

**THE TRIAL OF LENIN:
LEGITIMATING REVOLUTION THROUGH POLITICAL
THEATER, 1920-1923**

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Abstract

By 1920 the Bolshevik leaders of Soviet Russia had become adept at creating participatory political pageantry. They mounted parades and pro-government demonstrations; they reenacted leading historical events such as the storming of the Winter Palace; they inaugurated public ceremonies around elections. Around 1920 they also began creating agitation trials which showcased current political issues through theatrical performances designed to break down the distance between audience and performers. These plays took the form of trials in which the heroes submitted themselves to the will of the people, only to be acquitted and thus ritually vindicated and elevated to the status of heroes for all to emulate. The plays, thus, enacted and legitimated the Bolsheviks' rule. This article will focus on one of the first of these agitation trials, a 1920 "Trial of Lenin," in order to explore the significance of this new kind of spectacle.

Introduction

On April 17, 1920 the railroad workers in a Moscow suburb held what *Pravda* called “A Trial of Lenin.” It was a Saturday night and an audience of 300 came to see what was going on. The court called witnesses for the prosecution and the defense. Local communists brought charges against Lenin and the Communist Party. Ultimately, Lenin was acquitted, and the audience applauded.¹

The anonymous report in *Pravda* never explicitly states that this was a mock trial. In fact, however, it was one of the very first of a new form of propaganda known as agitation trials [*agitatsionnye sudy*]. These were plays that were improvised or scripted in the form of courtroom scenes. In the 1920s such dramatized trials became an important part of the political fabric of the Soviet Union, helping to illuminate political, social and cultural values of the new regime.²

The presentation of this mock trial contains elements of both the ordinary and the extraordinary. On the one hand, the account matter-of-factly describes how the local railway organization and the local political organization “organized” a trial [*ustroili sud*]. The report appears not on the front page of *Pravda* under a banner headline, but rather on page two, under the rubric “Workers’ Lives.” No officials of Lenin’s government presided over the trial, only the local political organizations of the railroad and the neighborhood. One contemporary observer, himself a dramatist and theater director, referred to the “Trial of Lenin” as “an ordinary event.”³

On the other hand, this was clearly a staged performance. The audience clapped at the conclusion of the evening and allegedly listened “with great interest” to this “new form of political conversation.” It was performed by communists for a non-communist audience of people who came after work. Moreover,

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¹ “Sud nad Leninym,” *Pravda*, April 22, 1920, p. 2.

² This article is part of a book-length monograph on the agitation trials, *Performing Justice: Agitation Trials in Revolutionary Russia, 1920-1933*.

³ Nikolai Karzhanskii, *Kollektivnaia Dramaturgiia. Material dlia Rabot Dramaticheskikh Studii i Kruzhkov* (Moscow, 1922), pp. 12, 66.

it was an event staged just five days before Lenin's fiftieth birthday. The report in *Pravda* appeared on the very day of his birthday (April 22, 1920).⁴

In this article I will argue that this mock "Trial of Lenin" was a deliberately new kind of spectacle designed to show, through staged polemics, the correctness of the path taken by Lenin and the Bolsheviks. In this sense it was a revolutionary version of what historian Richard Wortman has called a "scenario of power."⁵ Through a dramatized (and controlled) contest of wills, Lenin and other heroes of the day could dispel rumors and criticisms. They could prove that their ideas were correct. Above all, they could demonstrate in ritualized form that they were vindicated by the people's courts.

By 1920 the Bolshevik leaders of Soviet Russia had become adept at creating participatory political pageantry. They mounted parades and pro-government demonstrations; they reenacted leading historical events such as the storming of the Winter Palace; they inaugurated public ceremonies around elections.⁶ Around 1920 they also began creating agitation trials which showcased current political issues through theatrical performances designed to break down the distance between audience and performers.⁷ Where nineteenth-century Russian revolutionaries such as the Decembrists had engaged in play-acting in their everyday lives, the Bolsheviks in the early twentieth century staged public plays to enact and legitimate their rule.⁸ These plays took the form of trials in which the heroes submitted themselves to the

⁴ Occasionally historians give April 23 as Lenin's birthday rather than the 22nd. The reason for the discrepancy is that Lenin's birthday was April 10, 1870 in the Old Style calendar, which was used in the Russian Empire at that time. This calendar differed from the European and later Soviet calendars by twelve days in the nineteenth century and thirteen in the twentieth. Thus, in the nineteenth century the New Style date would have been the 22nd; this is the date that was commonly used in 1920.

⁵ Richard Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1995, 2000). Two other fascinating studies of court ritual in medieval Russia are Robert O. Crummey, "Court Spectacles in Seventeenth-Century Russia: Illusion and Reality," in Daniel Clarke Waugh, ed., *Essays in Honor of A. A. Zimin* (Columbus, OH, 1985); Nancy Shields Kollman, "Ritual and Social Drama at the Muscovite Court," *Slavic Review* 45, 3 (Fall 1986), pp. 486-502.

⁶ James Von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 83-88; E. A. Speranskaya, ed., *Agitatsionno-Massovoe Iskusstvo Pervykh Let Oktabria: Materialy i Issledovaniia* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1971); Katerina Clark, *Petersburg, Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995); Frederick Charles Corney, "Writing October: History, Memory, Identity and the Construction of the Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1927" (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1997).

⁷ For a fascinating discussion of the theatrical and film versions of trials, see Julie A. Cassiday, *The Enemy on Trial: Early Soviet Courts on Stage and Screen*, (Dekalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000).

⁸ Ju. M. Lotman, "The Decembrist in Everyday Life: Everyday Behavior as a Historical-Psychological Category," in Ju. M. Lotman and B. A. Uspenskii, *The Semiotics of Russian Culture* (ed. Ann Shukman) (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), pp. 71-123.

will of the people, only to be acquitted and thus ritually vindicated and elevated to the status of heroes for all to emulate.

