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Soviet box office films of the 1920s: to the question of film statistics

Over the past hundred years, a huge amount of scientific literature has been published about Soviet cinema of the 1920s, both in USSR, Russia and abroad. At the same time, data on the distribution of Soviet films of the 1920s in these publications are either absent altogether or very scarce. For example, for many years I could not find data on the attendance of the film "Battleship "Potemkin", and only this year in one of the rare editions (materials of the First All-Union Party Conference on Cinematography) - I found that 2.1 million spectators watched this famous film by Sergei Eisenstein during the first year of the demonstration in the cinemas of the USSR (Krinitsky, 1929: 18).

There is an opinion that it is impossible to compare films at the box office, since this is a changeable value over the years, while attendance is a constant value. However, is it possible to give at least one example when in Soviet times a film was the leader in terms of attendance, but at the same time it was not the leader in terms of box office receipts (naturally, in terms of one-two years of film distribution)?

Therefore, I believe that attendance and box office are closely related. And it is almost impossible to imagine that at any particular period of time (for example, the year of film distribution) a film was in the lead in terms of attendance, but was not included in the number of leaders in terms of box office receipts. So the most visited Soviet films, of course, were at the same time among the highest grossing films. Another thing is that if data on the attendance of many Soviet films exist, then data on their box office receipts are usually not available.

It is for this reason that the statistical data of the operational department of "Sovkino" (Sovkino, 1929) are of particular interest, since they contain specific figures not only for the production cost of almost a hundred Soviet films of the 1920s, but also for their box office receipts and percentages of the full cost of film production amount.

Plus, in the statistical data given in the materials of the First All-Union Party Conference on Cinematography (Krinitsky, 1929: 18), it is noted that the famous film "Battleship "Potemkin" was viewed in the USSR by 2.100.000 viewers; "Miss Mend" - 7.960.000; "Love Threesome" - 1.260.000 viewers" (Krinitsky, 1929: 18).

Based on these data of A. Krinitsky (of which, however, it is difficult to understand whether the attendance figures for the film "Miss Mend" are given per one part or for the entire film as a whole), I, firstly, supplemented the list of "Sovkino", and, secondly, I calculated the number of viewers according to the nine dozen Soviet films of the 1920s given in the statistical table "Sovkino" (1929).

The range of prices for cinema tickets in the USSR in the 1920s was quite significant - for screenings for an ordinary audience - from 25 kopecks to 2 rubles per ticket, depending on the time period of the 1920s, the status of the city and cinema, weekends, holidays) and 5 -10 kopecks for the audience of children's sessions (Boltynsky, 1929: 21, 214; Yusupova, 2016: 31 and other sources).

Taking into account that the vast majority of films from the "Sovkino" list (Sovkino, 1929) and the short list published in the materials of the First All-Union Party Conference on Cinematography were intended for an adult audience, when calculating the number of viewers, I used the following ratio, found when comparing these two sources.

The well-known film by A. Room "Love Threesome" ("The Third Meshanskaya"), according to "Sovkino", received 116.1 thousand rubles of cash profit (Sovkino, 1929), and, according to the data given in A. Krinitsky's report to the First All-Union Party Conference in cinematography, the same film, following the results of the first year of distribution, gathered an audience of 1.26 million viewers (Krinitsky, 1929: 18). Using this ratio between the data of "Sovkino" and A. Krinitsky for the film "Love Threesome", it was possible to calculate the approximate number of viewers for other films, the box office for which is indicated in the reference "Sovkino" (1929).

As a result, I compiled the following table (Table 1):

