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THE FILM “ALEXA DUNDIĆ” AS PART OF THE POLICY OF OVERCOMING THE CONFLICT OF THE FPR OF YUGOSLAVIA AND THE USSR

Abstract

Based on newspaper captions, the text deals with the film “Aleksa Dundić” (Russian: Олеко Дундич) shot in 1958 in co-production of the FPRY and the USSR. The author wants to point out how and to what extent the political reason of the moment in the relations between the two countries was paramount for its creation.

Keywords: *film, politics, Yugoslavia, USSR, Aleksa Dundić.*

Yugoslavia's relations with the Soviet Union experienced a radical turn after 1948. After the death of Stalin, an attempt was made to reconcile the ideological and practical political positions with Tito's meetings with Khrushchev in 1955 and 1956. However, throughout the existence of two essentially close regimes, they were in extraordinary contradiction regarding the way of building socialism and their position in international relations. Belgrade insisted on something the West called “national communism.”¹

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¹ There is an abundance of literature on this, from which I will highlight: Fingar, C. Thomas. 1999. Yugoslavia. From „National Communism” to national collapse. US Intelligence Community estimative products on Yugoslavia, 1948-1999. Washington: National Intelligence Council; Bogetić, Dragan. 2006. Nova strategija Jugoslovenske spoljne politike 1956-1961. Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju; Bogetić, Dragan. 2000. Jugoslavija i Zapad 1952-1955. Jugoslovensko približavanje NATO-u. Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju; Dimić, Ljubodrag.

It is known that film has been a powerful means of influence, because it strongly affects the consciousness, emotions and imagination of the viewer. This was noticed early on. From the original, according to many, bizarre “scientific invention” the film was suitable for fair attractions. For example, Edison considered it without seeing any new aesthetic form in it. But eventually film gradually turned into art, but also a powerful tool for influencing and shaping consciousness. All those who treated the film simply as a way to make theatrical performances more accessible to a wider audience were also wrong. That is why filming began early in different interiors and exteriors.² Even more wrong were those who believed the invention of film would destroy theater. Many predicted the end of painting with the invention of photography at the same time at the end of the 19th century.³

One of the earliest revolutionary steps in film is related to the American director David W. Griffith (1875-1948), who laid the foundations for film as a new art. At the same time, Griffith showed his ambition to express his political views in the monumental film “The Birth of a Nation” from 1915. This film dealt with the war between the northern and southern states of the USA in 1861-1865.⁴ Of course, war films have remained an unavoidable subject of numerous more or less successful film productions to this day.

The feature film “Aleksa Dundić” (Олеко Дундич) premiered in 1958 and was a production of two film companies, one from Belgrade and the other from Moscow. Actors and other artists from both countries took part in it, and it was filmed in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. Premieres were held in both countries. The film is basically conceived as a revolutionary biography of Aleksa Dundić. However, “Aleksa Dundić” is not just a biography, but a war film about the events in Russia from 1917 to 1920. The life of this person has been an enigma for a long time.

1999. „Jugoslovensko-sovjetski odnosi 1953-1956”, u *Jugoslovensko-sovjetski sukob 1948*, ur. Petar Kačavenda, 279-293. Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju; Петровић, Ненад Ж. Војна сарадња Југославије са Советским Савезом 1953-1964. године. Поглед из Београда, Београд: Институт за стратегијска истраживања. Мићуновић, Вељко. 1984. *Moskovske godine 1956/58*. Друго издање. Београд: Jugoslovenska revija.

² David Parkinson (2014), *Istorija filma*, Beograd: Dereta, 7-21. Edison did not patent his invention of the “kinetoscope” because he felt nothing would come of it. This misjudgment cost him dearly, so the Limière brothers overtook him in the invention with the first public projection of “moving pictures” on December 28, 1895, in Paris. (Parkinson 2014, 15)

³ The prediction that radio will be destroyed by the introduction of television turned out to be wrong. Today we see cinema screenings are in crisis, that there are no visitors except for the rare elderly, that the cinemas are mostly empty while the theaters are full.

⁴ David Parkinson (2014), *Istorija filma*, Beograd: Dereta, 22-26.

