

The Fires of Baku

(Ogni Baku, SU 1950; D.: Iosif Kheifits, Rza Tachmasib)

(Picture 2) This film about the heroic family of an old Baku master driller has a long history, but that is not unusual for the time, known as the “film hunger” of the later Stalin years. In 1947, Imran Ashumogli Kasumov, together with Rza Tachmasib, wrote the script about a Russian engineer drilling with great difficulty for oil in the Caspian Sea whose drill was eventually beaten by a younger man’s invention. The script was rejected for being too full of conflict and not reflecting enough of the political background of oil production; the Baku film studio instructed Kasumov to make a series of changes, which he refused to do, with the result that – at the behest of Moscow – a new script was written by Evgenij Pomeschchikov and Grigorij Koltunov that even included an appearance by Stalin. Apparently, Stalin himself had supported and pushed through production from the very beginning. In the end, well-known producers Aleksandr Zarkhi and Iosif Kheifits were commissioned to film the new script for the Baku film studio and the man behind the original idea, Rza Tachmasib, was listed in the opening credits as co-producer.

(Picture 3) The title, “The fire of Baku” refers firstly to the burning of natural gas that was unused at the time and secondly the word “fire” indirectly points to the fact that a majority of the film is set during the Second World War. Furthermore, fire is also a metaphor for the idea that this film represents, an idea that should continue to burn visibly, just like the flames on the oil rigs. The film begins in the 1930s, when drilling in Baku first discovered oil. The Standard Oil Company, to whom the land belonged prior to the revolution, immediately sent an envoy. Now, as the oil company’s clearly appointed management representative with tailored suit and cigar, he suddenly shows an interest in the land again. We are meant to infer from his performance that he has come directly from the oil fields in Iran and prior to that, from South America. This implies first of all that the company showed no interest in Baku when there was no oil here. Furthermore, the places that the representative has been to suggest that Standard Oil is a multi-national company that is involved anywhere business deals can be made, without patriotism or national loyalty. In the eyes of the target audience, this makes them a classic example of a capitalist.

(Picture 4) By contrast we see the workers who, we learn, live in Baku and have been involved with oil production for generations. What is more, oil is their collective property; they are highly motivated and capable of incredible feats of performance. Standard Oil's proposals to buy back their land and the oil are quite naturally rejected.

This scene very clearly defines the two sides: on one side, the foreign capitalists who are only interested in profit and on the other side the native Soviet citizens interested in the common good of the people. The film's action does not therefore focus on inner conflict, as it does in, for example, other Socialist Realism films in which the central character undergoes a learning process, but rather on a simple internal-external conflict, in which the film's protagonists, who otherwise live harmoniously together, are confronted with all the external problems. The main character is the master driller Ali Bala, presented to the viewer as the epitome of a down-to-earth, native worker, devoted to his job and his family.

(Picture 5) Some years later: Baku experiences an economic surge – indirect confirmation of the aforementioned willingness to work hard of its inhabitants and further confirmation that they were right not to hand over the land to Standard Oil. Ali Bala's boss informs one of Stalin's secretaries over the phone that Ali Bala is part of a delegation that were sent abroad to find out about other ways of extracting oil. As the international political situation is getting worse, all the stops are pulled out to get the delegates back quickly. The boss ends his phone call with the request to send a message to Stalin himself that the workers in Baku will continue their normal activity and will not disappoint him. On the one hand, this is a variation of the oath to Stalin that was usual at the time. On the other hand, it shows that it is not a party organ or another superior who is informed, but rather Stalin himself, a leitmotif of the whole film: Stalin is synonymous with the state. Whenever Stalin is mentioned it is intended to represent a style of leadership that encompasses all areas of life.

(Picture 6) The film cuts from this party official in his modest office in Baku, concerned for the common good of his workers, directly to a hotel in Romania, at the time linked with Nazi Germany. It is presented as typically Western, with striking details such as glittering neon signs, Art Deco furnishings and dance music – quite the opposite of the Baku townscape, underscored with Soviet marching music and dominated by a giant statue of Kirov. The scene is set in an elegantly decorated hotel bar – even in Western films this often implies a decadent, hedonistic society and dubious practices. The workplaces and modest private homes

of the protagonists in their Soviet homeland stand in clear contrast to this. This highlights once again that they were right not to let Standard Oil take Baku, as the Nazi Germans and American businessmen in the bar act as if the Americans have no scruples about granting fascists something if it serves them to do so. The message is that who knows what Baku's fate would have been in these conditions.

