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Film Programming in the USSR: A Case Study of Moscow Cinemas (1946–1955)

Kristina Tanis | ORCID: 0000-0001-5389-7761
Corresponding author
School of Philosophy and Cultural Studies, HSE University, Moscow, Russia
kristtanis@gmail.com

Anastasia Balykova
School of Philosophy and Cultural Studies, HSE University, Moscow, Russia
nastia.balikova@yandex.ru

Ivan Karnaukhov
School of Philosophy and Cultural Studies, HSE University, Moscow, Russia
ivan.karnauhov.99@gmail.com

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Abstract

This article presents a database on film programming in Moscow cinemas between 1946 and 1955. It outlines the place of this research at the intersection of new cinema history and academic debates on film distribution in the field of Soviet history. The article describes the data collection, the coding to present the data, and the structure of the database, which consists of the three datasets on Moscow film programming (1946–1955), Moscow cinemas (1946–1955), and the 1952 film calendar. Concluding remarks summarize the knowledge obtained from the database and introduce the Soviet case into the international context of digital data collections for historical cinema studies.

Keywords

film programming – database – USSR – Soviet film exhibition – Moscow cinemas

– Related data set "Film Programming in the USSR: A Case Study of Moscow Cinemas (1946–1955)" with DOI www.doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11109670 in repository "Zenodo"

1. Introduction

The ambition of film scholars to answer the question "What was cinema?" resulted in the emergence of a movement called New Cinema History. This research direction shifted the focus of analysis from film as a text to cinema as a form of social and cultural exchange (Maltby et al., 2011). As a consequence, scholars pay close attention to the institutional mechanisms of the film industry, the infrastructure of film exhibitions, and the cinema audience in spatial, temporal, social, cultural, and economic dimensions (Biltereyst et al., 2019). In his manifesto, Richard Maltby writes that "new cinema history is a quilt of many methods and many localities" (Maltby, 2011, p. 34). The proponents of this research movement use the methods of ethnographic research, oral history, memory studies, social geography, urban studies, and the digital humanities (Noordegraaf et al., 2018). The spatial perspective is realized as micro-historical studies, concentrating on the local cases of movie-going and exhibiting (Thissen & Zimmerman, 2016). Following in the footsteps of this research direction, this article introduces the Soviet case into the heterogeneous field of new cinema history studies.

The existing databases on Soviet cinema mostly belong to the field of traditional film history. They present data and digitalized sources, which might be useful in studying film narrative and the history of film production, cinematic style, and aesthetic codes. For instance, film scholar Yuri Tsivian created the database *Cinemetrics* to calculate a film's cutting rate.[1] The idea of the project derived from Tsivian's study of the Soviet film avant-garde, which is known for its rapid cutting rates. Eventually, the digital tool for analyzing the art of film editing has grown into an extensive and multifaceted database, which contributes to the global history of film style. The other databases covering Soviet cinema mostly present a digital repository of the films and their creators[2] or the scenarios and librettos of the early Russian films.[3] However, the processes of film programming and the practices of film screening in the

1 Cinemetrics. Movie Measurement and Study Tool Database. https://cinemetrics.uchicago.edu.
2 For instance, see the Russian version of IMDb – Kinopoisk Database. www.kinopoisk.ru.
3 Research Team Project 'Early Russian Film Prose'. Film Scenarios 1913–1917. https://hum.hse.ru/en/filmprose/scenarios/.

USSR remain underinvestigated. This article aims to fill this gap, presenting a database of film exhibitions in Moscow between 1946 and 1955. It follows New Cinema History's assortment of digital data collections and can be used for comparative research on the Soviet case with film programming in other countries (van Oort et al., 2020).