His real name is Tomo, but his name is Aleksa (known in Soviet literature as Oleko and Ivan). He was born in the village of Grabovac near Imotski (now Croatia, then Austria-Hungary) in 1896 or 1897 and died near Rovno in Ukraine on July 8, 1920. As a twelve-year-old, he went living with his relatives in South America, working as a cattle driver in Argentina and Brazil.

Returning to his homeland with the outbreak of the World War, he was mobilized in the army of the Dual Monarchy. In May 1916, he was captured in Russia and then joined the Serbian Volunteer Corps. After the February Revolution, he joined the Red Army. He was appointed commander at the headquarters of Semyon Budjoni's First Cavalry Division. He participated in numerous battles in which he was wounded. He was awarded the Order of the Red Banner. He became one of the epic figures of the Russian Revolution and Civil War. After the end of the war, his name was inscribed on the walls of the Kremlin together with other heroes of the revolution. A monument was erected to him in Rovno.⁵

"Aleksa Dundić" should be seen not only as a work of art but also as a tool within the new policy of rapprochement between two states and two similar regimes. Especially, after the years of conflict caused by Informburo resolutions in 1948 and 1949. It should be brought into the context of the time after the exchanged visits of Nikita Khrushchev and Josip Broz in 1955 and 1956. After a break of several years, cultural, educational and artistic ties were renewed, but with mutual suspicion of the other's intentions, especially from the Yugoslav side. It was constantly concerned about preserving "its own path in building socialism", which is why it feared "hegemonic" influences from the East. In the midst of preparations for the film, major social and political unrest took place in Hungary in October and November 1956, which may have slowed down, but still did not prevent the realization of the film.

Post-war Yugoslavia was distinguished by a very rich film production. A large number of plays and documentaries were recorded. Many of them achieved enviable success at international festivals. The first foreign co-production was the film *Bloody Road* (*Blodveinen*), which was made together with a partner from Norway and directed jointly by Radoš Novaković and Kåre Bergstrøm in 1955. The plot of the film is about the escape of captured Yugoslav partisans from a camp in Norway.⁶

⁵ *Српска енциклопедија* (2021) том III, књига 2, 721. Нови Сад-Београд: Матица српска, САНУ, Завод за уџбенике, 721.

⁶ Among the local actors, Yugoslav theater and film stars participated: Mihailo Bata Paskaljević,

Then, in 1956, the Franco-Italian-West German film “Mihail Strogov”, based on Jules Verne’s novel of the same name, was shot in Košutnjak. Although it was a foreign production without local actors, it is worth mentioning as the first experience in shooting foreign films in our studios and not by chance with partners from a nominally “alien” capitalist world.⁷ This was all an indicator of the cultural and business turn to the West. Therefore, the venture with “Aleksa Dundić” can be considered as a kind of “balancing” towards the East.

PRESS WRITING ABOUT THE PREPARATION AND RECORDING

The first hint about the film appeared in “Politika” on September 26, 1956.⁸ It has been announced that the film will be directed by the famous Soviet artist Leonid Lukov and will feature actors from both countries. The script will also be the result of joint work. After this, there was complete silence about this venture – during which time the screenwriters wrote and harmonized the script – until the spring of the following year. Then Borba informed the public on May 30, 1957, that a co-production contract had been signed with Avala Film. The screenwriters were listed as M. Katz, L. Lukov (also director) and Antonije Isaković. An actor was still being sought for the main role of Aleksa Dundić. The film was expected to be completed by the end of the year.⁹ However, the shooting did not start as announced and the press speculated who would be the main protagonist. Rade Marković was singled out as the most serious candidate and Branko Pleša as his rival in the film, officer Pavel Hodžić. It was pointed out that the film is being prepared as part of the celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the October Revolution.

Ivan Jonas, Milan Milošević, Antun Nalis and Milivoje Živanović. (The film and information about it can be seen on the YouTube channel.)

⁷ Information about the film can be found on the YouTube channel. Later, during the 1960s and 1970s, Košutnjak and the Jadran film studio in Zagreb were places where a large number of foreign and co-produced Yugoslav films with foreign partners were filmed. Thus, in 1962, in Zagreb, Orson Welles directed “The Process” based on Franz Kafka’s novel with Hollywood star Antony Perkins, famous in those years for his role in Hitchcock’s “Psycho.”