Heroic trials in 1920-1923

In the months after this first "Trial of Lenin," *Pravda* carried reports of a number of mock trials held for agitational purposes: trials of the Russian Communist Party, of the October Revolution, of the Soviet authorities, of Lenin and Trotsky, of the Red Army and Red commanders.⁹ While trials of negative role models were also coming into vogue at this time and would eventually become dominant, these earliest political trials (1920-1923) are striking for the large numbers that proceeded against the *heroes of the Revolution*.

These heroic trials, as I call them, contain real charges that were brought against leading individuals and organizations in popular conversation, in rumors, and in the emigre press.¹⁰ The Communist Party in several trials was charged with illegally seizing power in October 1917.¹¹ In other trials it was indicted for ruining industry, expropriating factories, closing newspapers, and introducing low-quality, inexperienced management.¹² The Soviet government was put on trial for allowing foreigners to lease concessions and, in so doing, for "betraying the principles of communism."¹³ The "new woman" was charged with betraying the family.¹⁴ The year 1920 was prosecuted in mock fashion for continuing the Civil War.¹⁵ In other words, in this early period of Soviet history genuine complaints and concerns were being voiced in these staged performances.

⁹ "Sud nad R.K.P.," *Pravda*, Feb. 18, 1921; "Novaia Forma Agitatsii," *Pravda*, Nov. 21, 1920; "Sud nad Sovetskoi Vlast'iu," *Pravda*, Dec. 21, 1920; "Sud nad Leninym i Trotskim," *Pravda*, Feb. 15, 1921; *Sud Bespartinykh Rabochikh i Krest'ian nad Krasnoi Armiei* (Moscow: Krasnaia nov', 1923).

¹⁰ As Lenin noted in November 1920, "the bourgeoisie is slandering us tirelessly with its whole apparatus of propaganda and agitation," "Rech' na Vserossiiskom Soveshchanii Politprosvetov," *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii*, 5th ed. (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1960-65), v. 41, pp. 406-7.

¹¹ "Novaia Forma Agitatsii"; "Sud nad R.K.P."; "Sud nad Oktiabr'skim Perevorotom 1917 goda" (typescript) (1922) in Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Voennyi Arkhiv [RGVA] f. 9, op. 13, d. 93, ll. 143-144.

¹² "Sud nad R.K.P."

¹³ "Sud nad Sovetskoi Vlast'iu."

¹⁴ "Sud nad novoi zhenshchinoi," *Pravda*, Feb. 20, 1921. For further discussion see Elizabeth A. Wood, "The Trial of the New Woman: Citizens-in-Training in the New Soviet Republic," *Gender and History* 13, 3 (November 2001), pp. 524-545.

¹⁵ F. K., "Privet Novomu Godu," *Pravda*, Jan. 5, 1921.

Some of the charges were quite elaborate. One instruction for "A Trial of the Communist Party" listed charges against the defendant on three different levels. One prosecution witness charged the Party with theoretical matters: the destruction of the principles of democracy, the establishment of a dictatorship over the proletariat, and the incorrect organization of labor. A second brought the "philistine" objections of someone defending only his own interests. The third witness dwelled on cold, hunger, bureaucratism and other hardships in people's lives.¹⁶

The trials thus staged a contest in which popular grumblings and criticisms could be voiced and then proven false. The "Trial of the Red Army," for example, listed as its sources a range of foreign materials as well as domestic ones: the emigre collection *Changing Landmarks* [*Smena vekh*], an emigre publication called *Rossia No. 2*, the white General Baron Wrangel's decree on land [*Zemel'nyi zakon Vrangelia*].¹⁷ As one commentator noted in *Pravda*, such mock trials were useful in combating rumors that undercut the authority of the government, especially when many of the factories had ground to a halt. Otherwise workers easily fell under the influence of "the cunning minions of the bourgeoisie, people whispering on the sly."¹⁸

The soon-to-be famous writer Dmitri Furmanov also wrote of the value of "public political trials" [*obshchestvenno-politicheskie sudy*] in their use of "fresh events." The trials, he thought, could be mobilized as a means to combat "the whole heavy artillery of our enemies, especially the Mensheviks whose conclusions at first glance so often seem logically based, serious and fair."¹⁹

These early trials made the people's courtroom the legitimating organization for judgments about the successes and failures in the political sphere. The workers of the city of Tver, for example, found the Polish upper class and bourgeoisie guilty of attacking Soviet Russia in "A Trial of Upper-crust Poland."²⁰ In the trials of the Russian Communist Party and the Soviet government, the workers of a particular

¹⁶ "Instruktsii Otdelam Rabotnits po Provedeniiu 'Nedeli Front,' [...] po Organizatsii 'Suda nad RKP'" (1920), Tsentral'nyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Istoriko-Politicheskikh Dokumentov g. Sankt-Peterburga, f. 1, op. 1, d. 924.

¹⁷ *Sud Bespartinykh Rabochikh i Krest'an nad Krasnoi Armiei*, p. 5.

¹⁸ M. Antonov, "O Kul'tprosvetakh," *Pravda*, March 16, 1921.

¹⁹ Furmanov, "Formy Agitatsii i Propagandy," *Krasnoe Znamia* [military newspaper], Oct. 28, 1920, pp. 2-3.

²⁰ "Sud nad Panskoi Pol'shei," *Pravda*, July 1, 1920.

neighborhood in Moscow (Sokol'niki) and the party cell of the Higher Military Chemical School were the ones who passed judgment.

