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The Enigmas and Facts of a Social Experiment:
A Reconsideration of Soviet Era Dramatic Texts 1920-1980

by

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To the Graduate Faculty:

The members of the committee appointed to examine the thesis of Joshua H. Wilson find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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The Enigmas and Facts of a Social Experiment:
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Thesis Abstract—Idaho State University (2003)

Western histories often gloss Soviet playwriting as “discredited” or “stagnant,” overlooking its rich history and the insights into Soviet history the plays offer. To provide a more objective basis for studying Soviet plays and playwrights, the study first extracts a definition for Socialist Realism, the USSR’s official genre, by examining its historiography and developmental history. The censorship agencies and economic incentives composing the Soviet enforcement system are described. The genre’s practical development is traced through watershed plays including Anatoly Lunacharsky’s Oliver Cromwell, Vladimir Belotserkovsky’s Storm, Vsevolod Ivanov’s Armored Train 14-69, Nikolai Pogodin’s Tempo, and Alexi Tolstoy’s Peter I as well as through the experiences of such persons as Vladimir Mayakovsky, Mikhail Bulgakov, Maxim Gorky, and Vsevolod Meyerhold. Three plays are extensively analyzed in their respective historical and critical contexts: Vladimir Solovyov’s Field Marshal Kutuzov; Mikhail Shatrov’s The Bolsheviks; and Ion Drutse’s The Birds of Our Youth.

Dedication

Dedicated to Jon and Marcia Wilson,
The scholars, philosophers, teachers, and parents

Marcia Wilson (1949-1994)

Introduction

The Art of the Revolution

The October Revolution of 1917 meant the introduction of a new government to Russia and much, much more. For many revolutionaries, the uprising also meant the introduction of a new era, a new society, and a new stage of human evolution. With the violent overthrow of class-based society, humanity and history had stepped towards their next phase of development: towards a utopia where conflict and competition would be things of the past. The new society would also provide the material needs of humanity, heretofore largely unmet due to scarcity and hoarding and hence the ultimate source of conflict and competition. However, of those who supported the revolution most agreed that the revolution was only a first step. The government, the economy, even the citizenry had to evolve, to be transformed, in order to bring about the utopia. But to what should they be transformed? How could the transformation best be brought about? Unfortunately, the major communist philosophers (Marx, Engels, Lenin, etc.) had not agreed upon a concrete description of what should happen post-revolution. Few had even attempted such a concrete description. Indeed, The Communist Manifesto, the most widely known source of communist ideology, while giving a thorough critique of capitalist society and an impassioned call for revolution, is especially vague on the subject. Beyond the details of functioning anarchy, fraternal brotherhood, and prosperity, communist society remains an abstract, dream-like state for Marx. Yet, while there was little agreement on how things were to change, nearly all agreed that everything was about to change.¹

In Russia the theatre has held celebrity status since the early nineteenth century. Its major practitioners enjoy a social position comparable to Hollywood actors or professional sports

¹ See, for example, information in K. Marx, 1848, The Communist Manifesto, (New York: Bantam Books); J. Roach, 1998, "A Future that Worked." Theatre Vol 28 Issue 2: 20; M. Davidow, 1977, People's Theatre: From the Box Office to the Stage. (Moscow: Progress Publishers).

stars in America.² By the mid-nineteenth century, amateur, provincial, and serf theatres had sprung up in even the most rural parts of Russia. By 1900, theatre was so widely practiced and respected, it could have been deemed a national pastime of the country.³ But now, in 1917, the country was changing. How would this highly visible and respected art change to meet the needs of a new, more democratic, egalitarian, and evolved society? These questions sparked a debate and a bonfire of experimentation in form and subject matter that would last well over a decade.

The debate was effectively quelled ca. 1934 when “Socialist Realism”⁴ became the official dramatic genre of the USSR. What did this mean for theatre in the Communist state? Most western historians are unanimous in their judgment and refer to the years spanning ca. 1930-1985 as the “Era of Stagnation.”⁵

Anatoly Smeliansky, who has been involved in the leadership of the Moscow Art Theatre since the Stalin era, and who has recently published his memoirs describes Socialist Realism as:

Socialist ‘royalism’, as the sixties dissident Arkady Belinkov called it, used the techniques of naturalism without the nature. Artists went to extraordinary lengths to depict situations, characters and conflicts that never existed. The method was therefore more akin to black magic: things that never were had to be conjured into being by artists meticulously reproducing the void. Aleksandr Laktionov, for instance... could paint with extreme fidelity to detail a group portrait entitled Happy Old Age, in a country where people were dying of starvation.⁶

Smeliansky then describes several productions “which, despite all their links with the new ideology, were major achievements of theatrical art.”⁷ Smeliansky assumes in this statement an inverse relationship between adherence to the new form and the quality of the production.

² Davidow, 27. see also Jelagin, Juri. 1951. The Taming of the Arts. N. Wreden, trans. (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc.) 132-148, for an extended anecdote on the subject

³ See Kelly, Catriona. 1999, “Popular, provincial, and amateur theatres 1820-1900.” In A History of Russian Theatre, R. Leach and V. Borovsky, eds. 124-145

⁴ The term Socialist Realism is sometimes translated from the Russian as Soviet Realism or as Socialistic Realism.

⁵ See, for example, Smeliansky, Anatoly. 1999, The Russian Theatre After Stalin, P. Miles, trans. New York: Cambridge University Press. p. 73; Solvyova, Inna. 1999, “The Theatre and Socialist Realism, 1923-1953.” In A History of Russian Theatre, R. Leach and V. Borovsky, eds. 325-357.

⁶ Smeliansky, 2

⁷ Ibid, 3

Other historians also assume this inverse relationship. For example, Inna Solovyova, in her contribution to the collection A History of Russian Theatre, describes Socialist Realism as part of “the ruthless and deliberate construction of communism” under which “any kind of artistic unity was impossible. The theatre was destroyed in the mid 1930s...”⁸ She describes the productions of this “destroyed” theatre as follows:

Theatrical style between 1930 and 1950 moved from restrained, almost austere, large scale, terse, monumental forms where all the richness lay in the riotous play of light, color and emotions, to verbose, over decorative productions which lost their sincerity, severity and stability.⁹

Oscar G. Brockett assumes this same relationship in his popular tertiary histories. He describes the form as follows: “While it is an exaggeration to say that socialist realism produced only ‘boy meets tractor’ plots, few examples of socialist realism go beyond these simplicities.”¹⁰ “Boy meets tractor” refers to the fact that some, indeed many, plays extolled the virtues of mechanizing agriculture and increasing yields and thus effectively functioned as propaganda pieces for Stalinist agricultural policies. The machinophilic phrase has been used as a blanket term to discredit Soviet-era productions in general and has a sister phrase, “production drama” which refers to plays which helped extol the Five-Year Plans, introduced by Stalin to increase the USSR’s industrial capacity and output. In a separate text, Brockett states that almost all plays of this period can be divided into three polemic categories: 1) plays which show the “reeducation of persons who have stood in the way of party goals;”¹¹ 2) Anti-American plays; 3) plays which glorified communism and its leaders.¹² All these categories seem rhetorically charged to repel American audiences and thus disparage the plays based on their politics.

⁸ Solovyova, 327, 337

⁹ Ibid, 339

¹⁰ Brockett, Oscar and Robert Findlay. 1991. Century of Innovation, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon) 194.

¹¹ Brockett, Oscar and Franklin J. Hildy. 1999. History of the Theatre, 8th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon) 531.

¹² Ibid

The harshest criticism, however, comes from translator Michael Glenny. In reviewing the post-glasnost play A Man with Connections, he compares it with Socialist Realist plays:

any resemblance to the cliché-ridden ‘production dramas’ of the past stops. This play, in fact, could have been consciously written as a grim, upside-down parody of that discredited genre... here there is no chorus of honest, indignant workers; no deus ex machina from the Party or the ministry descends in the last act to dispense justice and put everything to rights.¹³

Not only is the entire genre “discredited,” but appears to be entirely too trite and boring to warrant much more than a glance down the nose by historians and dramatists alike.

The list could continue indefinitely,¹⁴ but these typical examples demonstrate the general dismissal of Soviet drama in the west. No element of Soviet theatre has borne more dismissive criticism than playwriting. Both Smeliansky and Solovyova, for example, insist the quality of acting and directing remained high, leaving the producer (which was the Soviet government) and the playwright as the parties responsible for the “Era of Stagnation.” Also, nearly all the above criticism focuses on subject matter and plot structure, which both lie in the playwright’s realm. Despite its frequent occurrence, such dismissal of Soviet playwriting is problematic.

Accounting for exceptional acting, directing, and perhaps the exceptionally-not-so-bad play, as do most of the above sources, two peculiarities still stand out. First, if we are to blame Soviet censorship for creating bad plays, why are pre-censorship plays also underproduced in America?

According to Smith and Kraus Publishers, Mikhail Bulgakov is the most produced Soviet playwright in English.¹⁵ However, with the exception of a short off-Broadway run of Zoyka’s Apartment, he has received little attention in America. Neither has Vladimir Mayakovsky, also

¹³ Glenny, Michael. 1989. “Introduction.” In Stars in the Morning Sky. (London: Nick Hern Books). x.

¹⁴ See, for example, Dukes, Paul. 1998. A History of Russia 3rd ed. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press) 262-3; Gorchakov, Nikolai. 1958. The Theater in Soviet Russia. E. Lehrman, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press.); Carter, Huntly. 1970. The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia. (New York: Arno Press and The New York Times); to name a few.

¹⁵ “Publishers Notes for Zoyka’s Apartment” Smith and Kraus Publishers Online, May, 2003. Smith and Kraus Publishers, Lyme, N.H. <<http://www.smithkraus.com/catalogue/collections/1575292716.php3>>

considered one of the best early Soviet playwrights.¹⁶ Second, the Soviet theatre apparently lost little of its popular support during Soviet rule. How successful could a concert hall be if it presented primarily very bad music played very well? Yet, Brockett admits of the USSR: “no country in the world took its theatre more seriously as a medium of ideas and as an integral part of society.”¹⁷ For Brockett, then, the theatre remained “integral” despite trite and boring plays. It even, it seems, provided battle cries for the Soviets during WWII. British historian H. W. L. Dana writes that once German shells hit a makeshift army stage during a performance. The commander used the situation to rally his troops, exclaiming: “Don’t let those Nazis interfere with the drama!”¹⁸ These historical incongruities perhaps imply that Soviet drama has been dismissed because of cold war, anti-soviet prejudice rather than upon its own merits.

That the previous critiques are colored by prejudice is further evidenced in their rhetoric. They rely on vague, pejorative wording such as “unnatural plots and characters,” “cliché-ridden,” “over decorative,” and “insincerity.” What is an “unnatural plot?” How does one measure the “decorativeness” of a drama? The authors of the allegations never define their criteria, save for the implied general equation that the closer the play adheres to government mandates, the worse it is. The arguments, by remaining unsupported, assume that their audience must already agree with the general correlation that the audience has, in fact, pre-judged the plays based on the plays’ association with Communism.

Historian Ben W. Brown, writing in 1938 about contemporary Soviet theatre stated that after some ten years of censorship efforts, after the first terrifying purges, after the communist

¹⁶ Encyclopedia of Soviet Writers. May, 2003. SovLit.com, <<http://www.sovlit.com/bios/mayakovsky.html>>

¹⁷ Brockett, *History*, 484

¹⁸ Dana, H. W. L. 1946. “Introduction” in *Seven Soviet Plays*, (New York: The MacMillan Co.) viii; see also Komissarzhevsky, Vladimir. “The Bond of Time” in *Nine Modern Soviet Plays*. (Moscow: Progress Publishers) 11-15 for additional anecdotes.

restructuring of the theatres, and after the institution of Socialist Realism as an enforced official genre, Soviet audiences still thought of Soviet theatre as “OUR theatre” (emphasis his):

It is not a theatre in which the balance in black outweighs the artistry, and in which civic value is lightly passed over or forgotten altogether. It is a theatre whose triumphs are the pride and whose defeats are the joint responsibilities of its audiences, for they are its owners. Its playwrights, its designers, its directors, its actors are common property. The artists belong to the people. Theatre is classless. It is the privilege of every citizen to help make it the best theatre in the world.¹⁹

Mike Davidow, in his journalistic history People’s Theatre: From the Box Office to the Stage, asserts that theatre was, essentially, the same in 1977. Recalling performances he saw, he writes:

The Soviet audience... had obviously come straight from their shops and either didn’t have the time or didn’t bother to change their clothes. But they were very much at home... Soviet theatre is also sharply addressing itself to moral problems, to problems of relationships within the family, between generations and sexes.²⁰

Even if we simply attribute these quotes to, say, communist propaganda and perhaps the misguided efforts of a few intellectuals, it makes a 1989 quote by William A. Henry III all the more striking, particularly if we consider Time magazine an objective source on the subject.

According to Henry:

The quality of theatre in Moscow (in 1989) is very high. Playwriting, if at times too grandiosely spiritual, at least concerns itself with bigger issues than middle-class marriage, the preoccupation of the commercial stage in the West... Having justified itself for two decades and more as a medium of political expression... the soviet stage (now) sees itself as needing to rediscover its true concern, the human soul. Audiences apparently agree.²¹

Although Henry’s rhetoric is considerably more subdued, he places Soviet playwriting in the same position “dissenting” historians had placed it for years: as a politically conscious, socially concerned, popular theatre. If we assume the established “discredited” reputation of Soviet playwriting is deserved and we assume Henry can be taken at his word, the quote can only represent an ironic and near-miraculous resurrection of the Soviet theatre and playwriting.

¹⁹ Brown, Ben. 1938. Theatre at the Left. (Providence: The Booke Shop) p. 2.

²⁰ Davidow, p. 31, 191.

²¹ Henry, William. 1989. “Voices from the Inner Depths.” *Time*, Vol 133, Issue 15: 114

A reconsideration of Soviet playwriting is opportune; the Cold War is dead, the Soviet archives are open,²² and Russia's president recently attended a friendly fried-chicken picnic with America's leader. Also, a new generation, largely unaffected by Cold War stereotypes and politics, is finding its way into intellectual studies and into potential audiences for western productions of Soviet plays. Lastly, as coming chapters will show, Soviet plays provide invaluable and interesting sources for studying Soviet history, and, especially in light of that history, the plays themselves are fascinating artistic expressions.

To encourage their use as historic and dramatic texts, an understanding of Socialist Realism that moves beyond stereotypes and simplifications must first be established. Towards this effort, this thesis will reconsider Soviet-era playwriting by addressing two main questions: 1) What was the relationship between Soviet playwrights, theatres, and the government; and 2) How are the ideals of Socialist Realism expressed in selected, Soviet era dramatic texts? These questions will elucidate both the process that created Socialist Realist plays as well as the plays themselves and will be answered within the following methodologies.

The first question, which mostly concerns the creation of and regulation of Socialist Realist plays, will be addressed by a study of three issues. First, Chapter I will examine how the government came to define Socialist Realism. Second, Chapter II will investigate how the government enforced its policies. Third, Chapter III will examine how playwrights reacted to these governmental policies and implemented the genre's definition into a representative body of plays.

²² Although, it should be mentioned, some archives are still classified and many have yet to be organized or catalogued, making them effectively inaccessible. See Stephen F. Cohen, "Bukharin's Fate." In How It All Began, Nikolai Bukharin, xv – xvi.

The second question will examine this representative body of plays and will be addressed by comparing the mandates of Socialist Realism to plays written during the “Era of Stagnation” (1930 – 1985). As examples, three plays will be considered: Field Marshal Kutuzov, by Vladimir A. Solovyov (1939); The Bolsheviks, by Mikhail Shatrov (1965); and The Birds of Our Youth, by Ion Drutse (1974). The plays will be examined in their historical and critical contexts to emphasize their inherent historic and dramatic qualities. Three considerations will be employed in this examination. First, how closely does the play’s subject matter conform to that prescribed by Socialist Realism? Second, how closely does the play’s structure conform to the officially prescribed? Third, what criticism has been and can be offered for these plays? In answering this last question, a new body of substantive criticism based on analysis of character, diction, and narrative style will be offered.

Sources from both “Western” and “Soviet” scholars will be used in fulfilling this methodology. Both sets of scholars present factual, valuable information although both have tended to present only a small portion of the relevant information in a politically slanted format. This study will synthesize as much of the available information as possible into a more complete and objective consideration than has been presented heretofore.

The plays used as primary documents were selected for their historical spread across the “Era of Stagnation,” and, more importantly, because they are either seldom mentioned by previous scholarship and/or mentioned as particularly propagandistic. The selection represents three inherent limitations of this study. First, it is well beyond the scope of this thesis to give a thorough reconsideration of all Soviet-era plays. Second, because no plays written between ca. 1945 and ca. 1960 are readily available in English translation, there is a chronological gap between the first and second plays. This lacuna is likely the result of cold war foreign policies

on both sides of the Iron Curtain. The USSR tightly restricted communication between its people and the peoples of capitalist countries. Furthermore, as evidenced by the McCarthy Era, the people of capitalist countries generally came to distrust anything related to communism. Even Western communists and left-leaning intellectuals consciously avoided any association with the Soviet Union.²³ Understandably, few Soviet plays gained recognition in the West. Even today, new translations focus on authors already regarded as “exceptional” (especially Mikhail Bulgakov and Alexandr Vampilov) and thus do not question the “discredited” reputation of Soviet drama. The third limitation is the language barrier, necessitating that all plays and primary materials are in English translation. However, the limited selection of plays analyzed in this study exemplifies the chronological, ideological, and structural range of Soviet drama.

Defining the history of a theatrical era is clearly beyond the scope of this study. Rather, by synthesizing the available information on Soviet playwriting and its regulation, a more detailed and informed picture of both will emerge. This thesis will not be an apologia for Stalinist policy; there will be no denial of the censorship and oppression that occurred. Even American theatre scholars generally know little about Socialist Realism and its enforcement. Further, Western scholarship has generally misconceived and oversimplified Soviet theatre and its history. Consequently, a more detailed and informed picture is necessary to fully understand the art.

²³ See, for example information quoted in J. Edgar Hoover on Communism, 29.

Chapter I: **Socialist Realism Defined in Historical Perspective**

Defining Socialist Realism is difficult because the Soviet government never clearly defined the term and applied it in varying ways as party policies changed over more than five decades. To better understand the nebulous genre, this chapter is divided into historiography, history, and a synthesis of Socialist Realist thought. First, a historiography of previous attempts to define the genre will elucidate the scope of the historic complexities. Second, a brief history of the genre's origins will allow us to understand the implicit goals of Socialist Realism. Most theatre scholars have sense of what "Socialist Realism" means, but generally allow the term to remain nebulous. Consequently, the third section of this chapter is definitional: four salient features of the genre will be identified and described.

HISTORIOGRAPHY: THE USE OF THE TERM "SOCIALIST REALISM"

Historians have given the term Socialist Realism varying treatments. Perhaps the simplest definition comes from Russian theatre historian Boika Sokolova, who attributes the term's origin to the Union of Soviet writers, which first met in 1934:¹

At the First Congress of Soviet Writers, the newly defined method of Soviet literature and art was proclaimed... Four ideas stand out as its main tenants: realism, populism, historicism and class."²

This simple definition, as the rest of this chapter will show, is basically correct and agreed upon. However, Sokolova does not explain what "historicism" meant in the USSR, and such details are important to any practical definition. Furthermore, historians have disagreed about who

¹ Sokolova dates the Congress to 1932. All other sources date it to 1934. I can only assume that Sokolova's confusion has resulted from the fact that "Socialist Realism" was first coined in 1932. It was also in this year that the Union he asserts defined it was legally established although its first meeting would not occur until 1934.

² Sokolova, Boika. 2001. "Between Religion and Ideology: Some Russian *Hamlets* of the Twentieth Century." *Shakespeare Survey*, Vol. 54: 148

developed the definition, when it was developed, which definitive elements are most important, and what, if any, elements should be added to these. These differences and deficiencies are substantial enough to warrant further discussion.

Historians Oscar G. Brockett and Inna Solovyova both place the genre's definitive origin at the First Congress, but attribute it specifically to Andrei Zhdanov, the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and the introductory speaker at the First Congress. They define Socialist Realism by quoting Zhdanov:

Truth and historical concreteness of artistic portrayal must be combined with the task of ideologically transforming working people and educating them in the spirit of socialism. We call this method of writing Socialist Realism.³

In the abstract, both this definition and Sokolova's are compatible if we see "Socialist Realism" directly implying "realism," "historical concreteness" as "historicism," the focus on "working people" as "populism," and "the spirit of socialism" as "class." Solovyova adds to this definition "Socialist Realism was also marked by a tone of high seriousness;" comedies, melodramas, farces, and satires were all repressed.⁴ Brockett, for his part, adds that Socialist Realism required playwrights to support the current policies of the Communist Party and, in a statement that contradicts Solovyova, asserts that most plays produced were melodramas.⁵ I can only infer that Brockett and Solovyova must differ in their definitions of what constitutes a melodrama.

Historian and critic Nikolai Gorchakov emphasizes the political aspects, defining the genre with a quote from V. Kirpotin, a poet. The quote comes from a speech Kirpotin gave at the 1934 Congress:

³ Brockett, *Century*, 193; Solovyova, 328. Quoted is the version found in Solovyova. Brockett never directly attributes the quote to Zhdanov and uses a slightly different translation. However, both authors say the quote comes from the First Congress of Soviet Writers and are both quotes are identical in structure and intent, implying both come from Zhdanov.

⁴ Solovyova, 329-30.

⁵ Brockett, *Century*, 193-4.

The ideas of (Socialist Realism) are new. Its theme is collective toil and the collective struggle for socialism... (it) depicts man in a new way, as a participant in the class collective... it concerns... socialist industrialization, the collectivization of agriculture, the role of the intellectuals in the revolution.⁶

Gorchakov adds a quote from Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Commissar for Enlightenment during the early years of Soviet rule. In 1928, Lunacharsky asserted that playwrights must be “convinced of mankind’s Communist future and believe in the power of the proletariat, with its Party and leaders.”⁷ This definition, although worded differently for a different emphasis, is, in fact, similar to the definitions seen above. The Soviet government certainly considered supporting Party goals, which included industrialization and collectivization, to be in the “spirit of socialism.” Furthermore, the genre is here defined as depicting a generalized “man,” particularly the working class, which might be seen as populism.⁸ Marxist historicism, officially sponsored by the Soviet government, saw history inevitably resulting in a communist society. Thus, supporting “mankind’s Communist future” is historicist in Marxist terms. Lastly, as in previous definitions, Socialist Realism directly implies realistic playwrighting.

Despite differences in wording, emphasis, and attributed origin, each of the above treatments of the genre contains similar salient characteristics. Each lists the basic elements of realism, historicism, populism, and adherence to party goals as definitive elements. Sokolova gives each equal weight, while Solovyova emphasizes the genre’s seriousness (presumably as an aspect of realism), and Brockett and Gorchakov both emphasize party adherence as the most important quality. Gorchakov gives such adherence so much weight as to perhaps overshadow the other elements. Also, although these three date most of their definitions to the First Congress, Gorchakov’s added quote from Lunacharsky effectively places the genre’s origin six years earlier.

