

Workers' Theater as a Double-Edged Sword in Early Soviet Russia

In his influential 1918 book *The Creative Theater* (Tvorchesky teatr), Kerzhentsev hailed the explosive growth of worker-led theater groups as the “sprouts of a new culture”, marking the dawn of socialist agitational drama. Sixteen years later, In August 1934, A. A. Zhdanov called in a speech for the Soviet writers' Congress: “(Literature) not to depict it(the revolution) in a dead, scholastic way... We say that socialist realism is the basic method of Soviet belles lettres and literary criticism”, officially nailing the coffin of Agitprop shut. This Essay aims to analyze the unique relationship of Soviet agitprop and Revolutionary and soviet politics during that 16-year arc as a marriage of convenience, and expose political drivers behind the brief moment of agitprop.

This paper aims to discuss the dynamic relationship between agitational theatre and state power during Russia's Revolutionary and early Soviet period (from the October Revolution of 1917 to the widespread use of the mass propaganda tools such as radio beginning in the early 1930s), and to analyze the reasons for the rise and fall of agitprop.

In this essay, the term “agitprop”, “agitational Theatre”, “soviet agitprop” or “worker's agitational theatre” all commonly refer to the form of propaganda employed by the Early Soviet government which utilizes symbolic language and simplified ideals and encourages the widespread participation and production of the majority. The rise of Soviet agitprop is developed within the context of an array of battles in the form and structure of ideological control.

From Revolution to Civil War

In the immediate aftermath of Russia's February and October Revolutions, political groups struggled not only for control of the government. They also struggled

to determine who would control the mind of the Russian masses and what revolutionary culture should look like.

The turmoil began as the February Revolution started in Petrograd on March 8, 1917(OS), continuing through February 23, ending more than three centuries of Romanov rule when Nicholas II abdicated on March 15. The February Revolution was quickly followed by the October Revolution, during which the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional government November 7, 1917. These two political revolutions left uncertainties in power and legitimacy, prompting the new government with the need to win the hearts of the country, in which they had to reach an enormous illiterate population across a vast and sprawling countryside.

The struggle for cultural dominance developed during a period of violence and social collapse. For example, following the revolution, there were acute food shortages in the cities, where the Bolsheviks had the strongest support. Therefore, the new government needed to improve control of the peasant population to feed its power base—industrial workers in cities.

After the October Revolution, Lenin's government issued a Decree on Land on November 8, 1917, formally abolishing landed proprietorship "without any compensation" and transferring estates and church and monastery lands to local land committees (Lenin, articles 1–2). This decree was not the beginning of the peasant land revolution, as rural communities had already begun seizing and redistributing estate land throughout 1917. Rather, the Bolsheviks were attempting to gain peasant support by legally recognizing a process that had already taken place. However, later local measures such as Committees and food requisitioning were making the Bolsheviks increasingly unpopular among the majority peasant population. This unpopularity was reflected in the unfavorable results of the democratic elections of

the All-Russian Constituent Assembly, which the Bolsheviks lost the majority.

Peasant opposition was further inflamed just a few months later, with the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on March 3, 1918, removing Soviet Russia from the First World War, but at enormous cost: Russia relinquished Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Poland, Ukraine, and parts of the Caucasus, losing nearly one third of its farmlands and more than half of its industrial infrastructure. The treaty sparked intense, widespread opposition to Bolshevik rule.

The end of WWI in Russia, which came at such a high cost, did not end unrest. Civil war spread between the Red Army, multiple White armies supported by foreign intervention forces, peasant rebellions, nationalist movements, and anarchist armies. The Red Army would defeat the major White forces only by the end of 1920, including General Petr Wrangel's army in Crimea, with the capture of Vladivostok another two years later, in 1922, marking the collapse of the last major White government in the Russian Far East. The Soviet Union was formally created two months later, on December 30, 1922.

The first 5 years of Revolution, therefore, were a crucial time for solidifying political legitimacy and exercising ideological control over the vast nation.

Political and social conditions inherited by the Bolsheviks

In this early revolutionary period, the government needed to consolidate control over vast swaths of land while transforming a largely illiterate and fragmented population into a productive labor force and members of society. At the same time, it needed to exert administrative control over the people, especially in far reaches of the country that lay outside of soviet spheres of influence, whose political participation it claimed to encourage and whose produce they desperately need. To do this, it had, to borrow a modern phrase, to “win over hearts and minds.”