Political instructors began improvising these trials at a time when dissatisfaction was at its highest. The Civil War was coming to a close, yet the population was continuing to experience untold hardships. "A Trial of Lenin and Trotsky," for example, was held in the notoriously volatile province of Tambov in February 1921, at the very height of the peasant uprisings that soon stimulated the Party to introduce the New Economic Policy.²¹ A few months later political instructors working among the sailors of the Black Sea became extremely anxious that the Kronstadt mutiny near Petrograd would inspire rebellions and uprisings among their own fleets. In response, they created a dramatized trial of the Kronstadt mutineers in order "to immediately influence their [the sailors'] moods, introduce clarity, and demonstrate the loyalty of the sailors to the revolution."²²

If rulers in ancient Rome offered their subjects bread and circuses to distract them, Soviet rulers offered theirs a different kind of "circus," the mock political trial. This political trial could, as we shall see, engage the audience, present it with a dramatic contest, and prove that the new rulers had legitimately undergone a challenge from which they emerged victorious.

Multiple accounts of "A Trial of Lenin"

The original "Trial of Lenin," like many of the first agitation trials, is difficult to evaluate because of the lack of an actual script. Like much agitprop theater at the time, it was improvised by participants who had only a general working outline to go on. I have, however, been able to dig up three different accounts of the trial: the newspaper account in *Pravda*, dated April 22, 1920;²³ a handwritten report preserved in the files of the political department of the Vindava railway line, dated April 26, 1920;²⁴ and a

²¹ "Sud nad Leninym i Trotskim"; "Amnistiia 400 Krest'ian"; and "Bespartinye Krest'ianskie Konferentsii," *Pravda*, Feb. 15, 1921, p. 2.

²² Letter by the playwright Vsevolod Vishnevskii (date unknown), cited in Iu. Osnos, *V Mire Dramy* (Moscow, 1971), p. 62.

²³ "Sud nad Leninym."

²⁴ "Politicheskii Otdel 1-go Raiona Moskovsko-Vindavsko-Rybinskoi Zheleznoi Dorogi Moskovskoi Seti, 26/IV [1920]," Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial'no-Politicheskii Istorii [RGASPI, formerly Rossiiskii Tsentr Khraneniia i Izucheniia Dokumentov Noveishei Istorii, RTsKhIDNI], f. 111, op. 22, d. 153, l. 18.

memoir account by a contemporary witness published in the reformist journal *Novyi mir* in October 1957.²⁵

The *Pravda* account, a mere four paragraphs long, provides only the sketchiest of information. The fact of Lenin's acquittal is stated, but the actual charges are not given. Nor are the speeches of the prosecution, defense and witnesses reproduced, though the witnesses are listed. (A kulak, a member of the bourgeoisie, a Menshevik, a deserter, and a shirking worker testified for the prosecution, while German, Russian and women workers plus a wounded soldier gave evidence for the defense.)

The report from the political department of the Vindava Railroad where the "Trial of Lenin" was performed was filed in neat pencil on April 26 with the head of the railroad political department for this line [*dorpolit*] and with the political arm of the railroads, Glavpolitput.²⁶ In addition to the information given in *Pravda*, it mentions the names of the six communists who put on the trial. It also introduces a new term, calling the event a "politico-critical trial-debate" [*politiko-kriticheskii sud-disput*].

This term suggests the trial's close kinship to public debates [*disputy*] then being held on a wide range of subjects, including topics such as religion and atheism, morality, and social change. The local report also claims that such a form of agitation enlivened the viewers, "developing in the audience a critical view [*kritika*] of positions put forth by the orators." The political director's report insists that the indictment "was very harshly drawn." The Menshevik witness "went so overboard" [*nastol'ko perestaralsia*] that he "created a strong mood in favor of the prosecution." Only the detailed speech of the defense was able to "unmask the complete hopelessness of the bourgeois order and the shakiness of the policies of the defensists and conciliators."²⁷

Finally, the memoir account written by Sofiia Vinogradskaia (b. 1904), then a young journalist working in the *Pravda* editorial offices and later an author of several books on Lenin and his circle, appeared in *Novyi mir* in 1957.²⁸ She claims that the railroad workers themselves "unexpectedly"

²⁵ Sofiia Vinogradskaia, "Pervye Gody. Rasskazy," *Novyi mir* 10 (1957), pp. 46-48.

²⁶ "Politicheskii Otdel 1-go Raiona Moskovsko-Vindavsko-Rybinskoi Zheleznoi Dorogi Moskovskoi Seti, 26/IV [1920]," RGASPI, f. 111, op. 22, d. 153, l. 18.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ In addition to the article in *Novyi mir*, Vinogradskaia also published a book *Rasskazy o Lenine* (Moscow: Sovetskii Pisatel', 1965) which tells substantially the same story (pp. 106-107). Her sister Polina Semenovna Vinogradskaia also published two

[*neozhidano*] decided to put on the trial, then sent a report to *Pravda* for publication. When Mariia Ulianova, Lenin's sister and managing editor of *Pravda*, received the report, she took it home to Lenin for his approval, after which the newspaper published it.

Vinogradskaia makes much of the fact that the trial took place in the context of Lenin's fiftieth birthday. Lenin, she claims, was threatening to boycott the party planned for him at the headquarters of the Moscow Communist Party. Yet at the same time, evenings [*vechera*] in his honor were "springing up spontaneously" [*stikhitno to i delo voznikali*] all over Moscow. This "trial" was one of them.

The problem with the sources is, of course, that there is no way to verify the authenticity of any of them. My own working assumption is that a trial of Lenin was indeed staged at a small railway station outside Moscow on April 17, 1920. However, the fact that the archival railway report is dated *after* the report in *Pravda* suggests that local authorities may have submitted their report only after they saw how the *Pravda* report was phrased. Vinogradskaia's account of the railway workers submitting their report entirely on their own initiative is, I suspect, a fiction designed to emphasize the alleged spontaneity of the event. The very fact of the decision to stage such a trial and to publish a report in *Pravda* suggests that someone at the highest level or some group of individuals considered this to be a fundamentally important event.

