



# Culture and Legacy of the Russian Revolution

**Rhetoric and Performance – Religious Semantics –  
Impact on Asia**

Christopher Balme / Burcu Dogramaci /  
Christoph Hilgert / Riccardo Nicolosi /  
Andreas Renner (eds.)

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Culture and Legacy of the Russian Revolution

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Band 9

Christopher Balme / Burcu Dogramaci / Christoph Hilgert /  
Riccardo Nicolosi / Andreas Renner (eds.)

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Content .....	5
Introduction .....	7
<i>Rhetoric and Performance</i>	
Laurence Senelick Order out of Chaos: First Steps in Creating a Bolshevik and Proletarian Theatre .....	17
Ada Raev Russian Avant-garde Artists on the Stages of Revolution .....	37
Georg Witte “Drumming Preparation:” Poetics and Politics of Rhythm in the Soviet Avant-Garde.....	51
Natascha Drubek Exegi Monumentum Revolutionis – On Eisenstein’s <i>October</i> (1927).....	71
<i>Religious Semantics</i>	
Franziska Davies “Citizens-Muslims, organize!” Russia’s Muslims in the Age of Transformation and Revolution.....	103
Tobias Grill “Another Messiah has come:” Jewish Socialist Revolutionaries in Russia and their Attitude towards Religion (1890s-1920s).....	115
Vitalij Fastovskij Dying for the Common Cause: The Value of a Good Death in the Moral Framework of the Revolution.....	135

Johannes Gleixner	
Soviet Power as Enabler of Revolutionary Religion, 1917–1929 .....	157
<i>Impact on Asia</i>	
Martin Aust	
From Political and Social to Imperial and Global: Historiographies of the Russian Revolution Then and Now .....	179
Gerhard Grüßhaber	
From the Baltic to Anatolia: The German officer Hans Tröbst, between Freikorps, Wrangel, Kemalists, and Bolsheviks (1920–1923).....	189
Tatiana Linkhoeva	
The Russian Revolution and the Japanese Debates on the “Bolshevization” of Asia during the Foreign Intervention, 1917–1925.....	209
Yoshiro Ikeda	
Time and the Comintern: Rethinking the Cultural Impact of the Russian Revolution on Japanese Intellectuals .....	227
Irina Morozova	
The Mongolian Revolution of 1921 and its International Effect.....	241
Authors and editors .....	267

## Introduction

### **Culture and Legacy of the Russian Revolution: Rhetoric and Performance – Religious Semantics – Impact on Asia**

Until the late 1980s, the October Revolution of 1917 served as the undisputed focal point for historical research on Russia and the Soviet Union. With the collapse of the Soviet Union on the one hand and the rise of cultural history as historiographical approach on the other hand, the political and social significance of the caesura has been questioned while later periods have attracted considerably more attention. Yet, for scholars no other event has gained the paramount significance the 1917 revolution had. What is the meaning of this event in history hundred years later? And how have the historiographical debates of recent years led to a reevaluation of the events leading to and triggered by the Revolution?

The Russian Revolution of October 1917 was an event of global significance. Despite this fact, public attention and even research literature mostly focused on Russia and the other states that became part of USSR for many decades. The impact of these dramatic events on other parts of the world was neglected or not systematically explored until recently. And in analyzing the events, political history still dominates the field.

This volume wants to add to this image some valuable perspectives by exploring the culture as well as the political and cultural legacy of the Russian Revolution. Three focal points are taken here, which are blind spots in most historical inspections of the Russian Revolution so far: the revolution's rhetoric and performance, its religious semantics, and its impact on Asia.

## **Rhetoric and Performance**

The first section of articles deals with Rhetoric and Performance. The Russian Revolution saw a comprehensive attempt to restructure the arts (theatre, cinema, visual arts, literature) and even daily life according to new precepts and concepts. Performances intending to strengthen the identification of audiences with the ideas of the Russian Revolution in media



like theatre and film are explored. Different facets of the rhetoric of revolution and its interconnections with aesthetic phenomena are investigated, including Lenin's language and formalist poetics as well as the rhythms of revolution as an aesthetic principle.

