

# The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty (Padenie dinastii Romanovykh)

USSR | 1927 | 87 minutes

## Credits

<b>Director</b>	Esfir Shub
<b>Screenplay</b>	Esfir Shub
<b>Photography</b>	Alexander Rannie

## In Brief

The campaign for a montage style that preserved the intelligibility of film as a historical record was bolstered by the release of Esfir Shub's compilation film *The Fall Of The Romanov Dynasty (Padenie dinastii Romanovykh)*. Universally acclaimed, the film established Shub as a new type of documentarian, an editor-director. Made entirely of archival footage from 1913-1917, Shub's montage of historical documents was the result of countless hours spent poring over old newsreels, official film records and home movies of the Tsar's family and other dignitaries. Though not the first compilation film, *The Fall Of The Romanov Dynasty* is a cornerstone of found-footage filmmaking because of the director's aesthetic approach to the historical chronicle.

[Esfir] Shub's film, *Padenie dinastii Romanovykh*, is composed of spliced archive footage, which aims to show the iniquities of the Tsarist regime, the rise of popular unrest throughout the First World War and the final victory of the masses. After the exposure to countless TV documentaries and broadcasts using archive footage, a modern audience may view Shub's film as unremarkable and even boring. However, Shub's pioneering efforts in this field are remarkable. In her reminiscences, Shub recalled how she spent countless hours "opening" film documents which had lain forgotten or discarded in basements, cellars and cupboards, often unidentified as to the time, place and significance of the subject. She was even forced to track down films which had been sold abroad, and to watch hours of newsreel footage purchased from America in her attempt to find appropriate images.

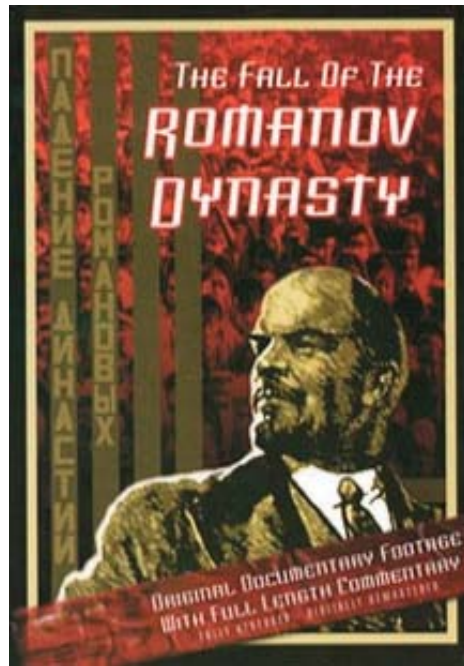
Previously insignificant or trivial scraps of film attain new importance within the sequence of Shub's editing. For example, a shot of a regional Tsarist governor and his wife sipping tea in their garden, while their bulldog gambols at their feet, becomes a scene of despotic cruelty when it is intercut with shots of peasants toiling in the fields. Shub overlays the film with lengthy intertitles and uses quotes from speeches, banners and declarations to link the film fragments and place them in an appropriate historical framework, so that the viewer is left little latitude to interpret events for himself.



*From [www.kinoglaz.fr](http://www.kinoglaz.fr)*

In May 1913 the Romanov Dynasty celebrates its 300th anniversary on the Russian throne. The last emperor in the long line is Czar Nicholas II. He rules over a country with huge social and economic differences. Russia is for the most part still an agrarian society, but capitalism and its industries are growing. In 1914 Russia gets involved in the First World War. Czar Nicholas II declares a general mobilization. A vast number of peasants and workers have to go to the front as soldiers. After three years the country is ruined by the war, and there is a shortage of provisions. In February 1917 workers begin striking in the capital, Petrograd. Their protests are soon joined by soldiers. Complete anarchy is threatening the country, when the parliament ... reorganizes the power structure by forming a new Provisional Government. At the same time the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies forms another ruling body at the City Hall of Petrograd. In this situation Czar Nicholas II sees no other possibility than to resign from his government. On the 4th of March 1917 he declares his abdication from the throne. The new Provisional Government and its war minister Kerensky continue the war. This presents an opportunity for the Bolsheviks to organize demonstrations and to persuade the workers and soldiers to overthrow the Provisional Government and seize power themselves.

*from IMDb, written by Maths Jespersen*



## Esfir Shub and Her Work

Necessity drove Esfir Shub to become a brilliant film editor in the years immediately after the 1917 Russian Revolution. In the early 1920s filmmaking resources were scarce, but film was a key modern art form and a crucial means of conveying information to people across the newly formed Soviet Republic.

Shub's work in the film industry involved re-editing foreign films, such as Fritz Lang's *Dr Mabuse* or trashy US serials, making them 'ideologically correct'. This was a key cultural role – in 1924 over 90% of films shown were produced in capitalist countries. Fritz Lang's film, for example, was converted into an anti-capitalist tale called *Gilded Rat*. The Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein watched Shub working, and learned from her. Shub found a politically viable solution to a materials crisis, and she learned how to montage films – editing together different camera shots for effect.

In 1927 Shub made her first independent documentary *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*. It was part of a trilogy on Russian history, reconstructing the past through newsreel footage and the home movies of the Romanov dynasty who ruled Russia before 1917. Documentary film of whatever type – news, industrial footage, home movies – could yield information about reality. Shub's compilation film showed the Romanovs at their summer home and carrying out duties of state, the carnage of war and Lenin agitating.

