

Sherlock Holmes: The Bloody Inscription

IGOR MASLENNIKOV

1979

After the scene-setting of opening gambit *Acquaintance*, the classic Lenfilm adaptations of the Sherlock tales truly take off with *The Bloody Inscription*, which is based on Conan Doyle's 1887 story *A Study in Scarlet*. With Holmes and Watson now firmly ensconced in Baker Street, the viewer is whisked briskly into the intrigue, which centres around the murders of two Americans and the titular macabre message left in blood at each crime scene: "Revenge".

In an 1981 interview, director Igor Maslennikov, for whom the Sherlock series was a career breakthrough, pondered as to the popularity of the quintessentially English sleuth in Russia both pre- and post-revolution. "What is the attractive power of this fictional literary person Sherlock Holmes?" he asked. "What did he catch us with? What is the charm of this hero from short stories which frankly are of average literary quality, set in a past epoch and distant from us geographically?" Maslennikov described the character of Holmes that he encountered in Conan Doyle's work in paradoxical terms: a shapeshifter, but also a man who embodied reliability and loyalty in an otherwise cold world.

Whatever the precise reason, it is certainly true that Sherlock has long been a big name in Russia. After the publication in 1902 of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Russian audiences went mad for the detective, to the extent that publishers struggled to match demands, one printing over two million copies of its translations. Soon Sherlock had evolved a second life in Russia, with unofficial additions to the canon finding the sleuth, somewhat improbably, transported to Siberia.

Maslennikov's five-part television film series, which ran until 1986, is often cited as the most popular programme of its kind ever produced for Soviet TV – a true icon of the Brezhnev era's consumer-driven popular culture. There has long been a pronounced and very particular strand of Anglophilia in Russian culture, and Maslennikov – ably aided by his leads, the impassive Vasily Livanov and the stalwart Vitaly Solomin – tapped directly into that well of curiosity and

affection when he brought the detective to the screen.

Despite his sniffiness regarding Conan Doyle's literary capabilities, Maslennikov's adaptation is more faithful to the original texts than many English-language versions before and since. His ersatz replica of Victorian London – the series was filmed in Riga, presumably for its quaint city centre – is impressively evocative, from the Baker Street sign, to the period costumes, the London Bobby, the tea service used by Holmes and Watson, and the taxi carriages. The director freely admitted that he crammed as many widely-held Russian tropes about the English character as possible into the films; even the theme music by Vladimir Dashkevich was meant to recall the BBC World Service jingle. With time, Holmes' home country has begun to acknowledge the tribute paid to Old Albion by the series: fifteen years ago, Livanov was awarded with an honorary MBE by the British government, and next to the British Embassy in Moscow there are statues of both Livanov and Solomin in their respective roles.

Holmes ultimately solves the riddle of the *Bloody Inscription* (of course). However, credit for the case goes to Inspector Lestrade, the somewhat hapless Scotland Yard counterpart to Sherlock and John's freelance sleuthing. This injustice prompts Watson to take up his pen to document Sherlock's adventures henceforth: this quite literally is the Sherlock Holmes "origin story". Perhaps there is some clue in this narrative framing device that also helps to explain the ready adoption of the Baker Street boys by Russian audiences: that sense of frustration at being overlooked, at having one's intelligence go unappreciated, may well have appealed to Soviet audiences, who were raised to believe they had inherited the fruits of world culture, but for whom the kind of genteel sophistication represented by Holmes and the world of imperial London nonetheless felt distant and alienated. Whatever the ultimate reason for their affection, in any case, Holmes and Watson found a home away from their Baker Street home, as *The Bloody Inscription* makes clear.