*Laurence Senelick* offers an intriguing analysis of the first steps of the transformation from imperial upper-class theatre to a Bolshevik and Proletarian Theatre. The theatre, of all the arts the one that speaks most immediately to the public, therefore required intense supervision and direction. Senelick investigates the unique role of the newly appointed Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky, who granted autonomy to artistic institutions and announced that the former Imperial theatres were henceforth to serve the Soviet cause. The theatre was supposed to uplift the intellectual and ideological status of the masses and indoctrinate them in the new political realities. However, the concept that the Russian Revolution would free artists to create new forms for a new society and the concept that the Revolution was meant to promote a socialist world-order were set on a collision course.

*Ada Raev* explores the theatricality of the Russian Revolution and the boom of theatrical actions for its celebratory commemoration in post-revolutionary Russia. Propagandistic actions moved away from the stages to the streets – in fact, the revolution was staged. Identifying both traditional and innovative performance practices in amateur as well as professional theatre helping to implement the ideas of social and cultural revolution, Raev can trace the importance of avant-garde artists on the stages of revolution. For a short time, Raev explores, revolution in the arts and political revolution went on hand in hand.

*Georg Witte* investigates the rhythm of revolution, highlighting the significance of rhythm as historical future tense. Referring, amongst others, to Osip Mandelstam's essay "Government and Rhythm" from 1920 and to Sergei Eisenstein's cinematographic art, Witte explores revolutionary bodies and revolutionary languages between organization and ecstasy and the relevance of universal, rhythmical acts for the creation of future history as a driving force in the Russian Revolution.

*Natascha Drubek* looks closer into the cinematic representation of revolution in Sergei Eisenstein's film *Oktyabr' / October*. This film, she ar-

gues, had a decisive impact on the revolutionary development of film history and theory. For Eisenstein, revolution on film was never merely the screen narrative of the historical event, more importantly, it was a philosophical concept, Drubek argues. In her paper, she explores how revolution can be re-enacted and shown in the medium of cinema, and how this medium is capable of not only staging or even falsifying history in a pseudo-documentary form, but also retain the dialectical gist of the philosophy behind the political revolution. The motifs she draws upon for her analysis are sculptures and monuments.

## Religious Semantics

Religious semantics of revolutionary discourse and practices in the Russian Revolution as well as revolutionary semantics of religious beliefs in this period of time are studied in the second set of articles of this volume. These contributions underscore the interdependencies of religion and revolution, which not by random both seem to address a promise of salvation and the willingness to make sacrifices.

*Franziska Davies* provides new perspectives on the 19th century origins of Muslim revolutionary politics in Russia. The Russian Empire's Muslim subjects were a culturally and ethnically heterogeneous group and while they shared the experience of Tsarist rule, their relationship to the imperial center was shaped by diverging historical experiences and these differences were mirrored in the ways in which the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 played out in the Crimea, the Southern Caucasus, the Volga-Ural Region and Central Asia. In 1917 the breakdown of Tsarist rule soon transformed into an inner-Muslim struggle between the reformists known as the Jadidists and the more conservative and traditional ulema over moral authority and power, before turning into a "Central Asian Civil War."

Even though Jews and individuals with Jewish background played a crucial role in the Russian revolutionary movement, so far no concentrated research has been devoted to the question of religious semantics in the revolutionary rhetoric of Jewish socialists. In his paper, *Tobias Grill*

discusses the questions why a remarkable number of Jews joined the revolutionary movement in the Russian Empire from the 1890s to the 1920s, what attitude towards religion they harbored, and the significance of religious motifs and imagery in their propaganda.

*Vitalij Fastovskij* explores how the Russian Narodniki in the 1860s and 1870s reflected upon their approaching deaths and to define the role that Christian-Jewish perceptions played in this regard. What meaning did the Narodniki give to their lives and what role did death play in the conception of what a good and fulfilling life might be? And what were the political consequences of such evaluations? To answer these questions, Fastovskij explores the terms these people wrote about life and death. He shows that most propagandistic leaflets and writings dedicated to the memory of the fallen comrades utilized the notion of “martyrdom” in one form or another. The Narodniki forged a powerful model that was later utilized by especially the Socialist revolutionary parties of the 20th century.

Between 1917 and 1929, Soviet Russia saw plenty of public discussions on religion. *Johannes Gleixner* examines this peculiar phenomenon that seems to contradict the common perception of Soviet antireligious policy: why did this avowed “atheist” country allow religious speech while effectively shutting down other venues of public discourse? As Gleixner demonstrates, there existed an interdependence between religious radicals and Bolshevik ideology. Despite its seemingly ideological foundations, the Soviet state had difficulty drawing a line between providing a discursive frame of reference, on one hand, and being a part of an ideological discourse on the other hand, thus mirroring a general problem of modern polities.