Trouble on the railroads and in the party

From the Vindava railway archives, it is possible to determine that the communists who appeared in the "Trial of Lenin" had only been appointed to work in the political departments [*politotdely*] of the railway a few weeks before.²⁹ One [Umrikhin] was the main commissar of the whole Vindava line; another [Kusmortsev] headed the agitation-education section of the political department of this line, the so-called dorpelit; another two were district commissars [Zaltan and Petrov]; a fifth [Ershov] worked for the railway Cheka; and a sixth [Nikolaev] was a local instructor.

volumes of memoir materials, *Pamiatnye Vstrechi* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1972) and *Sobytiia i Pamiatnye Vstrechi* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1968). A whole study could be written on the myths of Lenin in the Khrushchev years, the renewed attempts to make him seem more human and thus free of the "cult of personality" that Stalin was being accused of.

²⁹ "Doklad Agitatsionno-Prosvetitel'nogo Podotdela Dopolita Moskovsko-Vindavsko-Rybinsk Zheleznoi Dorogi s 1/III po 1/IV/1920 god" (April 20, 1920), RGASPI f. 111, op. 22, d. 153, l. 14.

As recently as a month before the trial, the agitprop section had complained that they did not have a single staff member for work in agitation. It was not until March 25 that the new comrades were appointed, some from Glavpolitput (the newly created political arm of the railways), others from the army's political departments, and a few from other district party committees.³⁰

The disciplinary problems on the Vindava line were colossal. Food rations were in short supply, and productivity was declining. On March 1, the workers of the nearby Podmoskovnaia station held an unsanctioned meeting, demanding that all food they collected for the state should be returned to them and distributed among them, and that they should also receive firewood and work clothes. Local reports emphasized that the mood of the masses was "unsatisfactory"; general meetings were "stormy."³¹ Umrikhin, the main commissar of the Vindava line and a participant in the "Trial of Lenin," wrote on February 12, 1920 that productivity on the line had fallen by 20% in just the last month and a half.³²

The influx of new political staff into this particular railway in the spring of 1920 came about as part of a larger move to militarize the railroads. At the time, there were only about 10,000 communists on all the railways (i.e., fewer than one percent of the total workforce of over one million). The Party Central Committee now ordered the transfer of another 5,000 communists into transport.³³ The communists who staged the "Trial of Lenin" were among those now streaming into the railways, often to be greeted by criticisms that they didn't know anything about the railways.

³⁰ *Ibid.* Even in June 1920, though, the whole Vindava line had only an acting head of its political department ("Shtaty Dorpolit M-V-R zh.d." [June 18, 1920], RGASPI f. 111, op. 22, d. 880, l. 60).

³¹ "Biulleten' no. 12 Informatsionnogo-Instrukorskogo Otdela Glavnogo Politicheskogo Upravleniia NKPS, 26 apreilia 1920 g." RGASPI f. 17, op. 60, d. 19, l. 145.

³² Npolkom Umrikhin, "Pamiatka dlia Komissarov Sluzhby Chastei i Uchastkov" (Feb. 12, 1920), Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Ekonomiki [RGAE], f. 1884, op. 3, d. 154, l. 6 ob.

³³ RGASPI f. 111, op. 22, d. 378, ll. 73-75. On January 12, 1920 the Orgbiuro of the Central Committee of the Party resolved officially to mobilize experienced political workers from the Red Army to the railroads as quickly as possible. About 800 were actually transferred. This was followed by a general transfer of communists from other areas to the railroads ("Doklad" [Aug. 8, 1920], RGASPI f. 17, op. 60, d. 19, l. 20). Two months later, the Ninth Party Congress (March-April 1920) considered the matter of the railroads so important that it passed a special resolution ordering Glavpolitput "urgently to improve transport through the organized influence of experienced communists" (*VKP v rezoliutsiakh* [1941], vol. 1, p. 335, cited in E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution* [New York, 1950-1953], vol. 2, p. 220). On the general struggle over the relations between Glavpolitput and the railroad workers' union, see Leonard Schapiro, *The Origin of the Communist Autocracy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), pp. 253-61; James Bunyan, *The Origin of Forced Labor in the Soviet State, 1917-1921* (Baltimore, 1967), pp. 181-212; William G. Rosenberg, "The Social Background to Tsekran," in Diane P. Koenker et al., eds., *Party, State, and Society in the Russian Civil War* (Bloomington, 1989), pp. 349-73; Robert Thomas Argenbright, "The Russian Railroad System and the Founding of the Communist State: 1917-1922" (Ph.D. dissertation, Univ. of California at Berkeley, 1990).

Militarization also meant the imposition of military revolutionary tribunals. Anyone who had ever worked in any capacity in the railways in the last ten years was required to register with the government and report for work in the field of transportation. If they did not, they could be turned over to revolutionary tribunals for trial. The administrative staffs and technical personnel of the railways were also given the right to arrest anyone they suspected of wrongdoing and to impose administrative penalties.³⁴

At the same time, however, the top authorities responsible for the railways were making great efforts to find political and, above all, cultural-educational solutions to the discipline problems. Railway strikes, after all, had brought the tsarist regime to its knees. The railways had been a central site of *Menshevik and Socialist-Revolutionary* organizing even after 1917. And most important, they were the backbone of the whole economy. If the trains did not run, then fuel and food could not be sent to their destinations and the economy had no chance of recovering after seven years of European and civil wars.

Repression alone had not proven effective in increasing labor productivity. By April 1920 the agitation-education section of the Vindava railroad line had begun to fill out its ranks and to try a number of new ventures. As Umrikhin noted in a special directive: "It is necessary to remind every commissar that we cannot raise productivity by repressions alone. Instead by means of personal example [and] heroism in work and agitation, we need to raise the consciousness of the masses of workers."³⁵ This "Politico-critical 'Trial of Lenin'" undoubtedly was intended to provide just such a "personal example" of heroism.³⁶

In 1920 and 1921, the Russian Communist Party faced problems not just on the railroads, but in its own ranks. When the Bolsheviks had seized power in 1917, they had been able to ride a powerful wave of anti-autocratic, anti-aristocratic, and anti-bourgeois sentiment.³⁷ Yet by now the myths which

³⁴ Bunyan, pp. 183-84 (from *Izvestiia Glavnogo Komiteta po Vseobshchei Trudovoi Povinnosti* 1 [March 1920], pp. 45-47, *Sobranie Uzakonenii*, 1920, no. 8, art. 52). Argenbright, p. 358, discusses the "demonstration effect" of the railroad tribunals. They were held in public and "their purpose was to inculcate ideals, not just punish."

