



# RED COWBOY

Man of the People

Ivan Vladimir Bryusov, nicknamed The Commissar, was a Soviet actor, director, producer, and Order of Lenin recipient. He was among the top box office draws for three decades famous for his roles in Soviet War Films.

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Ivan Vladimir Bryusov stood in the turret hatch of his T-34 tank. On the side, in white letters, was the tank's nickname "Commissar." Stalin himself had granted the famous actor permission to purchase his own tank and join the Red Army. At first, he was reluctant. He told Bryusov his job was to make movies and inspire the troops, raise morale. But Ivan kept insisting on it. Some thought Stalin was secretly hoping the fascists would kill him. It would bring an end to his constant demands to join the fight. Half the movie studio had gone with him. Ipatyev, his driver, now chauffeured him around town in a medium tank. Leonidovich, the second-unit director, brought camera equipment along and even now was filming the handsome tank commander.

"Don't worry," Leonidovich would yell in the blowing December wind. "If you get killed, I'll finish the film with a double."

Wearing his Red Young Pioneer scarf, Ivan was easy to pick out. But the frozen clouds of his breath made his features hard to distinguish. Talk about suffering for your art. It was cold. Not bone-chilling cold, it was the stupid-to-be-outside-in-it kind of freezing. At least the sun was out. For the last three days they'd been subjected to a blinding snowstorm. But the Red Army had learned to survive the cold. They'd suffered in Finland, where they froze and died by the hundreds. Half a dozen soldiers were clinging to the tank. Primarily because the engine was warm.

The tank sat on the only standing bridge over the Goretovka River. An entire German panzer division was on its way to this very spot. Ivan's tank was the only Red Army unit between the fascists and Moscow. The Red Army had withdrawn everyone else. So, now there was one tank and twenty men blocking the way of 10,000.

"How many rounds do you have for the infantry machine gun?" Ivan asked one of the soldiers.

"About a thousand... maybe... if we're lucky."

"That should be enough for the lead elements of the division. What do we do about the rest of them?"

"Why throw the gun at them, of course." Ipatyev blew warm air into his hands. "Can you see them yet, Ivan?"

Putting his binoculars over his eyes, he stared off into the distance. "I can see smoke, But I think it's on the other side of town."

"Ivan," Ipatyev rasped, "tell us about the *Big Trial*."

He waved his hand dismissively. "You don't want to hear such a boring story."

"Of course we do," Lagoshin protested, "it's better than thinking about the fascist tanks who are on their way here."

Bryusov laughed. "Alright, where shall I begin?"

"From the beginning."

"Very well, but I warn you, you will regret it." he snorted. "You know, I grew up around here. In Istra, the Istransky District. My father wanted me to be an engineer, like he was."

“My father expected me to become a pilot,” Lagoshin piped in. “But I’m afraid of heights.”

“Shut up, Lagoshin,” Ipatyev snarled, “let the man finish his story.”

Leaning lower Ivan whispered to them as if relaying a secret. “But while working one day in the factory, I was involved in an accident. The doctors didn’t think I would live. But I foiled their prognosis of my early death, I survived. Still, I was in the hospital for eighteen months. I missed the entrance exams, so I was never able to go to Moscow University. As a result, I ended up as an extra, working for the *kinokomitet*, the Soviet Film Agency and the People’s Commissariat for Education.”



### Six Years Ago

Ivan stood in a long line, waiting to be chosen by the casting director. She held more power than the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs and she knew it. She looked over the extras as if she was picking prize bulls for the agricultural commission. She had a soulless twinkle in her eyes. She would determine if you would work that day or go hungry. Ivan Vladimir Bryusov was supposed to be busy at his job fixing trucks, but he was standing in the line as usual. His friends would cover for him, but in the nine months he’d stood in line, he was never selected. He was always back to work before he was caught.

Bryusov was dressed in a gray workman’s overall. His hair was messed up as if he had yet to discover the usefulness of a comb. Taller than the others, he was quite noticeable. But it wasn’t the only reason he stood out. He smelled of oil and grease from the factory. Most of the other actors gave him a wide berth. He constantly shifted on his feet. This was the result of wearing a pair of shoes at least a full size too small for his feet. He’d been off the morning shoes came in hoping for a spot as an extra. By the time he’d gotten into the shoe line, they only had one size left.