## Impact on Asia

The third section of articles deals with Impact on Asia. So far, the cataclysmic events 1917 have mainly been studied in their consequences for the West. However, the breakup of the 19th-century order begun in the East: with the Chinese Revolution of 1911. And spreading the revolution to Asia was on the Bolsheviks' agenda until the early 1920s.

*Martin Aust's* paper elaborates on the task – and actually the challenge – to write a general account of the Russian Revolution on the occasion of the centenary of 1917. He sketches out the state of the art of political and social history accounts of the revolution and then brings in the far too often neglected dimensions and insights of imperial and global history. Aust argues that globalizing the history of the Russian Revolution recommends for a shift in the focus from the center in Moscow and the Bolsheviks to actors in other world regions. This plea is heard and further explored with regard to Asia in the following articles of this volume.

*Gerhard Grüßhaber* traces the astonishing military career of the German Officer Hans Tröbst after the First World War. First, Tröbst served as Freikorps soldier with the Grenzschutz Ost in Poland, the “Iron Division” in the Baltics and then participated in the March 1920 Kapp-Lüttwitz putsch in Berlin. As he had to give up his initial plans to join the White army operating in southern Russia, Tröbst decided to apply for the Turkish nationalist forces under General Mustafa Kemal [Atatürk] in the war against the Greek invasion of Western Anatolia. Later, he returned to Germany and eventually supported the early National Socialists. As Grüßhaber shows, Tröbst’s political ideas were especially shaped during the Russian Civil War.

Russian Revolution took a distinctive character in the non-European world: it not only merged socialism and revolution, but also anti-capitalist with anti-imperialist struggles. The history of the Russian Revolution therefore, *Tatiana Linkhoeva* argues in her paper focusing on Imperial Japan, necessarily includes the story of how, in the process of regaining its geopolitical pre-eminence in Europe and Asia, Soviet Russia transformed the meaning of Marxism and communism for people inhabiting those territories. The Japanese were less concerned with how communism would affect the Japanese nation, but rather with how anti-imperialist struggle of imperial subjects could destabilize their empire and thwart their plans for Manchuria. Much of anti-Bolshevik or anti-communist rhetoric was a convenient way for the Japanese imperial government and the army to gain public support for the imperial project on the continent, to justify their actions, and to gain support of the foreign powers.

*Yoshiro Ikeda* adds to this picture the perspective of Japanese intellectuals who felt that the Russian Revolution in general and the Bolshevik

Revolution in particular were quite attractive. The escalating concept of timeline propagated by the Comintern found resonance among many Japanese leftists in the early 1920s, as it provided them with an authoritative roadmap towards a social revolution. Here, Ikeda traces the basic development of interrelations between Soviet Russia and the Comintern on the one hand, and leftist intellectuals of Japan on the other, with special attention paid to the role played by the Bolshevik concept of world history.

*Irina Morozova* takes a look at Mongolia, which usually appears peripheral in Western and Eastern historiographical traditions. The modern idea of the nation state was brought into Mongolian valleys and steppes by the Bolsheviks and the agents of the Third Communist International, the Comintern, in the situation of the civil war in the Russian Far East at the end 1910s-beginning 1920s. Moreover, Mongolian revolutionaries, upon the advice of the Comintern, came to power and establish their rule in alliance with Buddhist elites. The revolutionaries in their social campaigns had to make lots of amendments to the symbolism of Buddhism, in the forms it was practiced by the Mongols that time.

This volume is largely based on papers presented at the third annual conference of the Graduate School for East and Southeast European Studies. The Graduate School is a joint and interdisciplinary doctoral program by the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich and the Universität Regensburg. The international third annual conference, which brought together both emerging and well-established scholars from different fields of research, took place in Munich in 2016. Some additional papers were exclusively invited to this book afterwards. Unfortunately, the editorial process faced some unexpected challenges and delay, which demanded patience from the authors as well as from the editors. Besides the relaunch of the DigiOst book series with a new publishing house, this was – not least and most unpleasant in itself – due to the end of original funding of the Graduate School in the excellence initiative in late 2019. This caesura resulted in severe cuts in financing and administrative personnel. But, finally, here we go. The editors would like to express their cordial gratitude to Carolin Piorun, Drivalda Delia, Megan Barry, Dannie Snyder, Anke Oehler, Tabea Roschka, Dr Felix Jeschke and Dr Arpine Maniero,

## Introduction

who all strongly contributed to the editing of this book during the publication process and who made possible to have the important contributions following published now.