The mechanisms of film programming under a planned economy provide a particularly challenging problem. Some scholars have approached Soviet cinema in terms of political history. From this point of view, the centralization of the film industry and planned economy resulted in the ideologization of film programming and state management of audience demand. Vance Kepley writes about the emergence of a model in the 1930s "in which public access to cinema was increased while the choice of what to see was considerably restricted" (1996, p. 49). The transition to a planned economy caused a decrease in consumer sovereignty, that is, the correction of film consumption habits took place following the film production plan. As a result, Soviet authorities could manipulate the viewers' choice by regulating the period of film programming, print runs, and the release or withdrawal of movies (Turovskaia, 2010). For example, a Soviet film premiere printed in a high print run had a screening advantage over any foreign movie released in a limited run. As a consequence, it had a larger total number of viewers. According to the proponents of this totalitarian approach, film programming depended directly on ideological and cultural policy rather than on audience demand.

Neo-revisionist studies, in contrast, insist that the Soviet cinematic landscape was a heterogeneous and decentralized environment shaped by different actors. The centralized control was only at the level of film production, while distribution and exhibition were on the other structural level. Moreover, institutionally, they were managed by different branches: the Main Film Distribution Administration was responsible for film distribution (*Glavkinoprokat,* 1938–1953), while the Main Department of Cinefication (*Glavkinofikatsiia,* 1938–1953) covered the exhibition activity. Although both departments were under the Ministry of Cinematography's management, each institution had its functions and areas of influence. Glavkinoprokat was responsible for the printing, distribution, and promotion of film copies, while Glavkinofikatsiia had to maintain the technical support for cinema venues, expand the cinema networks (the so-called cinefication policy), and exhibit films to the public. Maria Belodubrovskaya argues that "Because of this dispersed industry structure, the party-state did not have a full grasp of distribution and did not mandate to theaters what to show" (2017, pp. 7–8). Our database on film programming in Moscow cinemas between 1946 and 1955 contributes to the neo-revisionist scholarship, highlighting two main components of the

profit-making mechanisms under a planned economy. Firstly, it illustrates that the launch of foreign movies could serve as an instrument to overcome the shortage in film production. Secondly, it illuminates the pragmatism of Soviet film distributors and exhibitors, even if it seems contradictory to the imperative of ideology (Puchenkina, 2022).

Throughout its history, the Soviet film industry has used film imports to fill the gaps in the cinematic landscape. In the 1920s, the state cinema administration purchased foreign films to compete with and ultimately eliminate private film distributors from the market under the New Economic Policy (NEP). For example, statistics indicate that Sovkino released 3446 foreign films for distribution in 1925, 4608 in 1926, and 5508 in 1927 (Iusupova, 2016; Tsivian, 1996). During the 1930s, the number of foreign films was so limited that scholars refer to this period as the time of cinematic autarky (Turovskaia, 2010). The emphasis shifted primarily to the Soviet model of 'Cinema for the Millions', which sought to produce and screen politically relevant masterpieces like *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *Chapaev* (1934). The Soviet-American alliance during the Second World War altered this trajectory as Soviet authorities procured and distributed approximately 30 American and British films between 1940 and 1945. Our dataset covers the postwar decade when in the Soviet distribution were around 130 so-called 'trophy films'. Confiscated as part of the German State Film Archive in 1945 by the Red Army, these movies of past vintages and mostly of German and American origins were projected in the USSR between 1946 and 1955 (Knight, 2017; Tanis, 2020).

On the one hand, the distribution of 'trophy films' helped to rebuild the Soviet film industry after the war, providing the Soviet state with a source of revenue. The ambition to produce only political blockbusters and the artisanal mode of film-making resulted in the 'film famine' or 'cine-anemia' (*malokartin'e*) (Belodubrovskaya, 2017). This was the policy of 'fewer but better films', aimed at reducing the number of produced Soviet movies to concentrate the industry's investment on the creation of masterpieces. Therefore, 'trophy films' supplied cinema networks with regular new titles against the background of the low output in Soviet film production (Turovskaia, 2015; Pozner, 2012). On the other hand, the launch of Western movies signaled the permeability of the Iron Curtain (David-Fox, 2014). In the first post-war decade, foreign films, including 'trophies' and those officially purchased, accounted for 56 % of the total number. The increased number of titles in distribution expanded the space for the manifestation of viewers' sovereignty. In addition, audience choice was embedded into the structure of the film exhibition.