Table 1. Summary data on the distribution of Soviet films in the 1920s

№	Title of the film	Genre	Director(s)	Year of mass release	Cash revenue (in thousand rubles)	Approximate number spectators (in millions)
1	Miss Mend	Action	F. Otsep, B. Barnet	1926	?	8,0
2	The Poet and the Tsar	Drama	V. Gardin, V. Cherviakov	1927	435,0	4,7
3	Bear Wedding	Melodrama	K. Eggert, V. Gardin	1926	?	4,0
4	A Man from the restaurant	Drama	J. Protazanov	1927	253,5	2,7
5	Women of Ryazan	Drama	O. Preobrajenskaya, I. Pravov	1927	202,6	2,2
6	Battleship "Potemkin"	Drama	S. Eisenstein	1926	?	2,1
7	Captain's Daughter	Drama	Y. Tarich	1928	187,7	2,0
8	His Majesty's Soloist	Melodrama	M. Verner	1927	175,2	2,0
9	Ice House	Drama	K. Eggert	1928	171,6	1,9
10	October	Drama	S. Eisenstein	1928	168,9	1,8
11	Forty-first	Melodrama	J. Protazanov	1927	152,4	1,7
12	Asya	Melodrama	A. Ivanovsky	1928	152,2	1,6
13	Union of the Great Cause (SVD)	Drama	G. Kozintsev, L. Trauberg	1927	150,5	1,6
14	Land in Captivity	Drama	F. Otsep	1928	149,2	1,6
15	Girl with a Box	Comedia	B. Barnet	1928	142,2	1,5
16	Bulat-Batyr	Drama	Y. Tarich	1928	140,2	1,5
17	Bela	Melodrama	V. Barsky	1927	138,6	1,5
18	White Eagle	Drama	J. Protazanov	1928	137,8	1,5
19	Princess Mary	Melodrama	V. Barsky	1927	137,7	1,5
20	Victory of a Woman	Melodrama	Y. Zhelyabuzhsky	1927	137,7	1,5
21	Who are You	Drama	Y. Zhelyabuzhsky	1927	136,3	1,5
22	The Kiss of Mary Pickford	Comedia	S. Komarov	1927	131,8	1,4
23	Swirl	Drama	P. Petrov-Bytov	1927	131,1	1,4
24	Taras Trysililo	Drama	P. Chardynin	1927	131,0	1,4
25	Blizzard	Drama	Ch. Sabinski	1927	130,2	1,4
26	Two friends, a model and a girlfriend	Comedia	A. Popov	1928	129,7	1,4
27	Kastus Kalinovsky	Drama	V. Gardin	1928	127,3	1,4
28	A Cup of Tea	Comedia	N. Shpikovsky	1927	126,0	1,4
29	Forest Story	Action	Y. Tarich	1926	122,7	1,3
30	Wife	Melodrama	M. Doronin	1927	117,4	1,3
31	Parisian Shoemaker	Melodrama	F. Ermler	1928	117,4	1,3
32	Node	Drama	V. Shirokov	1927	117,2	1,3
33	Spartacus	Drama	E. Mukhsin-Bei	1926/28	116,7	1,3
34	Love Threesome (The Third Meshanskaya)	Melodrama	A. Room	1927	116,1	1,26
35	Poison	Detective	E. Ivanov-Barkov	1927	115,2	1,2
36	Anya	Drama	O. Preobrajenskaya, I. Pravov	1927	114,3	1,2
37	Descendant of Genghis Khan (Storm over Asia)	Drama	V. Pudovkin	1928	113,4	1,2
38	The Prostitute	Drama	O. Frelikh	1927	112,8	1,2
39	Zare	Drama	A. Bek-Nazarov, A. Danielian	1927	111,0	1,2
40	Sorochinskaya Fair	Comedia	G. Gricher-Cherikover	1927	109,2	1,2
41	My Son	Melodrama	E. Cherviakov	1928	107,2	1,2
42	End of St. Petersburg	Drama	V. Pudovkin	1927	105,6	1,1
43	Father Sergiy	Melodrama	J. Protazanov	1918	103,0	1,1
44	Gulli	Melodrama	L. Puch, N. Shengelaya	1927	101,9	1,1
45	Bumps	Melodrama	A. Room	1928	101,5	1,1
46	Such a Woman (Alien)	Melodrama	K. Eggert	1927	99,4	1,0
47	On the Rails	Melodrama	I. Khudoleev, A. Ivanov	1927	94,8	1,0
48	Salamander	Drama	G. Roshal	1928	94,1	1,0
49	Don Diego and Pelageya	Comedia	J. Protazanov	1928	90,0	1,0
50	Bag of the diplomatic courier	Action	A. Dovzhenko	1927	86,4	0,9

