



4-2013

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Recommended Citation

Brown, Kevin (2013) "Agitprop in Soviet Russia," *Constructing the Past*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/constructing/vol14/iss1/4>

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Abstract

Throughout the Soviet Union, propaganda could be seen everywhere - from art galleries to movies to street corners, Russian culture was flooded with pro-Bolshevik sentiments. Agitprop theatre, unlike other propaganda that was inaccessible to the working class, effectively appealed to and indoctrinated Russia's lower class citizens.

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Kevin Brown

Throughout the Soviet Union, propaganda could be seen everywhere – from art galleries to movies to street corners, Russian culture was flooded with pro-Bolshevik sentiments. However, because newspaper and radio, the most accessible means of propaganda to the educated class, were ineffective – 70% of Russia’s population was illiterate at the time – “the Soviets developed theatre as a weapon in the revolutionary struggle.”¹ With the onset of this style, “the barriers between stage and spectator were demolished.”² A new style of theatre emerged that appealed to the common worker: agitprop. Agitprop theatre, unlike other propaganda that was inaccessible to the working class, effectively appealed to and indoctrinated Russia’s lower class citizens.

The term agitprop developed after the establishment of the Department of Agitation and Propaganda in 1920 by the Soviet Communist Party.³ Agitprop theatre had one explicit purpose: to reach the working class directly. Before this movement, Russian theatre was not accessible to most. Bertolt Brecht, a German playwright and director, argues that “the art of theatre is candidly defined as having the power to release, sweep away, uplift, et cetera. It is not an art at all unless it does so.”⁴ However, because the focus was on bourgeois concerns – problems with wealth, identity, and, ultimately, the individual – proletariat culture was simply not interested. From the Moscow Art Theatre to Russia’s Classical Theatre, drama was far too developed for widespread acceptance.

However, everything changed in Russia after the October Revolution in 1917. The Bolsheviks came into power under the guise of popular support. Of course, this was far from the truth. In actuality, a small group seized power against the will of the majority. To combat this, the leading Bolsheviks instituted propaganda on a governmental level. While propaganda had been around for a long time before their rise to power, “the Bolshevik innovation consisted in assigning propaganda a central place in national life: previously employed to touch up or distort reality, in Communist Russia propaganda became a surrogate reality.”⁵ There arose a “‘cultural’ bureaucracy for whom culture was only a form of propaganda, and propaganda the highest form of culture.”⁶ Ideally, all works produced from 1917 on would push forward the Bolshevik agenda. Of

1. “Agit-prop,” *Modern Theatre in Context*, ed. Christopher Innes (<http://moderndrama.ca/crc/chrono/sup.php?id=43&print> [accessed April 12, 2012]).

2. Bertolt Brecht, “On the Experimental Theatre” in *Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (Freeport, NY: Grove Press, Inc., 1963), 95.

3. “Agit-prop,” *Modern Theatre*.

4. Brecht, *Theatre*, 106.

5. Richard Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 313.

6. *Ibid.*

course, the only effective propaganda was that which could be understood by its audience.

Agitprop theatre, unlike other forms of propaganda, was able to communicate directly to the masses. Vsevolod Meyerhold, a Russian actor and director, picked up the banner after the Revolution. Although his work was not political pre-1917, he was one of the first to work closely with the Bolshevik's message. When he took into account the demands of both the Communist Party and the people, Meyerhold believed that "the first concern of all those concerned in the theatre is the clarity of the message conveyed from the stage; the spectator will want to know precisely why a play is being performed and what the director and actors are trying to say in it."⁷ Meyerhold charged theatre with a new task: to "work on the spectator in order to awaken and strengthen in him a militancy strong enough to help him conquer the oblomovism, manilovism, hypocrisy, erotomania and pessimism within himself ... How can we imbue them with that 'life-giving force' ... which will carry the masses forward to a world of new revolutionary creative effort?"⁸ The answer to this was not theatre of the intellect – that was far too cranial for the proletariat.

Rather, it was theatre that evoked intense emotional response from the audience. Erwin Piscator, a German communist who heavily influenced agitprop theatre in Russia, discovered the way in which to do this. The purpose of Bolshevik theatre is not to demonstrate man's "relationship to himself, nor his relationship to God, but his relationship to society."⁹ In Piscator's view, "the business of revolutionary theatre is to take reality as its point of departure and to magnify the social discrepancy, making it an element of our indictment, our revolt, our new order."¹⁰ The goal of this new movement was to incite the audience, to connect them with the rest of their social class. Because the issues presented had many nuances and complexities, actors chose a few themes or messages that would be emphasized greatly through caricatures, symbolism, repetition, etc.