Historically, the ambition of the Soviet film industry to use cinema both as a source of income and political education resulted in the coexistence

of two types of cinema networks: (1) a professional commercial network, managed by the cinema administration, and (2) the non-commercial actors of film screening such as trade unions, kolkhozes, fabrics, and other ministries (Kepley, 1996). Commercial cinema networks (mostly urban cinemas) were supposed to generate profits. They had priority access to film premieres and were hierarchized according to the run system, like in other countries. The functions of alternative networks were twofold: (1) project educational and propaganda films, exemplifying the concept of Soviet cinema as an instrument of enlightenment; (2) establish cinema venues in remote areas of the Soviet Union, thus developing the policy of cinefication (Kepley, 1994; Miller, 2006). The different actors in the film market were expected to complement one another, while, in practice, they coexisted in competition (Tcherneva, 2020).

It should be noted that our database includes data only on commercial Moscow cinemas. This limitation was due to the availability of information since the film program of alternative venues is a blank spot in modern historiography, and the sources by which it could be traced are not known to researchers at this time. The schedule for commercial cinema networks, in contrast, was widely advertised and daily published in the Soviet press. Since commercial state cinemas had to generate profit, their work was directly dependent on audience preferences. To make this statement visible, we consider their planning process and taxation system.

Under the planned economy, the financial plan for a cinema was built on the professional knowledge and experience of film exhibitors, as it included such hardly predictable elements as audience choices. The annual plan was calculated based on two main parameters: the throughput capacity of a cinema and the percentage of occupancy rate for the previous year (Kalistratov, 1948; Naroditskiĭ, 1947). The first parameter was built on not only the number of seats but also the ticket price, the number of screenings, and the cinema's working days. Those items were centrally set for each cinema depending on its type and characteristics (run, location, population, etc.). For instance, ticket prices depended on the cinema's run. In 1949, first-run cinemas charged between 3 and 6 rubles, second-run cinemas ranged from 2 to 5 rubles, and third-run cinemas charged between 2 and 4,5 rubles (Nashel'skiĭ & Zaĭonts, 1949). However, the second parameter, the percentage of occupancy rate, was based on the cinema's results in the previous year. In other words, if the report for 1947 showed that the average occupancy rate of a cinema was 70%, then the financial plan for 1948 indicated a similar or slightly overestimated occupancy rate. The very existence of such a parameter as the percentage of occupancy rate, the need to track it for each screening, and its inclusion in the planning process indicate that the choice of the viewers was embedded

in the mechanism of Soviet film exhibition. At first glance, it appears that it was not in the best interest of the film exhibitors to fulfill the plan, as it caused an increase for the next year. However, as the taxation system demonstrates, a cinema's earnings constituted the source of profit not only for the state but also for itself.

In the postwar years, a state urban cinema paid the following taxes: 55% was the state tax, paid to the city budget (the Moscow City Government or Mosgorispolkom in the case of Moscow); 18% of the gross box office was designated as a film copy rental fee for the cinema administration (17% after 1952); and 27–28% remained on the cinema's balance. These proceeds were used for employee salaries, technical maintenance of the cinema, equipment renewal and replacement, advertising, etc. Operating on a self-supporting basis, a cinema survived on financial resources after paying all taxes. The imperative to allocate most of the box office revenues to the city budget brought the cinemas under control by the local authorities, despite being part of the film industry structure. This was largely due to the history of film exhibitions in the USSR when the cinema administration expanded cinema networks by merging its own funds with funding from local authorities (Kepley, 1996). In the post-war years, such institutional composition contributed to the decentralization of the film market and led to the dispersion of control over film exhibition practices.

Therefore, the Soviet system of film distribution and exhibition had clear mechanisms of control over financial resources but not over film programming. The film programming, if necessary, was manually regulated through the release of special resolutions and decrees. For instance, to strike the balance between Soviet and 'trophy films', the Ministry of Cinematography released Special Order No. 127, dated February 15, 1949. It prescribed 'trophy films' to occupy no more than 50% of the overall screening time whereas the plan for 1949 was increased due to the distribution of these movies. Thus, film exhibitors should maneuver between governmental directives and filmgoers' choices to fulfill the plan. These observations framed our research and set the architecture of the final database presented in this article.