51	Jackals of Ravat	Drama	K. Gertel	1927	83,5	0,9
52	Second Wife	Melodrama	M. Doronin	1927	83,3	0,9
53	From under the vaults of the mosque	Drama	K. Gertel	1928	80,7	0,9
54	Turbine No. 3	Drama	S. Timoshenko	1927	77,0	0,8
55	The Seventh Satellite	Drama	V. Kasianov	1928	75,3	0,8
56	Cafe Fanconi	Drama	M. Kapchinsky	1927	74,5	0,8
57	Two armored cars	Drama	S. Timoshenko	1928	72,6	0,8
58	Doll with Millions	Comedia	S. Komarov	1928	71,0	0,8
59	Sar-Pige	Drama	O. Frelikh	1927	71,0	0,8
60	House in the Snowdrifts	Drama	F. Ermler.	1928	70,6	0,8
61	Two Hunters	Притча	A. Tsytsynava	1927	70,0	0,8
62	Khas-Push	Drama	A. Bek-Nazarov	1928	68,6	0,7
63	Right to Life	Drama	P. Petrov-Bytov	1928	66,1	0,7
64	Girl from a distant river	Drama	E. Cherviakov	1928	65,2	0,7
65	Evil Spirit	Melodrama	M. Gelovani, P. Barkhudarian	1927	64,2	0,7
66	Maxim Maximych	Drama	V. Barsky	1927	63,3	0,7
67	Nord-Ost	Drama	Ch. Sabinski	1928	61,6	0,7
68	Northern Love	Drama	A. Ivanovsky	1928	60,4	0,6
69	Sultry Prince	Comedia	V. Schmidtgof- Lebedev, A. Bognanov	1928	60,2	0,6
70	Strong	Drama	P. Malakhov	1926	57,6	0,6
71	The Third Wife of Mullah	Melodrama	V. Viskovsky, Y. Muzikant	1928	57,6	0,6
72	Arrest Warrant	Drama	G. Tasin	1927	56,3	0,6
73	Moscow in October	Drama	B. Barnet	1927	56,0	0,6
74	Shor and Shorshor	Comedia	A. Bek-Nazarov, A. Danielian	1927	55,9	0,6
75	Lace	Drama	S. Yutkevich	1928	53,1	0,6
76	In the Big City	Melodrama	M. Averbakh, M. Donskoy	1928	52,6	0,6
77	Chadra	Drama	M. Averbakh	1927	50,0	0,5
78	Zorro Sign in the Village	Comedia	B. Lagunov, B. Nikiforov	1927	48,9	0,5
79	Forest Bylaw	Drama	G. Krol	1928	48,7	0,5
80	Steppe Lights	Drama	G. Lemberg	1926	46,8	0,5
81	Not All Shrovetide for the Cat	Drama	K. Gertel	1926	45,5	0,5
82	Anxiety (Catastrophe)	Drama	A. Usoltsev-Garf, E. Petrov	1928	44,3	0,5
83	Brother	Comedia	G. Kozintsev, L. Trauberg	1927	42,6	0,5
84	Life Laughs	Drama	A. Usoltsev-Garf	1928	41,2	0,4
85	Mitya	Comedia	N. Okhlopkov	1927	41,1	0,4
86	Tan'ka- innkeeper	Drama	B. Svetozarov	1929	41,0	0,4
87	Leap	Drama	E. Ioganson	1928	37,3	0,4
88	Your friend (Journalist)	Melodrama	L. Kuleshov	1927	32,5	0,3
89	Lame Lad	Drama	K. Eggert	1929	29,5	0,3
90	Chinese Mill	Comedia	A. Levshin	1928	27,7	0,3
91	Happy Golden	Drama	A. Dmitriev	1928	27,1	0,3
92	Ivan & Maria	Comedia	V. Shirokov	1928	25,3	0,3
93	Khabu	Drama	V. Viskovsky	1928	24,7	0,3
94	Hero of the Blast	Drama	E. Ivanov-Barkov	1929	18,1	0,2
95	Rebellion	Drama	S. Timoshenko	1928	16,4	0,2
96	Vasilisa's Victory	Drama	K. Molchanov	1928	5,2	0,05

