a mother, secondarily as a person, is instantly challenged by her character. Amongst the many fertile and challenging strands of Askoldov's film is the investigation of femininity and motherhood, one that would still challenge many of today's audiences. Throughout the film Vavilova is juxtaposed with Maria, the matriarch of the Jewish family that selflessly takes her in for her pregnancy and birth. Maria, with an unruly and lively brood, has honed maternal instincts. On top of this she is beautiful and kind, in many ways fulfilling a classic depiction of motherhood.

But her Jewishness and authentic depiction of it, was a challenge to a deeply anti-semitic society. She, as a character, reframed both offensive stereotypes and the fierce trials of motherhood. In one scene she describes childrearing in wartime to Vavilova, 'You think that motherhood is so easy compared to battle?' She picks up her children and washes them as though they were puppies, she delivers Vavilova's baby, and rises to the brutal and thankless task of raising a family through poverty, war, oppression and fear. After Vavilova's baby is born, on a tense night when the household await the White Army's march through their village, both women sing to their children. The traditional Jewish song, and the Russian folksong

merge into one beautiful harmony. Shots of the two women are interposed as they take on the unremitting duty of comforting. In this moment, the women for all their differences, both social and personal, dissolve. They are united in a universal and ancient maternal practice.

Vavilova begins the film as a cutthroat idealist, someone who believed fiercely in the utopian vision of communism that swept through regions, cultures and lives at violent cost. The belief in a better future ran so deep, the present was deemed inconsequential and the means were by whatever necessary. Undeniably she is changed, not just by her son's birth but by her time with the Magazanniks. They teach her the value of love, selflessness and an empathy that is individual, not just political. As the White Army storms their town, Vavilova hides in their bunker with the Magazanniks. Yefim, the charming father, expresses the Jewish plight: he and his family are forgotten by society and forced to participate in their wars. As the Magazanniks dance with their children to keep them from crying, Vavilova experiences a prophetic vision of the pogrom. In a subversive twist, when she makes the choice to leave for the front, this time it's not for communism but for the Jewish people. This subversion proved too challenging for the Soviet censors not only was anti-semitism rife, but no one critiqued the Red Army.

Plot aside, the film is visually stunning and inventively told. There are ethereal dream sequences and a surreal ten minute birthing scene that features legions of galloping horses. The mise-en-scene is rife with symbolism. It is rare that a film hangs together so perfectly, every aspect from acting to lighting in a perfect marriage.

Commissar, in the end, did receive its long overdue critical acclaim; Gabriel Garcia Marquez himself spoke to Mikhail Gorbachev to make a screening happen. Askoldov, for all of his bravery, never made another film. The film survived, but the artist did not. John Fiddler for *Senses of Cinema* aptly states: 'I can envision a happier ending: that Aleksandr Askoldov would make another film, then another, sharing his unique visual style, compelling moral perspective and rigorous aesthetic with a world too long denied them all.'