2. Methods of Data Gathering

The database on film programming in Moscow cinemas between 1946 and 1955 consists of three datasets: (1) film programming, (2) cinemas, and (3) a film calendar. If the information on film programming and cinemas reveals the practices of film exhibition and the volume of the state cinema park in

Moscow, then the recommendations for film screenings for Soviet celebrations refer to the ideological imperative (for instance, see the image of Joseph Stalin on the facade of the cinema Rodina, Figure 1).

The database includes chronological and spatial limitations. Firstly, the chronological framework of the datasets on film programming and cinemas spans from 1946 to 1955. It was due to the focus on 'trophy films', the majority of which were issued during the first postwar decade. The dataset on Soviet celebrations, however, spans only one year, 1952, since it is based on a source that reflects only a one-year timeframe (*Kino-Kalendar'*, 1952). The availability of sources is the main reason for the second limitation, which deals with spatial boundaries. The datasets on film programming and cinemas cover only Moscow. The Moscow-centered case was chosen due to the availability of the newspaper, its digitized form, and open access. At the same time, the dataset on the film calendar is based on the published recommendations to the Soviet exhibitors in general and might be used for studies on other Soviet cities.

The film programming dataset originates from film listings published in the daily newspaper *Vecherniaia Moskva* (Evening Moscow). This lifestyle

FIGURE 1 First-run cinema Rodina
PHOTO BY EMMANUIL EVZERIKHIN, 1945–1949. MULTIMEDIA ART MUSEUM, MOSCOW.

periodical has been published in the Soviet Union since 1923. It covered Moscow city news, from politics to entertainment. At the same time, the last page of *Vecherniaia Moskva* included a listing of movies screened in Moscow cinemas for the current or next day (see Figure 2). In addition, some of the data was collected based on the film posters discovered in the Museum of Moscow.[4] We looked through 3,025 issues of the newspaper and 13 archival documents to collect 46,320 records for the film screenings in Moscow. The dataset includes information on films (title, country of origin), the first day of screening in cinemas, and the number of screening days. We used the concept of a screening day as a basic timeframe for Soviet film distribution. According to professional literature, screening day was the day "accounted for by a projection unit if it projected at least one screening per day" (Kalistratov, 1948, p. 87). After recording the first day of screening, we counted screening days based on the daily published film listings. To help researchers identify a movie, we employed a unique identifier from the Internet Movie Database (IMDb). One of the challenges was identifying the foreign films that were

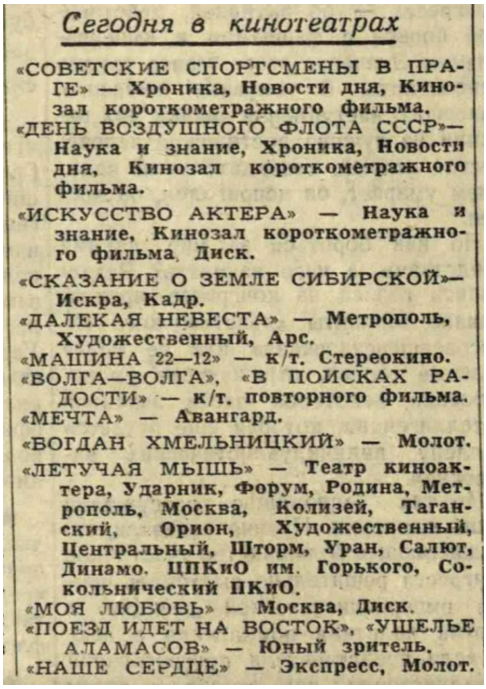

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FIGURE 2 An example of a Moscow film listing *VECHERNIAIA MOSKVA*, 13 SEPTEMBER, 1948. HTTPS://ELECTRO.NEKRASOVKA.RU/BOOKS/6165147

4 Archive of the Museum of Moscow: NVF-4081/1; NVF-4082/2, 3, 4; NVF-4247/1; NVF-4298/2, 3; NVF-4351/1, 2, 4; NVF-4352/5, 8, 12; NVF-4917/2.

screened under alternative titles. To manage this issue, we relied on the catalog composed by the archivists of the State Film Fund of the Russian Federation (*Katalog zvukovykh fil'mov*, n.d.).