The new government had few propaganda tools by which to reach a mass audience. Though Lenin would nationalize the film industry by 1919, Russian cinema was hampered during the civil war era by shortages of film stock and other materials. The reach of newspapers was also limited by extreme rates of illiteracy (49%). Radio, hailed by Lenin as a paperless newspaper, would not be nationalized until 1924. What the young Bolshevik government did have was the theatre: with a robust inheritance of professional theatres, fairground traditions, clubs, experimental artists, and amateur theatre circles.

The context of a weakening proletariat during the Civil War also **made the government weary and concerned about the stability of rule**. The Bolsheviks claimed to rule through a dictatorship of the proletariat. Yet, the industrial working class had fallen to just over one million people, only “a third” of its 1917 size (Fitzpatrick 17) due to shortages. The official designation “proletarian” was itself misleading. Approximately “5.5 million” people counted as workers were unemployed, serving as full-time revolutionaries, or fighting in the Red Army rather than working in industrial production (Fitzpatrick 17). Lenin acknowledged the current situation of workers when he stated that many people entering factories “are not proletariat but all kinds of accidental elements” (33). His statement suggests that the Soviet working class did not yet possess the unified identity that Bolshevik ideology assigned to it. Many workers retained close connections to rural villages and could return to peasant life when urban conditions deteriorated. The state therefore needed cultural institutions that could actively construct proletarian identity rather than merely assume that such an identity already existed. Hence one of the urgent functions of early Workers’ theatre would be to place ordinary people into the symbolic illusion of the revolutionary worker, allowing them to perform the social

class that the government needed them to become.

The crippling of **the old elites, primarily merchants, landowners, and the professional, intellectual, and artistic class – the so-called intelligentsia** – further intensified the problem of shared worker identity. During the period of War Communism (June 1918 - March 1921), **merchants and shipowners** were “put out of business,” while the landowning class had been largely eliminated through the peasant seizure and redistribution of land, a process subsequently formalized through Lenin’s 1917 Decree on Land (Lenin, “Decree on Land,” art. 1). The Bolsheviks had thus successfully weakened many of their most visible enemies – and this success removed the common enemy that had previously helped unite revolutionary supporters. A second task of the worker’s theatre, then, would be to paint a vivid picture of this missing common enemy. The intelligentsia then became the rhetorical enemy; however, political realities complicated the matter, as the state still needed educated specialists from the intelligentsia to administer the country, which could not be quickly reproduced or replaced.

At the same time, the Communist Party itself was shifting away from its worker base. At the Sixth Party Congress in 1917, eighteen of the twenty-one full-time delegates elected were intellectuals rather than workers (The Cultural Front, p. 24). By 1921, workers formed only “a little over 40 percent” of Party membership. These trends contributed to and are reflected in the Workers’ Opposition warning that “a gulf was opening” between the working class and the Party (The Cultural Front, p. 34).

These developments did not simply represent ideological betrayal. Governing a large state required administrators, teachers, technicians, writers, in other words, a whole established system of educated specialists. The Bolsheviks could not remove

these people without also weakening their ability to rule. What followed were attempts to place workers in administrative positions; it was considered so urgent that the matter “cannot be put off”, even at the sacrifice of an imbalance within the party. Despite these efforts, the Bolsheviks could not quickly replace experienced specialists (The Commissariat of Enlightenment, p. 35). Making matters worse, as workers entered administrative roles, they also became separated from ordinary factory labor, inevitably changing class alignments.

By engaging workers in the performance of class struggle, Worker’s Theatre provided the government with an alternative way to showcase its connection to the proletariat. In place of giving workers a political authority for which they had not been educated, the state could shroud them in a frenzy of illusory political power.

Theatre would eventually address both the problems of literacy and the waning of the rhetorical enemy. It could educate and mobilize audiences without requiring them to read ABC or understand the difference between Russian socialism and totalitarianism. And it could performatively embody the government’s preferred vision of the Communist struggle. Lunacharsky captured this political function when he told the theatre **circle** that the Revolution needed it “as a helper, as a searchlight,” so that its “friends and enemies” could be made visible **onstage** (Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant Garde, p. 24). Agitational theatre could therefore simplify political divisions, define proper behavior, and create the illusion of communication between the Party and the population. Agitprop is special because it is functionally a local scheme, and its impacts affect principally those who participate. The planners understand that agitprop is a created vision which has limited scope and reach. But, for the participants, it illusion of political impact and membership.