The casting director looked out across the crowd with a grin. It wasn’t an expression of happiness in any way, shape, or form. It was more like the position the lips and teeth assume when they see dinner approaching. Pointing out figures in the crowd, she made a quick selection. “You, you, you and...” she paused for a moment. “And you. That will be all for today.”

She stopped for a moment as an impressive-looking man, who was losing his hair, whispered something in her ear. She replied in a voice calculated so that everyone could hear. “Alright, Sergei, but you are making a huge mistake.” Lowering her finger like an ax poised to remove a man’s head, she pointed at Ivan. “You, report to wardrobe.”

Ivan practically danced his way onto the film studio. His body was light as a feather. He bowed deeply before the casting director, but before he could saunter past her, she grabbed his arm.

“You never been a farmer, have you?” She asked forcefully. Tightening her grip on Ivan’s arm, she almost cut off his circulation as he stammered for an answer. She had no intention of giving him enough time to formulate an answer. “You don’t even look like a farmer.” She practically spat at him. “Go, get dressed. Get out of my sight.” Releasing him he didn’t get more than a step before she grabbed the sleeve of his overalls and yanked him back. She wiped the grease from her hands onto his arm. “You are disgusting. And you smell vile. Next time you come here, leave the overalls at the factory.”

A wardrobe assistant grabbed his other arm and led him off towards one of the back buildings on the film lot. "Don't worry about her, she's been in a ten-year bad mood. You'll do fine dressed as a farmer." The assistant wiped her hand on his overall. "I can see you are used to being dirty. This won't be a stretch for you. Put on a farmers outfit." The assistant shoved him inside.

At first Ivan wasn't sure if he was being hazed... or perhaps the girl was. Inside was a naked woman with her back turned to him. He tried to remain quiet, but she turned around and screamed. Barely covering herself with a thin dress, she glared at him wide-eyed. "What are you doing in here pervert," Anya shouted.

"Sorry, sorry," Ivan muttered, turned his face away. "The assistant told me to get in here and find a farmer's outfit. She didn't tell me anyone was inside."

Anya sounded cross, but at least she's stopped yelling. "Well, next time announce yourself." Ivan took out a red scarf from the Vladimir Lenin All-Union Pioneer Organization and wiped his brow. "You're a member of the Red Pioneers?" She asked delightedly. "I was one too."

"Ivan Vladimir Bryusov. It a pleasure to meet you." He held out his hand.

Anya immediately slapped it. "Turn around, pervert." Her voice returned to being gruff with a speed only matched by Ivan's mother. "I'm Anya Yaroslavovna. Now get out of her until I finish dressing." Before he could see what was happening, a hand pushed him out through the door. Ivan had to struggle with his two feet, dancing like a madman, just to keep from falling over. His hands flew wildly. When he regained his feet, the assistant was inches from his nose.

"I said farmer's outfit, not a factory worker. Now get back in there."

"But, but," Ivan stumbled pointing back to the door. He knew what he wanted to say, but the words wouldn't come out of his mouth. As he continued to struggle with his explanation, he felt a soft hand on his back. Instantly, he found his footing and his voice seemed to jump back into his throat.

"You can go in now," Anya murmured. "There's a farmer's suit on the last rack. You should change your shoes too. You don't want to trip over your own two feet like an errant schoolboy in front of the director."

"No, no," Ivan confirmed as he watched her walk away. "I wouldn't want to do that." He stood there, his eyes following her every step. At least until the assistant slapped him in the face.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Get in there and get dressed, we haven't got all day. You're due on set in five minutes."



Ivan Bryusov hadn't been this happy since he was a small boy. "Mother, you would believe what happen to me today."

"That's nice," she replied continuing to clean the drapes.

"No, really. Sergei Eisenstein picked me out himself. I'm to be one of the farmers in his new film *Bezhin Meadow*. It's about a young farm boy whose father attempts to betray the Soviet government. He's

secretly a Social Revolutionary and a Trotskyite. The old man decides to sabotage the year's harvest. His own son stops his father to protect the Soviet state, But the old man murders him. It quite exciting.”