Please note: The transcription of names and other mentioned words from languages using non-Latin alphabets is mostly based on the BGN/PCGN (United States Board on Geographic Names/Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for British Official Use) Romanization system. For pragmatical reasons, some names may differ from this way of transliteration, when another spelling is already well-established.

Christoph Hilgert



*Rhetoric and Performance*





Laurence Senelick

## Order out of Chaos: First Steps in Creating a Bolshevik and Proletarian Theatre

Historians customarily cite 24/25 October (Nov. 7 n.s.) 1917 as the official opening date of the Bolshevik *coup d'état*. For theatre historians the emblematic advent of the new order comes somewhat earlier, on 25 February 1917. That was when the fur-swaddled audience leaving the opulent Alexandrinsky Theatre heard gunfire in the bitterly cold streets. The police were firing on a mob at the Nikolaev railroad station. The outbreak of the February Revolution had a symbolic meaning for the theatre world.

Vsevolod Meyerhold, the most prominent stage director in Russia, had rehearsed Lermontov's romantic verse melodrama *Masquerade* for seven years; all the resources of the imperial theatres had been put at his disposal. Everything that appeared on stage, from hundreds of costumes to tea services, had been especially designed and constructed for this production. Its sumptuousness marked the climax of both Meyerhold's work with traditional forms of romantic theatre and the open-handed patronage of the court. This opening night served, however, as a requiem for the society of bejewelled aristocrats and war profiteers who filled the stalls. This, the last production at the Alexandrinsky as an imperial playhouse, burst like a show of royal fireworks answered by the gunshots of the impending regime.<sup>1</sup>

### Chaos and Confusion

Overnight, a major cultural institution lost its bearings. The bureaucracy that ran the imperial theatres had been equivalent almost to a state ministry; the private theatres were dependent on millionaire patrons and stockholders. Companies that relied on the box-office saw empty houses due to unsafe streets and devaluation of currency. The paralysis of artists and intellectuals during this so-called "period of freedom" bemused cultural

1 Yur'ev: Zapiski, 232-235.

commentators. “The talented remain silent, disturbed and frightened by the terrible dregs, the confusion, and the disorder that our revolution has harboured,” wrote the novelist Nikonov, “Can songs of beauty and light conceivably be sung when the spectacle of a shameful struggle against our country is going on?”<sup>2</sup> The poet Alexander Blok insisted that the Provisional Government continue to support state theatre, because it was the only agency capable of allowing autonomy and independence to artistic institutions without compromise. He parroted the Russian belief that the theatre was a mighty force for education, necessary to train the new citizens who were bound to arise.<sup>3</sup> Another observer, struck by queues at the cinemas as long as bread lines, argued that, instead of insipid slapstick, an amusement-hungry public should be introduced to Shakespeare and the Russian classics.<sup>4</sup>

For many in the theatre, narrowly focused on their rehearsals, this was all white noise. At the Moscow Art Theatre’s first studio, working on Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, a young actress later recalled:

The October Revolution also took us completely by surprise. No one, including Stanislavsky, was prepared for it or could make sense of it. We considered that something extraordinary and meaningful had happened, but we had no direct relationship to it.<sup>5</sup>

News of the Petrograd events burst upon the Moscow theatre world in fits and starts. A performance of a Knut Hamsun play at the Art Theatre on October 24 had audience members rushing to the telephones in the intermissions to get the latest news. The Chief of the Moscow police, informed that Petrograd was in the hands of the Soviets, borrowed a workman’s outfit from the theatre’s wardrobe, while a dresser put his uniform in mothballs.<sup>6</sup>

2 Nikonov: *Obozrenie teatrov* (7 iyul’ 1917, 23 avgust 1917). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

3 Blok: *Pis’mo o teatre*, 392-394.

4 Vodin: *Rayonnye teatry*, 4-5.

5 Giatsintova: *S pamyat’yu naedine*, 164-165.

6 Boleslavsky / Woodward: *Lances Down*, 72-74.

Box-office receipts had already fallen precipitously in both capitals on October 15; by the 23rd the drop had become serious and by October 25 catastrophic. Some theatres carried on, others did not. Actors failed to show up, often owing to the raising of bridges. Many theatres lacked electricity during the day and had to call off rehearsals. Oddly enough, premieres could still attract full houses and at least fifteen to twenty spectators showed up at most performances even on Sundays. The only Petrograd playhouses to continue performing throughout this period and make money were the Nevsky and the Troitsky, which both specialized in bedroom farce.