Of course, the target audience – industrial workers, peasants who worked the land, volunteer Red soldiers – were not interested in attending provoking theatre performances. To combat this, agitprop brigades – indeed, fittingly charged language – were sent to factories and to the front between October 1917 and October 1922 during the Russian Civil War. Brigades hunted down audiences wherever there was one to find. Because these acting troupes were mobile, they were unable to bring bulky or complicated equipment, if anything at all. These troupes "rejected the conventions of aesthetic drama, the established modes of

7. Vsevolod Meyerhold, "The Reconstruction of the Theatre" in *Twentieth-Century Theatre: A sourcebook*, ed. Richard Drain (London: Routledge, 1995), 98.

8. *Ibid.*, 100.

9. Erwin Piscator, "Basic Principles of a Theory of Sociological Drama (1929)" in *Twentieth-Century Theatre: A sourcebook*, ed. Richard Drain (London: Routledge, 1995), 102.

10. *Ibid.*, 103.

presenting a story to an audience. They eschewed makeup, elaborate costumes, sets, stages, rigorous training programs, and sometimes even scripts.”¹¹ Troupes were encouraged not to bring anything at all so that performances could occur literally anywhere. Instead, they improvised everything. Agitprop brigades made “no special demands on space or conditions; any stage and any premises fit its requirements. The performances [did] not need decorations; the entire work of expression and form [was] fulfilled by the actors.”¹² Additionally, “the scenography was simple. The principle was to use available material in an inventive way.”¹³ That said, agitprop theatre was primarily for the uneducated masses. Therefore, in order to be understood by the majority, the content needed to be highly visual. In order to keep material varied enough to remain interesting, actors were required to constantly engage and involve the audience with different physical activities or improvised scenes.

A popular form of agitprop was the Living Newspaper. The practice began when actors read newspapers aloud to a large group of people. However, this soon became stale, as little was happening onstage. To liven up these events, actors began to perform the news, “using music, clowns, acrobats, cartoon style, and montage techniques.”¹⁴ By creating a stimulating, visual work, agitprop brigades were able to hold the attention of audience members. Of course, this worked predominantly to convey the underlying political messages. Directly after the October Revolution, “the man on the street seemed to feel that it made no difference who was in charge, since things were so bad they could not possibly get any worse.”¹⁵ Now, though, factory workers who normally would not care about political activities were rallying to the Bolshevik cause. By taking advantage of this vulnerability with agitprop theatre, the Soviet regime was able to spread their political message with ease.

The most famous troupe to use this technique, the Blue Blouse, spread throughout the Soviet Union. Started by Boris Yuzhanin with help from the Moscow Institute of Journalism in 1923, the Blue Blouse quickly gained attention. At its height, more than 100,000 people were involved.¹⁶ The Blue Blouse was named from their uniform – a blue worker’s blouse and pants. Further costuming could be added for effect – a capitalist’s top hat, a soldier’s rifle, etc. – but the worker’s uniform was always underneath, symbolizing the struggle of workers everywhere. Since they portrayed themselves as members of the working class, real workers felt an attachment to the troupes and connected to their

11. Lynn Mally, *Revolutionary Acts: Amateur Theater and the Soviet State, 1917-1938* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 151.

12. S. Yuzhanin quoted in František Deák, “Blue Blouse: 1923-1928,” *The Drama Review* 17 (March 1973): 38-39.

13. František Deák, “Blue Blouse: 1923-1928,” *The Drama Review* 17 (March 1973): 39.

14. “Agit-prop,” *Modern Theatre*.

15. Pipes, *Concise History*, 149.

16. Deák, “Blue Blouse,” 36.

message. Remarkably, what began as one troupe ended as five thousand; “groups all over the country, both professional and amateur, started up in emulation, drawing on its freely disseminated material. Performances offered skits, verse, monologues and ‘avant-garde oratory’ among ‘an uninterrupted montage of scenes, songs, music, dance, mime, acrobatics and gymnastics.’”¹⁷ Informative socio-political content and Bolshevik propaganda always featured in Blue Blouse performances. Because the actors appeared to represent workers as a whole, captured their attention, and subtly incorporated political messages, workers unconsciously subscribed to the Bolshevik agenda.

Agitprop theatre was used after the October Revolution to indoctrinate the working proletariat. This style of theatre quickly and easily spread the Bolshevik’s political message, as it evoked a powerful emotional reaction from spectators. The accessibility, mobility, and spontaneity of these productions made them perfect for Bolsheviks who, without agitprop theatre, had no way of making contact with the working class.

17. Richard Drain, *Twentieth-Century Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1995), 157.