His mother wasn't paying attention to anything he was saying. She was too busy staring at his shoes. Instead of his usual pair of ill-fitting clodhoppers he was wearing a fine pair of boots. They were even shined. “Where did you steal those?”

Clicking his tongue, Ivan waved his mother off. “No, no, I didn't steal them. I got them in wardrobe. Eisenstein himself said I should take them home.”

His mother put a hand to each cheek. “You stole them from the film company?” She pushed him toward the apartment door. “You have to take them back, right away. This is terrible. You'll lose your job at the factory. They'll come for us; say we are profiteering. Take those back at once.” She slapped him harder when he didn't move.

Ivan grabbed his mother's hands inside his own. “Mother, look at me.” He put his face directly in front of hers. “Mother, look at me, it's all right. I've made it into the movies.”

She was still shaking. “They are going to send us to Siberia... or worse. They are going to send us all to Siberia. We're ruined... ruined.”

Ivan simply held her in his arms as she wept.



### **Three Years Later**

Ivan struggled to get to the front of the room. His distinctive cat-like walk told you who he was the moment he entered the room. He was wearing a fine suit. It made him feel strange. It was the only thing he had ever worn which truly fit him. Under one arm he was carrying a briefcase, under the other a stack of papers. He barely managed to get to the front table. The papers and the briefcase landed on the table with a crash.

He stopped to take in the room as he adjusted his suit. The walls were covered with the symbols of the Soviet state. Party banners, the NKVD emblem, the symbol of the Ministry of Justice, and many more. He could smell the cleaning oils permeating the woodwork. The whole room sparkled and gleamed as if it had only been cleaned an hour ago. He paused to take in the spectacle, the awe of the people's state. As he stared, the tribunal entered and took their seats at the first table. Their dark robes matched their dark hair and sinister eyes.

“Take a seat,” The attorney at the table mumbled, “before you get us both in trouble.”

Ivan hurriedly sat, averting his eyes from the judges at the bench. He spoke slowly with his distinctive gravelly voice. “How am I supposed to take this case? I just found out about it yesterday.”

His fellow attorney cocked one eyebrow, “It easy. They are guilty.”

Frowning, he turned, holding his head low and whispering, “But I have to prove they are guilty. It's my duty to the state.”

He didn't even look at Ivan. "Don't strain your brain. They are Trotskyites. They won't be able to keep their mouths shut. Just like the filthy Bolsheviks who betrayed Lenin, who betrayed the revolution. They won't be able to help themselves. Their kind never can. They live to destroy everything that is right and good in the world. All you need to do is get them up on the stand. They'll incriminate themselves." He crossed his arms in his lap, intertwining his fingers. "Do you know what the funny part is?"

"What's that?"

"If you win this case, justice will prevail, and if you lose, justice will also prevail. It's the way the Soviet justice system works. Did you know that in the capitalist countries, justice is blind?"

"The statues, yes. I've seen pictures."

"It's so the capitalist oppressors can hide. But there is no hiding in the socialist system. Here we see everything. Our justice is not blind. It why you don't have to worry."

The lights in the room flickered. "Cut, cut..." the director yelled. "What's wrong with the lights? Somebody get it fixed." Eisenstein strode onto the set. His back was as straight as a ramrod. He was followed closely by two nervous-looking assistants. His shoes clacked across the floor as he headed for Bryusov.

Ivan rushed over to meet him. "That was good," he remarked, but then he leaned in closer. His voice had such strength, such power. "Let's do the scene one more time, but I need you to look more worried as you enter the scene. Your nerves are destroying you. Then you see the grandeur of the Soviet state all around you. Once it sinks in, I want you to stand tall, exude confidence. It's not until you sit down again the audience will realize it's all a front. The individual is nothing. It's the state which holds the power and only those who believe unreservedly in the state can share the power of the motherland." He rose back to his full height and shouted. "We'll take in from the top when they get the lights fixed."

From behind him, Ivan heard a squeaky voice. "Comrade Bryusov, it's such a pleasure to be working with a star of your caliber. I want you to know what an honor it is working with you. To be in Eisenstein's great film, *The Big Trial*."

"Nonsense," Ivan took his hand with a hearty handshake, "the honor is all mine."

"Yes, we are all equal in the eyes of the state."

