



Esfir Shub

Also Known As:

Eshter Il'inichna Shub

Lived:

March 3, 1894 - September 21, 1959

Worked as:

director, documentary maker, editor, screenwriter

Worked In:

Russia

by **Dunja Dogo**

Esfir' Shub was born in the town Surazhe in the Chernigovsky gubernatorate (which is now the Bryanskaya province), in the southwest part of the Russian Empire. By the mid-1910s, she settled in Moscow to study literature at the Institute for Women's Higher Education, where she got involved in the revolutionary movement that was becoming popular among young female students. In 1918, Shub started her career in the Soviet administration at the head office of the TEO Theatre Department of the Narkompros (People's Commissariat of Education) although she was originally hired only for minor secretarial tasks. Having a fascination for the theatre, she began collaborating with the stage director Vsevolod Meyerhold and the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and endorsed the manifesto for a renewal of Russian theatre written by the director Evgenii Vakhtangov. Together with the poetess Nina Rukavishnikova, Shub conceived a mass pantomime involving hundreds of extras that was to be staged at the Moscow circus in 1921. During her time at the Narkompros, she also collaborated on issues of the journal *Vestnik Teatr* and got acquainted with the Left Front of the Arts (LEF) group. LEF was an ensemble of artists with whom Shub would be associated till the end of the decade; its founder, Mayakovsky, became one of Shub's most vocal supporters when, in the mid-1920s, she turned her expertise to film direction. Later between 1928 and 1931 she took part in the artistic avant-garde group "October," considered to be the last constructivist collective of the century.

In 1922, shortly after Shub had become employed at the Goskino, the major state-owned film company, she was unexpectedly promoted to chief of the local montage division alongside another woman, Tatiana Levinton. At Goskino, in conjunction with another film company, Kino-Moskva, she underwent specialized training to teach her to excise politically incorrect portions of films in order to render them suitable for Soviet audiences. Re-editing and titling imported films for

domestic distribution, Shub developed a new style in designing documentary films. Due to the lack of production facilities and the limited supply of films from abroad in the early days of Soviet Russia, old titles were reissued, adjusted of course to Communist ideological principles, and Shub devoted herself to this major task. She completely reedited *Carmen* (1916), Charlie Chaplin's first film to be screened in Soviet Russia, and worked on a range of subjects from various American serials starring, for instance, [Pearl White](#), Eddie Polo, and Ruth Roland, to *Intolerance* (David W. Griffith 1916). She then progressed to cutting new films, until she joined Sergei M. Eisenstein in writing the shooting script of *Stachka/Strike* (1925), and coediting the "July Uprising" episode in *Oktiabr'/October* (1928). In 1923, at the third factory of Goskino, Shub worked on more than 40 films, including a long series in three parts, *Prikluchenie brat'ev bliznietsev/The Adventures of the Twin Brothers* (1924), which was released with many difficulties (RGALI Fund 3035).

After gaining expertise reediting pre-revolutionary and foreign productions as well as new Soviet features, Shub became, largely on her own initiative, a pioneer of the new Soviet documentary subgenre: the "compilation film." Her first accomplishment as a compilation director was *Padenie Dinastii Romanovykh/The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927), part of a trilogy to celebrate the rise to power of the Bolshevik Party. The film combined vastly different kinds of footage (old newsreels, amateur footage, footage shot by official cinematographers of the imperial family) recovered fortuitously from cellars, vaults, and closets of wartime cameramen such as Aleksandr Levitsky and Eduard Tissé, whom she interviewed when possible. Using restoration methods, Shub saved precious revolutionary footage that might otherwise have been destroyed. Here, *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* represents the second period in Soviet documentary cinema history following the earlier Dziga Vertov period. Thus a documentary work made entirely of archival material was contrasted with Vertov's celebrated "life caught unawares" poetics (Petric 1978, 434–443; 1984, 30–39).

