Radiating the Revolution:

Agitation in the Russian Civil War 1917-21

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REVOLUTION AND CIVIL WAR

When the Bolsheviks seized power in what was essentially a carefully organised *coup d'état* in October 1917, they seized control only of the levers of central power in the then capital, Petrograd, which had already become the centre of working-class discontent. What they most emphatically did *not* do was to seize control over the whole vast territory of the Russian Empire.

Even at the centre, their task was far from easy. Many civil servants who had loyally supported the *ancien régime* were reluctant to work for these dangerous radicals, whom they regarded as usurpers [*zakhvatchiki*]. Outside the main towns and cities of Russia, there was considerable opposition, both spontaneous and organised, to the ideals of what was to become known to historians as the October Revolution, while, beyond the frontiers of Russia proper, a national dimension, often already nascent, began to emerge as a compounding factor for disaffection. While opposition was often fragmented and poorly organised, it was sometimes supported from abroad: Great Britain, France, the new Czechoslovakia and the USA were among the foreign powers to intervene and appear to try to take advantage of Russia's weakness for their own political ends.

Russia was already fighting a foreign war when the October Revolution took place – a demoralising war on what we regard as the Eastern Front against the Central Powers, the other European empires of Germany and Austria-Hungary. As Lenin sued for what eventually became the humiliating Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in the spring of 1918, so war on the Eastern Front gave way to a devastating internal Civil War, with the Red Army, headed by Lev Trotsky, eventually victorious against the disparate forces known collectively as the Whites.

WINNING HEARTS AND MINDS

The January 1918 elections to the Constituent Assembly had confirmed the minority status of the Bolsheviks as a political party whose support and power were mainly confined to the larger towns and cities of what was to become the RSFSR. While the urban working class was seen by Marxists

as the vanguard of the proletariat as a whole, which totality of course included the peasantry, its power in these straitened circumstances remained severely restricted. The peasantry were further disaffected by the policy of grain requisitioning introduced during the Civil War to feed the urban population. In some ways the centralising excesses of the militarisation of the economy under War Communism threatened to derail the Communist experiment altogether. A power base therefore had to be created that would enable the régime to survive in the short term and the new political system to be established and maintained in the medium to longer term. Ultimately that power base had to rest upon public opinion, but that public opinion had to be created and coerced in the chaotic circumstances prevailing in much of the country.

These already complex difficulties were compounded by the enormously varied composition of the potential political public. The RSFSR covered, as the oft-repeated slogan accurately claimed, 'one sixth part of the Earth' [*shestaya chast' zemli*], at least in terms of its land surface, the territory ranging as it did from the Arctic permafrost to the subtropical regions of the Caucasus and the arid deserts of Central Asia, from the borderlands of Central Europe to the shores of the Pacific. Furthermore, this vast geographical land mass was populated by a multiplicity of ethnic and religious groups, speaking over a hundred different languages and ranging in cultural level from the highly educated to the roughly three-quarters of the population who were functionally illiterate at the time of the 1917 Revolution. To create a coherent public opinion from this hotchpotch was no mean task: even the attempt was heroic in its ambition. Such ambition required a medium that was mobile, flexible and reliable.

The trains were to act as the standard-bearers of revolutionary agitation.

A NEW USE FOR TRAINS

As a minority acting in the name of the majority, the Bolsheviks had been aware of the importance of agitation and propaganda for at least a decade before the October Revolution. The Agitprop (i.e. Agitation & Propaganda) Department of the Bolshevik Party, set up after the Revolution, decided on a unique and dramatic solution to the problem of public opinion during the Civil War and created a network of agit-trains [*agitpoezda*] that could criss-cross the country as deemed necessary by the authorities at the centre. Other modes of transportation were sometimes used, such as agit-steamers that plied their way along Russia's waterways, or fleets of motorcycles that were used in restricted localities, and seven agit-lorries in Petrograd, but the bulk of the effort during the Civil War period went into the trains. The trains were to act as the standard-bearers of revolutionary agitation, especially in areas recently liberated from the White forces, but they were to be supplemented by a network of 'agitational points' [*agitpunkty*], placed at strategic points such as railway junctions or large settlements. 140 such points were established by decree in May 1919, with a further 220 being set up in 1920.

The first agit-train was, perhaps not surprisingly, named after the leader of

Pictures from left:
A typical audience for the 'Red East' train.

Kalinin reviewing Red Army troops from an agit-train.