⁶ Gorchakov, 286-7. The quote he uses is quite lengthy. Quoted here is a scaled-down version.

⁷ Ibid, 287.

⁸ Although perhaps only with a bit of an ideological stretch.

Other historians also place the beginnings of Socialist Realism prior to the First Congress. Like Gorchakov, Bernard F. Dukore dates Socialist Realist criticism to Anatoly Lunacharsky.⁹ Lunacharsky, however, claims that most of his ideas originated with Georgi Plekhanov,¹⁰ a turn-of-the-century revolutionary and the man who taught communism to Lenin. Nick Worrall, in Modernism to Realism on the Soviet Stage, asserts:

On the socialist realist front, the major breakthrough is officially seen to have occurred in 1924 with productions of Bil-Belotserkovsky's play Storm... and of Lidya Seifullina's Virineya... These plays, and their methods of stage realization, were firmly within a tradition of realism which, henceforth, would be officially encouraged.¹¹

Finally, all of the above sources mention that the “fundamental principle” or “spirit” of the genre can be traced back to Lenin or Marx.

The discrepancies in dates and sources can be reasonably explained by an interesting historical fact: the Soviet government never issued an official, point-by-point definition.¹² Instead, the party line on drama developed slowly and, in practical application, artists gleaned the genre's definition from its enforcement. Thus, we must understand the genre in terms of its development and enforcement. Consequently, the remainder of this chapter will be devoted to understanding the history of Socialist Realist theory, Chapters II and III will examine its changing enforcement, and Chapters IV, V, and VI will, in part, show how this changing enforcement was exemplified in specific plays.

⁹ Dukore, Bernard. 1973. Dramatic Theory and Criticism. (San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.) 911.

¹⁰ Lunacharsky, Anatoly. 1928. On Literature and Art. Y. Ganushkin, trans. (Moscow: Progress Publishers) 14.

¹¹ Worrall, Nick. 1989. Modernism to Realism on the Soviet Stage. (New York: Cambridge University Press) 10.

¹² Solovyova, 330; Beumers, Birgit. “The Thaw and After, 1953-1986.” In A History of Russian Theatre, R. Leach and V. Borovsky, eds. 368-9

HISTORY: THE ORIGINS OF SOCIALIST REALIST THOUGHT

Socialist Realism developed from the theories of Karl Marx. In addition to Communism's seminal works,¹³ he also authored literary and dramatic criticism including essays on Goethe and Shakespeare. His degree from the University of Bonn was in classic literature and Marx himself wrote poetry, a novel, and began a tragedy called Oulanem. While his writings are quite extensive, his general theory can be summarized as follows. 1) Ideas, from which drama is born, are the product of economic conditions. 2) Economic conditions evolve over time in a linear, Darwinist progression. 3) This evolution is driven by a class struggle that pits the bourgeoisie against the proletariat. 4) The proletariat, as those owning the labor enabling economic systems to exist, will be the eventual victors in this dialectical class struggle. 5) Therefore, to understand drama, one must understand the historic and economic conditions that create it and drama must be understood in terms of how it critiques and/or represents those conditions.

Marx's theories provide the basis of Sokolova's simple definition. First, the importance of historicism and class go hand in hand. Also, Marx's emphasis on the importance of the proletariat (working people) indicates a need for populism as well. One important difference, however, is that no specific genre is mandated. Marx, as a materialist, saw artistic forms growing naturally and generally slowly from changing economic forms. He theorized that after a communist revolution, when the society's economic structure was changed, new forms of art would evolve as a matter of course.

Marx's theories found ready ideological ground in Russia. Decades before Marx's theories reached Russia, dramatist Alexandr Pushkin wrote: "What does a dramatist need?"

¹³ Such as *Das Kapital* and *The Communist Manifesto*

Some philosophy, impassivity, an historian's political ideas..."¹⁴ Pushkin also advocated that theatre educate the public in culture and politics, a populist view that (though often censored by the Tsar), would long influence Russian dramatic theory.¹⁵ For instance, Leo Tolstoy would define "good drama" as being: 1) drama the maximum number of people could appreciate and 2) drama fostering relationships with God and Jesus Christ. Both criteria are populist by Tolstoy's definition of religion: "the consciousness that our well-being, both material and spiritual, individual and collective, temporal and eternal, lies in the growth of brotherhood among all men."¹⁶ According to Tolstoy, religion was repressed and distorted by the ruling classes because, in sponsoring brotherhood, it threatened social privilege and material inequities. Marx was officially an atheist, but his ideas are fundamentally compatible with those of Tolstoy.

This emphasis on populism sought not to enlarge or diversify audiences, but to better serve the current audience. Theatre had become, by 1898, a vastly popular public entertainment. Tolstoy recounts that the educated classes would fill the "first couple rows" while *narodny* (common people, masses) occupied most seats.¹⁷ Theatre was also already addressing serious socio-political issues; therefore, early communists found the theatre a ready means of political expression.

Early in his career, Lenin wrote that "party literature" must educate people about socialism.¹⁸ In his vision, the Communist Party¹⁹ would continue to function in a multi-party state. Therefore, party literature would compete with non-party literature for public attention. Lenin speaks at great length about ensuring freedom of speech and press and even calls

¹⁴ Pushkin, Alexandr. 1830. "On National-Popular Drama and the Play *Martha the Seneschal's Wife*." In *Russian Dramatic Theory from Pushkin to the Symbolists*. Laurence Senelick, trans. ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press) 8.

¹⁵ In fact, it seems to still permeate it even in the post-Glasnost era. See Henry, 115.

¹⁶ Tolstoy, Leo. 1898. *What is Art?* Aylmer Maude, trans. (New York: T. Y. Crowell) 28.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Lenin, Vladimir. 1905. *On Literature and Art*. (Moscow: Progress Publishers) 15.

¹⁹ At the time he was writing, the Communist Party was known as the Social-Democratic Party

censorship “stupid attempts to prohibit that which the government is powerless to thwart.”²⁰

Significant, and a bit ironic, however, is Lenin’s definition of “free literature” which must “serve, not some satiated heroine, not some bored ‘upper ten thousand’ suffering from fatty degeneration but the millions and tens of millions of working people – the flower of the country, its strength and its future.”²¹ The only “free” literature, therefore, is literature with a worldview at least conducive to party concerns and goals. However, while a drama’s subject matter and intended audience should be “supervised” by “the organized socialist proletariat,” its style and approach was to remain “broad, multiform and varied.”²²

Lenin’s view was common among early socialist critics. George Lukacs, for example, was a contemporary of Lenin’s and had the longest and most successful career of any Soviet critic and theorist, working from 1905²³ to 1971 without substantial interruption. Lukacs felt that dramatists’ “convictions, their ideologies, are of the highest artistic importance, for they alone can lend a symptomatic significance to the naked data.”²⁴ He berates “bourgeois drama” for being inherently unable to show truth due to its focus on a faulted worldview. Perhaps most importantly, however, Lukacs also discusses “stylistic problems.” For him, drama must clearly depict reality by “the transposition of life into the drama (which) is achieved only by the symptomatic rendering of the life data” in order to fulfill its ideological mandates.²⁵ In short, realism is the true form of socialist art. Lenin would later lend this view credence: “I do not consider expressionism, futurism, cubism, and other ‘isms’ as high developments of human

²⁰ Ibid, 14.

²¹ 18

²² Ibid

²³ Lukacs began his career in Hungary in 1905. His writings first became widely popular in Russia ca. 1925 and he immigrated to Russia in 1933, where he lived until his death in 1971.

²⁴ Lukacs, George. 1909. “The Sociology of Modern Drama.” Lee Baxandall, trans. In Dukore, Dramatic Theory and Criticism. 938

²⁵ Ibid; Ironically, Lukacs also offers vociferous critiques on the negative effects intellectual critics have on drama.

genius. I do not understand them, I don't feel joy with them."²⁶ Lenin further exhorted artists to create art like the peasant's "simple black bread:" honest and unadorned.

Stalin also contemplated the role of drama in the socialist state, calling the dramatist an "engineer of the human soul."²⁷ In the materialist perspective, plays, as physical entities, create the ideas that drive human consciousness. By altering the parameters of plays, then, the consciousness of the population could be altered to create "Soviet man." Calling the dramatist an "engineer" placed a measurable, controllable, and inevitable social value to their work; a "bourgeois" drama will engineer bourgeois souls while creating socialist souls requires "socialist drama." Furthermore, "engineer" indicated that drama could be designed to have particular effects. The 1934 Congress can be seen as an attempt to engineer a better socialist drama.

Before discussing the organization and impact of the congress, however, we should note at least a few theorists who dissented from this developing view on art. The most notable of these was politician and philosopher Leon Trotsky. In Literature and Revolution, he argues the importance of allowing and encouraging new forms of art; suppressing any form of literature results in cultural stagnation, which can lead to the degeneration of a state.²⁸ Furthermore, he argues that there is no direct link between the quality of an author's work and an author's politics. Other notable nonconformists included the directors Vsevolod Meyerhold and Konstantine Stanislavsky. Stanislavsky generally advocated realism, but felt art should remain essentially apolitical and objective. Also, while preferring realism, he sponsored and encouraged other dramatic forms, including those used by Meyerhold, his former pupil. Meyerhold advocated a polemic theatre, championing a movement called "October in the Theatre," which

²⁶ Lenin, Vladimir. 1924. Notes on Art. (Moscow: Clara Zetkin) 24.

²⁷ Quoted in Solovyova, 328.

²⁸ Trotsky, Leon. 1923. Literature and Revolution. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press) et al; In light of the recent collapse of the USSR, perhaps Trotsky is right.

called for a “theatre adequate to the revolutionary movement.”²⁹ While his polemics supported official views, Meyerhold’s theory called for a stylized, sometimes directly anti-realistic theatre. In this, Meyerhold went so far as to call for realism to be banned in the Soviet Union.³⁰

These alternate views were eventually suppressed. Trotsky was exiled in 1927 and would later be murdered.³¹ His writings and theories were banned. Meyerhold was gradually stripped of his directing duties. He was killed in a Soviet prison in 1941 for “crimes against the revolution.” Stanislavsky did not actively resist the new government mandates and produced Socialist Realist plays. Also, he was Russia’s most respected proponent of realism. Therefore, his apoliticism was a non-issue in light of his passive support for the Soviet government. The urgency to officially suppress his political views was also lessened by his advancing age. Although he worked until dying a natural death at the age of 75 in 1938, his continuing influence was limited. These dissidents will be discussed further in coming chapters.

The Union of Soviet Writers was established in 1932 by a resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party entitled “On the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations.” Maxim Gorky, the playwright and personal friend of Stalin, was appointed to organize and lead the Union.³² In initial discussions between Gorky and Stalin, Stalin himself first coined the term “Socialist Realism.”³³ At its First Congress in 1934, the Union would draw the broad body of dramatic theory established by Marx, Lenin, and Stalin under the name Socialist Realism and proclaim it the official genre of the USSR. Thus, the congress did not

²⁹ Clark, Katerina. 1998. “Meyerhold’s Appropriation of Gogol for 1926 in the Soviet Union.” *Theater*, Vol. 28, Issue 2, p. 27

³⁰ Gordon, Mel and Christopher de Haan. 1998. “Remembering Between the Lines.” *Theater*, Vol. 28, Issue 2: 15-16

³¹ Trotsky was found in his study with an axe in his head on August 20, 1929. While the murder has never been solved, it is generally accepted to have been a political assassination sponsored by the Soviet government.

³² Jelagin, 73-75; Gorchakov, 357.

³³ Solovyova, 328; Gorchakov, 357

establish the theory, but rather, as an extension of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, gave it the official status necessary to make it truly enforceable for the first time.

Within the congressional speeches, no new dramatic theory is offered and all speakers argue in favor of officially adopting Socialist Realism. Furthermore, all speeches argue similar points and all praise Union chairman Maxim Gorky as the “giver of Socialist Realism.” Due to this unanimous praise, many theatrical workers in the 1930s directly associated the genre with Maxim Gorky.³⁴ Thus, while Gorky never gives a point-by-point definition for Socialist Realism, his argument can be seen as encapsulating the sentiments of the congress. Both can be understood as follows: 1) Realism is the inevitable outcome of the true creative process; “Imagining means abstracting the fundamental idea underlying the sum of a given reality, and embodying it in an image; that gives us realism.”³⁵ 2) Realism is “amplified through the addition of the desired and the possible,”³⁶ or, in other words, Realism should be slightly idealized to promote “a revolutionary attitude toward reality.”³⁷ 3) In addition to “promoting revolutionary attitudes,” drama should also instill in people knowledge of their history and be instilled with knowledge of popular folklore.³⁸ Also, history should not be presented “as it has been presented till now, but in the way it is shown in the teachings of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin.”³⁹ 4) History and drama must take these forms because the labor of the proletariat “is the chief organizer of culture and the creator of all ideas (including) the ideas of Marx, Lenin and Stalin.”⁴⁰ 5) Writers must be organized so as to enable them to “realize their collective force (and) harmoniously blend all

³⁴ Jelagin, 75.

³⁵ Gorky, Maxim. “Soviet Literature.” In On Literature. Julius Katzer, trans. ed. 244

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Ibid 243

³⁹ Ibid 268

⁴⁰ Ibid 253

those purposes in... directing the country's labor-creative energy."⁴¹ This would be done through "the education of young writers in work of all-Union importance – the all-round cognition of the past and present of our country."⁴²

It is important that Socialist Realism was never given a direct, linear definition. Three possible reasons come to mind concerning why the genre was kept vague. First, there is evidence that Maxim Gorky, the organizer of the Congress and head of the Writer's Union, was resisting government attempts to mandate a specific dramatic form.⁴³ He thus defined the official form in very broad terms, keeping that definition as loose as possible to allow for more varied expression in art. Second, a vague definition allowed the Soviet government to subtly alter that definition as Party goals and official views changed. So, government mandates such as those passed in 1938 requiring playwrights to represent Lenin and Stalin positively in drama, or in 1968 requesting "working heroes" could thus change the official requirements for acceptable drama, without adding to or altering some well-defined list of requirements. Rhetorically, this allowed the government to change its policies without implying its definition had ever been incomplete or incorrect. Third, the Soviet government's definition of Socialist Realism was largely dependent on Marx's historical theory. Marx, again, saw history as developing slowly as the needs and status of the proletariat changed. This developmentally historic definition of Socialist Realism thus supported the theories of Marx.

THE SALIENT CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIALIST REALISM

Despite his general vagueness, Gorky succeeds in describing Socialist Realism in terms that historians have often used to describe the genre and in terms historically familiar to Russian

⁴¹ Ibid 263

⁴² 268

⁴³ Jelagin 75-6

dramatic theory. In light of its historiography, the genre's historical development, and Gorky's keynote speech, the following definition will be used for the remainder of this study:

- 1) Drama should be written and presented under realistic principles.
- 2) Drama should present history and historical developments in Marxist terms.
- 3) Drama should be populist, written for the benefit of the proletariat.
- 4) Drama should adhere to Communist Party goals and policies.

As seen above, defining Socialist Realism is difficult due to multiple authorship, changing political context, and lack of an official, linear definition. The four seminal characteristics listed above represent the history and historiography of the genre and provide a practical definition for this study. Although we can effectively define the genre in retrospect, it was certainly not so easy for the artists trying to make a living under the new official mandates. As coming chapters will further evidence, two similar representations of history might result in praise for one playwright and condemnation for another. Especially during the genre's early years of enforcement, playwrights had to "feel out" what was expected of them from an enigmatic genre and a labyrinthine government enforcement system. Failure to comply with the often-inexplicable demands of either could result in fatal consequences.

Chapter II: **The Strange Enforcement of Socialist Realism**

Chapter I presented a practical definition of Socialist Realism. To enforce that definition, the Soviet government employed a vast bureaucracy as enigmatic as the genre itself; just as there was not a precise definition of Socialist Realism, there was no singular agency enforcing it. There were agencies for censoring plays, agencies for censoring playwrights, and agencies that provided economic incentives to encourage compliance. Furthermore, these varied agencies changed their names, bureaucratic alliances, and foci over time, presenting a substantial complication for historians investigating the genre's enforcement. That successive historians have described the system in widely varying ways is not at all surprising.

This chapter, like the last, will begin with an examination of the subject's historiography to provide a needed historical context. Then, as the most straightforward method of presenting such complicated information, a series of anecdotes will illuminate the system's Byzantine history and function. Lastly, both the historiographical and historical data will be synthesized into a concise picture of the enforcement system.

HISTORIOGRAPHY: PRESENTATIONS OF A COMPLICATED SYSTEM

The historiography of this subject is in some ways similar to that of Chapter I, with historians attributing the system's origin to various times and authorities. Despite these differences, each treatment can be seen as correct, but for different reasons than in Chapter I. Here the simplest answer is not the most workable. Rather, the Soviet enforcement system was large enough that each description with its concomitant plethora of authorities and agencies is correct, if only incomplete.

Many histories vastly oversimplify the system. For example, Boika Sokolova, whose simple definition of Socialist Realism was featured in Chapter I, asserts that the system required theatres to justify their repertory as early as 1924¹ and that by 1932, there was a “Soviet cut” of Hamlet: an official version of the play edited for ideological content.² For Sokolova, these cuts were implemented through a “monitored dialogue” enforced by fear:

The 1930s set in motion the nightmarish mincing machine of Stalinist reprisals. Fear ruled the lives of millions. In conditions of excessive ideological pressure, directors desperately groped for ways of bringing their productions close to safe political platforms and tuned carefully into the latest news spread by the Party press.³

This brief description leaves many open questions. If the fear began in the 1930’s, why did repertories require justification in 1924? To whom were they justified? How could all the work required to edit all mention of the afterlife, God, moral compunction, suicide, and even graveyards out of Hamlet (which the Soviet version quite amazingly did⁴) be organized by simply compelling directors to read the latest newspaper?

Although problems with this type of simple explanation are apparent, it seems to be the most popular. Historians Mel Gordon, Christopher de Haan, Paul Dukes, and Anatoly Smeliansky all use similar arguments. Gordon and de Haan,⁵ for instance, treat the repression of Vsevolod Meyerhold’s avant-garde techniques as part of a personal conflict between Meyerhold and Stalin which eventually resulted in Meyerhold’s arrest and execution; again, Socialist Realism is seen as enforced through fear of death. While the personal tastes of Stalin and the fear of death were part of the enforcement system (as this chapter and the next will discuss), the Gordon/de Haan description is incomplete. Stalin could not have personally controlled all of the

¹ Sokolova, 145-6

² 147

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid. The Soviet cut concentrated on political conflict. e.g. the “To be or not to be” monologue was rewritten as a dialogue between Horatio and Hamlet in which Hamlet tries to decide whether or not to become king.

⁵ Gordon, et al.

Soviet Union's theatres (approx. 500 in 1934) or playwrights (approx. 1500 in 1934): an organization would be needed for such a monumental task.

Smeliansky alludes to such an organization, but never directly names it. He refers only to "central censorship" and, again, implies that the whole system was run purely on fear. This fear was created by Stalin and, Smeliansky states, was great enough to be effective well after Stalin's death as "his shadow continued to strike fear into the country for many years to come."⁶ In his 200-plus-page history, no censoring agency is specifically mentioned.⁷

Dukes also argues enforcement-through-fear, but names some specific organizations:

During the 1930's the unions for writers, musicians and other artists increasingly imposed their control over the creative output of their members, many of whom disappeared temporarily or forever during the purges.⁸

For Dukes, authority rested with the unions and was derived from fear. Interestingly, he attributes the purges, which created the fear, not to Stalin but to the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the "ruthless" A. A. Zhdanov, the same Zhdanov who opened the First Congress and whose quote Oscar Brockett and Inna Solovyova used to define Socialist Realism. However, Dukes accounts for changes in the severity of the enforcement system largely by the death of Stalin, stating the "thaw" that occurred after his death brought new, gentler enforcement procedures, such as that of enforced emigration from the USSR.⁹

These histories are cursory, characterized by brief, rhetorically charged descriptions of a system driven solely by fear. Few describe specific enforcement policies, few name specific enforcement agencies, and all effectively date censorship to the 1930s.¹⁰ Oscar Brockett makes the first substantial break from this trend. He indicates that authority rested with both the unions

⁶ Smeliansky, 1. Smeliansky's book is entitled The Russian Theatre After Stalin

⁷ There was no agency known as "central censorship" and Soviet censorship was anything but centralized.

⁸ Dukes, 264.

⁹ Ibid, 311.

and other government agencies. He dates censorship slightly earlier, and names specific enforcement policies. For him, “The pressure to subordinate artistic to ideological ends was intensified around 1927.”¹¹ He explains that a few virulently proletarian organizations such as Proletcult, which had pressed for greater homogeneity in art, received official government support in that year: party members were installed as theatre managers and, after 1930, productions had to be licensed through RAPP (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers) before they could be legally performed.¹² In 1934, he states RAPP was replaced with the Union of Soviet Writers. Interestingly, while Brockett credits the Union for being “somewhat more liberal” than RAPP, he also credits the Union with “the first truly repressive measure” in art: implementing Socialist Realism. He does not explain what happened to the systems of theatre management and licensing with the demise of RAPP, which implies that they were inherited by the Union. But this was not exactly the case, as shall be shown later.¹³

While Brockett’s description is far more detailed than most, it is still far from complete, as a look at Inna Solovyova’s description will show. Solovyova dates censorship even earlier, to 1923, the founding of the governmental agency Glavrepertkom (Central Committee on Repertoires). This agency, which cooperated closely with the Soviet political police (known in 1923 as GPU and, later, the KGB), supervised the repertoires of theatres. Solovyova also mentions the role of Proletcult, RAPP, the Writer’s Union, and states that the Department of Agitation and Propaganda (Agitprop) held authority over playwrights as well. Also, unlike most

¹⁰ Smeliarsky does not name any specific date.

¹¹ Brockett, *Century*, 193.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Brockett also mentions the importance of other government offices and other unions. The All-Union Conference of Stage Directors, held in 1939, was intended to do for directing what the First Congress had done for playwriting. The Central Direction of Theatres was founded in 1936 to provide “a single agency authority over all troupes (approximately nine hundred).” These agencies could indirectly influence which plays would be produced and are worth mentioning although they are outside the immediate focus of this study: playwriting.

of the previous historians discussed, she describes those measures the Soviet government used to encourage Socialist Realism, rather than just censoring its opposite. These measures included lavishing funds, titles, and praise on favored theatres and artists. These issues, discussed in greater detail later, effectively demonstrate that even Brockett's more inclusive summary is still lacking. Clearly, a new, more complete description of the system is necessary.

