

Turksib

USSR | 1929 | 57 minutes

Credits

Director	Viktor Turin
Screenplay	Yakov Aron, Viktor Shklovsky
Photography	Boris Frantsisson, Yevgeni Slavinsky
Music	Zoran Borisavljević

In Brief

The perspective was entirely toward the future in Viktor Turin's *Turksib*, a surprise hit that engaged audiences and critics alike with its stirring chronicle of a central railway's construction — one bringing agricultural modernization and other progress to some of the nation's farthest-flung peasant outposts. It follows the building of a railway between Turkestan and Siberia and provides beautifully photographed images of traditional rural life.

Viktor Turin's *Turksib* (1930), which chronicles the construction of the Turkestan-Siberian railway, turned a Soviet industrial assignment into a dynamic film that became a popular hit with audiences. This edition dates back to an import prepared by British documentarian John Grierson...

From TCM.com

Resisting the character-driven narrative adhered to by the rest of the world's filmmakers, Viktor Turin formulated a grand, elemental drama centered around the struggle for survival in Asia, from the arid plains of Turkestan to the icy Siberian mountains. *Turksib* depicts the Herculean accomplishment of joining these distant and disparate regions by rail – an awesome monument to Soviet engineering that is also a satisfying spectacle to behold on a purely primal level.

From Kino Lorber Home Video



[Dziga] Vertov and [Esfir] Shub paved the way for the work of two other directors who took documentary in a more artistic, impressionistic, and even ethnographic direction: Viktor Turin and Mikhail Kalatozov. Both explored the remote and exotic territories on the southern fringe of the newly formed U.S.S.R., in documentaries produced outside the mainstream Russian studios. Both also celebrate the progressive mission of the Soviet government in bringing technological improvements to the lives of people whose lives had been virtually untouched by modern civilization. In *Turksib*, made by Vostok-Kino in Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan, Turin chronicles the construction of a new railroad linking the textile industry of southern Siberia with the wool and cotton producing regions of Kazakhstan. His treatment of the harsh beauty of the Kazakh steppe is breathtaking, its endless sandy expanses sculpted by the wind into weird abstract patterns. To illustrate the need for a reliable connection between the textile industry and its suppliers, he shows a long caravan of camels overtaken and submerged by a violent sandstorm. Pumping pistons and speeding locomotives provide the solution. Turin uses many of the same techniques (visual metaphors, striking informational graphics, allegorical montage) seen in other Soviet documentaries of the period, but with unusual taste and restraint.

From Cineaste magazine, Landmarks of Early Soviet Cinema

These programme notes, reprinted from the April 1933 bulletin of the Realist Film Association in Melbourne, Australia, were written for the screening there of the film written and directed by Victor Turin in 1928-29.

Turksib deals with one of the great achievements of the first Soviet Five Year Plan, the building of the Turkestan-Siberia railway to link the cotton fields of Turkestan with the granaries of Siberia. The film was released while the railway was still in construction, one of the purposes of its production being to speed the drive for completion of the project by 1930....

The film opens with a sequence showing the potentialities of Turkestan as a cotton-growing land. The whole Soviet Union needs the cotton of Turkestan, but its production is limited. The people of Turkestan must eat, so good cotton land and scarce water supplies are given over to grain crops. The remainder of the film is divided into five parts...

PART I emphasizes the problems of water supplies. It can be resolved into three sequences:

(a) In the parched fields of Turkestan men are hoeing and tending the irrigation channels. Cracked mud lies in the ditches; men sweat in the hot sun. Without water their work is in vain – there is nothing to do but wait. The workers in the fields, a panting dog, a baby, a calf, the machines in the cotton mill – all are waiting for water.

(b) But in the snow-capped peaks the snow is melting under the hot sun. The water flow increases in a gradual crescendo until there is a mighty torrent to supply the thirsty fields. As the stream enters the dry irrigation channels the workers spring to life and work frantically to control its flow. Hoes dig, water splashes and whirls, the cotton machines spin, in a frenzied rhythm. But there is only enough water for grain. The cotton must still thirst.

(c) It is necessary to bring grain to Turkestan: then the land will be freed for cotton – cotton for all Russia!

PART II also falls into three sequences:

(a) The economy of Turkestan is still primitive. Timber is scarce and fuel is sold by the pound. In addition to cotton growing, sheep, goats, and cattle are reared. Transport is by camels and mules.

(b) The desert land is fascinating and terrifying. The sands are silent and still until the wind stirs from the northeast. In a mounting tempo the movement increases until a camel train is caught and engulfed in whirling sand by the dreaded simoon.