Despite the official position that not one meter of negative or positive film on the February Revolution had been preserved, Shub recovered footage classified as lost. For *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* she inspected about 3 million feet in order to select 17,060 feet to be combined as montage (Petric 1978, 430–32). Her method, a minute study of formal elements, blending shots that had no strict causal or temporal relationship to make a precise political point, took further what she had learned from Lev Kuleshov as well as Eisenstein's theory of montage. Asserting fact over fiction, *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* was conceived as a *visual book of history*, meant to document the real Russian Revolution, which began in February 1917, not October 1917. Before the 10th anniversary of the February Revolution (March 11, 1917, in the old calendar), Shub discovered additional material in a huge package of films purchased from Eastman Kodak, found to contain intimate scenes with Lenin and a never-before-seen image of the dead leader, which she inserted in *Veliky put'/The Great Road* (1927).

Facing changes in mainstream cinematography with the advent of sound film at the time of Stalin's shifting politics, Shub changed her method, purposely stopping her meticulous work on archival material. Instead, she aimed for ultra-realism, employing newly shot material. Rather than just registering, she turned to creating while working on *K-SH-E* or *Komsomol/Leader of*

Electrification (1932), a long feature film in which she inserted shots of people looking into the camera lens, screwing up their eyes as they looked into bright arc-lamps. Never abandoning her profession of editor, she taught montage for Eisenstein's class at the VGIK Film Institute in 1933–1935. At the same time, she started a project entitled *Women* (1933–1934), which was never completed but was intended to demonstrate, as she wrote in her autobiography, that “only the proletarian revolution closed the account of ‘the history of the women question’” (Shub 1972, 286). Shub's script shows women as liberated by the Bolshevik Revolution from the proto-capitalist Russian system in which they were exploited both as objects of desire and as a working-class minority. Her idea was to use common women telling the story of their lives in front of the camera, but also fictional fragments, one of which depicted as a minor heroine an ex-prostitute who, after rehabilitation, became a shock worker within the Stalinist ranks.

Another important production was *Ispanya/Spain* (1939), a romantic account of the Spanish Civil War supporting the Republican cause. Here Shub returned to editing, combining captured fascist newsreels with the frontline camera footage shot by Roman Karmen and Boris Makaseyev. She continued her documentary work through the war years and into the late 1940s. In 1942, Shub left Goskino to become chief editor of the newsreel *Novosti Dnya/The News of the Day* at the Central Studio for Documentary Film in Moscow. In the last years of World War II, she departed from the objectives of Soviet propaganda to move to more socially conscious themes. Thus, her last completed project, *Po tu storonu Araksa/Across the Araks* (1946) criticized the terrible living conditions of Azeri people in Iran. Whereas in the 1920s Shub influenced mainstream Soviet directors, thanks to her ingenious montage of preexisting materials to create didactic and emotive effect, in the 1930s, she fell into disfavor with the government after Soviet ideology shifted. By 1934, she composed a few magazine announcements titled “I Want to Work,” but none of these was published, and after her death, they were filed at the Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts (RGALI) archive in Moscow (Roberts 1997, 44). One year later, however, Shub was honored as Artist of the Republic, and in 1937, while making the documentary *Strana Sovietov/Land of the Soviets* for the 20th anniversary of the Revolution, the state commission asked her to take on a new assignment—to honor Josef Stalin as head of the Bolshevik Party. This she undertook in *Strana Rodnaia/Native Land*, a chronicle of the first years of Soviet power ending with Stalin's addresses in 1936 and 1942 and completed for the 25th anniversary of the October Revolution.

Esfir' Shub's main legacy remains the establishment of documentary editing as principally creative in the effort to define the dramaturgy of the visual film form. As an editor and master in the silent era, heyday of the Soviet avant-garde, she established new theoretical principles of nonfiction filmmaking, but under the Soviet totalitarian regime, she suffered from indifference (Dunbar 1998, 388). In her memoirs, she describes numerous films that were either never made or that the government handed to lesser-known filmmakers who were favored at the time.