The table 1 "Summary data on the distribution of Soviet films in the 1920s" was compiled by cinematographer Alexander Fedorov. Source of box office figures: Statistics of the Sovkino Operational Department (Russian State Archive of Archives, fond 645, on. 1, no. 369). Source of audience data for "Miss Mend", "Battleship Potemkin", and "Love in Three Stars": Krinitsky A.I. Results of Constructing Cinema in the USSR and Tasks of Soviet Cinematography // The Way of Cinema. The First All-Union Party Conference on Cinematography / ed. by B.S. Olkhovoy. Moscow: Television Film Press, 1929. C. 18. Based on "The Bear's Wedding": Taylor R. Boris Shumyatsky and Soviet Cinematography in the 30s: Ideology as Entertainment for the Masses" / Film Studies Notes. 1989. № 3. Prokhorov A. Inherited Discourse: Paradigms of Stalinist Culture in Thaw Literature and Cinematography. SPb: Academic Project - DNA, 2007. C. 51.

Of course, the data of this table 1, alas, are far from completeness: they do not contain, for example, either the box office or the number of viewers for such recognized hits of the Soviet film distribution of the 1920s as "Aelita", "Cutter from Torzhok", "Red Devils", etc.

However, they give an idea that, contrary to popular opinion not based on facts, in the top ten grossing Soviet films of the 1920s from the list given in Table 1, the overwhelming number was filmed in the genre of drama (7), plus one action / adventure film and two melodramas. True, to a certain extent the dominance of the drama genre can be explained by the lack of statistics on box office receipts and attendance of such popular entertainment films as "Aelita", "The Cutter from Torzhok", "Red Devils", and others.

At the same time, S. Eisenstein's films "Battleship "Potemkin" (6th place) and "October" (10th place) managed to outstrip in box office such well-known comedies as "Girl with a box" (15th place) "The Kiss of Mary Pickford" (22st place), "Two friends, a model and a girlfriend" (26th place), "Don Diego and Pelagia" (49th place), "Doll with Millions" (58th place) and many melodramas.

At the same time, such famous films of the 1920s as "Love Threesome" ("The Third Meshchanskaya"), "The Descendant of Genghis Khan" ("Storm over Asia"), "The End of St. Petersburg" and "The Diplomatic Courier's Bag", based on box office figures and the number viewers, were in the range from 34rd to 50th place.

Statistical information of "Sovkino" (Sovkino, 1929) also shows that out of nine dozen Soviet movies of the 1920s, only 44 films were able to recoup the costs and / or bring profit to the production (to this are added "Miss Mend", "Bear Wedding" and "Battleship "Potemkin". Among the unprofitable films (they were also not very popular among viewers of the 1920s) there were, for example, such famous films as "Your Friend" ("Journalist") by L. Kuleshov, "House in the Snowdrifts" by F. Ermler and "Lace" by S. Yutkevich.

It is curious that, having received impressive (by Soviet standards of the 1920s) box office receipts, due to the high cost of their production, such famous films as "October" by S. Eisenstein (19% of the cost of the rental amount), "The End of St. Petersburg" by V. Pudovkin (58% coverage of the cost with the rental amount), "SVD" by G. Kozintsev and L. Trauberg (68% coverage of the cost with the rental amount), "Descendant of Genghis Khan" ("Storm over Asia") by V. Pudovkin (76% coverage of the cost with the rental amount) were unprofitable.

At the same time, let's not forget that in the 1920s, Soviet films had to face serious competition in the box office with Western (primarily Hollywood) production, but even under such difficult distribution conditions, the films "Miss Mend", "Bear Wedding", "The Poet and the Tsar" and "The Man from the Restaurant" managed to outstrip such foreign hits as "Variété", "Scaramouche" and "Three Musketeers" in terms of box office and the number of viewers.