Historians have tended to oversimplify the system for three reasons. The first reason is evidenced in their rhetoric. These historians do not provide specific evidence, apparently writing for an audience that would not require such details. I, personally, was more than halfway through Smeliansky's book before realizing that the censorship discussed was largely undefined and without source. Having lived most of my life with the image of a Soviet bureaucracy that loomed like an Orwellian dystopia, I was, at start, a ready audience for such arguments. In this study, however, I will not assume an uncritical audience and will thus consider these details as crucial. A second reason for the simplification is that official Soviet policy did not allow a free exchange of information within the country or over the border. Historians have long been dependant on interviews and "leaked" information to piece together enforcement procedures. Depending on what sources were used, different scenarios surfaced. These differences do not render the various scenarios incorrect, but simply incomplete. The third and final reason stems from the system's sheer size and complexity. To fully understand the system, a book-length study would be needed.

Given this difficulty, an exhaustive discussion of Soviet enforcement will not be attempted here. Instead, the remainder of this chapter will attempt to describe first, the nature of that system and second, its major agencies and policies more comprehensively than heretofore attempted. These agencies enforced their policies not only by promoting fear, but also by

controlling the resources playwrights needed to survive: those for both printing and producing a script.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF A BYZANTINE SYSTEM

Two key concepts are necessary to understand the nature of the censorship system. First, the severity of censorship varied over time. Second, the Soviet bureaucracy generally operated on a system of personal favors rather than on a system of definite policies enforced by “blind justice:” those with the best connections got the best “justice.”

The nature of the system changed over time as funding waxed and waned and as politics changed. This seventy-year process is succinctly summed in the following table:

Changes in the Severity of Censorship in the USSR Over Time¹⁴

- 1917 – 1940 Development of the Soviet system; as agencies are established and their power is augmented through the nationalization of resources, enforcement becomes more severe. This process peaks ca. 1936-40
- 1940 – 1945 Preparations for WWII and WWII itself stretch the USSR’s resources thin. Enforcement is relaxed predominantly as a cost-cutting measure.
- 1945 – 1952 The Cold War develops. As the country is rebuilt and becomes a super-power, enforcement surpasses pre-1940 levels.
- 1953 – 1963 Stalin dies in 1953. Nikita Khrushchev succeeds to the office, calling for a more liberal Soviet society and officially denouncing Stalinist policies in 1956. Enforcement is relaxed.
- 1964 – 1979 Brezhnev, a political reactionary and sympathizer with Stalinist policies, succeeds Khrushchev. Enforcement grows more severe, though never again approaches the severity of the Post-WWII era.
- 1980 – 1985 Russian invasion of Afghanistan again stretches Soviet resources thin. The liberality created by this is augmented by political turmoil created by a leadership crisis in the Communist party. Gorbachev emerges as victor and begins dismantling the enforcement system as part of his *perestroika* ca. 1985.

¹⁴ Table compiled from information from Smeliansky, Dukes, Solovyova, and Jelagin.

The web of personal favors on which this system operated is perhaps best summed by an anecdote recorded by Juri Jelagin of the Vakhtangov Theatre.¹⁵ The story is set in 1934 (the year of the First Congress) and concerns Lev Ruslanov, actor and the House Manager of the Vakhtangov Actor's House (an apartment building built for employees of the theatre). One of Ruslanov's tenants, the famed director Alexsi Popov, lived on the fifth floor and kept a series of flower pots affixed to the outside of his balcony rail with plumber's tape. Ruslanov, noticing the pots as a potential safety hazard, sent Popov a friendly note asking him to remove them. Popov, however, took great pride in his flowerpots and sent Ruslanov back a friendly letter explaining that they were firmly affixed and did not constitute a hazard. Ruslanov's authority was not to be challenged and the second note was answered with a third, bearing Ruslanov's official title, seal, and much more officious language. Popov was so indignant he did not bother to respond to the letter. The next day, Ruslanov had his acquaintance the district police chief send orders to Popov that the flowerpots were to be removed. Popov, however, contacted his friend Comrade Vul, the Moscow Chief of Police, and had the orders revoked. Ruslanov, not to be outdone, called on Comrade Markarian, Chief of the National Police of the Soviet Union, to reinstate the repealed orders. Popov re-repealed them with a favor called in from Marshal Voroshilov, the Commander in Chief of the Red Army and, furthermore (and perhaps ironically), The People's Commissar of War. Ruslanov was adamant about the flowerpots and obtained orders for their removal from Mikhail Kalinin, President of the Executive Committee of the USSR. Popov removed the flowerpots, but apparently not before considering appealing his case to the Politburo (Central Committee of the Communist Party), the country's most powerful agency, or to Stalin himself.

Admittedly, this case has little to do directly with the enforcement of Socialist Realism. However, the kind of erratic behavior it describes was quite common within the enforcement

¹⁵ Jelagin, 55-8.

system. Take, for example, the strange case of Alexandr Tairov. From the early nineteen-teens Tairov established himself as one of Russia's most creative anti-realists. However, in the early 1930s he, along with others such as Konstantine Stanislavsky and Nemirovitch-Danchenko, declared allegiance to Socialist Realism¹⁶ apparently as part of a process of "self-preservation and self-transformation."¹⁷ He was proclaimed a Peoples' Artist of the USSR in 1934. However, he apparently continued to practice anti-realism,¹⁸ provoking the government, in 1936, to forcibly merge his Kamerny Theatre with the aptly named Realistic Theatre. Through petitions to the government, however, the Kamerny was reestablished in 1939. In that same year his troupe was "evacuated" to Siberia due to the war. Incidentally, Siberia is a long, long way from any front line Russia experienced in WWII and was the traditional repository for those considered politically dangerous. Nonetheless, he was awarded the Order of Lenin in 1945 for wartime services. He was also again charged, in that year, with "formalism" (a blanket term used to describe anything not considered to be Socialist Realism) and continuously charged with formalism every year thereafter until his theatre was again stripped from him in 1950. This bizarre process was halted that year only by Tairov's death.¹⁹ Such was the nature of the Soviet system.

What the average playwright went through to get a play produced was no less complicated. He²⁰ faced two distinct phases of censorship: literary and dramatic. To concisely describe these phases, the following history will assume a narrative form. The history will also

¹⁶ Brockett, 196

¹⁷ Solovyova, 326.

¹⁸ Smeliansky, 3.

¹⁹ Brockett, 196.

²⁰ Most playwrights were male. Therefore, the masculine pronoun will suffice to describe "the average playwright."

assume that our average playwright is writing sometime before the outbreak of WWII, but the basic system remained throughout the Soviet Era.

The story begins simply enough: after our playwright has written his play, he needs to submit copies to the literary departments of several hundred theatres for production consideration.²¹ Here, the playwright encounters the first of many complications: by 1921, the government had fully nationalized the printing industry and thus controlled all publishing, publishing equipment, and distribution of published materials under an agency called Gosizdat (State Publishing House), officially founded in 1917.²²

In order to use a mimeograph or press, the playwright needs permission from Gosizdat. After 1923, however, Gosizdat could not approve any play not already approved by Glavit (Central Administration of Literature and Publishing). Glavit was founded in 1922 as part of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment to help "orient" the ideology purveyed by literature.²³ In 1923 it was given specific authority over new dramatic texts. In 1929, after the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment fell from favor for not being sufficiently stringent ideologically, Glavit was removed from the Commissariat and made an independent agency. The Commissariat, however, was not fully disbanded until 1932 with many of its remaining powers bequeathed to the newly established Writer's Union. Glavit, now officially independent, worked

²¹ Most of the 500 Soviet theatres' literary departments dated to the nineteenth century, established to evaluate, write, or rewrite scripts.

²² In 1920, a committee called Glapolitprosvet (Committee for Political Enlightenment) was formed within Gosizdat to evaluate which works would be eligible for continued publication and distribution in the USSR, making it that country's first censorship organ. Glapolitprosvet had jurisdiction only over previously written works, however, and is thus not of direct importance to plays produced after its incorporation. Among those playwrights censored by the committee were Leo Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov. Other censored authors included Plato, Nietzsche, and Kropotkin, a famous Russian anarchist. See MAAT Online Database of History. May 2003. Italy. <<http://web.genie.it/utenti/i/inanna/livello2/russia-1917.htm>>

²³ Gorchakov, 266-7

closely with Cheka (Secret National Political Police)²⁴ so its decision would be heavily influenced by the “ideological profile” obtained from Litkontrol (Bureau for the Control of Literature), a department of Cheka. The purpose of Litkontrol was to monitor the “life, creative work, moods, friendships, and statements of all Soviet writers.”²⁵ It is unclear exactly when Litkontrol was founded, but it is clear that Cheka was performing these functions as early as 1920.²⁶

Glavit, however, is the organization with which our playwright will first have direct contact. This contact begins as the playwright submits his text through a narrow window at Glavit’s large but cramped building.²⁷ Over the next few months, several censors read and annotate the text. They indicate where changes should be made to correct the work’s “class orientation” and “historical accuracy.” For example, the protagonist must represent the proletariat and if a leader from a previous era is depicted, that leader should be shown as oppressive to the proletariat (although, as Chapter III will show, there were major exceptions to this last rule).²⁸ Generally, then, the censors are concerned with assuring that the play conforms to the four tenets of Socialist Realism: realism, historicism, populism, and adherence to Party goals.²⁹

To achieve the desired corrections, censors cut lines, add lines, and/or make general notes on how characters or scenes should be changed. Now, a single version with all annotations from all censors is created. Glavit now interviews the playwright: he is presented with this final copy and questioned about his intentions, his political orientation, and specifics about his play. These

²⁴ This organization’s name changed often throughout history: GPU, OGPU, NKVD, and, of course, KGB.

²⁵ Gorchakov, 267. This portion of the text is heavily indebted to Gorchakov’s great history of Glavit.

²⁶ Seldes, George. 1995. *The George Seldes Reader*. (London: Barricade Books) 220.

²⁷ Gorchakov, 266-71

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ As described at the end of Chapter I, see page 20 of this study.

“interviews” will often become interrogations because semi-retired Cheka agents constitute much of Glavit’s staff.³⁰

After the interview, the playwright takes the annotated copy home and rewrites his text. Once done, the new version is resubmitted to Glavit for one of three fates. First, the revision may be denied by Glavit and declared “politically deficient,” in which case the text is sent to Litkontrol with any other information the agency has compiled about the author. This action officially bans the text, makes discussing the text illegal, and may result in the author’s arrest. Second, the revision may be re-censored and the process begun again. Third, the revision may be approved. If the third option occurs, Glavit binds the three copies (original, final annotated, and final revised) together. Glavit writes on the non-bound side of the book the author’s name, the number of pages contained in the text, and how many copies of the final revised version are authorized for printing. Over this is placed a large wax seal to prevent the information and/or the final version from being changed post-censorship.³¹

Fortunately for our playwright, Glavit’s approval usually constitutes approval from Gosizdat as well. However, Gosizdat still controls the resources needed for printing and can halt printing based on the availability of resources (paper, ink, etc). Apparently, politically suspect authors and texts are more subject to “scarcity.”³² If Gosizdat does not intervene, the playwright can finally apply for the use of a mimeograph or press from The Society of Dramatists and Composers.³³ Remember, all this has been done in an attempt to make enough copies to distribute the script to literary departments. This application, however, can be denied by the Writer’s Union, to which the Society was subordinated after 1934, thus making union

³⁰ Gorchakov, 267

³¹ Ibid

³² Seldes, 232

³³ Later known as the Society for the Protection of Author’s Rights

membership necessary to legally publish within the USSR. The Writer's Union, the official sponsor of Socialist Realism can thus also control publication by denying or revoking memberships. If all requirements are met, copies are made and distributed to literary departments.

It is generally through a literary department that the playwright will receive payment for his play. However, alternate sources of funding were available. Often, some well-connected person would arrange subsidies through the Housing Administration or the State Bank for a favored playwright. Stalin, for instance, arranged for an open bank account for playwright Alexi Tolstoy after being particularly taken by Tolstoy's play, Peter I.³⁴

Our playwright can also draw income by publishing and selling his play in bookstores. To do so, after obtaining approval from Gosizdat (after 1917) and Glavit (after 1922), and if the playwright is in good standing with the Writer's Union (after 1934), the playwright may apply for the approval of yet another agency, the Bureau of the Press. The Bureau, created in 1917 as a sub-department within Agitprop (Department of Agitation and Propaganda – which itself operated within the Politburo), had appointed managers to all publishing houses since 1921. The Bureau's representatives can edit, demand revisions, or deny publication of texts.³⁵

If the playwright wishes his play to be produced by a theatre, there are still more agencies and revisions to go through. This dramatic portion of the censorship process begins with the literary department who will pay the playwright only upon approving his text. Most literary departments remained quite liberal. The playwright probably knows the following anecdote concerning the Moscow Art Theatre: Mikhail Bulgakov, recognized as one of the early Soviet

³⁴ Jelagin, 97, 113.

³⁵ Gorchakov, 269; see also MAAT Online Database of History, <<http://web.genie.it/utenti/i/inanna/livello2/russia-1917.htm>>

era's most talented writers and as one of its most vociferous dissidents, was continually reprimanded for "politically deficient" plays, after which all his plays were banned. Incredibly frustrated, he wrote a letter to Stalin asking to either be exiled or shot so he could escape the enforcement system.³⁶ Most contemporary onlookers thought Stalin would choose to shoot, but instead he seems to have been greatly amused by the note. Stalin ordered Bulgakov be given a job in the Moscow Art Theatre and that one play, The Days of the Turbans, be returned to the repertory there (but not anywhere else). He even called Bulgakov personally to inform him of this.³⁷ Stanislavsky appointed Bulgakov to the literary department, where he remained until dying a natural death in 1938. Nothing he wrote there, however, would ever pass Glavit.³⁸

The playwright, knowing that literary departments usually approve plays based on their dramatic rather than polemic qualities, sends his play to the various literary departments.³⁹ He knows that many "politically deficient" playwrights are able to survive despite being consistently banned due to payments from these relatively liberal departments. However, this play is far from being performed onstage. If approved by a literary department, the playwright reads his play to the theatre's Art Council. On this council sit directors, designers, actors, and musicians,⁴⁰ led by the theatre's manager, who controls all funding, and its art director, who chairs the meeting.

Art Councils had been required in all state-owned theatres since 1920 but many had established such councils years before as a way of democratizing the artistic process. In 1920, the Art Councils were subordinated to the Theatrical Department of the People's Commissariat

³⁶ Jelagin, 102.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ See Jelagin, 127. Gorchakov, however, informs us that there were significant exceptions to this. Nevertheless, the literary departments were bureaucratically aligned with no entity but their respective theatres.

⁴⁰ Jelagin, 37, 39.

of Enlightenment, which had since appointed theatre managers to all state-owned theatres.⁴¹

However, with Vsevolod Meyerhold, a devout avant-gardist, as the department's first head, most of the first appointments had been exceptionally liberal party members.⁴² Furthermore, most of these original managers were weak and easily controlled by the famous artists who worked for them. For example, Juri Jelagin, a Vakhtangov musician, refers to his theatre's first manager as a short, fat woman lacking in intelligence and civility. Jelagin will only use her last name, Vaneyeva, and indicates that although she was manager, the Art Council of the Vakhtangov Theatre was really run by the famous people who worked there: the poet Pavel Antokolski; the famous actor Boris Shchukin; etc.⁴³

This all changed in 1935, however, when the newly formed Committee on Arts, an extension of the all-powerful Politburo, inherited the ability to appoint managers from the now defunct Commissariat of Enlightenment⁴⁴ and also began appointing art directors. Thus, both Art Council leaders were now representatives of the Committee on Arts. Furthermore, this new Art Council leadership can appoint "public representatives" to the council, further inflating its ranks with hard-line communists. The Art Council can, like Glavit, add or remove lines or demand general changes to scenes or characters. Based on these notes, given after the playwright's reading, the script is again revised and resubmitted to the Council for approval, additional notes, or denial.

If the Art Council denies production, that theatre cannot produce the play but other theatres may still consider it. If the Art Council approves the play, it must now be submitted to

⁴¹ Theoretically, it could appoint managers to all theatres, but its authority was, for all practical purposes, relegated to state-owned theatres.

⁴² Pesochinsky, Nikolai. 1998. "Meyerhold and the "Marxist Critique." Theater, Vol. 28, Issue 2: 35-6.

⁴³ Jelagin, 35, 78.

⁴⁴ Whose demise ca. 1929-1932 is described on pages 30-1 of this chapter.

Glavrepertkom. Established in 1923 as part of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment, Glavrepertkom, like Glavit, was made largely independent after 1929. The purpose of both these agencies was to "ideologically orient" drama, in concert with Cheka. No play could be added to a theatre's repertory or begin rehearsals without approval from Glavrepertkom. Yet again, the play is submitted, annotated, and revised, then either approved, annotated, or denied.⁴⁵

Glavrepertkom, however, differed from Glavit in one very important aspect: while Glavit benefited from the power of a government monopoly almost immediately, the government did not achieve such a monopoly over theatres until 1936. Many independent theatres, using their fame and prestige, managed to either influence the agency or ignore it altogether.⁴⁶ But for nationalized theatres, Glavrepertkom was an absolute authority. Vladimir Nemirovitch-Danchenko, a prestigious director at Russia's most prestigious theatre, The Moscow Art, complained of the agency as early as 1923: "it bans a play when it considers it counter-revolutionary, or when it isn't Soviet enough, or when there's a tsar (as in *The Snow Maiden*)... or when the past is beautiful or there's a church or whatever."⁴⁷ The Moscow Art was one of the first to fall under state ownership. The quote shows that Glavrepertkom operated under much the same principles as Glavit: "class orientation" (revolutionary, Soviet) and "historical accuracy" (the past was oppressive by Marxian standards, not beautiful). Also, "counter-revolutionary" was a term often applied to texts considered "non-realist" and Soviet policies included the promulgation of Marxist history and the elimination of all churches.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Solovyova, 326; Gorchakov, 270.

⁴⁶ Jelagin, 79-80; Solovyova, 329.

⁴⁷ Nemirovitch-Danchenko, 277-8.

⁴⁸ Again, we can see in Nemirovitch-Danchenko's quote a description of Soviet censorship ideals described at the end of Chapter I. See page 20 of this study.

As nationalization spread, so did Glavrepertkom's influence. In 1923, the year the agency was founded, the state owned 33 percent of all theatres. By 1926, this number grew to 63. Nationalization was completed in 1936.⁴⁹ If Glavrepertkom approves the play, rehearsals may begin. However, the play has not yet been licensed for public presentation. Licensing was required of all productions after 1930 but, again, was not fully enforced until 1936.⁵⁰ To become licensed, the playwright will attend the final dress rehearsal with a consortium consisting of the production's director and designers, as well as representatives from the Glavrepertkom, Agitprop, the Committee on Arts and, occasionally, the Politburo itself.⁵¹ Following the rehearsal, all consortium members discuss the merits of the play. If the government delegation approves the production, they may still demand changes to the text or its interpretation (acting, music, design, etc.).⁵² If they deny licensing, however, all copies of the script would be confiscated, performances canceled, and discussion of the play made effectively illegal. Furthermore, the theatre may be reprimanded, the playwright arrested, and the previous censors fired or arrested.⁵³ But, if the delegation approves, the play may finally receive public performance (although the various agencies may still cancel performances if controversy ensues).

Our playwright, then, has finally seen his play performed. In the process, he and his play have been scrutinized by more than a dozen agencies and he has rewritten the text at least three or four times. However, this is still the not whole story. There were still other agencies claiming dominion over the playwright, as well as other agencies that could censor the director, the actors,

⁴⁹ Brockett, *History*, 479-80.

⁵⁰ Brockett, *Century*, 193; Jelagin, 105.

⁵¹ Jelagin, 105; Gorchakov, 270.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Gorchakov, 270-1

the set designers, etc. Also, beyond censorship, many other agencies positively encouraged playwrights to conform to Socialist Realist expectations. Official rewards such as the Stalin Prizes, established in 1939 (and renamed the Lenin Prizes during the Khrushchev thaw of 1956), “represented a handsome sum of money, not to mention an improvement in social status.”⁵⁴ The title of “People’s Artist,” established ca. 1920, also gave an improvement in social status. People’s Artists were more likely to be named to government posts and thus receive extra salary (and still more prestige). “Improved social status” also meant access to better shops, restaurants, and apartments, relaxed passage through censorship, and more lavish productions of one’s plays.⁵⁵

Dissidents were also subject to unofficial enforcement procedures. Artists could be disenfranchised (stripped of their citizenship), making them ineligible for steady employment, union membership, and/or publication rights.⁵⁶ If a well-connected individual came to dislike a playwright, that individual could “pull strings” to threaten the playwright with eviction, disenfranchisement, deportation, and even death if the playwright did not change his writing style. Party sponsored dramatic critics could alter a playwright’s social status by either harsh or favorable reviews. A harsh review often meant decreased access to goods, more stringent censorship, and even hardships for the playwright’s family.⁵⁷

The apparatus for “ideologically orienting” playwrighting was more extensive, capricious, and enigmatic than described above. Take, for example, the case of Alexandr Kirshon, author of The Big Day, a play depicting a brave Soviet army defeating a Fascist invasion in just two days. One of the first playwrights to join the Communist party, Kirshon remained a fervent communist

⁵⁴ Solovyova, 353.

⁵⁵ Jelagin, 103, 125, 136.

⁵⁶ Jelagin, 15.

⁵⁷ Jelagin, 104, 125.

all his life, as did most of his family. However, when his cousin, Marshal Yagoda, then head of the Cheka (then known as NKVD) was purged in 1936, the new head arrested Yagoda's entire family. For the "crime" of being Yagoda's cousin, Kirshon died in a concentration camp, and his play was pulled from production at the prestigious Vakhtangov theatre.⁵⁸ Again, the system and all its processes would take a book to fully detail.

This history also admittedly does not account for all name changes, bureaucratic restructuring, and power shifts affecting the enforcement system. For example, Glavrepertkom was replaced with the Ministry of Culture in 1953. However, the Ministry performed much the same process using the same criteria, though it tended to be more liberal than its predecessor.⁵⁹

A PORTRAIT OF THE SYSTEM

Taking this historical and historiographical analysis into account, the enforcement system for Socialist Realism can be effectively summed in the following three-point description:

- 1) As the sole repository of economic resources, the government could decide what to print and what to stage because it controlled the resources for printing and staging.
- 2) Through an enigmatic, labyrinthine system that held the ultimate power of economic success and/or survival over the artist, the artist was both discouraged from acting contrary to the system's wishes and encouraged (or forced) to comply.
- 3) As a general rule, enforcement encouraged (or forcibly created) plays with "appropriate" class-orientation, realism,⁶⁰ historical presentation, and adherence to the current goals and policies of the Communist Party and its leadership.

⁵⁸ Jelagin, 102.

⁵⁹ See table on pages 28-9 of this chapter.

