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Russian Films Take Spotlight in Finland

By Daniel Witkin

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Friedrikh Ermler's 1934 film "Peasants" works as a propaganda attack on the kulaks.

SODANKYLA, Finland — The Midnight Sun Film Festival in the Finnish town of Sodankylä has been welcoming Russian films since it was founded in 1986, with the help of Aki and Mika Kaurismäki, the country's most famous directors.

Last week, the festival, which takes place in the constant sunlight of the Arctic Circle and attracted 25,000 people, opened with veteran filmmaker Gleb Panfilov's classic 1970 film "Debut" about a provincial factory worker who falls in love with a married man.

"It is probably the best festival in the world," film critic Boris Nelepo said. "Literally everything here happens only because of love and passion for cinema."

Nelepo spoke before a showing of Friedrikh Ermler's 1934 film "Peasants." The film is a propaganda attack on the kulaks, the richer farmers who would suffer so much in the 1930s. Introducing the film, Nelepo told the audience "not to enjoy the film, but to find it interesting."

Set in a collective farm, it shows a deceitful kulak's attempts to undermine the farm. Set in a claustrophobic collective farm it features jarringly contrasting episodes, both murder and a goofy subplot about beards.

The founder of the festival, Peter von Bagh, showed his latest film, "Socialism," which mixes footage from Soviet classics, such as Sergei Eisenstein's "October" and Aleksander Dovzhenko's "Earth" to take a look at the ideology behind the Bolshevik state.

Von Bagh takes a humanistic tack towards his subject, enthralled by its aims but horrified by the gruesome outcomes. When asked if he believes in socialism, von Bagh said: "Yes, because of my background in a mental hospital."

In "Voice of Sokurov," Finnish director Leena Kilpeläinen looks at Russian auteur Aleksander Sokurov, whose "Faust" won the Golden Bear at Viennna film festival in 2011. Sokurov goes around many of his favorite St. Petersburg locations talking candidly about his struggles with state censorship and the film market. "We have great art, literature, philosophy — and with no results whatsoever," he says at one point. It also looks at his battles to preserve historic buildings and the film studio Lenfilm in his hometown.

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