More accessible painting: 'Soviet cinema is the theatre of the people... The Sun of the Soviet Revolution illuminates the path to knowledge and truth.'

the Revolution, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin: it became the model for the others but was in turn an extension of the post-Revolutionary practice of having a propaganda compartment in every Red Army troop train to maintain morale and ideological rectitude. Hurriedly prepared and painted, the *V.I. Lenin* left Moscow on its maiden voyage for Kazan, the capital of the

Tartars roughly 1,500 kilometres to the east on the banks of the Volga, on 13 August 1918. The train varied in composition, consisting of between seven and nine coaches equipped with a library and bookshop, as well as offices and living quarters. The trip lasted just over two weeks, during which time the crew distributed newspapers and leaflets to Red Army troops stationed along the track. This experiment among the military was deemed to have been so successful that a decision was taken to extend the idea to the civilian population. In January 1919 the Praesidium of the Party's Central Executive Committee set up a Special Commission directly subordinate to itself to run the planned fleet of trains and also reserved to itself the right to appoint directly the political commissars who would manage the trains. This was a sure sign of the importance attached to the experiment and of the necessity of radiating the revolution and its propaganda out from the Red Army and into the broader swathes of the civilian population at large. Indeed, the January 1919 decree specifically refers to the need to establish contact between the centre and the regions, so it is small wonder that the trains became known by the not very catchy nickname of the 'Central Executive Committee on rails'!

Trotsky, then still People's Commissar for War and thus head of the Red Army, ordered five more 'literary-instructional' trains from the Moscow regional railway, although for technical reasons the last of these was not delivered until 1920. The second generation of trains was more ambitious than the *V.I. Lenin*. These trains were longer – between sixteen and eighteen coaches – and had both an internal telephone link and a radio transmitter-receiver to communicate with their home base in Moscow. Each train had a staff of approximately eighty variously qualified people in addition to the train crew. One of the contemporary criticisms of the staffing policy was that the train journeys were seen as a kind of rest cure for ailing comrades, who then either refused to do their fair share of the work or did it and destroyed their health completely.

In the first burst of revolutionary artistic fervour these trains were originally painted with symbolic and often abstract motifs representing the functions of the trains themselves or the main ideas and policies that they were trying to promote: El Lissitsky and Alexandra Exter were two of the artists involved. To the predominantly illiterate and (in urban intelligentsia terms) uncultured peasant audience these motifs remained largely obscure, at least rather mystifying and all too frequently downright unintelligible. Since this tended to put them off the message that the crew was trying to communicate, the trains were quickly re-painted with more realistic images. One Russian cultural historian, T.I. Volodina, has recently broken these images down into their principal thematic symbols: the (usually rising) sun; the globe; the banner; the hammer and sickle; the hammer and anvil; the five-pointed star; the conflagration of world revolution; the 'reptiles of capitalism' (the serpent, the Hydra, the dragon); the red knight; the fortress; the red broom; Lenin's light bulb [*lampochka Il'icha*] – representing electrification; the human hand in various gestures: pointing, summoning, clenched and giving; marching; smoking chimneys; and, finally, the steam locomotive – all symbols of urbanisation and industrialisation and, at that time, also symbols of modernisation and progress. It was no accident that these symbols subsequently became the staple diet of Soviet propaganda poster art. In this narrow field alone the agit-trains played an important part in European cultural history.

On the inside the trains were divided into different working sections. The most important were the Political Department, which controlled political instruction and agitational lectures, and the Information Department, which helped to prepare the appropriate propaganda material. Interestingly, there was also a Complaints Department, which received petitions from the populace and passed on important data on the sources of political discontent both to its own Political Department, who might be able to defuse the situation locally, and to the central authorities in Moscow. So the use of the focus group is not such a recent invention after all. But it had a darker legacy in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe. The box on the outside of the agit-train carriage where the peasantry could leave their anonymous complaints became in Stalin's time the box where anonymous denunciations could be posted, so that what began as a genuine and rather innocent attempt to consult the population soon

became distorted into a cynical and brutal attempt to control it.

Each train also had a ROSTA Department. ROSTA – the Russian Telegraph Agency – commissioned a very famous series of poster poems, known as 'ROSTA windows', with cartoon sketches by some of the leading artists of the new generation, such as El Lissitsky and Dmitri Moor, accompanied by rhyming couplets penned by the leading 'poet of the Revolution' (as Stalin called him after his suicide), Vladimir Mayakovsky, amongst others. The ROSTA Department on an agit- train organised the publication of newspapers, leaflets, posters and poster poems and it was also responsible for the train's radio transmitter-receiver and thus for its communications with the outside world. Most trains also had a bookstore, a more general shop, an exhibition space and a Film Department. The management of the train as a whole was supervised by a political commissar directly appointed by the Party Praesidium, once more underlining the significance attached to the experiment. At one time the *October Revolution* train was managed by Mikhail Kalinin, who was shortly to become the equivalent of Soviet President, while the agit-steamer *Red Star* was managed by Vyacheslav Molotov, later Stalin's Foreign Minister, with Lenin's wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, who was head of the Extra-Mural Department of the People's Commissariat for Education (*Narkompros*) as representative of the Commissariat on board.