⁶⁰ Class orientation, as seen in Chapter I, included not only showing the working class as heroes, but also presenting the story within realistic strictures. Lenin was quoted in that chapter as implying that realism was like the simple black bread of the peasantry and was thus something the general populace could understand.

The system, in its shifting intricacy, was inherently enigmatic and was maintained as such to produce fear in those subject to it. This fear was made possible, however, largely by the government's economic hegemony over those resources necessary for playwrights to be economically viable: theatres and presses. That censorship was enforced through economic means is quite ironic; removing the means of production from the hands of the bourgeoisie was supposed to free the artist, not censor him. Perhaps even this irony was all the more helpful to the system of fear, however, as it only adds to enigmatic nature of the system. With the authority derived from economic ownership and fear, Socialist Realism, as defined in Chapter I, was effectively enforced. Furthermore, as Chapter III will show, Socialist Realism was effectively implemented into a representative body of plays.

Chapter III: **The Art of Artistry in Soviet Russia**

As Chapters I and II have shown, dramatic art in Soviet Russia was created in part by a vast and enigmatic system enforcing a vaguely defined set of standards. So far, then, this study has concentrated on the enforcement of Socialist Realist playwriting. It will now shift focus to plays that represent the genre. Chapters IV through VI will each be devoted to analyzing a specific play in detail. First, however, this chapter will broadly examine how Soviet plays represented historicism, populism, realism, and adherence to party goals as well as how the Soviet enforcement system impacted Soviet artists and Soviet art.

Because an exhaustive definition was never given by either theorists or bureaucrats, those qualities which came to define Socialist Realism developed on a case-by-case basis as artists attempted to “feel out” what would be praised or reprimanded by the Soviet government through its various representatives. To understand this evolution, this chapter will consider a series of watershed plays and events. Plays considered “watershed” first embodied a particular aspect of what would become Socialist Realism (a term not coined until 1932) *and* which sparked high-profile debates and/or acclaim from three populations: 1) government employed dramatic critics; 2) theatre personnel; and 3) the general public. Watershed events were high profile and sufficiently dramatic to effectively change future playwriting.

This discussion will be organized by two methods: topical and chronological. Since the four aspects of Socialist Realism developed essentially one after the other, the information lends itself well to this type of cross-referenced organization. The chapter will begin by discussing how the policies of the new Soviet regime affected first, the general population of authors and second, specific authors with emphasis given to the playwright Vladimir Mayakovsky, whose experiences with the Soviet enforcement system are well-documented and characteristic. Next,

the development of each aspect of Socialist Realism will be traced through a series of plays that premiered in the years 1920-1936. Lastly, the chapter will consider how tightened government controls and the use of terror after 1936 affected theatre artists. Particular attention will be paid in this last portion to director Vsevolod Meyerhold's self-documented prison experience. This chapter will not feature a section on historiography because this type of product-driven analysis of Socialist Realism's development has not been previously attempted.¹

Perhaps the most immediate and surprising effect of the push for nationalizing publishers and theatres was to make it *easier* for many writers to get published and/or staged. Historian Inna Solovyova attributes the "rush of new writers" immediately following the revolution to political pressure from the government and opportunism from the writers.² These forces did not create an entirely new population of authors, however, as the Communists lifted Tsarist restrictions that had kept some authors' works unpublished or unproduced. Thus, a considerable portion of the "new" population had, in fact, been authors for some time, but were "just under the radar," so to speak. For example, the Tsarist government had previously banned pro-Communist literature and drama. This ban obviously disappeared after the revolution (and was replaced by a ban on pro-monarchist literature). Those authors more freely published and staged after the revolution include such recognizable names as Vladimir Mayakovsky and Alexi Tolstoy, who are discussed below. Publication was also easier for certain authors following the revolution because previously most publishers and theatres had considered Russian language texts exclusively, despite the nearly one hundred languages spoken in Russia.³ After the revolution, the communists required publishers and theatres to print and produce plays from traditionally

¹ Past chapters in this study have given careful recounts of historiography. While most historians will list a representative body of plays, none attempt to trace the genre's development through them.

² Solovyova, 353.

³ Gorky, "Soviet," 258-259.

underserved provinces, where minority languages were typically spoken. The government hoped that by celebrating Russia's many cultures, they could promote worker solidarity among the varied cultures and encourage education in particularly "proletarian provinces."⁴ Lastly, the communists built schools across the USSR and, by 1932, made primary education compulsory for all children. For the following varied reasons, more people could produce and consume literature after the revolution than before.

This situation also helps explain why many of the new artists were likely to be partial towards the communists. Gorky quotes from a letter he received from a Tartar writer:

The Great October Revolution has given us, writers of previously oppressed and uneducated nationalities, boundless opportunities, including the opportunity of entering Russian literature with our own works, which, true, are far from perfect.⁵

Many theatres and publishers considered funding minority artists as a forced act of charity.⁶ The more "quaint" the work they published or produced, the more charitable they felt their action would appear to the government. Hence, they did not often give resources to what might be considered the "best" art, but preferred more "mediocre" art.⁷ This tendency diminished as the general population of minority authors became better educated and as managers more supportive of the program took over the publishing houses (originally, pre-revolutionary managers were kept at their posts but were nearly all eventually replaced).

While certain Soviet policies benefited Soviet authors, others certainly did not. Groups like Proletcult and RAPP encouraged "simple, revolutionary art"⁸ and enjoyed early government support which they often used to harass "deviant" artists with censorship and/or scathing reviews

⁴ Brown, 2-3.

⁵ Gorky, *Ibid.*, 259.

⁶ One might think of it as something akin to what the MET might think if it were required to stage plays written by mentally challenged nine-year olds. That was the stereotype of provincial peoples the government program was trying to dismiss.

⁷ Gorky, *Ibid.*, 258-260.

⁸ Brocket, *Century*, 196.

in the papers, all of which the government owned. However, the Communist Party was still debating what, if anything, should be required of art. The government also simply didn't have the resources to enforce a strong policy for the theatre. Yet with each passing year the government grew in power and, by affecting the careers and even the survival of artists, warranted ever more concern by those artists.⁹

Vladimir Mayakovsky perhaps best exemplifies the confusion and fear generated by the burgeoning and sporadic Soviet enforcement system. Mayakovsky joined the Bolshevik Party in 1906 when he was thirteen years old. He was twice arrested for revolutionary activity by the Tsarist government. In 1915, he wrote his first major poem, A Cloud in Trousers, which was written in the “street language of the proletariat” and which advocated revolution:

Take your hands off the pockets pedestrians!
Grab stones, bombs, knives, whatever you can find
And those of you who have no hands
Hit with the forehead
March you o hungry ones
Crooked
Skinny dirty, full of parasites
March!¹⁰

A few years later, the Red Army chanted a Mayakovsky slogan as they captured the Winter Palace: “Eat pineapple, chew on quail / your last day is coming bourgeois!”¹¹ A line from his epic eulogy entitled Vladimir Ilych Lenin also became a Bolshevik slogan: “Lenin, even now, is more alive than the living.”¹² In 1930 he was one of Stalin's favorite poets and was selected to travel the country to rally support for Stalin's economic plans.¹³

For the same reasons that Stalin loved Mayakovsky's poetry, however, he despised his drama. Mayakovsky was known for both shocking imagery and untraditional structure. While

⁹ See Chapter II for a full recount of this process.

¹⁰ Encyclopedia of Soviet Authors, <http://www.sovlit.com/bios/mayakovsky.html>

¹¹ Ibid – the quote rhymes in the original

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

Mayakovsky's drama holds the same politics as his poetry (The Bedbug, for instance, shows a petit-bourgeois counter-revolutionary publicly humiliated), Stalin derided his drama as often as he praised his poetry. While it may not be possible to fully explain the personal tastes of Stalin, the ironic situation they helped create for Mayakovsky must have been exasperating. The censorship system was not strong enough in the late twenties to prevent Mayakovsky's drama from being performed. However the system, again, had control over the newspapers. Mayakovsky, who claimed he had been a revolutionary since the third grade, must have taken the critics' berating charges of "antirevolutionarism" very personally.¹⁴

On April 12, 1930, Mayakovsky wrote his last poem which read, in part:

As they say,
"the incident is closed."
The love boat
wrecked by daily life.
I'm all even with life
and nothing would be gained by listing
mutual hurts,
troubles,
and insults.¹⁵

He shot himself in his office two days later, having left the poem on his desk apparently as a suicide note explaining his lethal action. This example, while severe, was not uncommon during the early years of enforcement. The poet Sergi Esenin wrote a suicide poem and hanged himself in 1925 for much the same reason Mayakovsky shot himself.¹⁶ As noted in Chapter II, Mikhail Bulgakov wrote a letter to Stalin in 1930 asking to be exempted from censorship or shot.¹⁷ Some authors stopped writing (or at least publishing) during this time and waited for a change in or

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Although it should be noted that Esenin's case was exacerbated by schizophrenia and alcoholism. Esenin wrote his suicide poem in his own blood.

¹⁷ See Chapter II for a more complete version of the story – Bulgakov was not shot, but never published or staged a new play again.

clarification of official policy because, as Inna Solovyova states, “everyone knew there was a new official party line on art, but no one could be sure what it was.”¹⁸

Yet, acceptable subjects and how to treat those subjects became better-defined topics during these early years. One early watershed for historicism came in 1920, when Anatoly Lunacharsky wrote Oliver Cromwell. Lunacharsky depicted Cromwell as a revolutionary leader who did not fully understand that a revolution is a populist affair. Cromwell is shown callously stepping over the bodies of fellow revolutionaries and refers to them as “liquidated.”¹⁹

Apparently many leaders feared that this anti-populist, heartless Cromwell could be seen as a metaphor for the current revolutionary government.²⁰ The play sparked enormous controversy but was not banned, likely because its author was also the People’s Commissar for Enlightenment. At the time, the People’s Commissar was, short of Lenin, the highest authority over the theatre. By showing that he was willing to produce and support historical dramas even over complaints from critics, Lunacharsky solidified the developing motif of presenting historical events as imperfect precursors to Bolshevism. Soon, many similar historical dramas would appear, including V. Volkenshtein’s Spartacus (1920), K. Trevnev’s Pugachev’s Rebellion (1923 – it concerns an eighteenth century peasant revolt), and Alexi Tolstoy’s The Empress’s Conspiracy (1924 – it concerns Catherine the Great’s usurpation of the throne).

Each of these plays, however, also courted controversy: Spartacus featured too many “intellectual” speeches by the proletarian leader (the play was based on classical models); Pugachev’s Rebellion depicted Pugachev, a national hero to the Bolsheviks, as a petty thief with an unstable psychology (which is accurate²¹); finally, Tolstoy’s play failed to show the Empress

¹⁸ Solovyova, 330; See also Jelagin, 111.

¹⁹ Gorchakov, 173-4.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Dukes, 112, 116-7.

as abusive enough to peasants (although the playwright's hatred for tsarism is made quite clear). These plays were eventually produced and exemplified the type of "historicism" would characterize Socialist Realism throughout its history. Many theorists felt that showing these precursors validated Marx's conception of history as a linear progression culminating in the foundation of a communist state and, since past revolutions had been flawed (such as the one led by Cromwell), that the current Bolshevik regime was validated as the true fulfillment of Marx's prediction.²²

Another way of showing historicism was to show contemporary events in a "proper" historical light. While plays depicting the distant past grew in popularity, plays based in the present, even plays concerning such important recent events as the October Revolution were slower to develop. These tended to field harsher criticism and were more likely to be censored or banned, for obvious reasons. Thus, the first major prototype for the genre didn't appear until 1925. Storm, by Vladimir Bil-Belotserkovsky, depicts an iron-handed Bolshevik District Committee Chairman who, during the Russian Civil War, defends a provincial city from thieves, drunks, counter-revolutionaries, and The White Army. The play avoided criticism by never showing its protagonist on stage or even naming him. His character is developed only through others' commentary, which is always in glowing terms. Also, the play's strong characters and powerful revolutionary theme made it with theatres.²³ It was eventually produced by nearly every Soviet company and paved the way for other plays about Bolsheviks.

Not until 1927, however, would a "Bolshevik hero" be seen on stage. Vsevolod Ivanov's Armored Train 14-69 would also provide a model "populism" for future Soviet plays. In the

²² Ironically, many Christian groups have for centuries sought to show that Jesus is given many precursors in the Old Testament to show that he is, indeed, Christ using basically the same assumption as the Communists who claimed to be antithetical to the Christians.

²³ Gorchakov, 175.

play, a White Army regiment, separated from their Japanese and American allies, awaits Armored Train 14-69 to evacuate them from a small, Pacific coast town. However, a devout Bolshevik Party intellectual and the play's hero, Peklevanov, will help lead an attempt to capture the train, organize the town's workforce into an army, and defeat the stranded but still well-armed Whites. Early in the play, a Japanese spy shoots Peklevanov but the plan is carried to fruition by a rag-tag band of workers and peasants under the leadership of a muzhik (a backwoods peasant) named Vershinin.

The play received its premier at the Moscow Art Theatre, whose literary department heavily reworked the script before staging. The reworking did not alter the basic story or even the politics of the play, but rather sought to provide its characters with greater depth. According to N. Khmelev, the first actor to play Peklevanov: "every tendency to declamation was removed from the character. (He had) concentration, a good mind, and a gentle spirit."²⁴ Peklevanov is a Bolshevik who does not so much lead, as Party critic P. Ktsev noted, as "personify the will of the *narodny* (masses) as it moves forward."²⁵ These qualities (focused, intelligent, compassionate, and revolutionary) as described by Khmelev and Ktsev, came to represent a character type that appeared in many Soviet plays. To name just a few: Peter I in Alexi Tolstoy's Peter I (1936), Lenin in Nikolay Pogodin's Man with a Gun (1937), Field Marshal Kutuzov in Vladimir Solovyov's Field Marshal Kutuzov (1939), Lenin and Stalin in Vsevolod Vishnevsky's 1919-The Unforgettable Year (1939).

Showing the populace faithfully carrying out their Bolshevik leader's plans also became popular. In this, the play also depicts Vershinin, a common man, as a hero. Armored Train 14-69

²⁴ Quoted in Gorchakov 183.

²⁵ Ktsev, P. "Armoured Train 14-69" in Pravda, November 18, 1927. Available from Pravda Online. May 2003. Moscow, Russia. <http://english.pravda.ru/>

is therefore populist. Perhaps even more important in exemplifying populism for future playwriting, however, was the play's portrayal of Vershinin's rag-tag band of proletarians. They work together, despite their different races and cultures, to deliver the final blows that help to bring down the mighty White Army. One of the major difficulties faced by the Communists lay in unifying a proletariat consisting of more than one hundred nationalities, many of whom had desired national independence for centuries and who still fight for it today. The recent breakup of the former USSR and the recent well-publicized conflicts in Chechnya exemplify the centuries-old conflicts between Russia's many cultures. These conflicts were/are also fueled by the insularity and negative stereotyping historically maintained between these cultures. For example, Mongols were generalized as being exceptionally stupid and the Chinese were often stereotyped as dishonest.²⁶ Therefore, it is significant in Armored Train 14-69 that when a volunteer is sought for the incredibly dangerous assignment of lying across the tracks to force the armored train to stop, it is a Chinese man who accepts. Vershinin comments: "The Chinese wants to show his importance to Russia... He wants to show his great spirit."²⁷ Also, when Peklevanov is shot and Vershinin is away from the town capturing the train, the populace continues carries out their important individual tasks independently of central leadership. Showing a heroic and unified populace was also a major characteristic of Socialist Realism.

1927, the year Armored Train 14-69 premiered, was also the year the Central Committee of the Communist Party founded a special subcommittee to commission and "request" art on particular subjects relating to specific Party policies. The Committee felt that by doing so, they could foster a more productive and compliant spirit within the population for Communist party policies. With the advent of the first Five-Year Plan in 1929, thousands of new plays appeared,

²⁶ Gorchakov, 183.

²⁷ Quoted in Gorchakov, 184.

all emphasizing the importance of collectivizing agriculture and increasing industrial output. So many plays of this ilk were produced that, as discussed in the introduction, Soviet plays would be stereotyped as “boy meets tractor.”²⁸ Considering that, only a few years before, plays depicting recent politics were considered risky, tacit government support of these plays is evident. Furthermore, raising the USSR’s gross national product was a constant goal for the Communist party; hence, they would continue to encourage these plays of this type.

The party would also especially laud Nikolai Pogodin’s Tempo (1929), which became a model for both structure and content for many years to come. A former writer for *Pravda*, Pogodin wrote Tempo, his first play, in a terse, straightforward journalistic style. The play concerns the construction and opening of a new automobile plant in a rural city. An American engineer named Mr. Carter has been imported to oversee construction and to establish a “production program” based on those recently innovated by Henry Ford. The theme of the play is perhaps best summed in one of Carter’s last lines:

My heartiest congratulations to everybody. I am far from politics, but I am sure that such a record is outside the reach of any country with a different political organization from yours here. I am happy to inform you that the figures for the last ten days (of the production program) show not one hundred, or a hundred and twenty, or a hundred and fifty, but a hundred and sixty-eight percent of the program.²⁹

Carter himself worked quickly and efficiently, “like a machine” as one Soviet worker observes.³⁰

The Soviets are also quick but sing folksongs while working, a custom Carter never comes to understand. The difference between Soviet and American workers, then, is that Soviets work with joy for a communist system while Americans are but cogs in the capitalist system. This difference allows Soviet production to outstrip anything Americans might expect. Also, while

²⁸ Glenny, x.

²⁹ Pogodin, Nikolai. 1929. Tempo. In Six Soviet Plays. Eugene Lyons, trans. ed. (New York: Greenwood Press) 224.

³⁰ Ibid 186.

Carter is an exemplar of efficiency, he is also an object of fun. Not only do his students quickly outdo him, he also comes to think that *svoloch* is a compliment due to a mistranslation from his interpreter. He slaps Russian backs and heartily says “*Svoloch!*” which means, in Russian, “Scoundrel!”

Although the genre of Socialist Realism was reasonably well-developed by 1936, there was still considerable diversity in drama. Vsevolod Meyerhold’s theatre, for example, would continue to perform Revizor until 1938, a play which many people interpreted as a harsh satire of Soviet government. Several things happened in 1936, however, which would eventually draw nearly all Soviet drama into the parameters defined (however vaguely) by Socialist Realism.

First, the Soviet government published a 1936 list of all artists considered to be “People’s Artists of the Soviet Union.” The title had been created ca. 1920 and awarded to Konstantine Stanislavsky and Vsevolod Meyerhold soon afterward. However, the 1936 list, presented during a gala art festival in Moscow with representatives from all arts and all provinces of Russia, conspicuously omitted some names, among them Vsevolod Meyerhold and a favorite playwright of Meyerhold’s theatre, Vladimir Mayakovsky. The names listed were all associated with playwrights such as Gorky, Afinogenov, and Pogodin, who wrote patriotic, realistic plays and who would long be staples of the Soviet theatre. Referring to the list of People’s Artists, Vladimir Nemirovitch-Danchenko wrote to Konstantine Stanislavski: “I understand why Meyerhold isn’t on it. That indicates the [party] line [on art].”³¹ Incidentally, both Danchenko and Stanislavski were on the list. Their theatre, the Moscow Art, had produced all of Gorky’s and Afinogenov’s plays to date. Meyerhold had produced none. The 1936 list was a powerful rhetorical statement stating what type of plays the government would continue to support.³²

³¹ Nemirovich-Danchenko, Vladimir. 1936. Selected Letters, Vol II (Moscow: Progress Publishers) 277-8.

³² Keeping definitions vague seems to have been part of the Soviet policy on art. See Chapter II, pg. 40-1.

The need to comply with this new Party line on art was made more urgent by two other events directly affecting artists in 1936. First, the nationalization of the theatres was completed, making staging impossible without government approval. Second, 1936 marked the first Stalinist purges; many concentration camps were founded in that year and many people, from all professions and age groups, disappeared into these camps. Complying with government regulations thus became truly mandatory in 1936. Lastly, during this year when the Party line was becoming more clear and better enforced, Alexi Tolstoy's Peter I not only exemplified all the ideals of Socialist Realism, but also aided in exemplifying those ideals to artists by the convoluted path it had to take to eventually achieve its unprecedented fame.

Like Pogodin, Alexi Tolstoy had been a journalist. As he reported World War I from England, he developed a writing style that emphasized brevity and clarity. As an early Bolshevik sympathizer, he felt the tsarist government had unduly censored his reports, which also tended to emphasize the role of "the people" and a Marxian conception of war. Like many early Bolsheviks, Tolstoy developed a strong dislike for pre-revolutionary government types and for Tsarism in particular. When Tolstoy first treated the subject of Peter in his 1929 On the Rack, he depicted Peter as a macabre madman: ruling through terror; torturing his own son; enslaving and subjecting his country to unnecessary warfare. Tolstoy's depiction of history is accurate³³ and compatible with the type of history called for by Socialist Realism, as were his writing style and political leanings. Yet the Glavrepertkom banned it.

Several years later, Tolstoy discovered his "error:" Stalin saw Peter I as a hero, a strong leader who made Russia a military and economic power.³⁴ A cult of personality had quietly built up around the former Tsar as Stalin proclaimed him the embodiment of all current Soviet goals.

³³ Dukes 88-102.

³⁴ Gorchakov, 315-7.

Bolshevik textbooks on history were rewritten to emphasize Peter's contributions to Russia. Tolstoy likewise rewrote his play, keeping all the qualities of the first version, but completely reworking the character of the Tsar. The 1936 version was entitled Peter I and featured a "super-proletarian" Peter who labors in shipyards, jokes with workers, and rules with the support of proletarians and with their concerns in mind. He despises war and dreams of a day when Russians can labor in peace. He apprentices under a simple blacksmith named Zhemov, whom he regards as a great teacher. He forces nobles to help labor and to win the war. By the end of the play, Peter has built a great and mighty ship, symbolizing the power and greatness Russia achieved under him.

While this second description of Peter's character is nearly opposite from the first, neither is wholly inaccurate.³⁵ Following Peter's reign, Russia first became a European power. Also, fascinated by ships, Peter apprenticed in shipyards during his youth and was well known for his rollicking fraternization with the workers, much to his royal father's disdain. However, the apprenticeship ended well before he ever became tsar and thus the play "fudges" the time line a bit. It may seem ironic that Communists should prefer a popular tsar to tyrant deserving of revolution, but Tolstoy willingly created this new version. Furthermore, his play was quickly approved by all agencies, and cheered by both Stalin and the general public.³⁶ Stalin later awarded Tolstoy an open account at the State Bank and invitations to many important State events where Tolstoy was often pictured with Stalin and other important political leaders.