In the bar, but clearly separate from the Americans and Germans, the Soviet delegation sits at a table, including the worker Ali Bala. The opening dialogue makes it unmistakably clear that the group is not here to have fun but simply to have an evening meal together. We learn from their conversation that Romania's fascist government is now working together with Nazi Germany. The oil there that had been originally tapped and produced by the English is now being used by the Germans to fund war in Europe – including bombing English cities. Here the saying appears that a capitalist would sell the rope that will later hang him and it is stressed once again that the Western capitalist would join forces with the devil if it would make a profit.

(Picture 7) On this evening, the Soviet delegates run into Garcia, their South American colleague. Given the events in Romania he comes to the conclusion that everything must be done to use oil for the benefit of the country where it originates so that the residents are happy and satisfied and have no reason to wage wars. He is going to advocate for this with all his might in his South American republic, the name of which is not specified in the film. In this conversation we also learn that another delegate, the Russian engineer Shatrov, has invented a new type of drill that is supposed to be more powerful than any other.

(Picture 8) Back in Baku we see this engineer testing this drill with young local workers and further improving it. A British plane flies overhead with Churchill in it, smoking his fat cigar, clearly characterised as a capitalist. He looks out of the window and says that, for security, British troops should be deployed in Baku. To do this he will need to outwit Stalin. His secretary shakes his head and asks whether he really believes that Stalin will be taken in. This introduces another stylistic device central to the film: the secretary is a smartly dressed employee that seems to have an intuitive link to Stalin. In other words: even people working in other countries understand Stalin and his intentions. This encourages the reverse conclusion that Stalin understands them as well and acts in their interest.

(Picture 9) It is now 1943 in the film. Ali Bala's seven sons are off fighting in the war, one has been killed. We see young workers in Baku falling over to be allowed to go to war so they can defend the Soviet homeland. They represent the new Soviet people in a fully developed Communist society, ready to bear every sacrifice.

(Picture 10) Shortly afterwards, Stalin arrives in the Azerbaijani capital, stopping off on a journey to a conference in Tehran. In the car that collects him from the train station he remembers his time in a local prison. Here the film picks up on common contemporary Stalin myths about his stay in revolutionary Baku in 1904. At the same time, Ali Bala sits at home, deep in contemplation of a famous oil painting that Stalin shows to the top revolutionary workers and farmers. He claims, to his wife's great pride, that he is one of the men in the painting. Naturally he and his wife assume that Stalin is too busy to remember him. Straight away we then see Stalin in the car, asking himself at that very moment what became of good old Ali Bala. Once again, this builds on the idea of an almost mythical link between Stalin and "his" people.

Finally, the car stops on the banks of the Caspian Sea, where Stalin and his colleagues get out. Stalin looks out over the stormy waters and prophesies that the war will soon end and then more oil will be needed. To do this, the deposits under the ocean need to be tapped.

(Picture 11) In this scene there are several images that are typical for Stalin films of the time:

- 1) Purely iconographical – Stalin as the proverbial "pillar of strength";
- 2) Stalin as a commander. He gives orders and the scene is set during the Second World War. Moreover, he is at war with a hostile nature that needs to be overcome for the good of all humanity – with him at the top. This does not only emphasize his ability to lead humanity's fight for progress but also the significance of the progress itself, thus making Stalin's abilities even greater.
- 3) Stalin as demiurge and godlike creator. Like a god he shapes the nature that he finds according to his will, turning it into a new one, into his world. The scene is reminiscent of the Biblical sentence "In the beginning was the Word."
- 4) Water as a symbol of eternity. In this case, it is the eternal era of happiness that begins with Stalin – an era of harmony, without conflicts.

As a consequence, none of the figures in the film undergo any conflicts other than those that are imposed on them by capitalist, imperialist powers, i.e. from outside. Furthermore, as each figure represents a specific social or national group rather than an individual character, they are often pale and stereotypical. The protagonist is only permitted one conflict: the socialist rivalry for the most successful fulfilment or overfulfilment of a plan. In this film, this is the rivalry for the best idea for tapping the oil deposits under the Caspian Sea quickly and efficiently.