Bibliography

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Shub, Esfir' I. "Neigrovaia fil'ma." *Kino i kul'tura* (6 August 1929): n.p.

----- . *Krupnym planom* [In the Close-up]. Iskusstvo. Moscow, 1959.

----- . "Na postupakh k vtoroi piatiletke." *Proletarskoe kino* (28 March 1932): n.p.

----- . "Proidennyi put'." *Sovetskoe kino* (November - December 1934).

----- . "Vvodnaia zapiska." *Iskusstvo kino* (November 1960).

----- . "Vmesto predisloviia." *Iskusstvo kino* (November 1964).

----- . *Zhizn' moia - kinematograf* (My Life - Cinema). Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1972.

Archival Paper Collections:

Fund Esfir' I. Shub (no. 3035). [Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts](#).

Filmography

A. Archival Filmography: Extant Film Titles:

1. Esfir Shub as Director, Editor, and Screenwriter

Padenie Dinastii Romanovykh/The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty. Dir.: Esfir Shub, sc.: Mark Tseitlin (Sovkino USSR 1927) si, b&w, 7 reels, 5981 ft. Archive: [Russian State Archive of Cinema and Photo Documents](#), [Gosfilmofond of Russia \[RUR\]](#), [Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique \[BEB\]](#), [Cinemateca Romana \[ROB\]](#), [UC Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive \[USB\]](#), [BFI National Archive \[GBB\]](#), [Academy Film Archive \[USF\]](#), [Cinémathèque Québécoise \[CAQ\]](#), [Cinémathèque Française \[FRC\]](#), [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#), [Svenska Filminstitutet \[SES\]](#), [EYE Filmmuseum \[NLA\]](#).

Veliky put'/The Great Road. Dir.: Esfir' Shub (Mosfil'm USSR 1927) si, b&w, 10 reels, 5462.598 ft. Archive: [Russian State Archive of Cinema and Photo Documents](#), [Gosfilmofond of Russia \[RUR\]](#), [Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique \[BEB\]](#).

Segodnya/ Today. Dir.: Esfir' Shub, sc.: Esfir' Shub and Mark Tseitlin (Mosfil'm USSR 1930), si, b&w, 10 reels, 6762.139 ft. Archive: [Russian State Archive of Cinema and Photo Documents](#), [Gosfilmofond of Russia \[RUR\]](#), [Cinemateca Romana \[ROB\]](#), [Choson Minjujui Inmingonghwaguk Kugga Yonghwa Munhongo \[KPP\]](#).

Strana Sovetov/The Land of the Soviets. Dir.: Esfir' Shub, sc.: Esfir' Shub, Boris Agapov (Mosfil'm USSR 1937) sd., b&w, 8 reels, 6384 ft. Archive: [Russian State Archive of Cinema and Photo Documents](#).

Fashizm budet razbit/Fascism Will Be Defeated. Dir.: Esfir' Shub (Tsentral'naya Studija dokumental'nykh fil'mov USSR 1941) sd., b&w, 6 reels, Archive: [Russian State Archive of Cinema and Photo Documents](#).

Strana rodnaia/Native Land. Dir.: Esfir' Shub (Mosfil'm USSR 1942) sd., b&w, 9 reels, 7253 ft. Archive: [Russian State Archive of Cinema and Photo Documents](#).

Po tu storonu Araksa/Across the Araks. Dir.: Esfir' Shub (1947) sd., b&w, 6 reels, 4941 ft. Archive: [Russian State Archive of Cinema and Photo Documents](#).

Ot chistogo serdtsa. Dir.: Esfir' Shub, sc.: Esfir' Shub, Sergei Garin (Tsentral'naya Studija dokumental'nykh filmov USSR 1949) sd., color, 2 reels. Archive: [Russian State Archive of Cinema and Photo Documents](#).