Emergence and purpose of agitprop.

Theatre helped resolve this contradiction symbolically. It could continue to produce recognizable enemies such as capitalists, priests, selfish peasants, lazy workers, foreign imperialists, and corrupt bureaucrats even when social reality was more complicated. By presenting the conflict in the abstract, the stage maintained the blurry division between allies and enemies that revolutionary politics required.

The civil war and the early Soviet state's weak administrative reach also explain why Agitprop became necessary in the context of an unfriendly and unfamiliar population. Grain requisitioning under War Communism allowed the government to feed the Red Army and major cities, but armed detachments often took grain from villages at prices far below market value. What resulted was Rural resentment, which contributed to the Tambov uprising of 1920–1921 and other peasant revolts. The Kronstadt rebellion in March 1921 further demonstrated that even groups once associated with the Revolution, such as the Kronstadt soldiers, the very people who stormed the Winter Palace with the Bolsheviks, could turn against the Bolshevik regime without adequate control. Lenin responded by replacing requisitioning with a tax in kind and introducing the New Economic Policy, introducing limited markets, transition to agricultural quotas, and a general softening towards secondary targets such as the general peasant majority and small shop owners. Propaganda directed toward peasants therefore had to do more than celebrate socialism. Soviet educators had to explain policy, restore trust, and convince rural audiences that the government represented their interests. Since many villages had limited access to newspapers, film, radio, or trained lecturers, mobile and simple theatrical forms became practical methods of political communication.

And while agitprop could not eliminate illiteracy, it could communicate complex propaganda before long-term education programs produced results sufficient

for the success of paper media. The form's symbolic language enabled it to turn political ideas into visible concepts for the mass illiterate population.

The Struggle for Ideological Control

The emergence of Worker's Theatre and Agitprop transpired against a backdrop of political struggle. Debates swirled around the question of the proper role of theatre in the new regime. Some Bolshevik cultural leaders wanted to preserve parts of Russia's artistic inheritance, while "theatrical leftists" demanded that "everything old" from before the Revolution be "discarded and destroyed" (Rudnitsky 64).

Various organizations competed for authority over the control and support of theatrical propaganda during the early Soviet period. Proletkult, led by Aleksandr Bogdanov, advocated for an autonomous proletarian culture created by workers, asserting its independence from the state. In contrast, the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros), headed by Anatoly Lunacharsky from 1917 to 1929, sought to place cultural development under state guidance while adopting a relatively liberal attitude toward the pre-Revolutionary theatre. Within Narkompros, the Theatrical Department (TEO) was established in 1920 and, under the brief leadership of theatrical innovator Vsevolod Meyerhold, became a strong supporter of the Theatrical Left – the era's term for the aesthetic and political Avant-Garde. Alongside these institutions, trade unions, Red Army propaganda units, and influential political figures such as Lenin himself also competed to shape the direction and purpose of Soviet theatrical propaganda.

Narkompros attempted to place cultural development under state guidance, filtering through the gem of the old theatres, preserving the integrity of professional art. The TEO put forward a vision for a "revolution in the theatre," to which

Meyerhold gave the name “Theatrical October”, attacking the apolitical nature of the pre-revolutionary theatres, and advocating for their fall. . Vladimir Lenin, meanwhile, along with his wife Nadezhda Kruspakaya, would advocate for a preservation of the “old guard” tsarist theatres - the Alexandrinsky, Mariinsky, and Bolshoi – opening them to the workers and placing them in the service of a new, communist ideology.

These conflicts influenced the major theatrical intermix of the revolutionary period: competition between conventional plays, mass spectacles, agit trials, living newspapers, Blue Blouse productions, travelling agitprop, and amateur workers’ theatre.