(Picture 12) We now come to 1945, shortly after the end of the war, and the newly developed drill is finally put to use. However, it has not been made using the Russian chief engineer's ideas, but using the plans of his Azerbaijani pupil, who has since studied in Moscow and is now a qualified engineer. This illustrates once again the idea of peaceful competition in order to come up with the best plan as well as the role of different nationalities: the once oppressed people, represented by the Azerbaijani engineer, are now in a position to catch up with the centre of power, represented by the Russian chief engineer, and even to surpass it (probably with the latter's guidance). On the one hand this means Russia, the centre, i.e. Stalin, represent a social ideal. All the people on the Soviet periphery will try to attain this ideal and are varying distances away from this goal. This also implies the principle formulated here of peaceful competition between the individual nationalities with everyone sharing in the other's achievements. Thus in this film, a delegate from under-developed Kazakhstan gets to see the advanced technology from Baku so that he can use it for the good of his homeland. As the extraction of oil from underneath the sea was Stalin's idea this also leads to the reverse conclusion that every nationality bear any burden to fulfil his will.

(Picture 13) This image can communicate even more: just as old technology makes way for new, so old ways of thinking are conquered by new ones. In this film, the older generation gradually learn that new is better, until they finally become unreservedly enthusiastic about it, and give up the old ways. In this context, the old is a traditional, "oriental" view of the sexes in which women stay at home, don't get involved in politics and have lots of children. The free woman of the Orient, however, doesn't walk the path of self-realisation but puts her urgent professional responsibilities ahead of her private happiness, thus fulfilling her duty towards society. In line with this, the old people are dressed almost exclusively in traditional dress whilst the young people are in modern – but not fashionable – clothes.

(Picture 14) In a transnational context, a negative counter-image is also presented; in his South American homeland, the engineer Garcia who we saw in the Romanian hotel, pushes for more rights for the workers in the oil fields there. This leads to a strike which is violently quelled by the military government. In this unrest, the class-conscious engineer is shot. The oil company, i.e. capitalism, remains the victor.

The message is clear: Working together, for one another, peace and order in the Soviet Union; rivalry, a dog-eat-dog society and chaos in capitalist countries – harmony within, conflict and death without. The fact that out of all oil-producing countries a fictional state in South America was chosen is probably not a coincidence; the year before the film was made, Argentina's right-wing government banned the import and distribution of Soviet films.

(Bild 15) At the end, three of Ali Bala's sons receive the Order of Lenin. Here we can see two stylistic devices coming together: the almost obligatory Order of Lenin awarded to protagonists who have successfully filled their place in the new society, and the number of awards and their bearers. As in many other films, there are three – a party activist, a worker and an engineer.

In the final scene there is an outpouring at a large family gathering. In front of his assembled relatives, Ali Bala thanks the Great Stalin – the “father” and “eagle” who knew the way and has brought happiness. This is followed by an unusual ritual that appears to be from folklore. The youngest grandchild pours out a large cup of red wine, which is passed via the middle generation up to the head of the family. After toasting Stalin, old Ali Bala downs the blood-red drink in one. This can be interpreted as follows:

- 1) Ali Bala used to be a Muslim but has now given up religion and also drinks wine.
- 2) The grandchild represents the citizens born during Stalin's era of harmony who give thanks to the first generation for fighting for the creation of the new society that has resulted in new, happier lives for the grandchildren. Part of this life is given back to the founding father of the family in the form of wine, thus ushering him into the new life.
- 3) Ali Bala makes a toast to Stalin, the father of the Soviet people who has unified Russians, Azerbaijanis and Kazaks in harmony.

- 4) As the sea was previously, the wine can be seen a symbol of eternity – representing the final, conflict-free era of human history which has now dawned under Stalin's leadership.

From 1947 to 1950 there were several attempts before the script was finally ready and approved. Finally, the film was produced – but was never shown in cinemas and no reasons for this were ever given. The complete, 89-minute production was, without a doubt, shown to Stalin as a matter of routine. Once again, however, it is not precisely known why the complete film was never publicly shown in the Soviet Union. There was speculation and rumour that the censorship copy disappeared in Stalin's private chambers. We can possibly speculate that the film was held back because the portrayal of Stalin in the monumental battle epic "The fall of Berlin" (Padenie Berlina), filmed shortly before this film, could not be surpassed; "The fall of Berlin" raises the victorious Stalin up to a kind of god who, following his (!) victory over fascism, wisely and carefully guides the fate of not only the Soviet people, but of half the world. In "The fire of Baku" on the other hand, Stalin is "only" depicted as a person, which strictly speaking signified an iconographical step backwards.

In 1958, after the beginning of the thaw under Nikita Chruščev, a political "de-Stalinised" version was finally released with very little pomp in Soviet cinemas; all of the scenes containing Stalin had been cut out. It was only in 1999 that the original full-length version was shown to the public – ironically on ARTE, a TV channel promoting integration between cultures and classes.