



Spartacus and His Early Soviet Theatrical Representation

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Everyone who is fighting for freedom, for a better future for humanity, will put on their placard just one word – and this word will be Spartacus.

Vladimir Mazurkevich, 1920.¹

INTRODUCTION

In some respects, the year 1918 predetermined the future of the Classics in the early Bolshevik republics. It was in that year that Lenin's plan of "Monumental Propaganda" emerged, which provided the first official list of Bolshevik heroes of the past and indicated to whom new monuments should be erected. This plan originally comprised two documents: an April statement that demanded the destruction and removal of monuments to the czars and their servants, and a July decree that enlarged the list and ordered the design of new monuments to the socialist revolution.² This task was pri-

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- 1 Finishing this article would have been far easier in times of peace. Russia began a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. I dedicate this article to my colleague, the historian Dmytro Yevdokymov (b. 1998), who gave his life defending the Ukrainian people in late March 2022, and to everyone defending and supporting Ukraine today. I am grateful to Henry Stead for inviting me to the workshop in October 2021 and for his attentive remarks and kind suggestions when editing this article. My anonymous reviewer/s significantly contributed to the final shape and methodology of this essay.
- 2 Stead and Paulouskaya, "Classics, Crisis and the Soviet Experiment to 1939," 128–36; "Decree on Monuments of the Republic," 95–7; "Decree on the Approval of the List of Monuments to the Great People," 118–9.

marily entrusted to a special committee comprising the Commissar of Enlightenment (Education), the Commissar of the Property of the Republic (Finances), and the chair of the art department at the Commissariat of Enlightenment.

One of the Soviet leaders responsible for the politics of remembrance, Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875–1933), soon announced: “We begin to erect in the public gardens and other districts of the capital monuments which will rather pursue the purpose of wide propaganda than immortalization.”³ Early in August of 1918, a list of monuments that were supposed to be erected in Moscow and across socialist Russia was published.⁴ The list included six categories. The first, entitled “Revolutionaries and Public Leaders,” began with Spartacus, followed by Tiberius Gracchus and Marcus Junius Brutus. No monuments, however, to Gracchus or Brutus appeared within the next two decades, and even Spartacus remained a rare subject of Soviet sculpture, appearing only in the later periods of the Soviet era.⁵ Although it was easy enough for the classically-educated Marx and Engels to establish continuity between these ancient figures and the proletarian revolution, it was clearly more problematic for their Soviet descendants to harness any such continuity to propagandistic ends.⁶ This difficulty ensured that Spartacus, Brutus, and Gracchus were kept on the margins of communist monumental politics. The politics of monumental commemoration was rather biased toward the heroes of the modern world. Especially common were statues commemorating Karl Marx (1818–1883); communist and military leaders, such as Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) and Joseph Stalin (1878–1953); poets like Taras Shevchenko (1814–1861) or Mikhail Lermontov (1814–1841); French revolutionaries, including Maximilien Robespierre (1758–1794), Georges Danton (1759–1794) and Jean-Paul Marat (1743–1793); Red Army soldiers; and abstract “Heroes of the Revolution.”

3 Lunacharsky, *Ob Izobrazitel'nom Iskusstve*, 51–2; translation mine.

4 “The List of Figures to Whom Monuments Should Be Erected in Moscow and Other Cities of RSFSR.” See also *Dekrety Sovetskoy Vlasti*, t. III, 118–9; Michalski, *Public Monuments*, 109; Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 89. There were no other Greco-Roman heroes than Spartacus, Gracchus, and Brutus on the list.

5 For instance, one of the very few monuments to Spartacus in Ukraine was erected in Odesa as late as 1988.

6 See selected mentions about Marx and Engels reading the Classics: Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* 41, xxiii, 265; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* 42, 17, 31, 52. For a recent overview of Marx’s knowledge of ancient history, see Nippel, “Marx and Antiquity,” 185–208.