The avant-garde with Soviet characteristics

These circumstances explain the relatively soft cultural policy adopted during much of the early 1920s. Rather than immediately suppressing the old intelligentsia, Soviet leaders concentrated on “securing the cooperation of the intelligentsia” while gradually educating a new communist intellectual class (Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front*, p. 92). This policy placed Lunacharsky and Narkompros in a difficult position. They had to support revolutionary culture while preserving enough professional knowledge to keep theatres functioning. The result was neither full artistic freedom nor immediate total state control. Artists such as Vsevolod Meyerhold were temporarily allowed to experiment because their methods appeared capable of reshaping consciousness, but their freedom remained dependent on whether the government considered their work politically useful. The Soviet state tolerated experimentation not because it accepted permanent cultural independence, but because it had not yet developed the institutions or trained personnel necessary to replace the older artistic world.

The avant-garde initially appeared well suited to this transitional policy.

Avant-garde artists believed that a “new vision” could force conventional people to see society differently (Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre*, p. 30). This goal aligned with the Soviet ambition, especially that of Prolekult, to create a new socialist consciousness. Avant-garde theatre rejected realistic scenery, individualized characters, and traditional plots in favor of movement, symbols, machinery, placards, and exaggerated visual contrasts. These techniques could present political conflicts clearly to people with limited education. The avant-garde and the Revolution were therefore reluctant but useful partners. The Revolution needed new artistic forms capable of expressing a complete break with the past, while avant-garde artists needed revolutionary institutions, audiences, and resources.

Vladimir Mayakovsky’s *Mystery-Bouffe* demonstrates this temporary alliance. The play divided its characters into broad social groups, separated by simple costume indications like top hats for capitalists and blue tops for workers rather than psychologically complex individuals. Its rebellious workers, called the “Unclean,” wore similar clothing and acted collectively, visualizing the proletariat into an easily recognizable visual force.

Instead of requiring the audience to understand economic theory, the production transformed class conflict into physical movement and symbolic opposition. Lunacharsky praised the work as belonging to “the placard and mass meeting period of our Revolution” (Lunacharsky, quoted in Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre*, p. 24).

His description identifies both the strength and limitation of the play. James von Geldern similarly describes the emerging revolutionary spectacle as “a canvas of ideas and not details,” designed as “a proletarian show for a worker audience” (von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917–1920*, p. 33). This simplification was effective

during the turmoil of the early revolution because it resembled a public demonstration, being direct, emotional, and visually clear. However, the same simplification of enemies and friends that made it effective for mobilization limited its ability to address complicated social problems after the state had become more stable.

The Role of Theatre

The debate over nationalization revealed another conflict between political usefulness and artistic independence. In 1918, the municipalization of theatres emerged as a “spontaneous policy,” as local soviets and cultural activists took control of theatrical property (The Commissariat of Enlightenment, p. 142). Radical theatrical leftists proposed using institutions such as the Bolshoi Theatre directly “for agitation” (The Commissariat of Enlightenment, p. 143). From their perspective, traditional theatres were products of the old elite and should be converted into revolutionary institutions. Lunacharsky, however, argued that complete nationalization could be impractical and incompatible with “creative work” (The Commissariat of Enlightenment, p. 143). His concern was not that theatre should remain free of politics. Rather, he understood that propaganda would fail if audiences found it repetitive, unconvincing, or artistically weak. An agitational sketch might inspire committed revolutionaries through its “élan and sincerity,” but a major theatre that had to attract an audience of two thousand people every day required greater artistic complexity (The Commissariat of Enlightenment, p. 143).

The government therefore sought controlled cooperation rather than allowing either professionals or radical amateurs to dominate theatre completely. Only theatres operating under “reliable direction” and possessing cultural value considered “incontrovertible” could expect meaningful autonomy (The Commissariat of Enlightenment, p. 144). Even then, the state attempted to control administration,

personnel, repertoire, and political messaging. This policy demonstrates that the central issue was not simply whether Soviet theatre should be traditional or avant-garde. The more important issue was who possessed the authority to decide. In this transitional period, the government accepted many different theatrical forms when they served immediate needs, but it became suspicious whenever artists or workers claimed the right to define revolutionary culture independently.

Amateur theatre was especially valuable because it could reach people beyond the established professional stage. Lynn Mally describes Soviet amateur theatre as a “mass movement” that contemporaries believed could shape a new socialist culture (Lynn Mally, *Revolutionary Acts*, Introduction, pp. 1–2). Amateur groups appeared in factories, workers’ clubs, military units, neighborhoods, and villages. They continued some prerevolutionary traditions, including performances in people’s houses and seasonal fairground known as *balagany*, but gave them new political purpose. The importance of these amateur groups was not based primarily on artistic quality. Their performers were members of the same communities as their audiences, which reduced the distance between the stage and everyday life. When workers saw people like themselves performing, theatre appeared to become a collective activity rather than a cultural product delivered by a privileged professional class.