"Hogwash," Ivan spat, dropping the man's hand. His tone and face turned stern. "The state is nothing. The state is a farmer, nothing more. A temporary tenant. The motherland is everything. She was here before us and will be here long after we are all gone. What we share, if anything, is the love of mother Russia. If the state can amplify, focus our love, then all the better."

The actor's voice dropped to a tight whisper. "Better not let the security services hear you say such things."

Ivan gave him a dry laugh. His tone was light-hearted. "Oh, the security services don't care what I say in person. It's what I say on screen that counts. Did you like it?"

"I'm sorry?"

“Did you like the speech about the motherland and the state being a farmer?”

“I... I..” the man stumbled for words. “I don’t know.”

“It’s from act three, you know.” Ivan Bryusov smiled. “One of the traitors says it. It’s good isn’t it?”



Ipatyev squirmed in the cold. “I always love that story.”

“I could hear it over and over again,” Lagoshin commented.

“In this crew you will,” Leonidovich remarked, “until you can recite it by memory, and then you’ll hear it some more. The only thing you won’t hear are the bad reviews.”

Ivan grinned. “When people say one of my pictures got a bad review, I always wonder if they know it’s a redundant sentence, but I don’t care. The people like my pictures and that’s all that counts.” There was the sound of wood being broken by a tank tread. Ivan squinted at the village. He put the binoculars up to his eyes. “They’re coming. I can see eight... no nine Mark III tanks... and about a hundred men.

“We are unbelievably screwed,” Lagoshin lamented.

“Wrong,” Ipatyev broke in. “We were screwed after the first fifty men. The rest are merely overkill.”

Bryusov smirked. “Stop being so defeatist. Courage is being scared to death - and fighting anyway.”

Ipatyev snickered. “What movie is that line from?”

“All of them.” The entire group broke out in laughter as they dismounted the tank.

Leonidovich scoffed. “You’re just lucky one of them isn’t a Mark IV.”

“Why don’t you go over there and tell the fascists to bring one of them up,” Ivan declared, “We’ll wait.”

The first of the tanks stopped at the outskirts of town. “Look like they’ve seen us,” Lagoshin announced. The men readied themselves in the slit trenches by the bank of the river. They loaded the machineguns and got their ammunition belts ready. Even in the cold you could hear the oiled click of the gun bolts being pulled back. “Thank God the Luftwaffe isn’t about,” Lagoshin muttered. “I hate to be bombed on top of everything else.”

Ivan smirked. “God had nothing to do with it. Have you ever heard of Alexander Nevsky? Do you know where he fought? He fought in a howling wilderness, with summers too hot and winters freezing, and they also found some unpleasant German characters moving in. Do you think these soldiers complained saying the odds were a little unreasonable? Did they have a pension for their old age, for their crops, for their homes? They didn’t even own the land! Mother Russia owned them. They looked at the land. They looked up at the sky and they said, “We’ll take it from here.”

“What movie is that from?” Ipatyev asked.

“All of them,” the crew shouted back once more.

Raising the glasses to his eyes once more, Ivan could see the Germans moving to find cover. "They've definitely seen us. Hold your fire until I give the command." Almost as soon as he said this, the DShK 1938 Soviet Heavy Machine Gun started to open fire. Ivan yelled down at the position. "I said don't fire," he screamed.

"Sorry," Ipatyev hollered back, "I guess we're a little trigger happy.

Back to scanning the fascist tanks, Ivan noticed the lead tank had stopped and there was no more smoke coming from its exhaust. He handed the binoculars to Leonidovich. "What do you make of that?"

Leonidovich gazed at the enemy. He took his time scanning the front. "Yeah, I think you're right... their German."

"No, not... look at the front tank."

Scanning the scene again Leonidovich grunted. "The stories must be true. The German are burning their own fuel supplies to stay warm." Then at once, they both cried out, "The lead tank has run out of gas."

Inside one of the trenches the camera was still rolling. It was aimed up at the famous hero of Soviet cinema and he sat atop the pride of Russian armor development. Ivan shouted down into the tank. "Take a bead on the lead tank. Give me one round anti-tank." Everyone could hear movement in the tank and the turret turned... just slightly. "FIRE."