Nevertheless, unlike Gracchus or Brutus – who never quite captured the Soviet imagination as they might have – Spartacus remained firmly on the Bolshevik agenda, entering public discourse by other means than visual monuments. His prominent representation in history-writing and textbooks, toponymy, onomastics, and sport⁷ all contributed to Spartacus' unrivaled reputation in the early Soviet era as a precursor to the Bolshevik hero.

Theater and mass performances beginning in the 1920s also helped shape the proto-Soviet image of Spartacus. Such spectacles were especially effective in conveying simple messages to large audiences. They proliferated in the revolutionary era primarily due to the “vacuum of authority and control” that followed the October Revolution.⁸ Censorship principles and practices were rapidly changed. Together with the ostentatious willingness of the Bolsheviks to create a new proletarian culture, such changes sparked many artistic and theatrical experiments, including those engaging with the image of Spartacus. It is important to remember that until the late 1920s, Soviet culture was open to new, experimental tendencies in art, literature, cinema, and theater. In the 1930s, however, this all stopped. The repression of Ukrainian non-conformist authors, poets, and intellectuals, for example, was in line with the wider curtailment of artistic freedoms throughout the Soviet Union and Soviet-inspired states.

Theater and cinema had long been considered entertainments for the bourgeoisie. After the revolution, these media forms were opened up to the proletariat. Tickets became affordable and new cinemas opened across the cities of the Soviet Union.⁹ While their programming was not yet extensive, the sheer number of films, frequently experimental, produced by such artists as Dziga Vertov (1896–1954, ca. 26 films), Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948, 14 films), and Oleksandr Dovzhenko (1894–1956, c. 15 films), who began their careers in the 1920s and 1930s, indicates the high status that cinematography acquired in the newly founded Bolshevik state. Film and performance art more broadly became key mechanisms for promoting Bolshevik ideas.¹⁰ This essay

7 In Soviet sport, Spartacus gave his name to the famous Spartakiads (Spartacus competitions) and to “the people’s team” Spartak, e.g., the famous FC Spartak Moscow (est. 1922).

8 For the concept of the “vacuum of authority and control,” see John Von Szeliski, “Lunacharsky and the Rescue of Soviet Theatre,” 416.

9 Maksakov, “Teadelo na Ukraine,” 20. In 1928, the price for a theatre ticket in Ukraine was 73 kopecks compared to 1 ruble 43 kopecks before 1914.

10 Maksakov, “Teadelo na Ukraine,” 20.

will concentrate mainly on theater, with some attention paid to mass performances, where the material remains are comparatively scarce.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

Mass propaganda, or controlling the minds of the crowd, has been crucial for achieving specific political goals since antiquity.¹¹ In the aftermath of the Bolshevik coup in 1917, the role of mass performances and theater was reconsidered as they achieved new significance in their capacity for influencing the citizens of the newly established Soviet republics.¹² Although these republics were officially independent states under separate Bolshevik governments, Ukraine, Belarus, and the Caucasian republics were under the implicit control of the central government in Soviet Russia. A decision made in Moscow on a particular matter promptly became a guiding light for other republics.¹³ The Greco-Roman classics and the educational discipline founded upon them, which in the czarist era (as in contemporary Western Europe) was considered a marker of high cultural achievement and intellectual esteem, also experienced a new fate.¹⁴ As Stead and Paulouskaya have shown, before the Stalinist suppression of a cultural practice widely associated with the *ancien régime*, revolutionary Russia experienced a flood of classical culture, as the wave of the so-called Slavic renaissance broke on the seemingly impervious shores of the emerging Soviet republics.¹⁵ This article explores how and why the image of Spartacus was employed in early Bolshevik propaganda.