³⁵ Umrikhin, "Pamiatka," RGAE f. 1884, op. 3, d. 154, l. 6 ob.

³⁶ "Doklad Agitatsionno-Prosvetitel'nogo Podotdela Dorpolita Moskovsko-Vindavsko-Rybinskoi Zheleznoi Dorogi s 1/IV po 1/V 1920 g.," RGASPI f. 111, op. 22, d. 874.

³⁷ Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); B. Kolonitskii, "Antibourgeois Propaganda and Anti-'Burzhui' Consciousness in 1917," *Russian*

had sustained the party through two decades in the underground and through three years of Civil War were becoming stale. Tsarism had been overthrown. The military battles against the White guards and against the Entente were being won. The war was almost over. Yet, as everyone knew, the country was in a shambles. Morale was at an all-time low. There was no common external enemy to unify the country.

Two groups of party members, the Workers' Opposition and the Democratic Centralists, were attacking the party's policies on the grounds that they were leading to a "dictatorship of leaders" and the stifling of free criticism. They detested the introduction of so-called "political departments" [*politotdely*] as replacements for the party committees, particularly since they were appointed from above rather than elected. Soon, they feared, the Central Committee itself would be appointed. They argued, moreover, that the party was violating decisions taken by the Congress of Soviets, ostensibly elected by the whole nation. Lenin grew so exasperated at this flood of criticisms that he finally exclaimed on March 30, 1920: "If they show that we have violated a decision of the Congress, we ought to be put on trial."³⁸

Rituals to legitimate the Revolution

Writing in July 1921, a Bolshevik playwright named Nikolai Karzhanskii working in Smolensk commented that "almost everyone" had heard of "A Trial of Lenin," "A Trial of Kolchak," and "A Trial of Wrangel."³⁹ These earliest political trials, he noted, differed little from political rallies with long speeches focused on current events. The only difference was that they were given the appearance of a public trial.⁴⁰

Formal instructions and newspaper articles on this new form of political agitation make clear that the trials were expected to perform a wide variety of functions. Most important, they were to enliven the

Review 53, 2 (1994).

³⁸ Lenin, "Reply to the Discussion on the Report of the Central Committee" (March 30, 1920), *Collected Works*, v. 30, pp. 469; emphasis added. The next day, March 31, he opened his "Speech on Economic Development" with a comment in the same vein: "I maintain that you cannot hurl unsupported accusations, very serious accusations, at a Party Congress in that way. Of course, if the Council of People's Commissars has violated a decision of the All-Russia Central Executive Committee[,] it should be put on trial" (*ibid.*, p. 472).

³⁹ Karzhanskii, *Kollektivnaia Dramaturgiia*, p. 66.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.

required political meetings, of which workers and soldiers had grown heartily sick. The key, as activists in political theater were arguing, was to “work over” [*obrabatyvat*] the “inert, unmoving, masses who are closed off in their interests and their complacency and who continuously resist” outside intervention.⁴¹

The masses were not attending political rallies. In fact, they regularly chose to remain in the outdoor courtyards of their locked factories even in the dead of winter rather than go into the halls where political meetings were being held. On the other hand, they avidly sought to attend the theater. And the theater could make them think in a more lively fashion. “Little by little the great preacher [*propovednik*, i.e., the theater] is working over the inert, heavy, intellectually rigid masses.”⁴²

Organizers of the agitation trials had two principal audiences in mind, whom they wished to influence through the performance of these dramas. One was the audience sitting on benches in the workers’ club or theater. In recounting the “Trial of Lenin,” for example, *Pravda* commented that the audience was transformed from a group that was “dead, expressing itself only in shows of hands” into something “living, thinking.”⁴³

For an illiterate audience, the dramatic, visual presentation of ideas could be far more effective, organizers reasoned, than any long-winded political lecture by a single orator standing at a podium. They hoped that the audience would listen with “bated breath,” with “strained attention.”⁴⁴ They deliberately sought to “capture the mood of the audience,” to play to their emotions.⁴⁵ The whole point, they noted, was to make sure that “a certain mood takes over the audience, a certain idea penetrates its consciousness.”⁴⁶

⁴¹ A. Serafimovich, “Svoei Sobstvennoi Rukoi,” *Petrogradskaia Pravda*, April 18, 1920, p. 2.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ “Sud nad Leninym.”

⁴⁴ L. A. and L. M. Vasilevskii, *Sud nad Samogonshchikami. Delo Karpova Tikhona i ego Zheny Agaf'i po Obvineniiu v Izgotovlenii i Tainoi Torgovle Samogonnoi* ([Moscow]: Oktiabr', 1923), p. ii; Predislovie, *Sud Bespartinykh Rabochikh i Krest'ian nad Krasnoi Armiei*.

⁴⁵ “Politsud: Instruktsiia k Postanovke Instsenirovannykh Sudov” (Khar'kov, 1922), found in RGVA f. 9, op. 13, d. 108, l. 16; draft document in RGVA f. 9, op. 13, d. 51, ll. 215-18. Gr. Avlov, *Klubnyi samodeiatel'nyi teatr: Evoliutsiia metodov i form* (intr. A. Piotrovskii) (Leningrad-Moscow: Teatkinopechat', 1930), pp. 92-93.

⁴⁶ “Otzyv o Materialakh PRIVO: Terameets - Dezertir. Agitsud nad Terameitsem” (December 20, 1923), RGVA f. 9, op. 13, d. 97, l. 459.