⁸ “Studio Gorki and Avala film are shooting a film about Aleksa Dundić.” (I am grateful to the Archives of the Yugoslav Cinematheque for this and other press clippings from the Yugoslav press on the subject of this film. They gave examples to me from their rich collection. – Author)

⁹ “The shooting of the film “Aleksa Dundić” will begin on June 15.”

It fell on November 7 of that year.¹⁰ As we will see, due to the delay in the realization, the film arrived in cinemas later.

Although the beginning of filming was announced for the middle of June, the work did not start until the beginning of July. The director from Moscow stayed in Belgrade, chose actors for test shoots and toured the grounds around the capital. It turned out that there were several candidates for the main role: Branko Pleša, Rade Marković, Predrag Pepi Laković and Ljuba Bogdanović. The director chose Pleša. The Russian protagonists Piletskaya, Konyukhova and Soloviev also arrived. Mass scenes of battles that historically take place in Ukraine were filmed in Glogonj and on the Pancevački rit.¹¹ Finally, when filming began on July 11 on the grounds in Banat, the news about it attracted the attention of several print media throughout Yugoslavia. It was emphasized that hundreds of extras participate in the mass scenes, which should depict the battles of the "reds" and "whites" in the steppes. Over 500 soldiers of the cavalry units of the Yugoslav People's Army were engaged for these needs. The role of Dundić's rival Hodžić was entrusted to Milan Puzić.¹²

With the end of filming in Yugoslavia, it moved to the USSR. There the work continued in exteriors in Crimea and Kherson, as well as in Moscow film studios.¹³

¹⁰ "Aleksa Dundić: Hero of the October Revolution", Večer, Maribor, June 17, 1957. The text is accompanied by a photo of Rade Marković. (It will turn out that Marković will not participate in this film and that Pleša took the lead role.)

¹¹ „Лав са срцем детета. Ускоро почиње снимање филма 'Алекса Дундић'", *Младост*, Београд 3. јул 1957.

¹² „Почело снимање филма 'Алекса Дундић'", *Политика*, Београд 12. јул 1957; „Снима се...", *Борба*, Београд 14. јул 1957; „Пре неколико дана почело је снимање Југословенско-совјетског копродукционог филма 'Алекса Дундић'", *Панчевац*, Панчево 20. јул 1957; С. Селенић, „Са снимања филма 'Алекса Дундић'. Био је то лав са срцем малог детета", *Борба*, 30. јул 1957. (Касније познати драмски писац и професор у извештају са снимања препричава да му је Љуба Тадић рекао како је на снимању пао са коња „комплетног идиота"); И. Б., „Снима се 'Алекса Дундић'", *Политика*, Београд 30. јул 1957; Блаženка Стејић, „Ујеран лик Алексе Дундића", *Ослобођење*, Сарајево 1. август 1957; П. Ђуричић, „Јединице ЈНА на снимању филма Алексе Дундић. Два доба на једном полигону", *Народна армија*, Београд 15. август 1957.

¹³ „Успомена на великог ђовјека. Екипа 'Алексе Дундића' завршила снимање у Панчеву и одлази у СССР", *Globus*, Загреб 31. август 1957; „'Алекса Дундић' на Криму", *Политика*, Београд 8. октобар 1957; „Прва Југослованско-совјетска копродукција. Алексе Дундић", *Slovenski poročevalec*, Ljubljana 21. октобар 1957; „Завршено снимање филма 'Алекса Дундић'", *Црвена звезда*, Београд 18. март 1958; „Снимајући у Москви", *Борба*, Београд 15. април 1958.

CRITICAL REVIEWS OF THE FILM IN THE PRESS

A feature-length film shot in color (which was still rare and expensive at the time), and especially a war theme with lots of mass scenes and spectacular shots of cavalry charging through the plain, with lots of pyrotechnics and shooting, had to attract the attention of both the audience and the critics. Of course, the very context that the film was designed as a contribution to the October jubilee. A suitable person was found who connects the history of two nations and also ideologically beyond any doubt. It was a participant in the civil war on the side of socialism was clearly ideological. The main actor, then a rising star, Branko Pleša, spoke about this most directly.¹⁴ Speaking about the film, he did not hide that political and ideological moment: "It is precisely because of this (that Dundić was one of thirty thousand "our people" in the forces of the Bolsheviks – N. P.) that our task is doubly difficult." We were reminded of that by Vice President Kardelj's greeting¹⁵ during the celebration of the 40th anniversary in October, when the name of Aleksa Dundić was mentioned alongside the names of the legendary heroes of the Revolution ... That's why the film about Dundić will be a monument to our hero on the screen. Not a monument to the iron-concrete hero, but to Aleksa Dundić the man."¹⁶