The irony of portraying a Tsar as a Soviet hero may be partially explained (or made more inexplicable) by the fact that Tolstoy himself, the new "poster child" for Socialist Realism, had come from an aristocratic family. Count Alexi Tolstoy, in fact, still kept several houses staffed

³⁵ Dukes, 88-102

³⁶ Jelagin, 114; Gorchakov, 317.

by the same servants he had employed since before the revolution. This led, at times, to delightfully ironic situations where his old butler would, partly from force of habit, tell visitors that “his Excellency is away on Party business.”³⁷

In any case, the play’s meteoric rise to fame in the crucial year of 1936 caused at least three of its characteristics to become widely emulated. First, playwrights generally used simple, concise language to tell a well-defined story. This journalistic approach would become almost synonymous with Soviet definition of “realism.” Second, populism and Party goals were mixed in Soviet Realism. Plays depicted a strong and united proletariat class who, while ultimately stronger than their leaders, willingly submitted to benevolent authority. The people and their leaders would accomplish some great act such as building a factory, fending off a foreign invasion, or some other goal directly supporting or symbolizing the current goals of the Communist Party. While plays showed the people to be the ultimate source of political power (and thus “populist”) the plays also maintained that strong leadership is necessary to organize the people and thereby supported the growing power of the Bolshevik government. Third and lastly, historicism was also mixed with Party goals. Plays continued to show precursors of the Revolution on stage but Peter I marked the entrance of plays depicting precursors of Stalin (or at least the Stalin depicted by his cult of personality): an incredibly powerful, well-educated ruler who leads a united people to victory and glory. The Party also maintained official slants on history. Examples of these slants include not only perceptions of Peter’s role in history, but also, for example, the role of religion and popular movements. Plays that passed censorship were generally conducive to these official slants and playwrights would generally take care to present history “appropriately.”

³⁷ Jelagin, 112. “Excellency” is a title used to refer to the nobility. Since the communists proclaimed themselves to be antithetical to the nobility, the statement is ironic and almost absurd.

Plays thus supported Party goals by their depictions of leadership, the people, and history. While all of the qualities which came to define Socialist Realism were developed previously, Peter I was a full and timely expression of those qualities; in a time of widespread terror and censorship, it became perhaps history's most profitable play (Tolstoy's open bank account theoretically gave him access to Russia's entire GNP). It was often emulated and held up by Soviet censorship authorities as a model for playwrights.

While 1936 could be considered the year that Socialist Realism, as generally defined by the Soviet censorship apparatus, came to dominate Soviet art, there were still a few small but significant pockets of resistance. Vsevolod Meyerhold presents a vivid example of how dissidents were punished, "rehabilitated," and/or "liquidated" by the now powerful Soviet censorship apparatus. Meyerhold used his considerable influence as a director to coerce Glavrepertkom to allow him to stage highly controversial avant-garde plays.³⁸ Glavit had already passed the plays he produced, including an array of accepted classics such as Nikolay Gogol's The Inspector General and Alexandr Ostrovsky's The Forest. However, Meyerhold would rework the accepted script so heavily that he could be considered a playwright himself.³⁹ He even produced Gogol's The Inspector General, reworked into eleven episodic, surreal scenes, under a name of his own (Meyerhold's) invention: Revizor. By altering the scripts, Meyerhold staged high profile, flamboyant deviations from the official structures of Socialist Realism.

In part because Meyerhold had such powerful connections and was so well respected within the theatrical world, he was able to produce these plays until 1938, when his theatre was closed after a long battle with the Committee on Art and other enforcement agencies. However, at the insistence of Konstantine Stanislavsky (Meyerhold's former teacher), Meyerhold

³⁸ Gordon, 17.

³⁹ Clark, 28-30.

continued to direct at the Moscow Art Theatre Opera Studio. The change of location seemed to assuage Meyerhold's tendency to severely alter his scripts and in 1939 Meyerhold was invited to speak at the All-Union Conference of Stage Directors, presumably to confess his past errors and his new commitment to the official views on art. These public declarations had grown common during the late twenties and early thirties as the Soviet censorship apparatus had gained power and convinced one theatre artist after another to comply with the new regulations. Meyerhold, however, did not give the expected declaration.

The official transcript of Meyerhold's speech was omitted from the published transcript of the convention. However, Juri Jelagin, transcribed it from memory after hearing that the speech would not be published in official sources. He asserts that Meyerhold admitted to certain "mistakes," that his experimental style was not always successful at adding greater understanding to the original story, that his following ("Meyerhold mania" he called it) was misguided, and that he had practiced "formalism."⁴⁰ However, Jelagin has Meyerhold state that very few of his productions concentrated on form, that his "organic" style of rewriting scripts helped bring scripts to life, and that his style represented an indispensable "individual creativity."⁴¹ Meyerhold apparently concluded his speech by calling Socialist Realism (Socialistic Realism, as Jelagin translates it) enigmatic and inartistic. Meyerhold is quoted:

What is your definition of formalism? I would like to ask the question in reverse: what is antiformalism? What is socialistic realism? Apparently socialistic realism is orthodox antiformalism... You have destroyed art!⁴²

By linking vagaries into a circular logic, Meyerhold expressed frustration at the system he was forced to deal with. After his speech, he was arrested within the week and executed a few months later. His name was expunged from all published materials.

⁴⁰ Jelagin, 171-3.

⁴¹ Jelagin, 172.

⁴² Jelagin, 172-3.

While the original transcript of Meyerhold's speech has yet to be uncovered and published, a 1939 letter in which Meyerhold details his own prison experience has. It is impossible to know how many other theatre artists endured experiences similar to the one he describes. The text is especially significant because Meyerhold, as an articulate artist fascinated by expression, gives particularly concrete descriptions of his physical and emotional reactions to the prison experience he endured. For example:

Lying on the floor face down (being tortured), I showed a capacity to twist, contort my body and squeal like a dog being whipped by his master. The guard who led me away from such an interrogation once asked "Do you have malaria?" – such was the nervous tremble of which my body showed itself capable. When I lay down on my cot and fell asleep, only to go again an hour later to interrogation after enduring eighteen hours of it before that, I was awakened by my own groan and by being jerked up on the cot like a patient dying of fever. Fear arouses terror and terror forces one to self-defense.⁴³

It was because of this "self-defense" that Meyerhold states he is writing the letter, addressed to the President of the Sovnarkom, the highest political body of the USSR. Meyerhold states that after enduring this torture, he incorrectly stated that he and several colleagues, including his former student Nikolai Okhlopkov and the composer Shostakovich, were counter-revolutionaries and spies for capitalist countries. The letter, then, was written as Meyerhold realized that he would die in prison ("*in articulo mortis*" he states – Latin for "at the moment of death") in an attempt to exonerate those he had named "in self-defense." He gives a vivid account of his psychological reaction to torture that resulted in these false accusations:

I must undergo further torture... "This is the way it has to be," I persuaded myself. And my Self was split into two persons. The first began searching for the crimes of the second, and when it did find them, it began to invent them. My interrogator appeared to be my good, experienced helper in my case, and we began to create together in close alliance. When my fantasy was exhausted, my interrogators paired off... threatening, "If you don't write (that is: make something up!?), we'll beat you again; we'll leave your head and right hand alone, the rest we'll turn into a piece of formless mincemeat." And I signed it all by November 16, 1939.⁴⁴

⁴³ Meyerhold, Vselovod. 1940. "Petition." D. Krizhankaya and M. Hostetter, trans. Theater, Vol. 28, Issue 2: 47

⁴⁴ Meyerhold, 48-9

The date indicates that the whole process took about four months. He was executed probably one to three months afterward. No record of the execution, however, exists. A death certificate was apparently never issued.

The common subjects for Socialist Realist plays would change over the years. For example, the years of World War II brought many journalistic plays about recent battles and the experiences of soldiers at the front. Post WWII saw many plays about reconstruction. The sixties saw many plays about familial relationships (as an ideational generation gap developed in the USSR, as it had in the US). Over time, playwrights were given more or less freedom to work within the confines of Socialist Realism, as described at the end of Chapter II. However, by the late thirties, the definitive elements of Socialist Realism, their enforcement, and how they were to be expressed in a representative body of plays was established.

The following chapters will examine several representative plays from 1939 and after. They will give a more specific view of how the form was expressed and how it changed to suit current Party ideology and goals. They will also show, however, that while plays generally conform to the criteria defined in the last three chapters, they were also fascinating artistic expressions; adherence to government standards does not necessarily imply bad art, as many critics have heretofore assumed, and as were detailed in this study's introduction. Many writers, in fact, saw their writing as a true and noble act of patriotism. Even Meyerhold, at the end of his graphic letter states quite emphatically: "I love my country, and I will devote to it all the forces of my last years of life."⁴⁵ The next three chapters will each examine a different play that achieved fame on the Soviet stage under the requirements of Socialist Realism and its enforcement system.

⁴⁵ Meyerhold, 49.

Chapter IV: **Solovyov's Field Marshal Kutuzov**

Field Marshal Kutuzov by Vladimir A. Solovyov was written, published, and performed in 1939. By this time, all theatres and publishers were fully nationalized, giving the Soviet enforcement system consolidated and far-reaching powers over playwrights. This system awarded Solovyov's patriotic play a gala performance at the prestigious Vakhtangov Theatre as well as the first Stalin Prize, a 50,000-ruble award. When a Nazi bomb destroyed the Vakhtangov in 1941, the crowd-pleasing play was quickly approved for production by several other theatres throughout Russia. Like many of his countrymen, Solovyov joined the Red Army after the Nazi invasion. His first assignment was to turn his play into a movie. The Red Army hoped that this movie, known as Kutuzov, would help rally the populace to wartime efforts.¹

To discern how Field Marshal Kutuzov came to be favored by Soviet authorities, this chapter will examine the play's rhetoric in terms of Socialist Realism. As shall be shown, the play generally presents historicism and populism with distinct ideological slants that rhetorically support goals held by the Communist Party in 1939. However, Field Marshal Kutuzov cannot be described as "text-book perfect;" the play makes significant deviations from the "prescribed form" of realism. In considering these deviations, some postulation on why the system chose to more-than-overlook them will be offered. Lastly, to encourage reconsideration of these plays as historic documents and dramatic texts, this chapter will conclude by discussing what dramatic criticism is currently available on Field Marshal Kutuzov, and supplement this with original criticism. In this way, analyzing Solovyov's play can allow a still more complete understanding of Socialist Realism as an art form and encourage an understanding that moves beyond simplifications and stereotypes.

¹ Dana, "Solovyov." 2

Solovyov's play will be considered in its 1942 translation by J. J. Robbins, which is the only one available. This does not however, greatly limit this study, as Robbins' translation is quite readable. There are also very few sources of criticism for the play, save for two sources which briefly mention it. Perhaps because this play was so favored by Soviet authorities, western translators and historians have generally overlooked it.

To begin with a discussion of historicism, Field Marshal Kutuzov depicts the 1812 French-Russian conflict. In doing so, it supports several Communist party goals. First, educating the populace in history was considered an important first step to educating the populace in Communism because Marx's theories are derived from historical analysis.² Second, history is presented in Field Marshal Kutuzov from a Marxist perspective; the French and Russian leaders are portrayed as self-serving and oppressive and, later, the proletariat is depicted as the true hero of history. The first scene shows a Polish colonel in Napoleon's army complaining that no French promise to the Polish people has yet been fulfilled. The colonel states that Napoleon's "words have covered up / [his] Carnage by daylight so that he might hold / The Poles in hand."³ Other soldiers are threatening to lynch the colonel for treason when Napoleon himself enters. Napoleon exonerates the colonel, but then exiles him once all Poles have left the room. Thus, Napoleon wins favor with the Poles and his soldiers by appearing enlightened, but saves face with his Marshals by appearing stern, achieving both at the expense of his subjects. He further proves the colonel's words correct by asserting in scene six that the populace should be killed, enslaved, or emancipated to best suit a leader's political well-being.⁴

² See, for example, Marx, The Communist Manifesto, et all.

³ Vladimir Solovyov, Field Marshal Kutuzov, H. W. L. Dana, trans. In Seven Soviet Plays. (New York: the MacMillan Company.) 6-7

⁴ Ibid 10-1

Machiavellian acts are typical of Napoleon throughout the play. In scene six, a loyal soldier shoots a Bavarian rioter in Moscow (as marshal law dictates). Napoleon orders the soldier promoted with a proclamation that the soldier was defending Russians. Napoleon plans to winter in Moscow and thus wants to secure the good will of Russians. However, Napoleon quickly learns he must return to Paris. Therefore, he changes his orders to have the soldier shot, thus ensuring safe passage through Germany, the Bavarian homeland. Napoleon acts only in his own selfish best interests, with no consideration for justice or respect for life.

We see as early as scene two that Tsar Alexandr of Russia is no better. He is replacing his current Field Marshal (commander-in-chief) with Kutuzov although he believes the French will easily defeat Kutuzov. However, soldiers and peasants have petitioned the tsar to grant Kutuzov the position. Alexandr states that he is honoring the petitions so that he can blame future military losses on his subjects and thus save political face; the Tsar places his political standing above the lives of his soldiers and peasants, which might be lost in those military defeats. Alexandr takes this selfish logic even further in scene ten when he insists that his army, after winning a nearly bloodless victory over the French, pursue the retreating French, conquering new lands as they advance. This action impresses his English allies and extends his power but is unpopular with Russian commanders and soldiers. By scene eleven, the Russian military has advanced to the Swiss Alps, but no one can find tangible worth in taking over so much foreign land. Although new land adds to the Tsar's political capital, it presents no profit to the peasants and soldiers who fought and died to conquer them. Marx had described all pre-communist leaders as acting only in their own self-interest; both the Tsar and Napoleon fit this description.

Solovyov's historicism is perhaps not as interesting for the history it presents, however, as for the history it does not present. By carefully choosing which facts to "overlook," Solovyov rhetorically supports Soviet efforts to promote nationalism, glorify the military, and avoid engagement in WWII. These were important goals in 1939 because the USSR was economically and militarily unprepared for a major conflict. Industrialization was only beginning to take hold in Russia, which could not compete with a more developed country such as Germany. Also, the Russian military was comparatively weak, still relying on antiquated units such as the horse cavalry (as opposed to the German Panzer units) and still recovering from the divisions of the Russian Civil War.⁵ The Soviets understandably wanted to avoid any conflict with the comparatively well-armed Germans. However, also recognizing that the Nazis might choose to take advantage of odds stacked in their favor and attack while the Soviets were weak, the Soviets also wanted to be prepared.⁶ To encourage both pacifism and preparedness, Solovyov depicts Russia's military history as a grand succession of victorious defensive operations fought by a unified population. Solovyov, in fact, often leaves out important facts in order to achieve his desired effects.

In scene eight a Hussar (a Russian national minority) commander exclaims "To the Russian land! To the hour of victory / That we might bury Napoleon in these snows / As once our ancestors buried Charles of Sweden." The quote infers that the Russians had fought Charles for the same reason that the Russians were then fighting Napoleon: for leading an attack on the Russian homeland. In the early 1700s, Charles invaded Russia and was driven back out again by the Russian military. However, the reference doesn't mention that Charles was following a

⁵ Dukes, 241, 255

⁶ Dukes, 255

retreating Russian army that had first invaded Sweden.⁷ The quote also overlooks the fact that Charles' subsequent advance into Russia carried him so far that, having entered from the north, his most convenient retreat was to Turkey, in the south. The Russians then aggressively followed Charles hoping to crush his army and possibly capture Turkish land.⁸ Once there, however, the Russians found themselves surrounded by Charles' army, now well-reinforced with Turkish allies, and were consequently slaughtered. Solovyov tells only the part about Charles' defeat, however, and thus flatters Russian nationalist sentiment and pride in the Russian military. Also, incidentally, the Russian military would have found it impossible to "bury Napoleon in these snows." Despite widespread misconception, there was no snow in western Russia during the Napoleonic invasion. The Russians pride themselves, however, on their ability to survive cold and have long used stories about their exceptional winters to deter other countries from wanting to invade. Therefore, they have fostered the myth (and now generally believe it themselves) that the Russian winter helped stop Napoleon.⁹

This is not the only example of a half-told war story. Marshal Suvorov, the famous eighteenth century military commander, is referred to as a defender of Russia.¹⁰ In scene two, a Russian peasant states that "The great Suvorov, good Lord rest him, / taught us to meet such guests in other ways" to convince other peasants to fight off French invaders. Suvorov led a successful defense against the Turks in 1778-90. However, Suvorov is most famous for conquering the Crimea as well as substantial parts of Transcaucasia, Turkey, and Poland.

Through its carefully worded rhetoric, Solovyov's play serves to spread historical knowledge from a Marxist perspective. Furthermore, the slant offered by the rhetoric, which

⁷ The conflict is known as the Great Northern War.

⁸ Dukes, 91

⁹ Shenkman, R. 1994. Legends, Lies, and Cherished Myths of World History. (New York: Harper Perennial) 155-6

¹⁰ Solovyov, 34, 40, 72

concentrates on Russian defense rather than Russian aggression, helps to foster a public more prepared to defend the Russian homeland if invasion occurs, and more reluctant to invade another country. The play therefore expresses historicism in a manner that supports Party goals.

Solovyov also uses populism to bolster the same goals supported by his use of historicism. Solovyov's populism is similar to that pioneered by playwright Alexi Tolstoy in the highly successful Peter I, discussed in detail in Chapter III. Although the enforcement system generally required "a hero of the working class" and villains from the upper classes, there were notable exceptions to the rule.¹¹ Like Peter I, Field Marshal Kutuzov is a nobleman (he is also known as Prince Kutuzov). However, he has the support of the proletariat and rules with their concerns in mind. As mentioned before, Kutuzov obtained his military post through the petitions of soldiers and peasants. Also, Solovyov never mentions Kutuzov's peasants. As a Russian prince of the early nineteenth century, he most certainly owned peasants, yet they are never mentioned.¹² He is represented only as the accepted leader of the military.

In this office, furthermore, he is always consciously indebted to the efforts of his soldiers and the peasantry. In scene seven, Kutuzov states that "the only way to beat the French" is to cut off French supply lines. When the French Ambassador asks Kutuzov to prevent the Russian peasants from stealing French supplies, Kutuzov replies that he "can not control the forces of nature," and, after the ambassador leaves, orders the peasants be armed and supported. This scene is rhetorically rich. First, it implies that only through the peasant's efforts can Russia be defended. Second, it implies that this function of the peasantry is "natural," something the peasants do as part of their inherent nature. Thus, this scene encourages the peasantry to defend

¹¹ See page 53 of this study.

¹² Laws binding peasants to the land were not rescinded in Russia until 1861. The wealth of a nobleman was often measured in the number of peasants he owned until this time. See Borovsky, Victor. 1999. "The Emergence of the Russian Theatre, 1763-1800." In A History of the Russian Theatre, R. Leach and V. Borovsky, eds. 61-2.

their homeland and implies that populist leaders (read Bolsheviks) would support the peasant's efforts. Through its depiction of populism, then, Field Marshal Kutuzov also bolsters Party goals concerning defense without directly encouraging aggression.

Furthermore, Kutuzov exemplifies populism because he places the safety of his soldiers above the defense of politically important sites. In scene five, he leads a retreat, giving the French the city of Moscow because he believes it is indefensible. The war is won anyway and many soldiers' lives are saved. On the subject of giving up Moscow, Kutuzov states in scene five that "if we lose our army, we lose Russia. / If we lose Moscow, Russia's still alive." Thus, Russia is more represented by its vast numbers of proletarian soldiers than by lofty political centers. Kutuzov is a populist, appreciating and caring for peasants and soldiers and for the work they do. He is thus a "hero of the working class" and even a "precursor to Bolshevism," as discussed in Chapter III.

Populism is also used to bolster the Communist's efforts to spread education throughout the USSR. In 1939, the Communists were implementing an aggressive school construction program that was to extend to even the most rural parts of Russia.¹³ In Field Marshal Kutuzov, not only are the peasants responsible for winning the war, they are remarkably intelligent and make frequent references to historical persons and events.¹⁴ Thus, by example, Solovyov's characters encourage Russian peasants to value intelligence and historical knowledge.

Perhaps this is best evidenced in the character of Davydov. Davydov is a Hussar, a Russian national minority often stereotyped as ferocious on the battlefield and in the tavern. Scene three reveals his former promotion to Aide-de-camp under a Russian commander where, we can assume, he learned military strategy and became literate. As a member of a poor national

¹³ Dukes, 263.

¹⁴ Solovyov, 7, 26, 34.

minority, however, he would have had no access to formal education. Yet that does not stop him from writing exceptional poetry as is evidenced in scene eight:

In vain do others always think
That a Hussar, the son of glory,
Should only love to fight and drink
Nor ever hark to love's sweet story.
Not always does my heart desire
To hear men groan and see them fight,
But often melts with softer fire,
And in my helmet, gently bright
The doves weave nests and sweetly choir.

An audience of Hussars applauds this poetry at its conclusion. Showing Davidov rewarded by his peers for his poetry would encourage others in Russia, Russians and minorities alike, to become literate and emulate Davidov's rewarded action of creating art.

Solovyov's populism also supports Communist goals of national unity in similar manner as Armored Train 14-69, as discussed in Chapter III.¹⁵ National unity was necessary, the Communist theorized, to maintaining national defense as well to holding the multi-ethnic USSR together. The above quote promotes a broader vision of the Hussar minority than that promoted by stereotypes. They are here shown as powerful warriors (thus promoting the national defense theme), but also as connoisseurs of beauty, love, and peace (thus also encouraging non-aggression). Not only are the Hussars prohibitively represented, so are but so are Poles, who rail against French tyranny in scene one. Cossacks, known for their skills as horsemen, are positively shown providing information about the French horses, which leads Kutuzov to revise Russia's military strategy. Also shown positively is Nastya, the beautiful peasant girl. Promoting unity and equality between men and women was also a Communist goal, so that Russia's entire population could be mobilized into a military and industrial force.¹⁶ When fighting comes to her village in scene three, Nastya is Russia's most enthusiastic volunteer.

¹⁵ See page 48-50 of this study.

¹⁶ Dukes, 256.

When an old man questions her ability to soldier, she tells him to “bear no children in (her) absence” and marches off to war. Other peasants laugh and cheer her on.

In addition to supporting Party goals through his use of historicism and populism, Solovyov also helps mark a major shift in the official policy on religion. Since ca. 1930 the Communist Party had attempted to institute atheism as the USSR’s state religion (for lack of a better word). The Party suppressed Easter and Christmas, silenced church bells in many areas, and included clergymen in the lethal purges of 1937-8.¹⁷ In drama, censors expunged references to religion.¹⁸ In 1939, however, the Party changed its policy.¹⁹ Religion was no longer solely an “opiate of the masses,” as Marx famously referred to it (although note the qualifier “solely” – Marx was not seen as wrong). Now, the Party hoped that religion might help unify the country for the possible war. Easter and Christmas resumed, church bells chimed, and the clergy were relatively safe.²⁰ In drama, “objectively showing the role of the Church in Russian History” was now allowed.²¹ However, “objectively” was qualified: “Anti-religious propaganda... must be directed not against the Orthodox clergy but against Catholic monks and the Roman Pope.”²² By giving the Orthodox Church this “favored” status, the Soviets would greatly profit. The church raised enough money from its vast membership to purchase a tank squadron for the Red Army.²³

Field Marshal Kutuzov also uses religious references to identify the play’s true heroes: the Russian proletariat. Russian soldiers, peasants, and Kutuzov all positively reference religion. In scene three, a Russian peasant asks that the Lord bless the revered, deceased Marshal Suvorov. Shortly afterwards, the female peasant-soldier Nastya asks her father for a religious

¹⁷ Dukes, 262

¹⁸ Sokolova, 148; Solovyova, 326.