The second target group for the trials were the participants themselves. As the *Pravda* account of the "Trial of Lenin" noted, the communists who participated gained practice in public speaking. Through this kind of exercise they could learn not just to express empty phrases, but also to think and argue polemically about the issues of the day.

The report on "The Trial of Lenin" proudly claimed that "the comrade communists [...] so entered into their prosecution roles and expressed their viewpoint that they could hardly be reproached with having only a superficial knowledge of their own program and that of their opponents."⁴⁷ In a successful trial, "the comrade men and women workers enter deeply into the meaning of the issue they are discussing and hence the types they play [*izobrazhaemye imi tipy*] are so lifelike, so much in relief."⁴⁸

For both the audience and the participants, the trial was a sufficiently life-like form that it broke down what theater specialists at this time loved to call the "fourth wall," i.e., the distance in the theater that normally separated audience from participants.⁴⁹ In these plays (which could last anywhere from an hour or two to six or eight hours) the audience and participants in the trial could easily believe that they were not in a club or theater but rather in the midst of a real trial.

The ritual of the contemporary revolutionary tribunals and courts was maintained to the minutest degree.⁵⁰ The whole courtroom rose when the judge entered. He opened the court session in the name of the Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic. Court officials brought in the witnesses and then took them out to another room where they were sequestered for the duration of the trial. If either a character in the proceedings or someone in the audience spoke out of turn, the judge was equipped with a bell which he could use to reinforce his own authority and to discipline the offending person.

In this way, the audience and the participants were placed on an equal footing. Both were subject to the power of the state in the person of the judge. Often lines were scripted for an individual or two in

⁴⁷ "Sud nad Leninym."

⁴⁸ "Novaya Forma Agitatsii," *Pravda* 262, Nov. 21, 1920, p. 3; also B. D. Sverdlov, *Sovetskaya Propaganda v 20-e Gody* (Moscow: Znanie, 1990), p. 40.

⁴⁹ P. M. Kerzhentsev, *Tvorcheskii Teatr* (5th ed.) (Moscow-Petrograd: Gosizd. 1923); V. N. Vsevolodskii-Gerngross, *Istoriia Russkogo Teatra* (2 vols.) (Leningrad-Moscow: Teatinopechat', 1929), p. 302.

⁵⁰ "Politsud: Instruktsiia", Vsevolodskii-Gerngross, p. 397; A. Rozinskii, "K Voprosu o Formakh Politprosvettraboty," *Put' Politrabotnika* 8 (1921), p. 50.

the audience, so that it would appear that the audience was thoroughly engaged and speaking out of its own volition.

Why go to such lengths to put on this kind of political trial? Why choose to ritualize a series of mock trials as a form of interaction with the population, a “political conversation,” as it was called in “The Trial of Lenin”? Was this an intentional manipulation of a public which otherwise had no voice in public policy? Or was it an experiment in creating a ritualized space for people to express their negative views, their fears, their criticisms?

It was clearly both. The whole process was obviously illusory. Lenin and the Communist Party were never really on trial. At the same time, I would argue the trials served as a genuine, if still manipulated, attempt to create a legitimate ancestry and line of political empowerment for a new ruler and a new system of government.

If we look at the rituals of the trials in terms of what they were designed to present, we can see quite a number of illusions being deliberately fostered: an illusion that all this was real (especially since the trials were performed by ordinary workers, soldiers, and peasants rather than by actors); an illusion that the trials were democratic since it was “the people” who represented the court and who passed judgment; an illusion that “comrade” Lenin was being tried on the same basis as anyone else in the society; an illusion, therefore, that the Soviet state had transcended the arbitrary and venal nature of tsarist justice. Now anyone could be put on trial in a people’s court and found guilty or innocent on the merits of the case.⁵¹

Moreover, the trials were designed to convey a dramatic conflict among differing points of view. The bourgeoisie, the monarchists, the Mensheviks were given apparently free rein to speak their minds.⁵² Ordinary workers, peasants, and soldiers spoke of their lives under capitalism and their suffering under

⁵¹ In one trial, for example, the judges were played by two students, one employee and two army stable workers (“Sud nad Sovetskoi Vlast’iu”).

⁵² In a similar vein some observers of the Show Trials of the 1930s believed that they were real because of this very appearance (obviously illusory) of free speech. As A. J. Cummings, a British observer, noted in conjunction with the Metro-Vickers trial: “The narrative method is effective and impressive; for the prisoners are allowed virtually to tell the story themselves. We are permitted to know nearly everything relevant to the accusations they say to their interrogators. All that we are not permitted to know is what the interrogators say to them.” A. J. Cummings, *The Moscow Trial* (Victor Gollancz, London, 1933), cited in Friedrich Adler, “The Witchcraft Trial in Moscow,” *The Opposition: At Home and Abroad* (Nendeln, Lichtenstein: Kraus Reprint, 1975), p. 20n.

the old order. Instructions on how to stage agitation trials explained that they were more convincing if the defendant's guilt or innocence was less obvious so there could be more genuine conflict.⁵³

There was even a small chance that the trial would go "off the rails," i.e., that the wrong side might win if the participants forgot their lines or became confused, or if the stronger orators played the anti-communist side, though this was not desirable.⁵⁴ That chance of failure gave the trials extra piquancy for viewers who perceived that they were witnessing a real conflict, a real trial.⁵⁵

This new kind of ritual placement of the sitting ruler and his party on trial, in fact, filled an important void. Russia, after all, had had no state funeral for Tsar Nicholas II, though it had seen public celebrations of his overthrow in February 1917.⁵⁶ There had been no public trial of this hated tsar, despite the fact that Lenin and Trotsky had seriously considered it.⁵⁷ Between 1918 and 1920, the government published numerous pamphlets and monographs on the significance of the trial and execution of a king in the making of revolution.⁵⁸ Without such a signal event, one source said, all the revolutions after 1789, including the Russian Revolution of 1905, had been "indefinite, unfinished."⁵⁹ Beyond the absence of a trial of Nicholas II, there had also been no inauguration of Lenin as the leader of the nation. The Second Congress of Soviets had endorsed the seizure of power in October 1917, but there had been no formal ceremony installing the Bolsheviks in power.