Film played an important part in the life of the agit-trains for several reasons. First and foremost film, where it was available (and that was an important caveat in an era of such widespread shortages), had several advantages over other media. The moving silent picture was dynamic and

Picture oppositte page:
The 'Red East' with slogans painted in both Cyrillic and Arabic script.

Pictures from above:
Abstract painting of the film coach of the 'October Revolution'.

The 'Red Cossack' painted to appeal to women.

The 'Red Cossack' painted to appeal to men.

Film coach painted with slogans urging that cleanliness is essential for good health.

did not depend on language-specific dialogue to communicate its meaning: this made it ideally suitable for propaganda aimed at such a heterogeneous multilingual and multicultural audience. The shortage of raw film stock, which resulted partly from the import ban in the First World War and partly from the disruption caused by Revolution and Civil War, had led the Soviet authorities to promote the development of short agitational films on a single topic, the *agitka*, plural *agitki*. Of the ninety-two films produced by Soviet film organisations during the Civil War sixty-three were *agitki*, most of them less than 600 metres long, or less than thirty minutes when projected. Sometimes these films had an acted story line like the conventional feature film or melodrama, but more often they were made in the format of an educational documentary or training film. Their short length necessitated a more dynamic use of editing, or 'montage' as it became known in Russia. The practical experience gained, either in the propaganda front line on the agit-trains or back in Moscow at the editing table, played a significant part in the development of the specifically Soviet school of montage film-making. Amongst the film-makers involved in this process were Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Lev Kuleshov and Esfir Shub.

A number of the films shown were aimed specifically at children, inaugurating a long tradition during the Soviet period. Some adult-orientated *agitki* were devoted to topics of general interest, while others dealt with a more specific or localised issue. Lenin was particularly impressed by a 1920 film: *Gidrotorf*, which explained the advantages of lifting peat by the use of hydraulic rather than horse or man power. Many films depicted the horrors inflicted on the toiling masses under the *ancien régime*, the perils of counter-revolution, foreign intervention and restoration, the trials of the Whites associated with this and the alleged benefits and superiority of Soviet justice.

We can also see the beginnings of the Stalinist leadership cult at this time. Historically the Orthodox Church had forbidden 'graven images' of mere mortals, so the appearance of the new leadership in newsreels and other films endowed them with 'immortal' qualities. Despite Lenin's well-known aversion to his own deification, he was shown in a widely distributed newsreel walking in the Kremlin grounds in order to scotch rumours that he had been assassinated, while there is also evidence that some peasants were unable to conceive of him except in terms of the old system as anything other than 'the new tsar'.

In the course of the Civil War the agit-trains covered the parts of the country that were served by the then existing railway network. Following its initial trip the *V.I. Lenin* travelled across the Baltic coastal region from Pskov through present-day Latvia, Lithuania and Belorussia to the Ukraine. This region had recently been liberated from the Germans. In the autumn of 1919 the train travelled through Siberia, from Omsk to Ekaterinburg in the Urals, where the tsar and his family had been executed. This area had recently been liberated from Denikin's White army. Following his defeat the *Red Cossack* train toured the Don basin in southern Russia to rally the population behind the Revolution. When the need arose in the summer of 1920 the *Red Cossack* became the *Ukrainian V.I. Lenin* train, moved westwards and was re-decorated with paintings more suited to its new stomping ground. In Central Asia the *Red East* train, with a special section devoted to Islamic affairs, spent six months travelling across Turkestan. Down south the *Soviet Caucasus* travelled with medical and political assistance through the areas infested with malaria. The *October Revolution* train, headed by the future President Kalinin and something of a 'flagship' for the entire fleet, travelled as far afield as Petrograd in the north west, Minsk in the west, Irkutsk in the far east and the Don basin in the south. By the end of 1920 the crew had organised over 430 film shows for an audience exceeding 600,000 people.

Where the railways did not service the local population other modes of transport were conscripted. Some agit-trains had motorcycles (and in winter agit-sledges!) on board to reach the more outlying villages and settlements – and it has to be remembered that in a country like Russia some settlements were indeed outlying. Motorcycles and vans were used in cities such as Petrograd, but in this particular instance they were under local rather than central control.

There was also a small fleet of steamers that were used to ply the rivers of the new Russia. The best documented of these was the *Red Star*, mentioned above, with Molotov and Krupskaya in charge, which steamed down Russia's greatest river, the Volga, from Nizhny Novgorod. Krupskaya's contemporary account of the voyage illustrates the chaotic state to which Russia had been reduced by years of war and revolutionary upheaval. When she and her assistants reached Nizhny Novgorod the local Red Army soldiers refused to let them through because they did not recognise the existence of the central government in Moscow and had not heard of Lenin – and this was eighteen months after the revolution conducted in their name. Communication of more recent news and information therefore became one of the *Red Star*'s most urgent tasks once its voyage was under way.