On October 27, notices were posted all over Petrograd to announce the deposition of the Provisional Government. When it became known that the Bolsheviks now had the upper hand, members of the Theatre Commission of the Executive Committee of the Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies turned to Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875-1933), head of the Cultural-Enlightenment Department, to take measures to protect the theatres; he immediately ordered the Military-Revolutionary Committee of Petrograd to appoint a commissar over all the State and private theatres – Mikhail P. Murav'ëv, former stage manager of the theatre run by the millionaire publisher and monarchist Suvorin.

Murav'ëv issued an appeal, in which he directed all the actors and theatrical staff to remain at their posts. Anyone who refused to carry out his duties would be subject to punishment, as hostile to the new regime. At the *Mariinsky* theatre, the director Bespalov began to campaign vociferously for the Bolsheviks, much to the contempt of the union of soloists who wished to be distinguished from choristers and instrumentalists. Bespalov's supporters included the senior stage hands, the house proletariat, and, more surprisingly, the eminent director Meyerhold, who had a penchant for leaping on bandwagons. He had long propagandized for the idea that art and revolution were bound by family ties, and paid lip-service to the revolutionary ideals.<sup>7</sup>

Amid the growing ferment, on the day after the proclamation, the artists of the Russian Dramatic Troupe of the State Petrograd Theatres held a general meeting at which they repudiated Mur'ävëv's authority, deeming

7 Bertenson: *Vokrug iskusstva*, 236-237.

him an impostor unrecognized by Russia as a whole. They declared their continued loyalty to the Provisional Government, and, in protest, planned to suspend performances.<sup>8</sup> Although the Alexandrinsky went on strike, workers at other theatres refused to join, and, on October 31, proclaimed their reasons:

1. In view of our political immaturity, and not having a clear idea of the revolution that has taken place, we, the workers in the state theatres, cannot officially attach ourselves to any existing political party.
2. And as we are materially dependent upon each working day, we resolve with real commitment to fulfill to the letter the obligations of our service. And that is why we cannot bear responsibility for the cessation of performances in the theatres.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, the Theatre Commission worked out lists of theatres and the nearby military units that might undertake their protection. With great difficulty, Murav'ëv and his colleagues visited the major theatres in the city by automobile, only to discover that there was no soldier on guard anywhere, leaving the buildings undefended. Murav'ëv issued another "impassioned appeal to all theatrical workers: do not drag the theatres into the political struggle but protect them from destruction by the benighted masses of brutalized people [...]"<sup>10</sup>

## Trying to Proceed as Normal

Given the dire conditions, the question arose as to whether the theatres should remain open. In Moscow the Council of the Professional Actors Union convened an extraordinary meeting at which it affirmed that the

8 Frame: The St. Petersburg Imperial Theatres, 157-158.

9 Resolution of the Union of Workers of the Petrograd State Theatres in regard to the proposed strike, 31 oktyabr' 1917. Quoted after Frame: *Vokrug iskusstva*, 158-159.

10 Murav'ëv: *Zashchishchat' teatrov!* (Pis'mo k redaktsiyu).

tens of thousands of workers in the theatre had an elemental and inalienable right as citizens to a living. Moreover, “in these troubled times of our social degeneracy the theatre, whatever its forms, plays an exceptional role, as a factor in social unity grounded in artistic enjoyment and spiritual refreshment.”<sup>11</sup> Not only does the theatre act as “beneficial stimulation” of society, but it pays tens of millions of rubles in taxes to the government. Costs of fuel and lighting are immaterial, since the use of electricity in the theatre comprises only two per cent of general usage in Moscow. A specially appointed delegation of seven deputies of the Moscow actors union, including Stanislavsky, was appointed to serve as the voice of “generally accepted cultural and creative and social forces” to put their case before the public.<sup>12</sup>