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Appendix

A summary of the turnover of the rental of films. Statistics of the operational department of "Sovkino", 1929 (RGALI. F. 645. 1. № 369)

Soviet films	Full Film's cost (in rubles)	Gross revenue (in rubles)	% coverage of the full cost by the rental amount of Soviet movies
"Sovkino", 1926-1927			
Not All Shrovetide for the Cat	36848	45554	76
Steppe Lights	28860	46782	119
Love Threesome (The Third Meshanskaya)	51228	116077	170
Anya	83137	114340	103
Anxiety (Catastrophe)	16533	44352	201
Brother	36617	42593	87
A Cup of Tea	45934	126009	205
Turbine No. 3	71264	77006	81
Café Franconi	142322	74491	39
Union of the Great Cause (SVD)	164438	150516	68
Poison	108120	115247	80
On the Rails	68385	94802	104
The Poet and the Tsar	265418	435015	123
The Kiss of Mary Pickford	78000	131856	125
1927-1928			
Your friend (Journalist)	70899	32524	34
Wife	49285	117359	178
Swirl	78972	131079	124
Node	50871	117250	173
Blizzard	74812	130226	130
Women of Ryazan	74802	202599	212
House in the Snowdrifts	51108	70631	86
Two friends, a model and a girlfriend	78118	129681	124
Northern Love	51206	60432	56
Bumps	98655	101545	77
Parisian Shoemaker	67413	117373	130
Forest Side	73995	48743	49
Bulat-Batyr	196157	140234	53
October	655899	168888	19
Girl from a distant river	99066	65194	49
Lace	101957	53152	39

Sultry Prince	54782	60188	82
Chinese Mill	60932	27725	32
Khabu	77636	24729	23
Ivan & Maria	49239	25320	30
The Third Wife of Mullah	55480	57557	77
My Son	75215	107219	105
Asya	105992	152208	107
Father Sergiy	—	103037	—
Captain's Daughter	307640	187678	45
Kastus Kalinovsky	192579	127332	42
	1928-1929		
Two armored cars	149316	72586	36
Right to Life	91935	66072	53
The seventh Satellite	95896	75348	59
Life Laughs	47068	41164	65
Tan'ka- innkeeper	72878	40983	42
Nord-Ost	90236	61647	67
Leap	58762	37265	47
Hero of the Blast	106312	18075	12
Rebellion	12248	16396	10
	Mezhrabpom		
	1926-1927		
Forty-first	86082	152431	123
Girl with a Box	57407	142252	173
Victory of a Woman	90540	137702	106
A Man from the restaurant	146948	253460	120
	1927-1928		
Such a Woman (Alien)	89555	99375	77
Moscow in October	101056	55971	38
Who are You	95192	136269	106
End of St. Petersburg	127182	105605	58
Don Diego and Pelageya	52176	90020	120
Land in Captivity	88774	149202	117
Ice House	285825	171580	42
Happy Golden	54996	27057	30
A Person was born	—	—	70
House on Trubnaya	—	—	58
	1928-1929		
White Eagle	177611	137854	54
Descendant of Genghis Khan (Storm over Asia)	103636	113416	76
Lame Lad	—	29522	—
Doll with Millions	—	70959	—
Salamander	171581	94094	38
	Gosvoenkino		
His Majesty's Soloist	118330	175208	103
Strong	34275	57567	117

Goskinprom of Georgia			
	69353		
Princess Mary		137671	139
Bela	67877	138650	143
Two Hunters	69738	69959	90
Gulli	68639	101940	104
Maxim Maximych	30745	63344	144
VUFKU			
Taras Tryasilo	95064	130986	139
Sorochinskaya Fair	49264	109232	156
Mitya	41928	41082	89
Arrest Warrant	48656	56260	103
Bag of the diplomatic courier	39688	86450	163
Spartacus	43790	116705	200
Armenkino			
	60412		
Zare		110972	128
Shor and Shorshor	28987	55879	135
Evil Spirit	37766	64239	119
Kha-Push	—	68582	—
Uzbekgoskiino			
	48056		
Second Wife		83264	121
Jackals of Ravat	73455	83463	85
Chadra	32896	48980	104
From under the vaults of the mosque	93030	80690	68
Belgoskino			
The Prostitute	36364	112783	217
Forest Bylaw	83059	122694	103
In the Big City	28550	52647	129
Trudkino			
Zorro Sign in the Village	12279	48868	298
Chevashkino			
	66321		
Sar-Pige		71021	80
Foreign Movies			
Scaramouche	21644	190991	662
Three Musketeers	25635	142321	416
Second Wife	19262	138364	538
Variété		233391	767
Man and livery	21286		
Secretary of State's wife	23000	93210	304
Love and sport	16835	68634	305
Moral	9618	22405	174
	16648	95114	433

Source: RGALI. F. 645. 1. № 369).