As the Russian Civil War came to a close in the spring of 1921, the most urgent need for propaganda to win over the population began to be replaced by the sticks and carrots of Lenin's New Economic Policy. The

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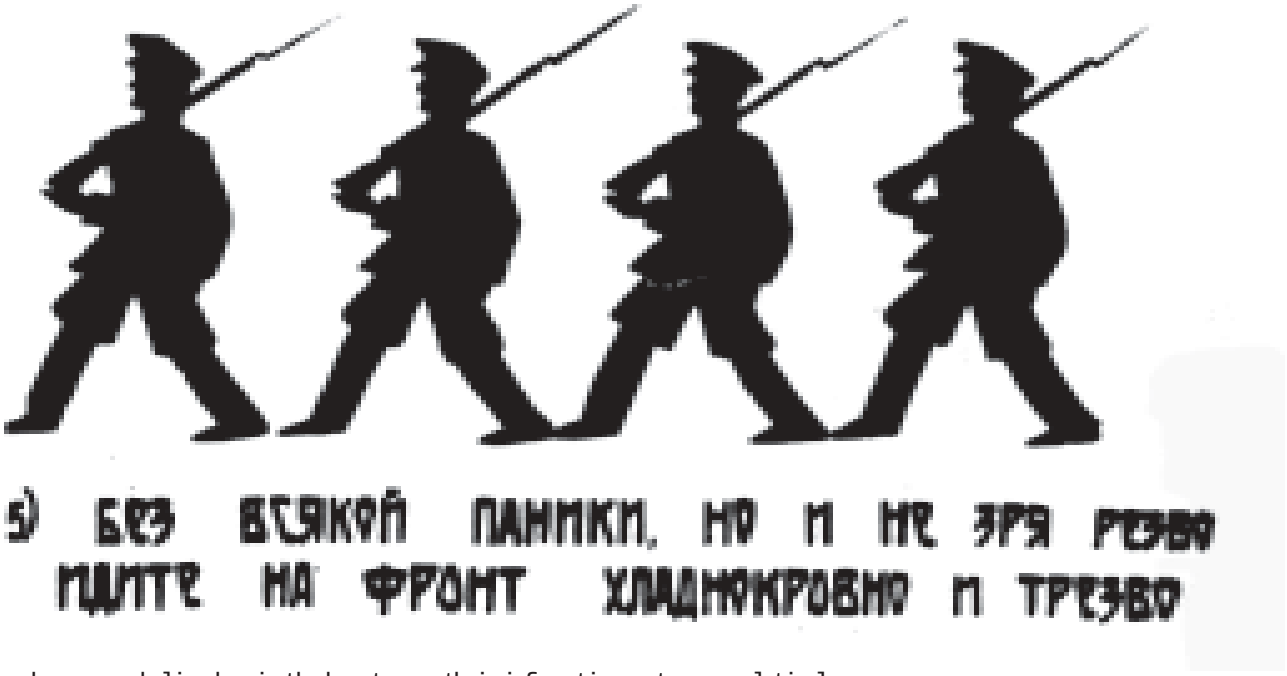
network of agit-trains was slowly disbanded, although the idea was resurrected during Stalin's Five-Year Plans, most notably in the film train run by Alexander Medvedkin. A direct line can be drawn from the education and training offered during the Civil War and that proffered in the later war against perceived 'saboteurs and wreckers'. The need, both real and imagined, for agitation and propaganda lived on in the hearts and minds of the Soviet leadership.

It is impossible to gauge the precise degree of success of the agit-trains and steamers in persuading the provincial and largely rural population of Russia of the advantages of the new Bolshevik way of doing things. There are no reliable statistics about what we might call geographical or ideological penetration and, even if we knew such things as precisely how many people had actually experienced the activities of the network directly, there are still a multiplicity of other factors that come into play in influencing and determining the volatile phenomenon that we call public opinion. What we can say, however, is that the agit-trains represented the first consistent attempt deliberately to propagandise an entire population in a way that became all too familiar in the subsequent development of the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century – most notably, Mussolini's Italy, Stalin's Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and Hitler's Third Reich.

More recently such efforts at 'opinion management', albeit by considerably subtler means, have become increasingly evident in contemporary states whose populations like to think of their political systems as altogether more open, liberal and democratic, and of their information systems as relatively un-doctored. It is in this historical context of the developing importance of the media in modern political systems, and of their management or manipulation through propaganda, that the significance of the early Soviet experiment with the agit-trains becomes much more evident, as does the thin line that divides political participation in one system from political mobilisation in another.



ROSTA window depicting the Red Army

FURTHER READING

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