Armed resistance in Moscow was sporadic. No newspapers or bread was available, outgoing phone calls could not be made, trams had stopped running, although water and light were still to be had. Holed up in their apartments in the dark, actors and audiences alike had no idea how life was to carry on.<sup>13</sup>

To take a single day, October 28, when the theatres in Petrograd were debating a strike, in Moscow box-office attendants were in place at the Art Theatre by 11:40 a.m. and the public was milling about in the lobby, even though machine-guns were rattling in the street. Throughout the day the wounded were transported on stretchers, motor-cars and in people’s arms, to a makeshift military hospital across the way. There was no panic, although the evening performance was cancelled. At one o’clock a request came from the Belostok hospital to allow a detachment of orderlies into the theatre – for rest and re-organization. The public prosecutor Aleksey Staal’ arrived from the Palace of Justice, unable to proceed with a meeting of the City Council. He reported that forces were being transferred from the front to defend the Provisional Government. However, rumors ran that 56 Bolshevik regiments had settled in at the National Hotel and were firing explosive bullets. It was decided to keep four watchmen on day duty, with pay beyond their board. The gunfire continued along Dmitrovskiy

11 Teatr i Iskusstvo 43 (22 oktyabr’ 1917), 743.

12 Teatr i Iskusstvo 43 (22 oktyabr’ 1917), 743.

13 Vakhtangov: Zapiski, 271-272.

Boulevard, all the way to the Hotel Continental, and at the corner a boy of ten was killed as he tried to run across the street.<sup>14</sup>

With the exception of a few cabarets, all Moscow theatres remained inactive from October 28 to November 7. The Bolshoi was severely damaged by missiles which fell on the roof and the scene shop; although the auditorium and stage remained untouched, the windows in lobbies and dressing-rooms were shattered, and costumes and properties plundered. The Maly Theatre was riddled with bullets, but suffered most from a gang of factory workers who broke in and vandalized the site; they made off with all the best costumes and the actors' civilian clothes from the dressing-rooms. The losses amounted to hundreds of thousands of rubles, and the so-called House of Ostrovsky was left a pigsty. Stanislavsky was so appalled that he wrote: "It is as though they had raped my mother."<sup>15</sup> Troops arrived a week later and managed to arrest the ring-leaders. Later, it was learned out that Red Army soldiers had also taken part in the vandalism.

A general meeting of the theatre workers of Moscow passed the following resolution: "To declare Tuesday November 7 a day of mourning for the theatre as a token of grief and sorrow over the spilling of blood and the cruel acts of destruction, on that day no performances or shows will be given."<sup>16</sup> The following day a general meeting of all the staff and workers of the former imperial theatres was called to clarify the further work in their damaged premises. An editorial in *Teatr i Iskusstvo*, dated November 12, rebuked the theatre's inactivity at this time as "a double sin and a double apostasy;" even if it abstained from the political controversies, it had the duty of comforting the losers and urging the winners to contemplation. "The inactivity of the theatre will be the *coup de grâce* to the chaos and spiritual oppression we are undergoing at the moment."<sup>17</sup>

Moscow resistance devolved into a small band of military cadets trying to defend the Kremlin, before they were overpowered and slaughtered between November 12 and 14. A council of the Russian Theatrical Society made an appeal not to perform on November 13 as a token of mourning

14 Moskvín: Dnevnoy doklad, 353-354.

15 Stanislavsky to A. I. Yuzhin (8 noyabr' 1917).

16 *Teatral'naya gazeta* (3 noyabr' 1917).

17 *Teatr i Iskusstvo* 44-46 (12 noyabr' 1917), 762-764.

for those slain by the Bolsheviks. After the managers of private theatres in Moscow announced that salaries would be paid to staff members, all playhouses re-opened, except for the Art Theatre which did not resume performances until November 21, when elections were held at the Constituent Assembly, ostensibly without force or coercion.