Since the role of toponymy, sport, and history-writing in shaping the image of Spartacus is relatively well explored, other key issues shall be the focus here.¹⁶ First, the utility of the ancient hero in Bolshevik propaganda will be investigated. Second, the way Soviet theater and mass performance became an important site for experimentation

11 See several classical works on the topic, beginning with Republican Rome: Mouritsen, *Plebs and Politics in the Late Roman Republic*; Morstein-Marx, *Mass Oratory and Political Power in the Late Roman Republic*; Jakobson, *Elections and Electioneering in Rome*; Edwards Jr., *Luther's Last Battles*.

12 Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 93–7.

13 Heller and Nekrich, *Utopia in Power*, 70–7.

14 Stead and Paulouskaya, “Classics, Crisis and the Soviet Experiment to 1939,” 142; Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front*, 37–64.

15 Stead and Paulouskaya, “Classics, Crisis and the Soviet Experiment to 1939,” 128–47.

16 Phillis, “Spartacus and Sports in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe”; Rudenko, “The Making of a Soviet Hero.”

with the classical will be demonstrated. Third, the representation of Spartacus and his uprising in the most important Soviet plays and performances created in the first few years after the October revolution will be analyzed. The greatest attention will be paid to the two most popular dramas about Spartacus' uprising, which were written by Vladimir Mazurkevich (1920) and Vladimir Volkenstein (1921).¹⁷ Where available, contemporary critical reviews will be used in determining how the plays were received. Finally, the narratives of Spartacus' uprising will be compared in order to show how each writer reflects upon the events surrounding the 1917 Revolution through the lens of the ancient world.

Given the centrality of classical education among the intelligentsia and Czarist cultural practice more broadly, it is perhaps unsurprising that classical antiquity should have played a crucial role in Bolshevik propaganda after 1917. Classical culture's associations with Czarism and aristocratic power made it an attractive area to turn upside down. Revolutionary examples from antiquity would help the Bolsheviks implement their proletarian narratives into the public sphere. These narratives emphasized several key features: class struggle, modest descent as a defining factor of a human's worth, the destruction of the state, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the fight against the bourgeoisie (broadly defined).¹⁸ It was, however, not easy to find a proletarian or socialist hero in the distant past. The democratic system of Athens or the military devotion of Sparta did not align with Bolshevik political concepts, which primarily praised the dictatorship of the proletariat.¹⁹

Where then to look for heroes of antiquity, suitable for symbolizing seemingly eternal proletarian ideals? The solution was clear to the Bolshevik leaders: in figures *opposing* those regimes. Hence the appearance of the three ancient heroes in Lenin's above-mentioned plan: Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, Spartacus, and Marcus Junius Brutus.²⁰ Both Gracchus and Brutus originated from aristocratic families, and despite the simplified historical narrative about their resistance toward the *optimates* and Caesar, neither of them could serve as a convincing example in a discourse of class struggle. A slave,

17 When referring to the plays about Spartacus, I use "drama" and "play" interchangeably, bearing in mind that the plays about Spartacus' uprising were only dramas.

18 Heller and Nekrich, *Utopia in Power*, 50–77. Lenin formulated these key postulates in his *State and Revolution*, written in August–September of 1917.

19 Chiesa, "Lenin and the State of the Revolution," 106–31.

20 A hero, in this case, does not imply any axiological value.

however, a gladiator with humble Thracian origins, thus descending from the “periphery” of the ancient world, without any preserved images or detailed biography, absolutely could. As Frederick Ahl bluntly put it, “Spartacus was the historical proof that these people could rise and menace any society which had wealthy employers and mistreated employees, even though his rebellion was ultimately crushed.”²¹ The Bolsheviks henceforth considered themselves as the revolutionaries who successfully managed to convert the actions of their revolutionary predecessors, including the Spartacists, into a new society. The image of Spartacus therefore became that of a heroic proto-Bolshevik revolutionary in the Soviet republics in the first two decades of their existence.