¹⁹ Although movements towards this change can be seen as early as ca. 1934; See Dukes, 262

²⁰ Dukes, 262.

²¹ League of Militant Atheists Declaration of 1939, quoted in Dukes, 262.

²² Ibid

²³ Smeliansky, 25

blessing before going to war. Her father then asks Nastya to remember him on Saint Gregory's Day (the Russian memorial day) if he is killed. In scene two, Kutuzov speaks his first line to the Tsar: "With the last strength the Lord has given me, I hurried at your call, your Majesty." No non-Russian ever speaks of God or religion; only Russian proletarians show religious piety.

Religious references are also used to disparage Tsar Alexandr and the petit bourgeoisie. Kutuzov's line, spoken from his deathbed to the Tsar in scene eleven, even links the judgment of the proletariat to the judgment of God:

In the hour when my soul is destined
To stand before a Throne greater than yours,
Your Majesty, without withholding a word,
I'll say it all. Please, do not stop me now.
There are many words I have, but little enough of life.
Entrusting me with the fate of Russian armies,
Your Majesty entrusted me with the fate of Russia,
And you and I will both be held for answer
Before the fatherland that is yours and mine.

The Tsar's power is shown as subordinate to both God and the people (fatherland). Furthermore, Alexandr himself previously linked the two powers in scene two. Telling Kutuzov of his promotion to Field Marshal, the Tsar says "Vox populi, Vox Dei," (Latin: "the voice of the populace is the voice of God"). However, since the Tsar had previously disparaged the populace, he is thus disparaging God as well. The Tsar thus makes his religious reference deceptively to further his plans to undermine the power of the people; in context, the reference is not reverent but Machiavellian. Furthermore, the reference is made in Latin, the official language of the Catholic Church, which further separates the reference from those made by Russian proletarians, most of whom were likely Orthodox.²⁴

²⁴ Orthodoxy has traditionally been the largest organized religion in Russia. See Treadgold, Donald. 1972. *Twentieth Century Russia*. (Chicago: Rand McNally and Co.) 16.

The Soviet government was systematically eliminating the petit bourgeoisie through “purges” in 1939.²⁵ Language also plays a decisive role in satirizing a religious reference made by the petit bourgeois Landowner and his Wife in scene three. Panicked that the French army is approaching their property, they exclaim:

Landowner: The French are near here!

Wife: Oh, mon Dieu! Oh, mon Dieu!

The wife’s line means “Oh my God! Oh my God!” in French. The Russian upper classes often spoke French in Russia, as many wealthy Europeans did during the nineteenth century. However, the lower classes of Russia and the rest of Europe found this practice of leaning another language to speak in your own country to be quite absurd. The communists utilized this situation to drive the lower classes toward rebellion, pointing out that the language barrier only mystified the people and, further, indicated that those leaders were really weak: kowtowing to the leaders of other countries. Under the nationalist philosophy popular among the European proletariat, this was a grave offence. Thus, the line serves to remind the audience about the reasons they revolted in the first place. The line is also quite ironic in that the wife is despairing being conquered by the French soldiers when she has already succumbed to their culture.

By satirizing the petit bourgeois, Solovyov supports the Soviet policy to exterminate them by separating their identity from the true people, the proletariat. By having the oppressive Tsar reference God in Latin, Solovyov links Catholicism with oppression, furthering the Soviet policy against Catholicism. Finally, by having only the Russian proletariat make pious religious references, Solovyov helps foster the official “objective, not anti-religious” view of Orthodoxy.

So far, we have seen how Solovyov’s play conforms to Socialist Realist prescriptions. However, as mentioned before, the play is not “text-book perfect.” Solovyov’s most obvious

²⁵ Ibid, 268.

and striking deviation from realism is that he has written Field Marshal Kutuzov in verse. Most other plays in the Socialist Realist genre, like those of other realists such as Henrik Ibsen, rely on simple, conversational language to tell their story. Soviet critics throughout the twenties heavily debated Shakespeare, whose poetic verse some critics charged was too intellectual or avant-garde for proletarian audiences. However, by 1932 the debate had been largely resolved, with the official approval for performance of “Soviet cuts” of Shakespeare’s plays, censored for ideological content but retaining verse form.²⁶ While verse form is not typical then, it was not expressly forbidden. In fact, Solovyov likely felt secure using the form for Field Marshal Kutuzov as his previous verse dramas, Personal Life (1934) and The Human Smile (1937), had received wide and successful productions throughout the USSR.²⁷

Another possible deviation is the play’s prominent use of music, which the Committee on Arts had officially considered “a symptom of formalism” since 1937.²⁸ Field Marshal Kutuzov opens with a song and features a second song in scene nine. The songs may have been removed by the Licensing Committee before production, but allowed to remain by Glavit, the main publishing censor, for publication, but I can find no evidence for this. More likely, the songs, as folk songs sung by soldiers, were allowed to remain as expressions of proletarian culture.

Besides these two unique features of Field Marshal Kutuzov, the play generally retains those features common to other Soviet plays and plays by other realists. As published, it features a well-defined, linear story as the Marshal tries to expel Napoleon from Russia.

As mentioned previously, there are few sources of dramatic criticism for Field Marshal Kutuzov. Historian H. W. L. Dana wrote the introduction for the anthology in which J. J.

²⁶ There is evidence that Solovyov had Shakespeare’s Hamlet in mind when he wrote Field Marshal Kutuzov. His lead character, Kutuzov, is decisively indecisive, recalling Hamlet. Furthermore, in a monologue, Kutuzov ponders whether “to surrender or not to surrender Moscow.”

²⁷ Dana, H. W. L. 1946. “Solovyov.” In Seven Soviet Plays, (New York: The MacMillan Co). 2

²⁸ Jelagin, 105

Robbins' translation was published. He writes that the play presents "a splendid panorama of the Napoleonic invasion of 1812 and a noble portrait of the patient, long suffering Russian commander."²⁹ From this we can discern that Dana approves of the play's portrayal of its subject matter and characters (splendid, noble). Dana also emphasizes the play's efforts to prepare the populace for a possible invasion: "all these voices from the past thundered across the centuries to inspire a new generation to the defense of Russia."³⁰ From this, we may assume that the story and diction of the play is compelling if it has the ability to "thunder across centuries." Historian Nikolay Gorchakov gives a rather contradictory critique of the play. Although he claims the play is "outstanding" he defines the word only as "not bad." Furthermore, the evidence Gorchakov provides does not support his claim. He states that it showcases "Russian chauvinism and jingoism," that it proves "Soviet playwrights were interested in current politics rather than history," and finally, that its characters are unbelievable and flat.³¹

I would agree more with Dana. The play has a few weaknesses, such as the perhaps overplayed scene four, when Russian soldiers allow themselves to be run through simply because their injured officer insisted he be left on the battlefield. But despite this, Solovyov's Field Marshal Kutuzov, as translated by J. J. Robbins, is remarkably entertaining. Kutuzov's lament at the end of scene five is striking in its poetry and serves to substantially develop the character of Kutuzov:

Will the army ever forgive me? Or, at this time,
 Having lost the last vestiges of support,
 Shall I remain alone to the bitter end of things?
 The fatherland called me. And without a fear
 Did I accept the power and the high command,
 Lifting, a shield before the face of the idle monarch,
 The trust and faith of all the Russian people.
 How will I face the army, meeting in its ranks

²⁹ Dana, "Introduction," v

³⁰ Ibid, vi.

³¹ Gorchakov, 367-9

A silence and a sadness?

Most readers, I am sure, can empathize with Kutuzov's desire to perform his job well and to retain the respect of his peers. The parallel structure of this excerpt, beginning and ending with same question to show the despair of the situation, effectively illustrates how likely the fulfillment of that desire might be denied to Kutuzov. By showing that our common desire may not be fulfilled, we are invited, through empathy, to make an emotional investment in his character.

Solovyov's characters are often charismatic and clever. Davidov, for example, has the feel of a Robin Hood. He leads a small band of men (and women) in woodland raids. He steals from the French and distributes the goods among Russian soldiers and peasants. Furthermore, he consistently defies the odds, winning battles against far larger regiments. However, because we always hear him deliver his military strategy in orders, his actions do not seem so incredible. In scene eight, he captures a convoy of French winter uniforms by commanding a small group of men to attack the military detachment accompanying the convoy head on. When the French fight back, the group retreats, luring the detachment into the woods and there, presumably, use their knowledge of the countryside to cause the French to become lost. Meanwhile, Davidov attacks the undefended convoy from behind with a larger force, capturing it with ease.

Kutuzov is another example of a charismatic character. He constantly defies authority and wins. In scene seven, after retreating from Moscow, Kutuzov senses that the Tsar will likely replace him. To prevent this, Kutuzov sends his slowest horseman to deliver the news to the Tsar in St. Petersburg. To prevent retribution from his generals, he takes advantage of their misconceptions of him as an old man who will be too weak to fight the French. He tells his aide to tell any visitors "the Field Marshal is asleep." Kutuzov uses the extra time this gives him to reposition and regroup his troops and later leads a successful general advance. There is a

delightful irony as Kutuzov uses others' underestimations of his ability to emerge ultimately victorious.

Even Napoleon, the play's antagonist, is well developed and not wholly unlikable, even by Soviet standards. In scene six, he laments that he must sue for peace from the Russians, from whom he has just conquered Moscow. He gives many reasons for this: first, there has been an attempted military coup against him in Paris; second, the Russians are not allowing the war to progress as quickly as he had planned, leading to attrition in his forces; third, and most respectably, Napoleon also concedes that he needs peace for the sake of his soldiers. He states:

My men are tired.
They have suffered greatly through the whole campaign.
Peace, get me peace, no matter what you pay.
Yield everything, but only save our honor.

Again, a human desire to maintain respect (honor) is seen. Napoleon's ruthlessness and willingness to sacrifice those he loves keeps him from being a character deserving of full empathy. This serves to identify his character as the play's antagonist and thus serves to clarify the story line; it is not particularly a weakness within the play.

Field Marshal Kutuzov by Vladimir Solovyov has been shown to closely adhere to all the requirements of Socialist Realism, making it more than deserving of Soviet praise. However, the play, as currently available to contemporary American audiences in Robins' translation, defies the stereotype of Socialist Realist plays by its striking poetic language and well-developed, often charismatic characters. While not an unquestionable masterpiece, it is an achievement of Socialist Realist drama.

This chapter has examined a text and an author largely overlooked by other historians and critics. The next, however, will examine an author often berated by western historians for his close adherence to Communist ideology: Mikhail Shatrov and his play The Bolsheviks.

Chapter V: **Shatrov's The Bolsheviks**

The Bolsheviks¹ was written in 1966 and premiered at the Sovremennik Theatre in Moscow in that same year. The Sovremennik had been founded just a decade before at the beginning of the Khrushchev “thaw.”² A studio of the prestigious Moscow Art Theatre, it was known for unwavering adherence to the ideals of Stanislavsky, for productions of high value, and for occasionally producing a show that would likely have been banned anywhere else. However, this “liberal” theatre generally remained true to Socialist Realism.³ As part of the official celebrations marking the October Revolution, The Bolsheviks’ premier was staged as part of a trilogy (with The Decembrists and The People’s Will Party) showing the Russian revolutions from 1905 to 1920 in an historical progression celebrating the ideals of revolution.⁴ The theatre was still known for liberalism in 1966, but by this year Khrushchev was ousted by the conservative supporters of Brezhnev and the chill of a new freeze was setting in. By 1970, the Sovremennik was disbanded and the theatre that housed it was torn down.

The Bolsheviks thus comes from a time of transition, between a thaw and a freeze.⁵ The new, more conservative government would destroy the “liberal” theatre, but would long lavish praise on the play. The Bolsheviks was featured in Nine Modern Soviet Plays, a collection published in 1977 for distribution abroad to show the strength and diversity of Soviet drama.⁶ In the introduction to this collection, Victor Komissarzhevsky, a Soviet authority on drama, spends

¹ The Bolsheviks is also sometimes referred to as 30th of August, its working title. However, it premiered under the name The Bolsheviks and has usually been published under that name since. I will therefore refer to it by that name.

² Stalin died in 1953. See chart in on page 27 for a time line.

³ Beumers, Bridget. 1999. “The Theatre and Socialist Realism, 1923-1953.” In A History of Russian Theatre, R. Leach and V. Borovsky, eds. 362-3; Smeliansky, 16-7.

⁴ Smeliansky, 25-7.

⁵ Thaws, by American standards, were still quite oppressive. See Beumers, et al.

⁶ Komissarzhevsky, 23. the book is published by the then state publishing house, Progress Publishers of Moscow.

several pages extolling the play for its historical accuracy and its sympathetically depicted, well-rounded characters.⁷ To show how this play thrived during this time of transition, its rhetoric will be analyzed in terms of Socialist Realism. Like Field Marshal Kutuzov, we shall see that The Bolsheviks presents historicism and populism in a manner rhetorically supportive of Party policies, yet deviates slightly from the official form of realism. Reasons why the enforcement system may have chosen to overlook these deviations will also be discussed. Then, to encourage reconsideration of these plays as historic documents and dramatic texts, this chapter will conclude by discussing the dramatic criticism currently available for The Bolsheviks, and will supplement this with original criticism. In this way, analyzing Shatrov's play can allow a still more complete understanding of Socialist Realism as an art form and encourage an understanding of that form that moves beyond simplifications and stereotypes.

The Bolsheviks will be considered in its 1989 translation by Michael Glenny. I have chosen Glenny's translation over a 1974 translation by Robert Darglish.⁸ Glenny tends to extrapolate Russian colloquialisms into lengthier English phrases than Darglish, but he also, I believe, achieves greater clarity and readability. All quotes come from Glenny's translation.

Shatrov is part playwright, part historian. He writes documentary dramas: plays based in history that include extensive quotes from primary source documents. Thus, in The Bolsheviks, when Commissar Kursky, the People's Commissar for Justice, delivers interrogation reports, he reads them in the same words and format as they appear in historical archives. A great many of the telegrams and messages read and stories told by characters about antecedent events, etc., also

⁷ The Komissarzhevsky family has supplied authorities on drama since western drama came to Russia in the mid-seventeenth century. They are the subject of a new book: Borovsky, Victor. 2001. Triptych from the Russian Theatre: An Artistic Biography of the Komissarzhevsky Family (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.)

⁸ See Shatrov, Mikhail. 1966. The Bolsheviks. R. Darglish, trans. In Nine Modern Soviet Plays. V. Komissarzhevsky, ed. (Moscow: Progress Publishers). 29-104; 1966. The Bolsheviks. M. Glenny, trans. In The Bolsheviks: Three Plays. London: Nick Hern Books. 81-158.

have historical counterparts or backing.⁹ Shatrov's historicism gives his play an air of scholarly research, making it appear objective and authoritative. However, having established this, the play's subject matter is then presented with a pronounced Soviet-Marxist slant. Shatrov's rhetorical message is made all the more powerful because he does not appear to be delivering a rhetorical message at all, but rather a history lesson.

The Bolsheviks depicts the August 30th 1918 meeting of the Council of People's Commissars (a.k.a. Sovnarkom). At this meeting, which occurred on the same day Lenin was shot by would-be political assassin Fanya Kaplan, the members of the Sovnarkom debated and voted unanimously in favor of instituting the now infamous "Red terror," which allowed Stalin to later legally conduct his lethal purges. Within this debate, Shatrov seems to present both sides of the issue, which again makes his play seem objective. Indeed, many productions have presented the debate as objective.¹⁰ However, under rhetorical analysis, this debate can be seen as presented with a pronounced ideological slant.

First, Shatrov favorably depicts the early communist leaders as ultimately concerned for the well being of the people and as part of "the people." Before the leaders appear on stage, two secretaries gossip while preparing the room for the meeting, giving a character sketch of each. We find out about each leader's personal habits (smoking, reading, etc.), about what s/he did during the 1918 civil war, about his/her interrelations with the other commissars, and about how the meetings generally progress as all these leaders interact.¹¹ By humanizing the historical figures with several intimate facts, Shatrov makes them more personable and thus more likeable. Furthermore, the dynamics between the secretaries reinforces this. One secretary is a

⁹ Shatrov, "Author's Note," 82; Glenny, Michael. 1990. "Introduction." In The Bolsheviks: Three Plays, (London: Nick Hern Books). xi-xii; Smeliansky, 27.

¹⁰ Smeliansky, 27-8; Glenny, "Introduction." xiii.

¹¹ Shatrov, 85-88.

hypertensive trainee. The experienced secretary assuages her fears by speaking plainly and lovingly about the commissars as if they were her favorite uncles. This familiar reverence for the commissars helps us to accept their decision by first accepting them.

Not only do these representatives of the people show respect and concern for their leaders, their leaders reciprocate this concern and respect. In 1918, because of World War I and the current civil war, there was a major famine throughout Russia. In one of the first telegrams read, Lenin orders a communist party member be arrested because that member “wouldn’t help 120 starving workers.”¹² Furthermore, the first issue the meeting addresses concerns Moscow’s bread supplies. Tsurupa, the Commissar for Food, is berated for not supplying the city with enough free bread to feed the workers. Later, lest we think Tsurupa is as heartless as the arrested party member, we learn that Tsurupa himself has recently fainted from hunger. Apparently, Tsurupa is already giving out so much food that he himself does not have enough.¹³ This story, incidentally, is substantiated, as are the telegram and intimate details formerly presented. Thus, historical facts are used to present early Soviet leaders in a positive light. Furthermore, the blame for the shortages is placed largely on “bourgeois” black-marketers attempting to profit from shortages and not on any communists.¹⁴

The major debate between these characters is the Red terror is argued in terms of class conflict and historical progression. Kollontai (Commissar for State Benefits) gives the working definition of “terror” for the debate: “an atmosphere of fear, which threatens people with being found guilty even if their connection with some individual or event is so remote as to be effectively non-existent.”¹⁵ She states that the purpose of terror, then, is to intimidate all social

¹² Ibid, 93

¹³ Incidentally, this story is substantiated, at least by Soviet historians. See Komissarzhevsky, 13.

¹⁴ Shatrov, 93.

¹⁵ Ibid, 142

strata so as nullify the bourgeoisie's power, derived from a historically dominant economic place in society. Without the terror, the bourgeoisie would be able to consolidate a "formidable social base." The terror is thus necessary to move history beyond its present conditions of bourgeois dominance. Pokrovsky (Deputy Commissar for Enlightenment), furthermore, states that attempting to win a revolution without using a period of terror is like trying to cross the sea on foot. He continues to insist that previous socialist revolutions (most notably the Jacobean in France) had utilized terror, and so would the Bolshevik revolution.¹⁶ Furthermore, by instituting the terror, Kollontai states that communist rule can be established with "a minimum of bloodshed."¹⁷ Not only is the use of terror historically inevitable, it is the most humane (bloodless) method of establishing a communist state.

Most poignantly, while the Commissars debate the morality of and possible "excesses of a reign of terror,"¹⁸ no one ever questions its historical inevitability. Even when Lunacharsky (Commissar for Enlightenment) laments: "we wanted to avoid the use of terror," the statement assumes the use of terror as part of an established path; to "avoid" it is to deviate from that path. Marxist history, the approved history of the USSR, assumes just such an established path of history: a linear, evolutionary progression resulting in a final and most complete state of communism. Lunacharsky's comment, by also assuming this path, supports the Marxian view, rendering all questions of morality essentially meaningless since the linearity of the theory assumes inevitability. Furthermore, no character ever postulates an alternative to a reign of terror. The absence of an alternative again implies inevitability because it leaves only one choice.

¹⁶ Ibid, 136

¹⁷ Ibid, 142

¹⁸ Ibid, 137

Shatrov develops the absent character of Lenin as a populist leader and uses this image of Lenin to further justify the Red terror. Lenin never actually appears onstage but is discussed frequently; he lies in his adjoining chamber, seriously wounded and only occasionally conscious. As part of the character sketches previously mentioned, the secretaries also discuss Lenin. He is shown to be patient and understanding, taking blame upon himself for his secretary's mistake and going out of his way to fix it.¹⁹ Lenin respects the proletariat and is respected by them.

Lenin's character is also developed by the constant stream of telegrams two nameless females dictate to a telegraph operator during the course of the play. The source of these telegrams is never defined. They certainly could not be emanating from Lenin, as he is only fleetingly conscious. If Lenin is presumed to have produced all the orders that morning before the shooting, his is an extraordinary capacity for work. While representing Lenin as a super-proletarian would correspond with several precedents for Bolshevik heroes, as shown in Chapter III, the telegrams represent such a strain on credulity that they threaten the effectiveness of the play's realism. The purpose, however, is populist in intent; by placing Lenin's orders in the mouths of nameless members of the proletariat, Lenin is shown to rule with their consent. Furthermore, because the proletariat possesses ultimate authority, the Soviet government, operating on the proletariat's authority, continues to function even in Lenin's absence. When the girl reading the orders hears that Lenin has been shot, she is momentarily overcome by emotion and states that she "can't go on."²⁰ At the insistence of the telegraph operator, however, she does "go on" and thus orders an investigation into why a young, ill, and apparently innocent boy was

¹⁹ This anecdote, incidentally, is also substantiated. See Komissarzhevsky, 13.

²⁰ Shatrov, 101

previously arrested.²¹ By continuing to work, the girl continues to exercise political power and thus expedites justice.

In The Bolsheviks, all members of the proletariat react with anguish and/or outrage to the assassination attempt on their respected and representative leader. Gill, Lenin's driver, states that after the shooting, he covered Lenin's body with his own and drew his gun to protect Lenin from further harm. He also states that a sailor and a woman attempted to rush to Lenin's aid despite the drawn gun and orders to halt.²² Batulin, the soldier who arrested Fanya Kaplan, asks the Sovnarkom at the end of his statement to tell Lenin "the people are furious... we all hope... he'll be back with us again."²³ The people are indeed shown to be furious at the conclusion of Part One of The Bolsheviks. Zagorsky (Secretary of the Moscow Party Committee) rushes in to report that people are flooding into "crowded open-air meetings" to demand that action be taken concerning the crime against Lenin. One of these many meetings can be heard through the windows of the boardroom, in the street outside, with two anonymous speakers heard over the din. The First Speaker, a woman, cries: "let the blood of the bourgeoisie and its hirelings flow in torrents! Long live the Red terror!"²⁴ The Second Speaker, a man, declares of the group: "in reply to the gunman's treacherous actions we demand that the Soviet government declare the start of a red terror. We demand the blood of the bourgeoisie!" The text gives no mention of any attendee opposing these speakers. By showing diverse anonymous representatives expressing the same sentiment, Shatrov gives the impression of unanimity among the people. This image the Red terror as populist and just is furthered in Part Two as Sverdlov (Deputy Chairman of the Sovnarkom and Lenin's second-in-command), first officially proposes a red

²¹ Ibid, 102

²² Ibid, 115-6

²³ Ibid, 132

²⁴ Ibid, 123

terror because he has received “a flood of telegrams from around the country demanding permission to carry out mass arrests and executions.”²⁵ If the people hold ultimate political authority and if the people are unanimously demanding a Red terror, the only just thing to do is to institute a Red terror. Again, although the Commissars debate the morality of the terror, the debate is moot because the decision is ultimately not theirs to make, but resides with the people. The Red terror is thus a populist and just act.