The Art Theatre's daily Performance Journal chronicles increasing deterioration, absences of actors and staff, dereliction of duty by caretakers and watchmen, unrest in the audience. Rats ran wild. Yet, despite trams not running beyond 9 p.m. and ongoing unrest, tickets were sold out for the pre-Revolutionary productions of *The Blue Bird* and *Three Sisters*. The matinee audiences resembled the normal gathering of intelligentsia, whereas the evening spectators comprised shop clerks and provincial intelligentsia; there was a noticeable absence of workers and soldiers.<sup>18</sup>

## Lunacharsky Takes Control

Normal conditions had to be established. On 9 (22) November 1917, a fortnight after it seized power, the Soviet of the People's Commissars (Sovnarkom) passed a decree placing the theatres under the authority of the arts sector of the brand-new State Commission for Enlightenment, which was to become the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment (Narkompros).<sup>19</sup> On December 12 the newly-appointed Commissar of Enlightenment, Lunacharsky, announced that the former imperial theatres were henceforth to serve the Soviet cause. In his address to the staff of the Petrograd state theatres he explained his rationale:

It goes without saying that the new government does not demand of works in any field whatever, least of all theatre, a specific political credo.

We exact from you no oaths of allegiance, no declarations of loyalty and obedience. The disgraceful times, when you were in a position

18 Nemirovich-Danchenko: *Dnevnoy doklad*, 249.

19 The word *Prosveshchenie* was chosen instead of that for Education or Instruction, in line with the concept of the masses as *chernyy* or "benighted."



of servitude to the Tsar's court, have passed, never to return. You are free citizens, free artists, and no one will encroach upon your freedom.

But there is a new master in this land – the common working man. The land is going through an extremely critical moment. Therefore it is no longer so easy for the new master to dispense the people's money. The working man cannot support the State theatres, unless he is convinced that they exist not for the entertainment of aristocrats, but to satisfy the deep cultural needs of the working class. Democracy, the public, must come to an agreement with the actors. This agreement is in the highest degree possible. Its preliminary condition is the mutual understanding between me, the individual empowered to act for the workers' democracy in this area, and representatives of all the companies and groups of the State theatres.<sup>20</sup>

Lunacharsky confirmed the theatres' autonomy, continued their subsidies and transferred the functions of the existing bureaucracy to a yet-to-be created Theatre Council (Teatral'nyy sovet) with representatives from each of the troupes, including the technical staff. Every theatre was to have a Khudrepkom (Artistic Repertoire Committee) answerable to the Council. The purpose was to simplify contact between the individual theatres and the Council with a minimum of red tape. They were never actually realized, however, being rendered superfluous by the creation of the Theatre Division (Teatral'nyy Otdel, TEO) of Narkompros on 18 February 1918. This was tasked with running the theatre as a branch of the government and to give the provinces directives of general character concerning the management of theatrical activity, with the intention of unifying it. Cooperation had been superseded by co-optation.

The question arises as to why, in the midst of cataclysm, the Bolshevik leadership should concern itself with the theatre. Only in societies where art and literature are taken seriously are they regarded as potent and dangerous. The Bolshevik concern was a natural extension of the deeply-rooted belief among most educated Russians that theatre had to be more than mere entertainment. Even if it did not deal in crude messages, its

20 Lunacharskiy: *Obrashchenie ... k artistam i rabotnikami gosudarstvennykh teatrov* Petrograd.

sophistication, polish and high level of artistry were supposed to edify and improve the spectator. One was to leave the playhouse spiritually elevated and morally improved. This tradition fit neatly within the scheme for the arts promoted by the Communist Party and the Soviet state. Inspired by socialism, the theatre would uplift the intellectual and ideological status of the masses and indoctrinate them in the new political realities. The conviction that culture matters was evident in the attention paid to even minor details of theatrical activity by the highest levels of the state bureaucracy. It would serve to advance socialism.

Subsuming all artistic endeavor into one giant purpose had been stipulated in one of Lenin's statements:

In the Soviet Workers' and Peasants' Republic, every educational endeavor, both in politics and in education generally – and in art particularly – must be permeated with the spirit of the proletariat's class struggle for successful accomplishing the aims of its dictatorship.<sup>21</sup>

The theatre, of all the arts the one that speaks most immediately to the public, therefore required intense supervision and direction. The reactions of spectators had to be foreseen and regimented, so that the correct political lesson could be learned. Every action in the Russian theatre between 1917 and 1992, whether traditional or experimental, Party-dictated or dissenting, amateur or professional, was taken in reaction to a political event, decree or atmosphere. Unlike a painter who might hide his most personal creations in the cellar, showing them only to trustworthy visitors, the theatre artist had to work out in the open. That so many extraordinary accomplishments saw the light of day is all the more surprising, given the obstacle course set in their path.