The dataset on cinemas includes data on the cinema's name, address, run, capacity, and institutional affiliation. It is based on the annual reports of the Main Department of Cinefication, the Moscow City Executive Committee's Department of Cinefication, and the Ministry of Cinematography, discovered at the Central State Archive of the City of Moscow (TSGAM) and the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI).[5] The main difficulty in collecting data was that cinemas changed their run, capacity, name, and even address from year to year. Unfortunately, the archival sources do not always include the full range of information. As a consequence, when any of the data for a selected year was not available, we relied on information from the previous or upcoming year. We called this method reconstruction and noted whether the information was reconstructed or originated from the archival source in a special column.

The dataset on Soviet celebrations represents a copy of the 1952 film calendar in two different table forms (*Kino-Kalendar'*, 1952). The brochure contains a list of Soviet celebrations that took place in 1952 and films (both fiction and documentaries) recommended for projection on these memorable dates. There were three levels of celebrations in the Soviet Union: first-tier celebrations (the First of May, Lenin's Day, the Anniversary of the October Revolution), second-tier celebrations (International Women's Day, the Day of the Red Army), and third-tier celebrations (narrow-themed holidays, like Forest Day, or regional celebrations) (Rolf, 2013). The brochure contains only celebrations from the two first tiers. It also mentions the dates of Soviet leaders' births and anniversaries of the inclusion of Soviet republics into the USSR.

3. Description of the Datasets

- **Film Programming in the USSR: A Case Study of Moscow Cinemas (1946–1955) deposited at Zenodo – DOI:** www.doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11109670
- **Temporal coverage:** 1946–1955

5 Central State Archive of the City of Moscow (TSGAM): F. R-265, op. 1, d. 10, 14, 17, 19, 21, 23, 30, 36, 42; Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI): F. 2473, op. 1, d. 286, 345, 399, 477; F. 2456, op. 1, d. 2162, 2600.

The dataset on film programming consists of nine columns: 'cinema (ID)', 'first day of screening', 'screening days', 'title (source)', 'title (transliteration)', 'title (original)', 'IMDB id', 'country of origin', and 'source'.

3.1. *Film Programming, 1946–1955*

cinema (*ID*)	Unique identifier of a cinema
first day of screening	The first day of the film screening in dd/mm/yyyy format
screening days	The total number of screening days
title (*source*)	The title of the film, according to the source
title (*transliteration*)	The transliterated version of title (source) according to the Library of Congress system
title (*original*)	The original title of the film, restored according to IMDb, catalogs or other sources
IMDb identifier	The ID number that refers to this film on the IMDb. In the case of unavailability of an IMDb ID, the field is marked 'N/A'
country of origin	The code of the country of production (used ISO 3166-1 alpha-2 two-letter system). In the case of co-productions, multiple countries are listed
source	Source of the information on film programming (*Vecherniaia Moskva* or the Museum of Moscow)

The dataset on Moscow state cinemas consists of thirteen columns: 'cinema (ID)', 'cinema (source)', 'cinema (transliteration)', 'city, country', 'year', 'address', 'lat, long', 'run', 'seats', 'affiliation', 'comments', 'source', and 'reconstruction'.