The T-34 belched smoke and thundered. Almost at once a German Mark III exploded and burst into flame. Its turret went flying into the air, as the soldiers around it scrambled for cover. Without waiting for orders, Ipatyev started the machine gun again. Soon everyone was firing. The burning tank was now blocking the approach road, with the other eight tanks trapped behind it. "Reload."

The machine gun continued to clatter. It was soon joined by the machinegun on the tank. There was a loud thud from the T-34's turret, followed by a screech of metal and a sound like a firecracker going off. "Damn, fascists," Ivan yelled, "They've shot at us." Fortunately, the round failed to penetrate the armor and had bounced off. Looking around with the glasses he found a tank with smoke issuing from its gun. "Track nine degrees left." the turret rotated with a scraping sound. The smell of cordite was everywhere.

"Fire," Bryusov shouted.

A second tank exploded. Ivan watched as the crew abandoned the burning wreck. Most of them were gunned down by his associates in the film crew, but a few managed to scramble behind some buildings and escape their fate. "Two degrees right."

The turret moved again, and Ivan shouted the command to fire. The black smoke from three tanks now rose into the air across the river. Bullets began flying everywhere. There was a regular rattle and snap as they ricocheted off the tank's armored hull. To anyone in the area it sounded like the t-34 was beset by an angry swarm of bees. Leonidovich waved his arm frantically at Ivan, whose upper body was still sticking out of the top of the tank turret. "Get down you idiot. What are you a Georgian Kulak? You do want to get killed on camera?"

"I can see better from up here."

Leonidovich nodded his head. "You're insane."

“I thought you knew that?” He paused to yell down into the turret again. “Fire.” He leaned over toward his second-unit director Leonidovich. A bullet bounced off the turret hatch behind him, only a centimeter or two from his shoulder. “It’s the duty of every citizen to do all that he can to win this war, comrade.”

“Yes,” Leonidovich smiled back, “and it’s the director’s duty to do everything else.”

“This is what they pay me ten rubles a month for.”

The director guffawed. “Comrade, that won’t even cover the cost of your tombstone.”

Lagoshin elbowed the director. “Pick up a rifle, we could use the help.”

Bullets whizzed over their heads. “I killed a wolf once,” Leonidovich announced, “I didn’t much like it.”

“Then you’re in luck,” Lagoshin declared, slapping a Tokarev TT-33 pistol into his hand, “They’re only Germans.”

The fighting went on for some minutes, bullets and shells flying everywhere. By now, six of the German tanks were burning on the far side of the river. German infantry was using smoke shells to obscure their position and the last of their tanks. These final tanks had given up on trying to knock out the T-34 and they had switched to high explosive shells to take out the infantry.

One shell practically landed on Ipatyev’s machine gun position. When the smoke cleared, the loader was dead, and Ipatyev was busy holding his bleeding arm with his other hand. Seeing this Ivan jumped down from the turret of his tank. Removing his famous Young Pioneer red scarf, he wrapped it around Ipatyev’s bleeding shoulder.

“Your famous scarf,” Ipatyev protested. “It’ll get all stained.”

“A badge of honor,” Ivan insisted, slapping him on the other shoulder. “Besides, I think after the studio gets a look at our footage, they might spring for another one.”

“Don’t count on it.”

“Always the gloomy one, Ipatyev. Get back to shooting them. I’m going to need the cover fire.”

“What are you going to do?”

Ivan grinned. “Get back up on my tank.”

Another soldier ran up to help feed the machine gun and soon it was clattering away at the enemy. Ivan rose to try to get out of the trench. As soon as he stuck his head up, the entire ground around him seemed to grow puffs of dirt as if they were weeds in a Ukrainian wheat field. The Germans were planting lead. “Well, they know how to shoot, I’ll give them that.”

“Stay put. Don’t try to be a hero. Wait until they have to change out the barrel.” Ipatyev instructed him as he ducked back into the trench.

More puffs of dirt appeared from the intense machine gunfire. “As long as I live, I swear, I never make fun of one of these war scenes in a movie again,” Ivan lamented.

For a moment, Ivan was content to keep his head down. then he noticed the cameraman. He'd crawled out of his trench and was behind the T-34, so he could capture the famous actor heroically saving a comrade with this signature red scarf.

"Damn," Ivan muttered.

Ipatyev grabbed his shirt sleeve when he tried to leave the trench. "What the hell do you think you are doing?"