Amateur performance also supported the socialist ideal of *samodeiatelnost’*, or independent cultural activity. Soviet writers contrasted this concept with *liubitel’s tvo*, which suggested unskilled or dilettantish amateurism (Mally, *Revolutionary Acts*, pp. 4–5). The distinction carried an important ideological meaning. Ordinary workers were not supposed merely to consume culture made by professionals; they were expected to create culture collectively. Supporters believed this process could become a “self-educator of the people,” because participants would teach themselves socialist

discipline through rehearsal, cooperation, and performance (Mally, *Revolutionary Acts*, Chapter 1, p. 1). Workers' theatre thus modeled the revolution's promise that ordinary people could become active creators of history. At the same time, the state hoped to guide that activity toward approved political conclusions.

The practical conditions of Soviet Russia made small agitational forms particularly useful. In 1926, approximately 48.9 percent of the population remained illiterate (Ilya Voskoboynikov, "Living Standards in the USSR During the Interwar Period," p. 14). The New Economic Policy also reduced the resources available for state education. Peter Kenez explains that the return to "financial orthodoxy" caused government support for literacy work to decline until "the monies for teaching illiterates simply disappeared" (Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State*, pp. 146, 158). Organizations created to combat illiteracy often existed more successfully on paper than in practice. Provincial branches lacked money, teachers, and the ability to supervise local programs. Theatre could not eliminate illiteracy, but it offered an immediate method for communicating before long-term education programs could produce results.

Forms of agitprop

Printed posters were relatively easy to distribute and could use recognizable images, but abstract symbolism still required explanation. Film could attract and educate large audiences, but projectors, electrical equipment, film stock, and trained technicians were scarce.

Agit trains partially solved these problems by carrying printing equipment, films, political literature, theatre groups, and government officials along the railway system. The October Revolution train, for example, carried major officials including Commissar of Justice Dmitrii Kurskii, Commissar of Health Nikolai Semashko,

Commissar of Internal Affairs Grigorii Petrovskii, and Lunacharsky himself (Kenez, 59). These trains combined propaganda with administration: officials could hear complaints and coordinate local government while performers and printers distributed political messages. Their brightly decorated appearance also made the physical presence of Soviet authority visible. However, the trains remained limited by the railway network and could not provide continuous contact with isolated communities.

Agitprop theatre, however, was more flexible. A local group could produce a short performance using basic costumes, slogans, songs, newspaper articles, and familiar political symbols. A top hat could identify a bourgeois character, while workers' clothing could immediately identify a proletarian hero. These symbolic elements reduced complex political questions to recognizable visual categories. They also made Agitprop relatively cheap to produce. Agitprop was especially useful when performers explained posters or newspaper reports that audience members could not read independently. It could turn an abstract policy into a conflict between recognizable characters and connect national campaigns to local problems.

Specifically, Living Newspapers (*zhivaia gazeta*), developed this informational function further. Performers dramatized recent news, government policies, speeches, and factory production output figures through brief scenes and commentary. Because the material could be revised quickly, a living newspaper remained more current than a conventional play. Agitational trials used a similar method by placing (representations of) class enemies or antisocial behavior on trial before the audience. Through public accusation, judgment, and punishment, these performances taught audiences how socialist citizens were expected to evaluate conduct and what might happen if they did otherwise. The form's purpose was not to explore uncertainty. Living Newspapers transformed political morality into a simple

black and white between acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

Blue Blouse groups became one of the best-known examples of mobile, inexpensive agitprop. Their performances combined short sketches, music, physical movement, news reports, and visual symbols. They required little scenery and could perform in clubs, factories, cafeterias, or improvised rural spaces. One description explained that “Blue Blouse makes no special demands on space or conditions; any stage and any premises fit its requirements” (The Drama Review: Russian Issue Missing page no.). This flexibility was important because many local communities lacked purpose-built theatres and professional equipment. Blue Blouse groups also distributed scripts and staging instructions, allowing distant performers to reproduce a recognizable format without extensive professional training. Consequently, the form extended Soviet messages farther than a centralized professional company could travel.