3.2. *Cinema Theaters, 1946–1955*

cinema (*ID*)	Unique identifier for cinema, compiled of the first 3 letters of the city followed by 3 digits[6]
cinema (*source*)	The title of a cinema in the original language (Russian)
cinema (*transliteration*)	The transliterated version of cinema (source) according to the Library of Congress system
city, country	In all cases, it is: Moscow, SU

6 Since the cinema's data sometimes changes from year to year, the same cinema might possess different IDs in different years. To identify and track a cinema's dynamic over time, we also recommend paying close attention to its title, which is fixed in 'cinema (source)' and 'cinema (transliteration)'.

year	The particular year (from 1946 to 1955)
address	The cinema's address according to the archival source but transliterated based on the Library of Congress system
lat, long	The geographical coordinates (based on Google Maps)
run	The cinema's run. In the case of an empty field, the cinema falls under the category of 'specialized' and does not have any run at all
seats	The number of seats in the cinema in a particular year
affiliation	The institution managing the cinema in English
comments	Additional information about the cinema (type, venues, etc.)
source	The source of information about the cinema for a particular year. In the case of the unavailability of information, the record refers to the data of previous or upcoming years.
reconstruction	1 if any information for this year was reconstructed, 0 if the data is based on the source for a particular year

Since the film calendar represents a valuable source for dissecting both Soviet celebrations and film programming, it was decided to represent them in two subsequent datasets that can be used in comparison with and juxtaposition to our main database. These two datasets have the following structure:

3.3. *Film Calendar, 1952* (*first version*)

date	The date of the celebration in dd/mm/yyyy format
celebration_original	The celebration title, taken from the film calendar in Russian
celebration_translit	The celebration title, transliterated according to the Library of Congress system
celebration_translated	The celebration title translated into English
recommended_films	The films recommended for projection during celebrations in Russian / its transliterated version / in English
source	Source of the information on film calendar. (For all the records is *Kino-Kalendar'* (1952 [*spisok kinofil'mov, rekomendovannykh dlia demonstratsii v dni pamiatnykh godovshchin i vsenarodnykh prazdnikov*])

3.4. *Film Calendar, 1952* (*second version*)

The second dataset is a mainly transposed version of the first one, where the first four columns are the same. However, the list of recommended films is dummy-coded (1 if the film was recommended for projection, 0 if not). It is also supplemented with an extra row and a column (both named Total), where we can see how many times the specific film was recommended or how many films were recommended for a certain celebration.

Our database is stored in a tab-separated value (TSV) format. This format is easily transferred between any platform and programming languages and is easily readable.

4. Concluding Remarks

The database on the Moscow case study provides empirically validated conclusions on the Soviet film market. Firstly, the dataset on film programming shows that, in general, the Soviet system of film distribution was based on the principle of price discrimination, as it was in capitalist markets (Sedgwick, 2011). Similar to Western countries, a film premiere in the USSR was first released in first-run cinemas and then went down a hierarchical scale, maximizing profit at each level of the film screening. This fact expands the academic knowledge of the mechanisms and infrastructure of film distribution and exhibition in the USSR revealing that, despite anti-commercial declarations, the Soviet film market was also a profit-making environment. This conclusion is supported by our dataset of Moscow cinemas, which reveals a highly developed network of cinemas and the predominance of first-run cinemas during the postwar decade. Between 1946 and 1955, the network of state cinemas increased from 42 to 59, while first-run cinema theaters comprised about 50% of the total number (see Figure 3). Thirdly, the film calendar dataset serves as evidence that cinema might have been used as an instrument in the Sovietization of time and space. However, whether the calendar was used in practice can only be ascertained by further comparison of the film programming dataset with the dataset on Soviet celebrations.

This study bridges the gap between the digital turn in new cinema history and Soviet cinema. For the first time in historiography, the practices of Soviet film exhibitors were collected and systematized in a single database. The database on film programming in Moscow cinemas between 1946 and 1955 can

FIGURE 3 First-run cinema Kolizeĭ
PHOTO BY GEORGIĬ PETRUSOV, THE 1950S. MULTIMEDIA ART MUSEUM, MOSCOW

be used by researchers in different ways. The juxtaposition of the film calendar with film programming can reveal the relations between recommendations and the real practices of film exhibitors, as well as the involvement of cinema in propaganda in the USSR. For cinema historians, the film programming dataset is a tool to take a closer look at the Soviet patterns of film distribution, while further comparison of screenings of Soviet and foreign movies in the USSR might be used for the investigation of cultural transfers from a global perspective. Finally, placed in a worldwide context, the Soviet case could serve as a basis for further cross-comparative studies.

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