Ivan scowled. "I can't stay down here while the cameraman is up there... in the open."

"You always have to steal the limelight, don't you?" Ipatyev complained. "You're a scene hog, do you know that?"

Bryusov shouted up to the gunner in the tank. "Switch to high-explosive. See if you can keep their heads down for a minute or two. Then he took cover deeper in the trench. Explosions were popping up all over. "The Germans must have brought up mortars," Ipatyev broke in.

The actor's face grimaced. "Are you going to cover me or not?" Ivan inquired, "You're not in my will you know. So, if I get killed, you get nothing."

"Just keep your shirt on, comrade." Ipatyev bellowed. Ivan could barely hear him anyway with all the shooting and the explosions rending the earth nearby. "I don't need any loud noises. My head is killing me. I have this dreadful hangover from all the vodka we had last night."

"Are you kidding me?" Ivan spat. "We ran out of vodka three days ago."

"So, I guess it must be all this shooting that is making my head hurt..." Ipatyev admitted. "Some party there Germans are throwing. You'd think they could at least brink the vodka."

"Fell free to go over and ask them for some."

Another explosion ripped the earth. "I'm busy trying to keep them from killing your hide. *You* ask them." He started another long burst with the machine gun, raking the ground across the river. Just then the T-34 started lobbing HE shells at the Germans. "Okay, comrade," Ipatyev pushed the actor, "go now. NOW." He returned to spraying the enemy positions as Ivan bolted for the back of the tank.

Ivan looked at the cameraman. "Get a good close up, Okay?" He climbed the back of the tank and carefully crawled his way back into the turret hatch. "There's too much shooting going on," he yelled.

"Just like my first marriage," Leonidovich added. "You want us to full back?"

"No," Ivan gritted his teeth, "We've pulled back five times in the last six days."

"Four," Leonidovich insisted.

"Five," the actor argued.

"One of them was Stalin's birthday, so it doesn't count."

The firing started to die down. Either the Germans were running out of ammunition or the film crew was running out of Germans. Ivan hoped it was the latter. The T-34 belched smoke and fire again as another

shell sailed over the river. Ivan sniffed the air. "You know Leonidovich, Eisenstein was going to fire you before this all started. Saddens me he didn't."

"Why Ivan, I didn't know you cared."

Now the only fire seemed to be on the west side of the river. "Ceasefire, they withdrew."

The Red Army line when quiet. All except for Ipatyev, who kept clattering away with the machine gun. "Damn it, Ipatyev, I said CEASEFIRE."

At long last, Ipatyev withdrew his fingers from the trigger. The world fell into an eerie silence. Ipatyev's breathing was deep and shallow. "Sorry, comrade. I just not used to them retreating."

"Now what do we do?" Lagoshin asked.

"We hope they don't bring up the 88s," Ipatyev answered grimly. "Or they'll turn 'Commissar' here into a cheese grater."

There was a loud noise in the sky, and everyone ducked. Half the crew threw themselves in the slit trenches. The other half ducked under the tank. Ivan looked up. It was a Yak-1, flying close to the ground, a huge red star decorating its wings. "Oh, sure," Leonidovich yelled up at the pilot, "now you show up. You have lousy timing you Trotskyist sky jockey." The fighter flew off toward the retreating Germans, wagging its wings as if flew over.

"Do you think they knew the famous Comrade Bryusov was here?" Leonidovich wheezed.

"Not a chance, Leonidovich," Ipatyev insisted.

Ivan put on a fake display of being insulted. "What makes you so sure?"

Ipatyev held his belly as he laughed. "You weren't in the spotlight."

"All these years in the film business," Leonidovich wailed, "and he still doesn't know how to hit a mark."

The sun was starting to go down. Smoke rose from the German tanks, blotting out the sun as it set. Tomorrow would be the sixth of December. They'd bought another day for their beloved motherland. "Say," Ivan Vladimir Bryusov tried to break the tension, "did I ever tell you the story of the Mongolian movie we tried to make?"

"Oh, for the love of my grandmother," Ipatyev swore. "Not that one."

Ivan grinned, showing his dirty teeth and the sun disappeared over the horizon, "It's a good story." Everyone gowned. "There we were, in the middle of the steppe, not a soul for miles around, and..."