Support and patronage

State and social institutions supported amateur theatre for different but overlapping purposes. Narkompros regarded it as a means of education and cultural development. Glavpolitprosvet, the political education subdivision of Narkompros, focused more directly on using performances to “disseminate political information and mark important celebrations” (Mally, *Revolutionary Acts*, 5–6). Trade unions supported theatre as political education, collective recreation, and workplace discipline. By the middle of the 1920s, “trade unions alone were supporting a national network of some twelve thousand amateur stages” (Mally, *Revolutionary Acts*, p. 89). This scale shows that workers’ theatre was not a minor artistic experiment. It became integrated into the institutional structure surrounding workers’ daily lives.

Proletkult offered the most independent interpretation of workers’ culture. Led

by figures such as Alexander Bogdanov, it argued that workers should create their own culture rather than inherit bourgeois artistic standards or depend on professional intellectuals. Its supporters valued worker-written scripts, collective improvisation, and performances based on labor and everyday struggle. Amateur theatre appeared to embody “collective interaction and productive social results,” making the creative process itself seem socialist (Mally, *Revolutionary Acts*, pp. 4–5). Nevertheless, Proletkult’s demand for autonomy challenged the Party’s claim to direct the revolution. The Bolsheviks supported worker participation, but they did not accept an independent institution deciding what proletarian culture meant. As the state consolidated power, Proletkult was increasingly subordinated and marginalized.

A dangerous signal

This conflict reveals the danger contained of relying upon amateur theatre for propaganda purposes. The same participation that made it politically attractive allowed performers to adapt scripts, criticize local conditions, and introduce their own experiences. Mally argues that amateur performances became public forums in which participants could express “their own political and social visions” (*Revolutionary Acts*, p. 7). A local group might intend to support socialism while criticizing a factory manager, Party official, or government bureaucracy. From the performers’ perspective, such criticism could represent an attempt to improve the revolution. From the state’s perspective, however, the performance could weaken authority or encourage audiences to question official leadership.

Agitprop could simplify political divisions, define proper socialist behavior, and create the appearance of direct communication between the Communist Party and the population; it also helped the state construct proletarian identity by allowing ordinary people to perform the symbolic role of revolutionary workers. However, the

same qualities that made Agitprop useful also made it difficult to control. Because performances were created quickly and acted out before real workers and local audiences, rapid production left little room for censorship, review, or careful ideological supervision. Living newspapers, Blue Blouse sketches, agitational trials, and mobile workers' performances could all adapt to local conditions, but that flexibility meant performers could also introduce jokes, complaints, and criticisms that did not fully align with official policy. Agitational trials were especially dangerous because they encouraged audiences to talk openly about failure, corruption, shortages, laziness, and mismanagement, much of which was connected to the government's own policies during War Communism, the NEP, collectivization, and rapid industrialization. A performance meant to direct anger against class enemies could easily redirect attention toward the state's own failures. This problem reflected the larger distinction between preserving revolutionary ideals and preserving the Soviet state. The political revolution had already created a government, army, ministries, factories under state control, and a growing Party bureaucracy, so Bolshevik leaders increasingly needed stability, discipline, and administrative continuity. The theatrical left, by contrast, wanted the artistic revolution to continue by overturning old stages, acting methods, professional hierarchies, and inherited cultural institutions. As the Party became tied to the interests of the Soviet state, revolutionary theatrical experimentation appeared less like a useful ally and more like a potential threat.

Revision of the theatre

During the First Five-Year Plan, the government attempted to reduce this unpredictability by integrating agitprop brigades more directly into state campaigns. Brigades worked with Party organizations, factory administrations, and trade unions,

becoming part of what Mally calls the Soviet cultural “front” (Revolutionary Acts, pp. 160–164). Their performances addressed industrial production, collectivization, government loans, labor discipline, and competition between work teams. Instead of merely explaining policy, the brigades attempted to produce immediate “behavioral responses,” such as promises to increase output or purchase government bonds (Mally, Revolutionary Acts, pp. 167–169). Performance and political action began to merge.