2. Esfir Shub as Editor

Moroka. Dir.: Evgenii Ivanov-Barkov and Iurii Tarich (Mosfil'm USSR 1925) cas.: Tatiana Barysheva, Iashka Bukhalov and M. Kotel'nikov, si, b&w, 7 reels, 6167.979 ft. Archive: [Gosfilmofond of Russia \[RUR\]](#).

Gospoda Skotininy. Dir.: Grigorii Roshal, sc.: Serafima Roshal and Vera Stroeva (Goskino USSR 1926)cas.: Varvara Massalitinova, P. Tamm, M. Stepanov, N. Beliaev, Sof'ia Iakovleva, Nina Shaternikova, Nikolai Lazarev, Igor' Doronin, Galina Ivanovskaia, Nadezhda Borskaia. si, b&w, 7 reels, 6968.503 ft. Archive: [Gosfilmofond of Russia \[RUR\]](#).

Krilya kolopa. Dir.: Iurii Tarich and Leonid Leonidov, sc.: Iurii Tarich, Konstantin Shil'dkret and Viktor Shklovsky (Goskino USSR 1926) cas.: Leonid Leonidov, S. Askarova, Vladimir Korsh-Sablin, Nikolai Vitovtov, Nikolai Prozorovsky, Vasilii Makarov. si, b&w, 9 reels, 7007.874 ft. Archive: [Gosfilmofond of Russia \[RUR\]](#), [UC Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive \[USB\]](#), [Filmoteca Española \[ESM\]](#).

Prostituka/Ubitaia zhizniu. Dir.: Oleg Frelikh, sc.: Noi Galkin and Elizaveta Demidovich (Belgoskino USSR 1927), cas.: Vera Orlova, F. Iaroslavstev, E. Iarosh, Ol'ga Bonus, Ivan Lagutin, E. Sheremet'eva, Aleksandr Ledashchev, Oleg Frelikh, Mark Donskoi, si, b&w, 7 reels, 5905.511 ft. Archive: [Gosfilmofond of Russia \[RUR\]](#).

B. Filmography: Non-Extant Film Titles:

1. Esfir Shub as Editor

Ostrov ionych pionerov/Ionye pionery, 1924; *Prikluchenie brat'ev bliznietsev/The Adventures of the Twin Brothers*, 1924; *Pereval*, 1925; *Pervye ogni /First Fires*, 1925; *Abrek zaur*, 1926.

2. Esfir Shub as Director, Editor, and Screenwriter

Rossya Nikolaya II i Lev Tolstoi/The Russia of Nicholas II and Lev Tolstoy, 1929.

C. DVD Sources:

The Landmarks of Early Soviet Film (Flicker Alley US 2011)

D. Streamed Media:

Excerpt from *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927)

[*The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*](#) (1927) is streaming online via Kanopy

Credit Report

As reported by the RGAKFD Online Catalogue, only one reel (59.7112 ft.) of the trailer (released in 1929) for *Rossiya Nikolaya II i Lev Tolstoi/The Russia of Nicholas II and Lev Tolstoy* is extant. A search of online and paper catalogs of archives did not bring up any information on the documentary films *Idiot novaia Turtsia* (Turkey 1934) and *Moskva stroit metro (Moscow Builds the Subway/The Metro by Night)*, both directed and edited by Esfir' Shub. According to IMDb.com, *Abrek zaur* was restored in 1938 while in this [online Russian database](#), the film is

mentioned as restored in 1968. However, an archive holding the film was not found. According to the Gosfil'mofond and FIAF paper catalogs, the series *Prikliuchenie brat'ev bliznietsev* is not extant, but it is difficult to be completely sure since neither catalog is 100% accurate.

Citation

Dogo, Dunja . "Esfir Shub." In Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta, eds. *Women Film Pioneers Project*. New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries, 2013.
<<https://wfpp-test.cul.columbia.edu/pioneer/ccp-esfir-shub/>>