Shatrov also implies that Lenin would have been in favor of the terror. As the debate starts a telegram containing the following command is read: “Your instructions are to act more energetically and decisively against the White Army and the Kulaks.”²⁶ Voting in approval of a red terror, would, of course, allow the execution of this order to be expedited. As the debate proceeds, other telegrams demanding action help add a sense of urgency to the debate, as if Lenin were goading the communist leaders to enact that which history and the unanimous proletariat have predetermined. Furthermore, after the terror is unanimously approved by the Commissars, Lenin’s vote approving the use of intimidation is symbolically cast in the form of a telegram in which he warns a large group of bureaucrats that he can have them “arrested and shot” for disobeying him.²⁷ By showing that Lenin would utilize terror, Shatrov implies that Lenin approves of its use. Again, the terror is just by populist standards.

The positive image Shatrov provides for a “policy of intimidation” supported transitioning Soviet policies. While Nikita Khrushchev would denounce the Red terror in 1956 and lead an era of Soviet liberalism, Leonid Brezhnev, a political conservative and sympathizer with Stalinist policies, came to power in 1964. By 1966, the Red terror was again coming into widespread use as a political tool. Shatrov’s arguments are well suited to this shift. He presents

²⁵ Ibid, 134

²⁶ 136

his arguments as objective and balanced, appealing to the current, more liberal mindset. However, the slant imposed on his arguments really assumes that there is one inevitable answer: that terror is ultimately just and necessary. Shatrov thus uses an appeal to liberalism to foster a more conservative mindset supportive of current Party goals.

Shatrov also addresses two other subjects of shifting Party policy: religion and art. Ca. 1963, the Soviet Government resumed its efforts to establish atheism as the state “religion” of the USSR. To accomplish this, the government organized the first All-Union Conference on Socialist Ceremonies, which first met in 1964. The Conference was to find ways of eliminating all mention of God from society. Under the Conference’s direction, monasteries and churches were forcibly closed and replaced by secular institutions offering similar services. The Communist baptism ceremony closely resembled its traditional counterpart except that Lenin and the Communist Party were the authoritarian forces it named. “Palaces of Marriage” were established to provide elaborate yet secular marriage ceremonies.²⁸ Shatrov supports this by not making a single reference to religion or God. This stands in contrast to earlier plays, such as Field Marshal Kutuzov, for instance, which had presented religion as an integral and even positive aspect in the lives of proletarian Russians.²⁹

The Bolsheviks directly addresses art. Ca. 1964 several controversial writers and artists were arrested as “parasites” to the state and several plays, some of which had been in production for some time, were suddenly banned. After 1966, anyone resisting the new terror or known to have liberal views was disenfranchised (stripped of political rights, which included the right to

²⁷ 153

²⁸ Dukes, 297-298.

²⁹ Which, by the way, it generally is and always has been. See Ivanits, Linda J. 1992. *Russian Folk Belief*. (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, Inc). et all.

employment) or arrested.³⁰ In Part One, the commissars discuss art, ultimately making a laughing stock out of all non-realist, non-representational art. For example, Zagorsky (Secretary of the Moscow Party Committee) jokingly mistakes a pile of firewood for a statue of Emelyan Pugachev (leader of a peasant revolt in 1773) sculpted under cubist principles. In the same scene, he also addresses futurism:

the People's Commissar and his deputy are afraid the sculptor may not produce a good likeness the second time. It was pure luck the first time... No you shouldn't laugh, comrades... Futurism is an important artistic phenomenon, and we should study it. As for the fact that they make Karl Marx in his old age look like Friedrich Engels as a young man...³¹

This quote is rhetorically rich. First, it defines “good art” as that which presents a “good likeness;” all other art is laughable. Second, if “a good likeness” is not achieved, the art and the artist that created it are to be ridiculed; it implies that the commissars are, indeed, laughing at the concept of non-representational art. Third, while Futurism is given passing credit, that credit only serves to present Futurism as a joke. It may be “art” but it cannot understand or accurately represent communism, a philosophy epitomized by Marx and Engels. If futurist cannot keep Marx separate from Engels, they cannot be expected to understand communism. Fourth, therefore, Futurists and all other non-representational artists are depicted as “others” within a communist society, people alien to and possibly even antithetical to the members of an integrated communist society. Tsurupa (Commissar for Food) furthers this concept by adding that Lenin doesn't “understand... modern art” and, in addition, that if communists mounted a piece of futurist art they would “simply have to take it down again.”³² Again, the representative leader of the people does not appreciate modern art, implying it is non-populist and what is non-populist cannot have a permanent place within a populist society. Lastly, by presenting this group of

³⁰ Beumers, 370-1.

³¹ Shatrov, 99

³² Ibid, 99-100

artists and their art in exclusionary, ultimately derogatory terms (the commissars are laughing at the artists' expense), Shatrov encourages their ostracism from Soviet society. This supports and justifies the enforcement system's removal of plays considered to be "formalist" or otherwise antithetical to the "needs of the proletariat."

Shatrov's message on art is strengthened by the fact that, again, he presents it as a debate between historical characters, giving it an air of objectivity. Although two characters dissent from the above view, Lunacharsky and Pokrovsky (the intellectual Commissar for Education and his deputy), Pokrovsky's main contribution to the debate is to tell Lunacharsky that "the only thing we can do is to play along,"³³ indicating complicity with the majority opinion. Furthermore, Lunacharsky is a joke; he is only once allowed to finish a sentence disparaging censorship. This sentence marks play's the turning point: Car tires are immediately heard screeching outside and news that Lenin has been shot arrives and thus, populist communism in the USSR becomes seriously threatened. Dissent is, indeed, dangerous.

The Bolsheviks itself generally exemplifies realism, though with some questionable aspects. The play tells a well-defined story, that of the implementation of the Red terror. If characters with larger vocabularies refer to important concepts, characters with smaller vocabularies will also describe those concepts. Furthermore, the play employs the Aristotelian unities, thus minimizing strains on credulity. All action takes place in the same room, or in a visible adjoining corridor, and both scenes are described in detail at the text's commencement. From the characters' lines, we learn that the play begins at 7:30 pm and ends 3:00 am, meaning that time has been compressed by only a few hours. The "skipped" hours all elapse in the space between Part One and Part Two. All action deals specifically with the founding of the red terror.

³³ Ibid, 98.

The play thus creates the illusion that the audience could well be in the room with the communist leaders, experiencing the events as they unfold.

The one major departure from realism in The Bolsheviks is the near-Brechtian use of the telegrams. However, because they could be explained as a morning's work for Lenin, or perhaps because they are so pivotal in showing Lenin's approval for a government policy instituted while he was unconscious, they were apparently overlooked by Soviet censorship. While other productions were being closed wholesale, and while the theatre which had premiered The Bolsheviks was eventually closed, The Bolsheviks had the personal endorsement of the Minister of Culture, who was effectively the enforcement system's highest authority at the time.³⁴

Several critics have previously considered The Bolsheviks. Michael Glenny, the play's translator, also wrote a short introduction for the play, in which he gives it positive criticism.

History does not provide playwrights with many scenarios for tragedy of such epic proportions... It is a sign of Shatrov's dramatic skill that he elects to bring out the full, shocking implications of this near-catastrophe by focusing, in penetrating detail, on the effect that it has on Lenin's closest colleagues and family.³⁵

Victor Komissarzhevsky's opinion has already been mentioned. He praises the play for its historical accuracy and well-rounded characters, calling Shatrov one of the Soviet Union's "most consistent playwrights."³⁶ Anatoly Smeliansky would seem to agree with the latter comment, calling the play "100 percent Soviet,"³⁷ but he disagrees with the former, insisting that the play's "Sovietness" entails that the play's characters all wear "ideological blinders," implying that their presentation is forced.³⁸

³⁴ Smeliansky,

³⁵ Glenny, xi

³⁶ Komissarzhevsky, 12-4

³⁷ Smeliansky, 28. Smeliansky also states, however, that Shatrov's plays were "banned and mangled" by the Soviet censor. See Smeliansky, 25.

³⁸ Smeliansky, 25-7

I found Shatrov's play to possess well-developed, individuated characters and an extremely interesting narrative. Shatrov is successful in humanizing the revolutionary leaders. Each character speaks with an individuated, historically appropriate voice. Lunacharsky, for instance, The Commissar for Education, was an intellectual known for his encyclopedic knowledge and eloquent expression. He expresses early concern about the revolution's fate:

It's one of the tragic contradictions of all revolutions, not only ours... Don't you see that all the vermin we chased out the door yesterday are going to crawl back in through the window today, either with Party membership cards in their pockets, or at the very least with red rosettes in their buttonholes?³⁹

Lunacharsky often refers back to a "wider picture" or more theoretical backing. Here he explains that a peculiarity of the Russian Revolution is actually common to all revolutions. He typically speaks in longer sentences colored with metaphor, here speaking of bourgeois bureaucrats as vermin who crawl through windows disguised as well-meaning members of the household (communists). In contrast to Lunacharsky, Yenukidze was the political head of Russia's military and was known for efficiency and precision. Here he speaks of the same problem of bourgeois bureaucrats:

Who are we going to get to do essential, routine office work? Party members? Workers? Where will we find them? And who will let me have them if I do find them? We can't take all the best men out of the front line. The jobs can't be done by illiterates. So inevitably petty-bourgeois riff-raff get them.⁴⁰

Yenukidze speaks in short, direct sentences that typically use a simple subject-predicate-direct object structure. Sometimes he forgoes structure altogether and speaks in a clipped manner (Workers?). He speaks in an informal, colloquial vocabulary, (riff-raff). Finally, he seldom uses metaphor and his adjectives are essential to the meaning of his sentence (essential, best, front).

Shatrov's depictions of these idiomatic leaders thus provide the play with a rich cast of characters. Furthermore, the richness of the cast translates to a richness of diction created by

³⁹ Shatrov, 90-1.

⁴⁰ Shatrov, 92.

each character's use of language. Shatrov creates still more textual variation by alternating between a more formal, logical diction and a looser, more impassioned speech. Not only does this make the play more interesting to read, but also helps provide the play with clipped pace that keeps the reader reading. For example, Kursky (People's Commissar of Justice) reads an official interrogation report on stage:

First statement: 'I am Fanya Yefimovna Kaplan. I have used that name since 1906, and under that name I was imprisoned by the Tsarist authorities in Akatui for illegal political activity. I shot at Lenin today... Interrogator: Kursky, People's Commissar of Justice.'⁴¹

Kursky reads the headings and signature of the document, giving it a very formal, authoritative rhetoric. Information about the assassination attempt arrives frequently and is often delivered in this type of official, simple format. This in itself helps give The Bolsheviks a tense pace similar to that created by the sporadic news coverage often delivered after a particularly tragic event. This same tension is also carried through the more informal, impassioned dialogue. Just after the above interrogation report is read, Sverdlov (the Chairman of the Sovnarkom) explodes at the other commissars who worry what Lenin's death might mean for the fate of the revolution:

Pull yourself together. You must not talk like that! He (Lenin) said to me just now: "There's to be no moaning and sniveling! Our cause is right and just, but if you weaken or start splitting up it will mean disaster!" Pull yourselves together. The fate of the revolution cannot... *must* not depend on a single individual.'⁴²

This emotionally charged dialogue compliments the officious language of the reports. While the reports tell what happened, the dialogue tells how we should react to what happened; while the reports are informative, the dialogue is argumentative. Notice the inflammatory language Sverdlov uses to prove his point: "sniveling, right and just, disaster" as compared to the relatively adjective-less and neutral report.

⁴¹ Ibid, 116-7

⁴² Ibid, 118

By rapidly alternating between idioms and speaking styles, Shatrov provides richness to his diction, a tense pace to his plot, and individuated characters. The audience's attention is further held by the fact that Shatrov peppers his play with interesting historical details such as that "a man named Beacker was expelled from the First International, on the grounds that he was 'a hopeless idiot.'"⁴³ His rhetoric is delivered with a pronounced slant but is ultimately effective. While the play's conclusion is inevitable as presented and as history dictates, the conclusion is still awaited with anticipation. It is not unlike The Bachae or Oedipus in this quality. As another comparison, reading The Bolsheviks is a bit like watching a slow motion Mack truck jackknife on a crowded interstate: it is a terrible occurrence, but one which holds such an emotional charge that it must be watched to its conclusion.

The Bolsheviks, then, is yet another example of a play that adheres to the tenants of Socialist Realism, which was popular with the Soviet authorities, and which is an example of an engaging and fascinating drama. The following chapter will consider one final play from the last years of Socialist Realist's enforced status. This last play and its author have not received any mention by historians or critics save for within the anthology that published it. The play is The Birds of Our Youth written by Ion Drutse in 1973.

⁴³ Ibid, 93

Chapter VI: **Ion Drutse's The Birds of Our Youth**

The Birds of Our Youth was written by Ion Drutse in 1973 and produced by the Maly Theatre in Moscow in 1974. Anatoly Smeliansky, who was working at the Moscow Art Theatre in 1974, refers to the Maly as a “court theatre” because of its zealous adherence to Soviet policies.¹ The government certainly judged The Birds of Our Youth an acceptable play; like The Bolsheviks, it is featured in Nine Modern Soviet Plays, published by the Soviet government in 1977 to showcase Soviet drama abroad.² Also like The Bolsheviks, Drutse's play received a glowing review by noted Soviet authority Victor Komissarzhevsky, who praises the play for its “dramatic poetry” as well as a “characteristic historical optimism, faith in the progress and spiritual possibilities of mankind.”³ By 1977, this successful play was playing in two Moscow theatres (including the Maly) as well as in several other theatres across the USSR.⁴

In 1974, Brezhnev was at the height of his political power and Soviet artists were enduring the most stringent enforcement procedures since the Stalin era.⁵ The system had recently adopted “enforced emigration” as a method of controlling artists. While expelling artists from the country was certainly more humane than the Stalin's system of concentration camps, the punishment still meant that the artist would likely never see his/her family or other loved ones again. Other common methods of punishment also, as always, included arrest, imprisonment, disenfranchisement, and execution. There was considerable incentive for artists

¹ Smeliansky, 10

² Komissarzhevsky, 23. The book is published by the then state publishing house, Progress Publishers of Moscow.

³ Ibid, 7.

⁴ Komissarzhevsky, 15-7. Komissarzhevsky, writing in 1977, speaks of two Moscow productions in the present tense. He does not state in which other theatre also hosted the play and I have found no other information on this second production. Komissarzhevsky also implies that other theatres had the play in production by his assertion that the play was “widely popular.”

⁵ See Dukes, 310-1

to comply with Soviet standards. However, although Brezhnev and the enforcement system were enjoying considerable power at this time, 1974 also represented a time of substantial change within the Soviet state. Many problems were forming, problems that would eventually contribute to the USSR's dissolution. First, a generation gap formed within the Communist Party, with younger members seriously questioning the conservative views of older members. Furthermore, the introduction of smaller, cheaper, easier-to-smuggle mimeographs and tape decks challenged the government's monopoly on media.⁶ Thus, dissent was growing and harder to control. This dissent did not seriously question the existence of the Communist government, but rather questioned what type of Communist government should exist.

To understand Drutse's play within its unique historical context, this chapter will analyze the play's rhetoric in terms of Socialist Realism. As shall be shown, while the play supports certain Party goals through slanted historicism and populism, it also subtly criticizes other Soviet policies. Also, although the play premiered at the Maly, a "court theatre," it makes the most significant deviations from realism than any play considered so far. After postulating some further explanation of how both types of "deviations" passed the Soviet censor, this chapter will conclude by discussing what dramatic criticism is currently available on The Birds of Our Youth, and supplement this with original criticism. In this way, analyzing Drutse's play can allow a still more complete understanding of Socialist Realism as an art form and further encourage an understanding that moves beyond simplifications and stereotypes.

The Birds of Our Youth has only one available translation, copyrighted by Alex Miller in 1977.⁷ While I believe Miller's translations to be more stilted than some, I do not believe this

⁶ Beumers, 374-5; Dukes, 324. Some historians, interestingly, argue that Beatles and Rolling Stones lyrics had more to do with the fall of the Iron Curtain than U.S. foreign policies.

⁷ Drutse, Ion. 1973. The Birds of Our Youth. Alex Miller, trans. In Nine Modern Soviet Plays. Moscow: Progress Publishers.) 167-228.

seriously hinders the play's worth as a historical document to western scholars. Leaving further discussion of critical aspects for later, we now move to a discussion of Drutse's historicism.

In 1974, many scholars were beginning to change the way they thought about history. Historians had previously focused on "great men with great causes," and were thus concerned largely with kings, generals, wars, nation building, etc. Thus, that all plays considered in previous chapters were also concerned with these things should not be surprising. During the late sixties and early seventies, however, the fields of archeology, anthropology, sociology, and history began to merge to form a new type of history: social history, a history concerned with the common people and how their quality of life changes over time. For the Soviets, of course, history had long been a populist affair and the concepts advanced by social history more or less easily merged into already accepted presentations of history.

Employing these historical concepts, Drutse concentrates not on an important historical event but, rather, on showing the historicity of contemporary events. The Birds of Our Youth concerns itself with how the culture and landscape of a small village have changed during Soviet rule. This change is considered within a dichotomy created by the play's two main characters. This narrative convention is appropriate for a Soviet play because Marx argued that dialectical forces drove history. On one side is Pavel Rusu, a dying kolkhoz chairman. A kolkhoz is a collective farm, one of the smallest units of the Soviet political economy. Pavel has been chairman since the end of WWII and has thus overseen the development of vast amounts of new farmland, orchards, livestock pens, and the reconstruction of the entire village from a loose grouping of medieval-style hovels to a well-organized village of modern homes, complete with modern heating systems and television aerials. On the opposing side is Pavel's aunt, Aunt Rutsa. An ancient woman, she is the widely respected village authority on *dvoeverie*. *Dvoeverie* means:

“double faith;” it combines a strong belief in God and prayer with ancient pagan superstitions and mythology and thus is Rutsa a sort of witch-priest for her village.⁸ *Dvoeverie* was, of course, officially discouraged by the Soviets and, furthermore, Rutsa laments the changes to her village because she claims the changes have destroyed the village’s former beauty. In this historical dichotomy, then, Pavel represents the progressive Soviet influence for modernizing Russia while Rutsa represents a conservative influence for maintaining Russia’s traditional ways.

While Drutse presents both sides of the dichotomy, the dichotomy itself is devoutly communist. Pavel refers with pride to the village improvements he dutifully helped construct:

When grain was needed, I took a course at the agricultural school for kolkhoz chairmen; we smothered the land with grain and had more than enough to eat, and we put some by for a rainy day as well. When it was necessary to plant orchards, I became a fruit-grower and now we have the best apples in the north of the republic. When it was necessary to improve the stock farms, I became an animal expert.⁹

By referring to the improvements only as “necessary” and leaving unstated that the government required villages to do these things under penalty of law, the desires of the Soviet government are presented as objective truth. Furthermore, emphasizes the government’s benefits to the Soviet people; the Soviet people now have enough to eat, have the best apples, etc. The line says nothing, however, about how the increased production has financed the Soviet state’s attainment of nuclear super-power status. By focusing on the positive effects of governmental decrees, the state is presented as a wise and benevolent force in Soviet life.

Rutsa argues her side in terms of patriotism and love for one’s fellow man, both qualities, of course, endorsed by the Soviet government. Lenin wrote: “Communism begins when we begin to concern ourselves with the fate of those distant from us.”¹⁰ Komissarzhevsky quotes

⁸ This unique belief system is still common among the Russian peasantry as it has been ever since Christianity came to Russia more than a millennia ago. Ivanits, 4.

⁹ Drutse, 187.

¹⁰ Quoted in Komissarzhevsky, 18.

this, pointing out that “distant” can refer to the distance between workers in different countries or workers in different parts of a small village.¹¹ The village under consideration in The Birds of Our Youth is Valya Kokorilor, which means: “Vale of Storks,” so named for the large population of birds that used to nest in its thatch roofs. However, since the village’s reconstruction, modern shingles have replaced the thatch roofs and the birds no longer nest in the village. Rutsa also argues that the birds no longer recognize the village without the rising smoke from burning dung fuel that had traditionally kept village homes warm. Rutsa has refused to let her home be rebuilt and keeps burning dung fuel to bring back the storks because, as she says,

We used to fly away with the storks every autumn to the far ends of the earth, to the warm lands; and every spring we used to come back from those incredibly far-off lands. Without flying away and coming back again, we’ll forget how to love our country and we’ll forget how to love one another.¹²

Rutsa assumes that “to love our country” (patriotism) is a positive trait to be maintained. She argues that without the village’s symbiotic relationship with the storks, the village loses its ability to love its country as well as its ability to be communist (love one another).

Although Rutsa’s argument can be seen as grounded in communist ideology, it can also be seen as critical of Soviet travel restrictions. As mentioned in the introduction of this study, the Soviet government discouraged contact between its citizens and the citizens of capitalist countries, lest the “engineered Soviet soul” be tainted with outside influence. In 1974, Soviet citizens were forbidden to leave the USSR and were discouraged from interacting with visiting foreigners.¹³ For Rutsa, without the freedom to leave something and come back to it (flying away and coming back again), a person will forget how to love that something. Thus, Rutsa

¹¹ Komissarzhevsky, 18.

¹² Drutse, 177.

¹³ Hedrick Smith, who lived and worked at the American Embassy in Moscow during the seventies, tells of being snuck into apartments for friendly visits for fear of reprisals and of being forcibly separated from Russians at times by the Soviet police. See Smith, 20, 165.

symbolically implies that travel restrictions are jeopardizing communism in Russia. Yet, while this implication questions Soviet policy, it upholds communist ideology.