As James von Geldern has noted, one of the dominant preoccupations of the Bolshevik leadership at this time was to "mark the center," i.e., to demonstrate the legitimacy and focus of the revolution and

⁵³ "Otzyv o Materialakh k Instsenirovannym Sudam (Izd. U.V.O.)," RGVA f. 9, op. 13, d. 97, ll. 109-110.

⁵⁴ "Organizatsiia Proletarskikh Prazdnikov" in N. K. Krupskaya, ed., *Proletarskie Prazdniki v Rabochikh Klubakh* (2nd ed.) (Moscow: Krasnaia Nov', 1924).

⁵⁵ M. Shishkevich, "Metodika Agit-sudov" in V. Boichevskii, V. Malkis, and M. Shishkevich, eds., *Sbornik Agit-sudy* (Moscow: "Novaya Moskva" [Moskovskii Gubpolitprosvet], 1926), p. 5.

⁵⁶ Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, pp. 80-83.

⁵⁷ Leon Trotsky, "Dnevnik," Trotsky Archive, Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS/Russ 13, T3731, p. 110, also translated in *Trotsky's Diary in Exile 1935* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), p. 80; discussion in Mark D. Steinberg and Vladimir M. Khrustalev, *The Fall of the Romanovs* (New Haven, 1995), pp. 287-88.

⁵⁸ N. Antonov, *Karl I-Liudovik XVI-Nikolai II* (Moscow: izd. Vseross. Tsentral'nogo Iсполnitel'nago Komiteta Sovetov R. S. K. i K. [sic] Deputatov, 1918); K. N. Berkova, *Protsess Liudovika XVI* (Moscow: Gosizd., 1920); *Protsess Zhirondistov (Iz Istori Velikoi Frantsuzskoi Revoliutsii)* (Petrograd: izd. sov. rab. i krest. dep., 1919; Gosizd., 1920); P. A. Kropotkin, *Velikata Frantsuzskaia Revoliutsiia* (Moscow: Gosizd., 1917, 1919, 1922).

⁵⁹ Antonov, *Karl I*, p. 14.

the state.⁶⁰ Fred Corney has also written of how the Bolshevik leaders chose to “write” the October Revolution, to create versions that people would “remember” as if they had actually happened.⁶¹ Equally important, I would argue, was the drawing of a sharp distinction between the new order and the old. This new regime was doing something unthinkable in the old tsarist order (and in the later Soviet order as well), namely creating mock trials of the ruling head of state, the ruling party, and the government in power.

This was a useful form, because it could be contained. Through its ceremonial opening and closing and through the enforced submission of the actors and audience to a court hierarchy (from the judge to the guards), the trial format placed bounds on the central conflict, dictating when it began and ended and how much genuine criticism could be voiced.

Above all, such early mock trials ritually expressed genuine conflicts that existed in the society. “The goal of the agitation trials,” noted one speaker at a conference in 1923, “is the exposure [*vylavlenie*] of the negative sides of our life; the agitation trials follow the goal of socializing us [*vospitanie*] in a moral sense.”⁶²

Participants could hear their own voices as expressed in their roles, in their votes for guilt or acquittal, in their discussions after the conclusion of the performance. Through that experience they would be drawn into the clubs and persuaded to become further involved in public productions. For organizers, this meant local people would then find themselves to be the “object-subjects” [*sic*] of work in the clubs and would increasingly come under the clubs’ influence.⁶³ In short, the trial format both constrained its performers and also allowed them a certain amount of creativity in the arguments they made and rebuttals they gave to others’ arguments.

⁶⁰ Von Geldern, esp. ch. 6, “Marking the Center,” pp. 175-207.

⁶¹ Corney, “Writing October.”

⁶² “Agitatsiia, Disputy i Ustgazy (Dokladchik Tov. Abserman),” *Protokol utrennego Zasedaniia Klubnoi Sektsii Konferentsii Politprosvettrabotnikov X-i str. div.*, 2 okt. 1923 g., RGVA f. 9, op. 13, d. 111, l. 226.

⁶³ A. Sipachev, “Massovaia Rabota, kak Rezul'tat Organizatsionnoi Samodeiatel'nosti lacheek Kluba,” *Politrabotnik*, 1 (1922), pp. 75-80.

The trial format also provided a dramatized rite of passage for Lenin and Trotsky as leaders, marking their transition from an underground party resisting the tsarist order to an inaugurated party in power. In the ritualized form of the trial the leaders are separated from the rest of society. Their ideas are put in the dock and declared open for discussion. Once that discussion takes place and the court acquits them, they are returned to their place at the head of the state.⁶⁴

The clubs liked to put on such trials because, as one observer noted, with a minimum effort they could create a maximum impression on the viewer.⁶⁵ As contemporaries were well aware, ordinary citizens were terrified of the courts and avoided any participation in them at all cost.⁶⁶ To witness a trial and even to participate in one – audience members were often chosen as assessors or were allowed to vote at the conclusion of the play – made the whole experience of “trying” the leader’s policies and then acquitting him all the more dramatic.

The trials legitimated Lenin and his party not only by dramatizing the testing and victory of their ideas, but also by positioning them in the long line of great revolutionaries who had been on public trial from the 1860s onward. Lenin, like his entire generation, had been steeped in the heroic cult of those trials and of the defendants who used their trial speeches as virulent attacks on autocracy.⁶⁷ When jury trials were introduced in 1866 and urban Russia became obsessed with them, newspapers published defendants’ attacks on tsarism as official court documents.⁶⁸ As Georgii Plekhanov, Lenin’s mentor in

⁶⁴ The classic works on separation, liminality, and reabsorption into the community are Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960) and Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969); also Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974).