The methods used by these brigades show how workers’ theatre gradually changed from collective education into a mechanism of governance. Inspired by the industrial shock movement, performers rejected “privileges and established methods” and presented themselves as laborers rather than a separate artist class (Mally, Revolutionary Acts, pp. 150–151). The slogan “A shock work tempo demands shock work methods” expressed their commitment to rapid production in all spheres of work including theatre. Yet this speed often reduced complicated problems to accusations against individual workers. Brigades used red lists, blacklists, ranking systems, and public humiliation to identify productive and unproductive workers. A poorly performing laborer might receive a badge of shame or be mocked before coworkers. Theatre no longer simply represented social pressure; it became one of the methods through which that pressure was applied.

These practices could produce short-term participation, but they also revealed the limitations of excessive instrumentalism. When every performance repeated production figures, slogans, and predictable villains, agitprop lost much of its entertainment value. Critics increasingly described brigade performances as “schematic” and “mechanical” (Mally, Revolutionary Acts, 173–175). The problem was not merely poor acting. The form had become so closely subordinated to

immediate policy that it left little room for character, conflict, surprise, or emotional persuasion. Audiences could anticipate the approved conclusion before a performance began.

At the same time, as literacy increased with the spread of education [beginning in year] and radio, film, and other forms of mass entertainment expanded [years], theatre was no longer the only method available for communicating political information. The state also continued investing in professional institutions, no longer relying exclusively on cheap agitprop. As early as 1918, Soviet cultural authorities were already supporting state drama theatres and professional theatres for children and young people (TYUZ). This tension makes clear that agitprop was never the government's only theatrical policy. Officials recognized that lasting cultural influence required trained performers, developed narratives, stable institutions, productions capable of holding an audience's attention, and reliable mechanisms of censorship and ideological control. Amateur agitation served immediate political emergencies, while professional theatre promised more sophisticated and continuous cultural education.

The Soviet strikes back

The conflict between amateur and professional theatre became visible at the 1933 Moscow Olympiad of Revolutionary Theatre. Awards favored developed plays rather than repetitive short forms, and amateur performers were encouraged to consult professionals. Critics argued that amateur groups required "fundamentally different aesthetic and organizational principles" (Mally, *Revolutionary Acts*, p. 178). Officials increasingly called for a "true synthesis" that would be both "politically correct and entertaining" (Mally, *Revolutionary Acts*, p. 178). Political leaders had not abandoned theatre as a conduit of propaganda. Instead, they concluded that propaganda needed

stronger artistic methods to remain persuasive.

This transformation also appeared internationally. In “Exporting Soviet Culture: The Case of Agitprop Theater,” Mally explains that revolutionary theatre circulated through communist networks in Europe, North America, and Asia. Organizations such as the Comintern and the International Workers’ Theatrical Union, commonly known as MORT, attempted to coordinate international leftist theatre and establish Soviet standards (Mally, “Exporting Soviet Culture,” pp. 324–328). Foreign groups retained agitprop longer because they faced political repression, limited resources, and the need to campaign against governments that did not yet support them. While Soviet performers were agitating on behalf of “a state that already existed,” many foreign groups were struggling for “a state that was yet to be” (Mally, *Revolutionary Acts*, Introduction, p. 4). Agitprop therefore remained more revolutionary abroad even as it became increasingly administrative within the Soviet Union.

By the early 1930s, independent cultural organizations such as Prolekult had been abolished and socialist realism emerged as the preferred artistic framework. Soviet officials demanded professionally organized works with clearer narratives, developed characters, ideological reliability, and broader emotional appeal. This was a shift from propaganda as theatre to a theatre of propaganda. In the earlier model, political agitation itself generated theatrical form: workers improvised, transformed news into scenes, and responded rapidly to local conditions. In the later model, the state increasingly determined the repertoire, organizational structure, acceptable heroes, and political conclusions of theatrical production. Theatre remained propagandistic, but the process became more centralized and less open to spontaneous worker participation.

The rise and fall of Agitprop

Ultimately, workers' theatre was necessary to the early Soviet project because it was inexpensive, immediate, participatory, and accessible to audiences whom written propaganda could not reach. It helped the Bolsheviks compensate for mass illiteracy, weak local administration, the shrinking industrial workforce, and the growing separation between the Party and ordinary workers. Through agitprop, living newspapers, mass spectacles, Blue Blouse performances, and amateur stages, political ideas became visible and collective. Workers were not only on the receiving end of revolutionary ideas, but they also became part of it.