Recognizing that artists could have an immense influence on public awareness, the Bolsheviks set out to attract writers, philosophers, artists, composers and theatre people to their cause. In line with this idea, the leadership of the TEO sector was entrusted to theatrical veterans.<sup>22</sup> Although the first administrator was Trotsky's wife Ol'ga Kameneva, she was

21 Lenin: Draft of resolution "O proletarskoy kul'ture."

22 Lunacharskiy / Kameneva: Polozhenie o TEO Narkomprosa (29 iyun' 1918).

teamed with the prominent director Vsevolod Meyerhold, who was to succeed her in August 1920, after having run the Petrograd section of TEO. From March 1918 to February 1919 the brilliant poet Alexander Blok directed the repertory sector and was instrumental in the founding of the Bolshoi Dramatic Theatre in Petrograd. Yevgeny Vakhtangov, Stanislavsky's favorite student, took on the management of the Moscow directing sector in 1919. The TEO was not allowed control over the State Theatres, which irritated the maximalists like Kameneva and Meyerhold, who wanted to appropriate the former imperial playhouses.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout this period, Lunacharsky was the pivotal figure. An old-fashioned *intelligent* down to his pince-nez and rolled r's, he was renowned as a public speaker and had impeccable credentials as a Marxist from his teens and a card-carrying Bolshevik from 1903. Lunacharsky saw his task as reconciling the aims of the Revolution with the needs of the artistic community, and, ideally, merging the two. He proved for at least a decade to be an effective mediator. Through his efforts the best theatres of the Tsarist era were preserved from destruction, radical artists were given latitude for their experiments, and the attempts of governmental agencies to interfere with creative activities were closely monitored and, occasionally, chastised.<sup>24</sup>

Despite a straitened budget, Lunacharsky argued that funds and resources had to be allotted to the maintenance of both old and new theatres.<sup>25</sup> He explained to the theatres resisting the new guidelines that if the government were to finance them, "it has the right to regulate their life."<sup>26</sup> Since salaries could be paid only sporadically, actors went free-lance. A neologism, "khaltura," entered the language. A calque of "kultura," "culture," it was the sarcastic response of artists to the call to pitch their crea-

23 Meyerchol'd: O rabote i otdykhe (7 avgust 1918).

24 For a more negative view of Lunacharsky as a dreamer and windbag and of his earliest projects for the theatre, see Benua: Moy dnevnik 1916-1917-1918, 406-408.

25 Lunacharskiy: Puti razvitiya teatra, 30.

26 Lunacharskiy: Iz protokola zasedaniy osobogo soveshchaniya po teatral'nomu voprosu (10 dekabr' 1918).

tivity to the level of the proletarian audience. The verb “khalturit” combined the idea of moonlighting with that of hackwork. Lunacharsky, aware that it betrayed the highest ideals of art, nevertheless welcomed it as a resource for unpaid actors and a slaking of the masses’ thirst for rational entertainment.<sup>27</sup>

## The Dawning of a Soviet Theatre

“Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven.” Wordsworth’s response to the outbreak of the French Revolution may be applied to the Russian Revolution only with provisos. The instability of daily life, the privations, the terror unleashed by the Bolsheviks in their own insecurity prevented even true believers from being wholly elated by the turn of events. Even so, many artists, among them Meyerhold and Vakhtangov, greeted the Revolution enthusiastically and believed in its utopian aims; they seized on the opportunity to introduce previously sidelined or experimental styles to the public. In the early absence of censorship, anything went.

Although Marxism was anti-religion, the millennial atmosphere churned up a remarkable number of works on Biblical or mystical themes, variegated manifestations of this impulse to clothe apocalyptic events in traditional religious imagery. Typical was *Mystery Bouffe* by the cubo-futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky. He had enthusiastically welcomed the events of October 1917 as “my revolution.” That November he attended a meeting of writers, artists and stage directors convened by Lunacharsky at the Smolnyy Institute to advance future cooperation between artists and the Bolshevik regime. As early as August 1917, he had conceived of a revolutionary play that would link the genres of *mysterium* or religious enactment and farcical comedy. *Mystery Bouffe* was an extravagant rewrite of Genesis, with the bourgeois Clean and the proletarian Unclean seeking salvation each in his own way. He proposed it as a celebration of the first anniversary of the Revolution. The production opened at the Theatre of

27 Lunacharskiy: Teatr i revolyutsiya.