⁶⁵ A. K. Mavrogan, ed. *Spisok Materialov dlia Raboty Dramkruzhkov v Klubakh* (Moscow: Mosk. teatral’noe izd., 1925), p. 3.

⁶⁶ Fainblit, S., “O Formakh Politraboty,” *Puti Politrabotnika* 6 (1921), p. 5. For one historian’s groundbreaking discussion of Russians and the courts, see Stephen P. Frank, “Popular Justice, Community, and Culture among the Russian Peasantry, 1870-1900,” *Russian Review* 46, 3 (July 1987), pp. 239-65. A very popular play at the turn of the twentieth century was “Shemiakin sud” which satirized the corruption and venality of the courts.

⁶⁷ N. A. Troitskii, *Tsarizm pod Sudom Progressivnoi Obshchestvennosti, 1866-1895 gg.* (Moscow, 1979).

⁶⁸ Such reports were published in official journals, including the government’s own *Pravitel’svennyi Vestnik*, as well as in new publications that sprang up to capture the public interest. For discussion of the fascination with jury trials and the connection between law and literature in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russia, see Harriet Murav, *Russia’s Legal Fictions*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998). For more on the jury trials per se, see Jurgen Baberowski, *Autokratie und Justiz: zum Verhältnis von Rechtsstaatlichkeit und Rückständigkeit im Ausgehenden Zarenreich 1864-1914* (Frankfurt am Main, 1996); Samuel Kucherov, *Courts, Lawyers, and Trials under the Last Three Tsars* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1974).

the study of Marxism, noted, the revolutionary trials of the 1870s and 1880s were "the great historical drama which is called the trial of the government by the people."⁶⁹

Once tsarist censorship began to lift following the 1905 Revolution, the newly liberated press raced to print information on the trials of earlier revolutionaries and, above all, their speeches in the dock.⁷⁰ Again and again, the revolutionaries in tsarist Russia used the dock as their tribunal, turning the charges away from themselves and onto the government. One Social Democrat, for example, boasted of "having transformed the tsarist court into a tribunal to unmask tsarism's predatory policies."⁷¹ Lenin himself would also have practiced mock trials as a law student. And he would have been aware that April 17 (the day of his later "trial" in 1920) was the date when tsarist-era lawyers annually celebrated the founding of the reformed jury courts. Thus, by the time of the revolutions of 1917, trials had long served in many ways as a leading means of disseminating critical ideas and demonstrating the heroism of those who withstood their test.⁷²

Conclusion

Such "heroic" trials, i.e., trials of the victors in the revolution, lasted only a very few years. They began in 1920 as experiments. Instructors on the railroads and in the army reported on individual performances of agitation trials before they published any formal instructions and methodologies. They regularly called on the party to study their attempts and issue general guidelines for others.⁷³

⁶⁹ G. V. Plekhanov, "To Russian Society [1879]," cited in Franco Venturi, *Roots of Revolution: A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in Nineteenth-Century Russia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 607.

⁷⁰ The list of publications on trials of revolutionaries in the years 1905-1930 is too long to cite here. Suffice it to say that almost every issue of the journals *Byloe* and *Katorga i Ssylka* carried information on trials. For references, see Venturi, *Roots of Revolution*, pp. 721-836; Troitskii, *Tsarizm pod Sudom*, pp. 292-335; *ibidem*, *Tsarskie Sudy protiv Revoliutsionnoi Rossii* (Saratov, 1976); M. Lemke, *Politicheskie Protsessy v Rossii 1860-kh gg.* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1923); M. N. Kovalenskii, *Russkaia Revoliutsiia v Sudebnykh Protsessakh i Memuarakh* (Moscow, 1924).

⁷¹ F. N. Samoilov, *Po Sledam Minuvshogo* (Moscow, 1954), pp. 314-324, reproduced in A. V. Tolmachev, ed., *Podsudimye Obviniaiat* (Moscow: Gos. Izd. Iuridicheskoi Literatury, 1962), p. 247.

⁷² It is even possible to view these trials of Lenin and the Communist Party as a transmogrified and secularized version of the kenotic (Christ-like) ideals of medieval Russia (Michael Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People: Studies in Russian Myths* [New York, 1961]). As in the ideal medieval world one can see in the Soviet political realm a longing for union between ruler and ruled. The mock trial in this early period was the one place where the ruler appeared to submit to the will of the people. Not surprisingly, these heroic versions of the agitation trials died out almost entirely once Stalin came to power following Lenin's death.

⁷³ Degtiarev, "O Novykh Formakh Politraboty," *Put' Politrabotnika* 8 (1921), pp. 44-45; M. Gekker, "Istoricheskie Otdeleniia i Politrabota v Krasnoi Armii," *Put' Politrabotnika* 8 (1921), p. 52; Karchanskii, *Kollektivnaia Dramaturgiia*, pp. 11-12.

In the end it is impossible to say who authored this "Trial of Lenin" and the other heroic trials. We can, however, say that the authors and producers went to extraordinary lengths to claim that these were spontaneous events designed by and for the working masses. If Lenin and the Communist Party could be "acquitted" in the court of the people, then they would surely be "vindicated" (which is the same word in Russian, *opravdany*) in the court of history. This tiny trial in a railway station in Moscow with an audience of 300 was an experiment in finding new ways to mark the revolution and to mark Lenin's identification with that revolution. Whether any of the accounts of this and other heroic trials were actually true in some absolute sense (whether audiences listened "with great interest," whether they applauded, whether they went on to further discussion of the issues raised) – none of this mattered in comparison with the construction of the particular ceremony of marking Lenin's fiftieth birthday and his "coronation" with a trial. Finally, he too could have his day in court. He and the revolution could be vindicated not only by the court of the people, but also by the court of history.