Much of the material had originally been produced to serve right wing causes, but Shub was able to skilfully redeploy the clips in a new context. In her first job at the film company Goskino, Shub met the filmmaker Dziga Vertov. He was also a documentary maker and, despite later debates between them, Shub considered herself his pupil. In 1927 she argued in the journal *Novyi Lef* that the controversy between staged and unstaged films – epitomised in the work of Eisenstein and Vertov respectively – was 'the basic issue of contemporary cinema'. She insisted that only documentary cinema could express reality, arguing that 'with great mastery it is possible to make a film from non-played material that is better than any fiction film'.

Shub criticised Eisenstein's film *October* as a distortion of history, because it restaged the events of the 1917 Russian Revolution using actors. However, Shub also ran into arguments with Vertov. She objected to his efforts to monopolise non-fiction filmmaking, insisting in a piece written in 1926 that 'different facts must reach the studio', not just those endorsed by the Futurist school led by Vertov.

Vertov deployed all manner of tricks and technical devices to emphasis cinema's role in mediating reality – not simply reflecting the world, but reconstructing it in film. In contrast Shub avoided playing with the material, tending rather to let the chunks of film run their course. The film material was of historical interest in itself and, she argued, did not need to be undercut and criticised through cinematic devices. Connections between events and their interpretation were expressed through her much less flashy style of editing.

Despite her criticism of other filmmakers – a product of the exciting culture of debate in the young Soviet Republic – Shub acted in solidarity with them as Stalin's cultural policy tightened its grip. In 1931, while filming in Mexico, Eisenstein was accused in the Soviet journal *International Literature* of 'technical fetishism' and other 'petty bourgeois limitations', Shub wrote warning him of the increasingly hostile climate and recommending his swift return.

She suffered too, denied authorial rights to her trilogy and demoted to simply an editor. The bureaucrats who now controlled Soviet filmmaking could not understand the transformation in the forms and division of artistic labour resulting from the revolution. They could not see that an editor – a hands-on worker in film – might usurp the traditionally more glorified role of director.

In her later years Shub joined a call for anti-militarist films to counter 'bourgeois war propaganda' in 1932. She worked on a few documentaries in the 1930s and 1940s on topics such as the building of the Moscow metro, the history of Soviet cinema and the fight against Fascism. She died in 1959, with the stimulating debates about cinema and cultural form a 30 year old memory.

*By Esther Leslie, Socialist Worker Online, from [www.kinoglaz.fr](http://www.kinoglaz.fr)*

In Soviet cinema, documentary film occupied a highly privileged position. As Maxim Pozdorovkin writes in his accompanying essay [with the DVD set], "Nonfiction film was recognized both as an art form and as source material for the writing of history." Many Soviet filmmakers blurred the line between feature and documentary; Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* and *October* provide only two of the best examples. In his ground-breaking *Man with a Movie Camera*, Dziga Vertov ... proved that documentary film could be exciting and artistic. ...

Esfir Shub (1894-1959), one of the few female directors in the early Soviet





film industry, had a less “activist” view of documentary than Vertov. Her masterpiece, *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927), is a “montage of historical documents” that she found in newsreels, official film records, and home movies of the Tsar’s family. For Shub, montage meant allowing the original footage to speak for itself without excessive formal manipulation. Because the footage she discovered is so emotionally revealing, exposing the amazing indifference of the Russian aristocracy to the squalor that surrounded them during the horrific slaughter of World War I, what emerges is a powerful documentation of “living reality,” as fellow director Vsevolod Pudovkin described it. The pace of the editing is slower, more deliberate, than in most other Soviet documentaries of the period, but the analytical message condemning the evils of the old regime no less incisive.

*From Cineaste magazine, Landmarks of Early Soviet Cinema*

### [Esfir Shub: Biography from IMDb.com](#)

Esfir Shub (1894–1959) was born into a family of landowners. She studied literature in Moscow, but after the Revolution she began to attend the classes at the Institute for Women's Higher Education and then got a job as a 'theater officer' at the State Commissariat of Education. In the theatre she worked in collaboration with the famous avant-garde director Meyerhold and the poet Mayakovsky, who was one of her friends. Shub joined the Goskino film company and met Dziga Vertov. Their professional friendship was lifelong, but stormy. Shub shared Vertov's belief in film's intrinsic ability to reveal aspects of reality not visible to the naked eye. But she became engaged more in the interpretation of the historical world than in only contemporary matters. First Shub worked as a re-editor of foreign films for Soviet distribution. In 1927 (the tenth anniversary of the Revolution) she made her first documentary film *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*. This film was the first part of a trilogy which also consists of *The Great Road* (1927) and *Lev Tolstoy and the Russia of Nicolai II* (1928). In the process of making the trilogy, Shub had to contend with not only an overwhelming volume of material but also the problem of locating relevant footage. She often found that valuable documents of the pre-war period had been sold abroad or had been badly damaged in ill-equipped newsreel archives. Shub compensated for the lack of material by using newly shot footage. Her films derive much of their power from this technique of providing a contemporary context for archival footage. Thus, Shub created the absolutely new genre 'historical compilation film'. She later claimed she just wanted to create 'editorialized newsreels'. Critics and colleagues admired Shub's work, because she found a middle path between narrative and documentary forms. But, like her other contemporaries, she was a victim of ideological prejudice against 'formalism'. Sovkino denied her authorial rights for her trilogy claiming that she was just an editor. However, in 1935 Shub was awarded the title Honored Artist of the Republic. In the beginning of the forties she collaborated with Vsevolod Pudovkin on the successful *Twenty Years of Soviet Cinema* (1940). Then she left Goskino to become chief editor of the *News of the Day* at the central studio for documentary film in Moscow. Most of her later years were confined to editing duties. Shub was definitely the most prominent Soviet woman filmmaker of her generation.

edinBURGH  
FILM  
GUILD

Silent Soviet Cinema