Finally, the film was belatedly premiered at the Festival of Yugoslav Feature Films in Pula.¹⁷ Apart from Pleša and Pužić, our actors in the film featured Ljuba Tadić, Stojan Arandelović, Dragomir Felba, Zoran Benderić and Viktor Starčić in the episodic role of a Serbian general. Among the Soviet actors, Tatyana Pileckaya and Tatyana Konyukhova had bigger roles. After that, a ceremonial premiere was held in the

¹⁴ Branimir Vjenceslav Pleša (Kiseljak, Bosnia and Herzegovina 1926 – Belgrade 2001), studied acting in Zagreb and Belgrade. He had his first professional engagement at the Croatian National Theater in the 1945/46 season. Since its foundation in 1947, he had been a member of the Yugoslav Drama Theater in Belgrade. Achieved a number of outstanding roles in theater, film and television. He also directed theatre, television and film.

¹⁵ Edvard Kardelj (Ljubljana 1910-1979) was then the vice-president of the Federal Executive Council, i.e. the Federal Government.

¹⁶ „Бранко Плеша у Београду: 'Да није било рата Дундић би био глумац'", *Борба*, Београд 11. децембар 1957. (The opinion about Dundić from the subtitle was given by Budjoni. It refers to the fact that Dundić resorted to, otherwise prohibited by the Hague Convention, disguising himself in the uniforms of the rival party. It enabled him to infiltrate the enemy's rear and perform spectacular actions. Some of those actions, of course with Hollywood exaggerations, found a place in the film.)

¹⁷ Љ. Радичевић, „Од свега по мало-од свачег по нешто. Филм 'Алекса Дундић' успела ко-продукција", *Вечерње новости*, Београд 23. јул 1958.

Uran cinema in Moscow, which was attended by the FPRY ambassador Veljko Mićunović and the staff of the embassy.¹⁸ From the premiere in Pula and then with the release of the film in a regular cinema screening, a series of texts followed that either merely noted the beginning of the screening or showed it critically.¹⁹ The fact that there was no formal premiere in Belgrade – where the Soviet ambassador and other dignitaries would have attended as the equivalent of the Moscow premiere – indicates the Yugoslav side wanted to downplay the importance of the film. They feared it would create the impression of overly great closeness to Moscow, which was constantly avoided.

Even though the film was a state project of foreign policy importance and as such imbued with the ideology of communism and socialist revolution, in the vast majority of newspaper reviews it was rated poorly, sometimes more moderately. Based on the watched film that can be found on the YouTube channel, we believe that these criticisms were appropriate. They ranged from the fact that the film is technically (directorially) well done, but the viewer does not get an answer to the basic question: who was Aleksa Dundić? No personality was visible from the heroized character.²⁰ This claim was completely contrary to what Pleša stated in his interview with "Borba." Criticism was unrelenting: the film is more like a western than a biography of a revolutionary. "But the way Dundić is portrayed here – a rider under whom three horses die during one battle and he remains almost unharmed; a gallant cavalier who easily penetrates the White Guards' ball; an adventurer who kidnaps the general of the interventionist army in the blink of an eye – that's Dundić to us. He looks more like a hero of cowboy movies than a serious revolutionary of the Red Army."²¹

¹⁸ „Премијера филма 'Алекса Дундић' у Москви”, *Политика*, 27. септембар 1958. In his memoirs, Mićunović does not mention the premiere of the film. In those days, he was preparing to return to Yugoslavia after two years spent in Moscow. (Mićunović, Veljko. 1984. *Moskovske godine 1956/58. Drugo izdanje*. Beograd: Jugoslovenska revija.)

¹⁹ Newspapers from smaller towns also noted the beginning of the show in their areas: *Панчевац*, Панчево 15. септембар 1958; *Наша реч*, Лесковац 31. јануар 1959; *Нанред*, Ваљево 28. фебруар 1959; *Народне новине*, Ниш 15. новембар 1958.