Just as Marx asserted that dialectical forces eventually come to a synthesis, Drutse brings his character's views to a synthesis at the end of his play. This synthesis falls decidedly on the side of progress and change. Both characters (and thus both historical forces) are presented as facing mortality: Pavel because of his failing liver and Rutsa because of her age. Pavel, unlike Rutsa, however, will be quickly replaced as kolkhoz leader and, thus, as a driving force for progress in history. His respected and ambitious brother, Andron, is likely to be his political successor, and, furthermore, a son is born to this brother just after Pavel's death. Rutsa compares the birth and transition to a field renewing its crop just after a harvest.¹⁴ While Pavel is replaced as a historical force, Rutsa has no heir. Nobody is training under her to learn the herbal recipes and the divination methods. No other source for these potions and services is mentioned. Thus, when Rutsa dies, her force will also die. Rutsa tells Andron that after her death, he will inherit her hovel allowing him to tear it down and complete the village reconstruction.¹⁵

Yet, while the old ways are bound for extermination, something of them is to remain, much as in Marx's theories where the industrial processes and infrastructure developed by the bourgeoisie would live on after the bourgeoisie was eliminated. In the last scene, Rutsa explains why she has long been infatuated with storks by describing this scene from her past:

... suddenly storks appeared from somewhere up north. They were flying in pairs... white and silvery, even tinged with pink, as you see only in your dreams. I was stunned by their beauty; but then, coming down, the storks turned white and became ordinary storks, and all my life, whenever I think of that incident, I still try to understand what it was all about.¹⁶

¹⁴ Drutse, 227-8.

¹⁵ Ibid, 176.

¹⁶ Ibid, 226.

For Rutsa, the storks were a source of wonderment, representing a religious experience.

However, Rutsa also explains that she has indeed come to understand the experience:

It was the sun that had made them so beautiful. It hadn't risen above the horizon, but high up there, where they were flying, it was already morning and the sun was shining. And as soon as I realized this, I felt so good that I went down on my knees before the Almighty and thanked him for giving me the chance to be born and to live on this earth.¹⁷

Rutsa's discovery is based on Einstein's principle of relativity wherein location can determine time.¹⁸ As the sun rises against the horizon, its rays strike the earth at an ever-widening angle because the curvature of the earth¹⁹ creates a shadow. Thus, if one measures time by the movement of the sun across the sky, birds seen overhead can exist in a future time relative to their observer.²⁰ It was this effect that had awed Rutsa. However, now that she understands that effect, she considers it no less awesome. In fact, she considers the revelation of understanding to be a religious experience in itself and she falls to her knees and thanks God for it. Thus, Rutsa's appreciation of beauty and her curiosity about the world around her, once embodied in her religion, *Dvoeverie*, now finds expression in science. This process is (at least metaphorically) equivalent to a factory, built within a bourgeois society, finding use in a proletarian society. Appreciation, wonderment, and curiosity are to be the legacy of Russia's old culture in Russia's new scientific, Marxist culture.

Showing religion as overtaken by science was perfectly in line with contemporary policy on religion and education. In 1966 (shortly after The Bolsheviki was written), the Soviet government abruptly changed its policy concerning religion because, according to one Soviet authority: "Violence and the forcible closing of churches not only fail to reduce the number of

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ See Einstein, Albert. 1905. The Principle of Relativity. (New York: Dover Publications).

¹⁹ Or, for Rutsa, most likely a mountain range. Valya Kokorilor is located in Moldavia, Drutse's homeland.

²⁰ One can recreate the basic effect with a light bulb and a tennis ball, if one were so inclined. This is also the basic principle that necessitates we have time zones across the broad span of the US, only the example Rutsa explains is based on altitude rather than latitude.

believers, but actually tend to increase their number... and to antagonize believers against the state.”²¹ The new plan to eliminate religion from society was to regulate it, contain it, and gradually replace it. First, to stop the spread of religion by creating martyrs, congregations were allowed to legally meet if they first registered with the government. For those religions known for proselytizing, such as Baptists, registration was made more difficult in an attempt to consolidate those religions into other, less evangelical religions.²² Once contained, the Soviets hoped to replace religion with science. As historian Paul Dukes states: “A secular faith was asserted from space by a succession of cosmonauts with variations on the theme that ours is a wonderful but small earth in a vast, still to be fathomed universe.”²³ Just like Rutsa, these cosmonauts were appreciating the mysteries of earth, but also striving to understand them in physical terms. It is also interesting that Rutsa chose an effect of the sun to express her admiration for advanced scientific concepts. At the 1979 All-Union Conference on Socialist Ceremonies, the necessity of replacing “the illusory sun in the minds of believers” with the “Soviet sun” of materialist, scientific concepts was propounded.²⁴

There were also other reasons to push for scientific curiosity as well. First, the Communists’ immense project of bringing basic education to all Soviets was finally nearing completion in the 1970s. Thus, for the first time, the government could concentrate on spreading higher education. Second, spreading these concepts was necessary to building a properly communist society, which, according to Brezhnev, should be dominated by concepts of science and materialism.²⁵ These concepts are the basis of Marxist thought. Third, in an age of space

²¹ Quoted in Dukes, 310

²² This apparently had some success with altering the official numbers of religious believers, although its effects on people’s actual beliefs appear to have been minimal. See Dukes, 311.

²³ Quoted in Dukes, 321

²⁴ The founding and first meeting of this Conference is discussed in Chapter V. See page 83 of this study.

²⁵ Quoted in Dukes, 321

races, nuclear proliferation, and mechanized industry, technology was key to maintaining a position of world power. Although the Soviet push to stamp out religion never met with much success, the push to spread education did. Enrolment in secondary and tertiary education increased by over one and half million during in the 1970s.²⁶

Drutse's depiction of history is perhaps the most directly populist we have seen so far. Drutse shows history as driven by dialectical forces directly embodied within everyday people. Thus, there is no need to "personify the will of the people as it moves forward," as some critics claimed a Bolshevik hero should.²⁷ Here, the characters truly are "the people" and it is their will pushing forward.

The Birds of Our Youth also upholds the communist principle that the people own the fruits of their own labor. However, in upholding this principle, the play also questions Soviet policies. In scene two, Pavel argues with The Man in Spectacles, a Communist Party authority and Pavel's immediate supervisor, over the recent dispersal of 140 tons of grain from the kolkhoz stores to the kolkhoz workers. This payment-in-kind was not to have occurred until after the region including Pavel's kolkhoz had fulfilled state quotas. Due to their hard work and superior methods, however, Pavel's kolkhoz had an early harvest and Pavel distributed his grain early despite the mandate. Pavel explains:

When people work in an orchard and the fruit ripens, they have a need to eat a couple of apples. People working in the vineyards have need to eat a few bunches of grapes when they're ready. Well, people working in the fields have the same need after the harvest has been gathered in they want to bake some fresh bread irrespective of whether they have grain from the previous years at home or not.²⁸

²⁶ Dukes, 323.

²⁷ P. Ktzev "Armoured Train 14-69" in Pravda, November 18, 1927. Available from Pravda Online. May 2003. Moscow, Russia. <<http://english.pravda.ru/>>

²⁸ Drutse, 180.

Pavel speaks of “needs” as he spoke of “necessities” earlier. A worker’s right to enjoy the fruits of his labor is inherent within objective reality and thus is not to be denied or postponed, even if the state rules otherwise.

Drutse places worker’s rights above the needs of the state and encourages rebellion if the state attempts to usurp those rights. While the Man in Spectacles threatens to reprimand Pavel, he doesn’t. It is also implied that Pavel habitually breaks rules without suffering repercussion from his supervisor. Thus, rebellion against the state is easy and profitable because the state is powerless to stop it. While this is rhetorically populist, it certainly did not support Party policies on collective agriculture, which strove for increased yield and organization so as to keep the Soviet Union in its super-power position.

Drutse also “pushes the boundaries” with his presentation of “realism.” Emphasizing the dialectic between them, scenes alternate between the two main characters. Rutsa’s scenes represent reality heavily infused with the supernatural: the text describes her divining, brewing potions, praying, and describing the beliefs of *dvoeverie*. Furthermore, Rutsa’s mysticism is effective: her love potions result in pregnant wives and doctors endorse Rutsa’s mystical cures. This defies Soviet policy in two ways. First, the fantastic is generally considered antithetical to the realistic, as defined by the genre’s major proponents. Second, the government officially discouraged the practices of *dvoeverie*, which was considered an especially “worthless vestige of tsarist times.” Drutse shows the practice as far from worthless.

Perhaps now is an appropriate time to begin discussion of how these transgressions passed the enforcement system. In Komissarzhevsky’s description of the play’s premier production he describes Rutsa scenes: “(Rutsa’s) young eyes twinkle so and she improvises with

such gusto... that we clearly see what sort of ‘sorcery’ she practices.”²⁹ Perhaps, then, the text was ushered through censorship by someone willing to present the witchcraft as an old woman’s way of helping her comrades do the things they could, in fact, do themselves. Thus, “witchcraft” is presented as a kind of con, making it acceptable within the confines of realism and at least more acceptable in light of official Soviet policy.

Pavel’s scenes lean even farther towards fantasy and the supernatural than Rutsa’s. As he slowly dies, Pavel speaks with people from his past as they appeared in his past, with his dead mother, and even has a conversation with “The Lord God.” Similar to Rutsa’s witchcraft this presentation of God serves to cut away at the power ascribed to God as a supernatural force. First, it depicts God as a fumbling bureaucrat, unable to read the small handwriting of Pavel’s “file,” relying purely on Pavel’s word when interviewing him about his life, and being often shocked at what Pavel says. God, in this depiction, is far from omnipotent or omniscient. Second, the scene implies that Communist Party has restored to the man the paradise God took away. When God asks Pavel if he has lived a “good” and “happy” life, Pavel answers in the affirmative because, he says, he was raised by a family that valued work above all else and worked with his fellow villagers all his life. In the Bible, when Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge, God expelled Adam and commanded that Adam should now live “by the sweat of his brow.” Work, in the religious sense, can thus be considered a kind of eternal penance for Adam’s sin. God, therefore, expresses shock that work can entail both “good” and “happy,” and asks for more detail. Pavel explains how the many improvements built by the village have benefited him and his “kinsfolk,” which Pavel describes as the “three thousand” members of his village. Thus, Pavel again rejoices in the commands of the Communist government and God is one-upped by the Communist government.

²⁹ Komissarzhevsky, 16.

There is, of course, significant difficulty in seeing this as a profitable way for the Soviet government to portray itself. Referring again to the Bible, the action of one-upping God is most often associated with Satan and sin. This is not, therefore, rhetoric likely “replace the illusory sun in the minds of believers,” but rather likely to encourage those believers to rebel.

What appears to have been the official explanation for allowing Pavel’s supernatural scenes is also questionable. According to both Komissarzhevsky and the printed stage directions, Pavel never leaves his hospital bed, implying that, like Rutsa’s witchcraft, God and the other characters Pavel meets are illusions of Pavel’s dying mind. The stage directions state repeatedly that Pavel is always dressed in a hospital gown. Komissarzhevsky states that Pavel’s part “requires a particularly skillful actor, because he must dominate the action as he lies on his deathbed.”³⁰ Thus these fantastic scenes can be explained as the illusions of a dying man’s mind. That the audience can directly see the images in a character’s mind would, however, require a very loose interpretation of realism. When Arthur Miller allowed the audience to see the hallucinations of Willy Loman in Death of a Salesman, for example, most critics termed classified the play as “selectively realistic.” A conservative interpretation of realism would not likely allow for “selection.” Furthermore, this official explanation of the play’s deviations from Socialist Realism is discredited by evidence also to be found in the Soviet government’s own publication: Nine Modern Soviet Plays. The collection features several pictures of the Maly Theatre production. In each, Pavel is shown wearing street clothes: a button down shirt, trousers and dark dress shoes. Also, in Pavel is never shown in a hospital bed; in most he stands upright.

How is the enforcement system’s approval and even praise for The Birds of Our Youth to be explained? Perhaps strings we pulled within the enforcement system by someone close to

³⁰ Komissarzhevsky, 17.

Drutse or his play. Perhaps the play is simply indicative of the system's enigmatic nature, described in Chapters II and III. Or, perhaps the play might be explained as symptomatic of the fissures forming within the formidable Soviet power base. It is difficult to theorize beyond this because the only source of historical information and criticism on The Birds of Our Youth is Nine Modern Soviet Plays, which has already been discussed.

This dearth of information is perhaps ironic given many historian and critic's views of Soviet drama. As discussed in the introduction of this study, many western historians and critics have assumed an inverse relationship between a play's worth and that play's adherence to Socialist Realism's requirements. One might think that this play, which so criticizes Party policies, would have made someone's list of "exceptional" plays from the era.

To explain this irony, or perhaps to add to it, I consider The Birds of Our Youth to be the weakest play considered so far in terms of its dramatic qualities. Nevertheless, it is still fascinating, as we shall see. Most of its weaknesses are diction related, which may be partially explained by poor translation. Alex Miller seems to have tried to literally translate many of the play's Russian colloquialisms, which has resulted in a foreign-sounding, often confusing diction. For example, in bemoaning the lives of modern Soviet women, Rutsa cries: "Can't you see the sort of lives our womenfolk live? They've hardly blossomed out before there's no telling whether they're women or men."³¹ The term "blossomed out," at least to myself, a modern American audience member, seems a hopelessly cliché euphemism and "the sort of lives our womenfolk live" seems cumbersome and formal. Because of this same cumbersomeness, the meaning of the line (that Russian women have lost their femininity) is not immediately clear.

³¹ 195

Incidentally, this translation seems to have a penchant for hopelessly cliché euphemisms, as the characters often speak about a woman's "need for caresses" and "hitching up one's petticoats."³²

If considered as a realistic play, Drutse's heavily abstracted, simplified characters would represent another weakness. Aunt Rutsa can barely part her lips without some gem of universal truth tumbling out from between them. Pavel is so humble and awed by everything around him that I wonder how he ever got anything accomplished in his life. However, as argued before, The Birds of Our Youth is not a realistic play. With its fantasy sequences and heavily symbolic characters, the play is more akin to symbolism or a medieval morality play than to realism.

Thus, Drutse's characters are abstract and simplified for a purpose: to tell an incredibly complex story within a very simple frame. In this Drutse's play bears resemblance to Everyman, which also tells a complex story about morality within a simple story about a man's search for travel companions or Maurice Maeterlinck's The Bluebird, which tells a beautiful story about the human condition through two children's search for another child's lost pet. Drutse gives a rich look at how the Soviet regime drastically changed the lives for several million Russians through his simple story about an old woman resolving a dispute with her dying nephew. Through the course of this story, we learn how Russian tradition was beaten down by the progressive Soviet government (Aunt Rutsa was flogged for an unexplained reason when the kolkhoz first started forming). We learn how travel restrictions have caused a new longing in Russians to fly away, if only for a little while. We see how concepts of science and religion were changing (or were ideally going to be changed). Finally, we can also see a striking prediction that the Soviet government's usurpation of so much power would prove futile, much as shown by the Biblical stories about the war for heaven.

³² Ibid

The Birds of Our Youth may not be the best example of Socialist Realism, but it was given the title of Socialist Realism and praised under that title by the enforcement system. Furthermore, although it has not received the best of translations, The Birds of Our Youth, like Field Marshal Kutuzov and The Bolsheviks, provides fascinating entertainment as well as insight into the history of the Soviet era.

Conclusion:
The Art of The Revolution Revisited

For many, the Russian Revolution of 1917 was to have ushered in a new era of freedom and harmony by destroying the material inequities of the past. To achieve this, artists, intellectuals, and playwrights helped fight that revolution, as the character Lunacharsky points out in Mikhail Shatrov's The Bolsheviks:

Who prepared the revolution under the conditions of Tsarist rule? Who brought millions of people to the point of rebellion? A comparatively thin stratum of progressive, politically educated workers plus the revolutionary intelligentsia.¹

Playwrights, who were considered “educated workers” under revolutionary ideology,² were fighting not only to escape the tsar’s oppressive censorship, but also to end squalor and poverty for their fellow man. As previously quoted from the playwright and poet Vladimir Mayakovsky: “March you o hungry ones / Crooked / Skinny dirty, full of parasites / March!”³ By marching, the philosopher and politician Leon Trotsky promised, they were paving the way for “the average human type (to) rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx. And above this ridge new peaks will rise.”⁴

The Soviet Union, created by this revolution, was not an intellectual utopia but rather one of the largest and most oppressive bureaucracies the world has ever known. This bureaucracy controlled its “educated workers” through incredibly complex interactions. Discrediting Soviet art because it evidences the Soviet enforcement system, as historians have in the past, is problematic. Many historians have tended, as Paul Dukes notes, towards “oversimplif[ied] explanations centering around the characterization of Stalin as an omnipotent dictator, enslaving

¹ Shatrov 90-1

² Trotsky, 233

³ Encyclopedia of Soviet Authors. <http://www.sovlit.com/bios/mayakovsky.html>

⁴ Trotsky, 256

millions of people to satisfy his own persecution mania and sadistic perversity.” Yet even Dukes, when discussing Soviet playwriting, relies on oversimplification and supports the “discredited” reputation that many have questionably applied to the genre.⁵ This widely purported stereotype has discouraged the exploration of Socialist Realist plays, as both historic artifacts and dramatic texts.

In an effort to dispel oversimplifications and stereotypes, this study has closely examined the plays and their history. Two questions were consequently explored: 1) What was the relationship between Soviet playwrights, theatres, and the government; and 2) How are the ideals of Socialist Realism expressed in selected Soviet era dramatic texts? To conclude this text, I would like first, to summarize how these questions were explored and second, to briefly discuss the manifold possibilities for future studies in Soviet drama.

Six chapters each contributed to understanding Socialist Realism as an artistic genre. Recognizing that the Soviet government never issued a clear official definition and that, therefore, the definitive characteristics of the genre were largely developed through the interaction between Soviet artists and the Soviet enforcement system, Chapter I developed a practical definition for the genre. First, a historiography revealed the historic complexities of the nebulous genre. Second, a brief history of the genre’s origins elucidated the implicit goals of Socialist Realism. Beginning with Marxist theory and its introduction to a body of Russian dramatic theory prepared by Alexandr Pushkin and Lev Tolstoy, the genre’s development was traced through Lenin, George Lukacs, and Stalin to its official recognition by the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1934. Chapter I concluded by identifying the following four salient characteristics from this historiography and developmental history:

⁵ Although, to be perfectly fair to Dukes, his study does not concentrate on Soviet playwriting. However, the rhetoric in his study does rely on oversimplifications. See page 24 of this study.

- 1) Drama should be written and presented under realistic principles.
- 2) Drama should present history and historical developments in Marxist terms.
- 3) Drama should be populist, written for the benefit of the proletariat.
- 4) Drama should adhere to Communist Party goals and policies.

Chapter II explored the Soviet enforcement system. Again recognizing the enigmatic nature of its subject matter, the chapter began with a historiography that elucidated the system's problematic scope. Next, the system's Byzantine history and function were described by first analyzing the changes in the system which occurred over time, and then through a series of anecdotes recounting the system's enigmatic nature and "basic" procedures while recognizing its more peripheral agencies and procedures as well. Finally, the following three-point summation of the system was identified from its historiography and history:

- 1) As the sole repository of economic resources, the government could decide what to print and what to stage because it controlled the resources for printing and staging.
- 2) Through an enigmatic, labyrinthine system that held the ultimate power of economic success and/or survival over the artist, the artist was both discouraged from acting contrary to the system's wishes and encouraged (or forced) to comply.
- 3) As a general rule, enforcement encouraged (or forcibly created) plays with "appropriate" class-orientation, realism,⁶ historical presentation, and adherence to the current goals and policies of the Communist Party and its leadership.

Chapter III considered how Socialist Realism, as defined in Chapter I, came to be represented within a body of plays through playwrights' various interactions with the

⁶ Class orientation, as seen in Chapter I, included not only showing the working class as heroes, but also presenting the story within realistic strictures. Lenin was quoted in that chapter as implying that realism was like the simple black bread of the peasantry and was thus something the general populace could understand.

enforcement system described in Chapter II. Utilizing a unique product-driven analysis of the genre's development through several watershed plays and events, this chapter began by exploring the effect of various Soviet policies on Soviet authors in general and on specific authors such as Vladimir Mayakovsky. Next, the development of each aspect of Socialist Realism was be traced through a series of plays which premiered between the years 1920-1936. Lastly, the chapter considered how government policies including the use of terror affected theatre artists in general with separate attention given to the experiences of Vsevolod Meyerhold.

To show how the form's practical expression changed under shifting party policies, Chapters VI, V, and VI each analyzed a specific play in detail (Field Marshal Kutuzov, The Bolsheviks, and Birds of Our Youth, respectively), emphasizing their historical context and critical aspects. These plays collectively demonstrated the following: first, Soviet plays presented historicism and populism with a pronounced rhetorical slant that generally supported party policies (although dissent can also be seen, esp. in The Birds of Our Youth); second, perhaps despite the official "realistic" genre, these plays represent a wide range of presentational style (verse drama, documentary drama, and allegory, respectively); third, if the reader may agree with my critical analysis, that Soviet plays can represent fascinating artistic expression.

Furthermore, by emphasizing their respective historical contexts, Chapter VI, V, and VI have shown that Socialist Realist plays can be used to study the history of Soviet Russia, demonstrating their value as historic artifacts. These chapters also provided critical information that, I believe, demonstrated the plays' value as artistic expressions.

This study was performed using only translated materials available in America. There are some seven decades of plays that have been overlooked by western historians and theatres. Only a small number of the available plays have been considered here and these plays could be

useful to future studies. Also, considering the amount of new materials made available by the fall of the iron curtain and the opening of the Soviet archives, a vast amount of further study is possible. To list just a few of the possibilities for further study:

- 1) New translations of Socialist Realist plays would make these plays more accessible to western historians and theatres.
- 2) The Soviet enforcement system could be examined in greater detail with more attention given to its unofficial procedures, disputes that must have evolved between its numerous agencies, and/or possible anomalies in the types of plays that system passed, such as was touched on in Chapter VI of this study.
- 3) The more official procedures of the enforcement system could be greatly elucidated by an examination of one or more Glavit bindings, which contain a play's original, annotated, and officially approved forms. What specifically did the censor mark? How did the playwright "adapt" his script to suit the censor?
- 4) There are also a number of plays that were officially banned, but preserved in the archives for various reasons.⁷ Is there evidence for why these plays were "politically deficient?" Is there evidence for why these plays were preserved?
- 5) There are no Socialist Realist plays written between the years 1945-1960 available in America. A future study could examine the varied reasons for this gap in greater detail. Future studies could also examine the plays written during these years, or provide translations of these plays.
- 6) A more comprehensive analysis of how the expectations for Soviet plays changed over the Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev eras could be offered.

⁷ See Stephen F. Cohen, "Bukharin's Fate." In How It All Began, Nikolai Bukharin, xv – xvi.

These are just a few of the studies possible in the field of Socialist Realist drama. Decades of plays and other historical documents are now available. Decades of playwrights who worked under extraordinary conditions await discovery by western historians and theatres. Years of research and analysis have yet to be performed. If we are to ever understand the promises, the horrors, and the ironies of the Soviet era, we must understand Soviet art: we must understand Socialist Realism.

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