(c) Suddenly the scene is transferred to the north – to Siberia. Horse-drawn sleds in the snow contrast sharply with the camels we have seen plodding through hot sand. In Siberia there are vast supplies of timber and grain, but for Turkestan the way is closed. It is necessary to break through.

PART III tells of the work of surveying the route. There are again three sequences:

(a) The surveyors, "the advance guard of the new civilization," blaze the trail by plane, motor truck, horse, and foot.

(b) In the huts of a nomad village, the people are asleep in the heat of midday. Dogs give warning of the approach of strangers. The children are first to investigate, but others emerge from the huts as a truckload of surveyors arrive. Doubt and suspicion give way to smiles and handshakes as gifts of food and drink are thrust upon the newcomers. There is momentary panic amongst the children and dogs when the motor-horn is sounded, then the survey party is off again, with an escort of tribespeople running behind.

(c) Back to headquarters in Alma-Ata, draughtsmen are at work on charts and plans. On a map of Turkestan, rivers, lakes, and desert areas appear, and a probing line representing the railroad seeks a way from north to south past or through all obstacles. 900 miles of steel will weld Turkestan to Siberia.

PART IV shows plans becoming reality. Again we find three sequences:

(a) Railway trucks or camels carry rails and sleepers to the base of operations. Under the hot sun, men work with pick, shovel and machine, thrusting out mile after mile of track.

(b) The way is barred by a huge rocky outcrop. While men and work-animals rest, and a steam shovel waits hungrily for its prey, the rocks are drilled to receive charges of explosive. Finally the obstruction is shattered and men and machines move in to the attack.

(c) Nomad tribesmen strike their tents and make their way from the furthest corners to see the new wonders. Somewhere along the track a group of nomads, mounted on camels, donkeys, ponies, and steers, cluster around a giant locomotive. They panic when it blows off steam, then when it moves off there is a glorious chase. But they have to admit defeat. A camel left at a curve in the track bows its head in acknowledgment.



PART V recapitulates what has gone before and leads up to a pulsating climax exhorting the completion of the railroad by 1930. The desert simoon and Siberian blizzard are defied, explosions rend the earth, sleepers are dumped, rails laid, rivets driven. With the coming of the railroad civilization breaks through. Education is brought to the previously illiterate desert people; new methods of irrigation and farming are introduced together with the new machines. The old herds are built up with new stock. A great future of increasing plenty for Turkestan and the U.S.S.R. is the spur which impels every worker on the railroad to help complete the immense project by 1930.

...Turin's achievement in Turksib is his organization of material. The great footage, covering a tremendous variety of subjects and ranging over a wide geographical area, could have become, in less skillful hands, a travelogue that would have left

its audience exhausted before half its length had run.

Turin's scenario and editing, however, have given the material a classical form and a rhythm that make it analogous to a symphony. After the introduction, *Turksib* is divided into five parts or movements. Each part deals with a separate and clearly defined aspect of the subject, but throughout the film there are recurring themes which help to intensify the total effect, at the same time providing strong continuity links. Each of the first four parts is divided clearly into three sequences, which are developed in such a way that the tempo rises gradually to a climax. The last part is a sustained whole, and is largely recapitulation, leading up to a rhetorical conclusion. It can be compared with the finale of a symphony.

Throughout the film, the control of tempo is amazingly exact, two outstanding sequences being the coming of water and the desert sandstorm.



Turksib contains hundreds of shots which repay study from the point of view of composition within the frame, but the shots are never held on the screen so that we become aware of their beauty in isolation; they are there only to fulfill their part dynamically in the integrated whole; the eye is assailed by a rain of emphatic images. The shots are bold and immediately comprehensible; significant detail is strongly emphasized; centralized or powerful diagonal patterns constantly recur.

Camera movement is never resorted to (as in so many films) to conceal inability to analyze and select the material. In *Turksib* the camera moves, as a rule, only to concentrate attention on moving subjects.

The main transition devices used are the cut and the fade. There are very few examples of dissolves or wipes, which in many films are used to dazzle the audience and conceal the director's lack of ideas. There are some dissolves which are used for a definite purpose, e.g., from an expanse of water to fields of cotton.

...*Turksib* was never intended as an instructional film to show "how precisely" a railway is built. Its purpose was to drive home the importance of the railway for the peoples of Turkestan and Siberia (and, through the sectors of the first Five Year Plan which depended on its completion, its importance for the whole of the Soviet Union).

From www.latrobe.edu.au