However, this strength was inseparable from danger. Once ordinary people entered the theatrical process, they could reinterpret approved texts, criticize local officials, and articulate their own understanding of socialism. The state wanted workers to participate in culture, but only within conclusions established by the Party. As Soviet power consolidated, officials increasingly responded to this contradiction through regulation, professional supervision, repertoire control, and the marginalization of autonomous organizations such as Proletkult. The decline of agitprop was therefore not caused only by rising literacy or competition from film and radio. It also resulted from the government's growing unwillingness to tolerate the unpredictability that had made revolutionary theatre effective. Workers' theatre began as a means of bringing the masses into the Revolution, but it was gradually transformed into a means of bringing the masses under the state.

WWI devastated Russia, in the process of war, the economic systems between the city and the rural communities were broken. Because of inflation and the shutdown of factories, cities had little to offer in exchange for food; peasants did not want the scarce industrial products that they did not need, and they did not want the money that they could not spend. As a result, there was an appalling lack of food in the cities, as peasants were unwilling to sell their food into cities.

The February Revolution began in Petrograd on March 8, 1917 (Russian calendar), continuing through February 23, ending more than three centuries of Romanov rule when Nicholas II abdicated on March 15. The February Revolution was quickly followed by the second, October Revolution, during which the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government on November 7, 1917. These two political revolutions left the new government with the need to win the country ideologically and reach an enormous illiterate population across a vast and sprawling countryside.

The Bolshevik Party was primarily supported by workers and city-dwelling populations. Therefore, the Bolshevik Party desperately needed food to fulfill their promise of Bread, Peace, and Land.

After the October Revolution, Lenin's government issued a Decree on Land on November 8, 1917, formally abolishing landed proprietorship "without any compensation" and transferring estates and church and monastery lands to local land committees (Lenin, articles 1–2). The decree was not the beginning of the peasant land revolution, as rural communities had already seized and redistributed estate land throughout 1917. Rather, the Bolsheviks were attempting to gain peasant support by legally recognizing a process that had already taken place.

In November 1917, Russia held its first democratic elections. The All-Russian Constituent Assembly is formed. In the process, the Bolsheviks gain just 24% of the vote.

On January 6, 1918 (OS), Lenin declares the Assembly illegal and forcibly dissolves it.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, signed on March 3, 1918, removed Soviet Russia from the First World War, at enormous cost: Russia relinquished Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Poland, Ukraine, and parts of the Caucasus, losing nearly one third of its farmlands and more than half of its industrial infrastructure.

This sparked opposition to Bolshevik rule, such as the left SR uprisings on July 6th, 1918, and eventually contributed to the renewed vigor of the civil war.

In 1918, the center of Soviet Russia found itself cut off from the most important agricultural regions of the country; at this stage of the Russian Civil War, the White movement controlled many of the traditional food-producing areas. Grain reserves ran low, causing hunger among the urban population, from which the

Bolshevik government received its strongest support. To meet basic food needs, the Soviet government imposed strict controls on the food surpluses of prosperous rural households.

The number of different kinds of products designated for collection by the state was calculated on the basis of the data on each guberniia's areas under crops, crop capacity, and the reserves of past years. Within each guberniia, the collection plan was broken down between uezds, volosts, villages, and then separate peasant households.

The collection procedures were performed by the agencies of the People's Commissariat for Provisions and prodotriads with the help of kombeds and of local Soviets.

And while the intelligentsia remained a target for “rhetorical purposes,” the reality was much more complicated, as the state still needed educated specialists to administer the country (The Cultural Front, p. 18).

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Productions of Nikolai Gogol’s *The Inspector General* exposed this problem. The play criticized corruption and incompetence within the tsarist bureaucracy, making it appear suitable for a revolutionary audience. Yet spectators could also draw “parallels with the Soviet bureaucracy” (Mally, *Revolutionary Acts*, Chapter 2, p. 6). The text had been approved, but its meaning changed when performed before people who had their own experiences with Soviet officials. This episode demonstrates why censorship of scripts alone could not guarantee ideological control. Meaning was created not only by the playwright or the state but also by actors, directors, local circumstances, and audiences. The participatory character of theatre therefore made propaganda more persuasive while simultaneously making it less predictable.