²⁰ S. G., „V kinu nam kažejo”, *Slovenski poročevalec*, Ljubljana 3. novembar 1958. The author writes that already the premiere audience in Pula as well as the critics welcomed the film with some restraint. („nekoliko zadržano”).

²¹ M. K., „Алекса Дундић”, *Дневник*, Нови Сад 11. децембар 1958. The film is similarly characterized in the review V. K., „Aleksa Dundić”, *Glas Slavonije*, Osijek 21. decembar 1958. (We cannot escape the impression that this film was an early hint of the partisan roles of Bata Živojinović and Ljubiša Samardžić. Basically building a character in the manner of Hollywood spectacular unrealistic characters e.g. James Bond 007.)

The remark was also that the role of the interventionist forces of the Entente remains a mystery to the average viewer and that the rival side ("whites") is depicted in a caricature. "Why the distorted individuality of the opponents, intoned with elements of caricature? ... "Aleksa Dundić" is not a masterpiece: it is at the level of similar Soviet works that demonstrate one style."²² The director made a typical action film that does not deal with the psychology of the main character. But the scenes of the "invulnerable" hero contribute to a simplified view of Dundić.²³ There is melodrama and pathos in the film, the character of Dundić is given superficially, but the mass scenes are excellently filmed.²⁴ The character of Dundić was conceived romantically and not as a revolutionary: "Whether this was done for commercial or other reasons is not clear. But there is no doubt that the emphasized romanticism certainly interferes with the portrayal of a strong October figure."²⁵

It is significant the strongest criticism came from "Borba", the central paper of the Socialist Union of the Working People of Yugoslavia. It states the film is a "revolutionary western": "This means that in it psychology has given way to action and realistic dramatic analysis to romantic pathos."²⁶ In the central Zagreb newspaper, it was also noted that: "Before the viewer's eyes, a wide variety of mostly spectacular scenes in color line up. From battles to gypsy dances, from aristocratic balls to love lyrics, from comic details to tragic death, this film spins before us like a somewhat strange kaleidoscope. But through all this, through the dynamics of the revolutionary ferment and through the director's effort to make the film as vivid as possible, it feels a bit like a rosy cliché."²⁷

CONCLUSION

We have nothing to add to everything stated in the evaluation of the film by the domestic press. The question remains whether such unfavorable writings were instructed by the political structures of the time. They may have in the meantime concluded they "stumbled" into a dangerous fraternization with Moscow, or that it was really the freely

²² Коста Васиљковић, „Пустоловна херонка”, *Студент*, Београд 16. децембар 1958.

²³ „Bioskopi prikazuju... Legenda o revolucionaru”, *Oslobođenje*, Sarajevo 21. januar 1959.

²⁴ Ђ. В. „Алекса Дундић”, *Црвена звезда*, Београд 16. децембар 1958.

²⁵ М. Ј., „Filmovi koje gledamo. 'Aleksa Dundić'”, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, Split 22. maj 1959.

²⁶ М. Милошевић, „Културни живот. Романтична прича о хероју”, *Борба*, Београд 10. децембар 1958.

²⁷ „'Aleksa Dundić'. Uspjela koprodukcija”, *Vjesnik*, Zagreb 14. novembar 1958.

expressed opinion of film critics. Also, we do not know how the Soviet press covered the film because we were unable to consult the sources there. In any case, during the period of the Second Yugoslavia – except for a short period from 1945 to 1948 – there were extremely few co-production films between the two countries, and far more with partners from various Western countries. Also, there were few films from the Soviet Union in the regular cinema repertoire. Films from the USA, Germany, Italy, France dominated... The Yugoslav public at the time was dominated by the belief that a system in which there are no basic civil liberties cannot produce any worthwhile artistic achievements. Films behind the "Iron Curtain" were viewed as propaganda projects, as unrealistic "paint coats." It was forgotten that even through films that openly show various social anomalies that affected (and are affecting) the countries of capitalism, propaganda also spreads in its own way. If nothing else, propaganda that "everything is possible" there and that these are "free societies."

NOTE: We note with regret that due to the work carried out in the Diplomatic Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, it was impossible for us to view the documents from the archive of the then State Secretariat for Foreign Affairs of the FPRY. In it (as we know from earlier research on other topics) there are reports from the Embassy in Moscow regarding this film and its political background. This work remains to be completed later with that data when it becomes accessible.

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