SPARTACUS AND THE CLASS STRUGGLE

In the unofficial competition between the “big three” ancient revolutionaries, Spartacus acquired several other advantages over Gracchus and Brutus. In a frequently cited letter to Engels, Marx called Spartacus “the most capital fellow in the whole history of antiquity” and a “real representative of the proletariat of ancient times.”²² Consequently, according to the quasi-religious adherence of Soviet society to the writings of Marx, Spartacus’ uprising became a seminal and exemplary revolutionary event in world history. Furthermore, in a speech at the Polytechnic Museum in Moscow in 1918, none other than Lenin referred to Spartacus as an initiator of the war, “fighting against the yoke of capitalism.”²³ With the advocacy of both eponymous fathers of Marxism-Leninism, who both readily projected the language of capitalism and class struggle back into antiquity, it is no wonder Spartacus was so widely celebrated in the Soviet republics. Lenin’s speech and the general attitude of the Bolshevik leaders toward Spartacus defined the future image of Spartacus in the Soviet era both inside and beyond the academy.

21 Ahl, “Spartacus, Exodus, and Dalton Trumbo,” 77.

22 “Spartacus emerges as the most capital fellow in the whole history of antiquity. Great general, of noble character, a real representative of the proletariat of ancient times.” See Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* 41, 265.

23 All translations from the Russian are mine unless otherwise stated. Lenin, “The State: A Lecture Delivered at the Sverdlov University,” 470–88. George Hanna’s translation seems to be slightly incorrect as in its original version Lenin claimed that Spartacus began the war “in the defence of the suppressed class.” For Russian original see Lenin, “Rech na mitinge v Politekhicheskom muzee,” т. 37, 65–70.

Yet, the transition of historiographical discourse toward a uniform class-struggle narrative was not entirely smooth. It began to be implemented in the 1920s, when it was adopted in the first Soviet textbooks, but it became predominant only in the 1930s.²⁴ This period of transitioning from Russian imperial scholarship to the newly established Soviet historiography was not merely academic but heralded serious real-world implications. This era, for example, brought with it significant changes in the composition of ancient history departments at institutes and universities.²⁵ It also led to the substitution of leading historians from the Czarist era with the newly-emerging ‘stars’ of Greco-Roman studies in the USSR, such as Alexandr Mishulin (1901–1948) – who named his nephew Spartak – and Sergei Utchenko (1908–1976).²⁶

Finally, by naming their revolutionary movement after Spartacus, the German communist movement *Spartakusbund* (the Spartacus League), created in 1916, attempted to establish historical continuity in the Bolshevik struggle for power.²⁷ In a powerful act of invoking ancient exemplarity, Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919) even conflated the name of Spartacus with German communism in her 1918 speech: “We of the Spartacus Group, we of the Communist Party of Germany, are the only ones in all Germany who are on the side of the striking and fighting workers.”²⁸ Hence, the broad lacunae in Spartacus’ own biography, his ostensibly modest (or at least unknown) descent – which fitted within the narrative of the centuries-long struggle in defense of the “oppressed class,” his recognition in the Marxist-Leninist scriptures as one of the key symbols of the ancient proletariat, and his invoca-

24 Rubinsohn, *Der Spartakus-Aufstand*, 14–5, 48.

25 Mishulin, “Drevniaia istoriia v srednei i vysshei shkole,” 9–15; Braginskaya, “Studying the History,” 35–50. On the fate of classical pedagogy in the early Soviet Union, see, e.g., the contributions of Braginskaya, Budaragina, Fayer and Yasinovskiy in Movrin and Olechowska, *Classics and Class*; Takho-Godi and Rosenberg, “Classical Studies in the Soviet Union,” 123–27. For Soviet classics, see Baryshnikov, “New Threats, Old Challenges,” 3–6, with a full bibliography of Russian language sources. See also Karpyuk and Malyugin, “Soviet antiquity, view from the 21st century,” 459–64; Krikh, *Obraz drevnosti v sovetskoy istoriografii: konstruirovaniye i transformatsiya*, 118–41.

26 See more in Rubinsohn, *Der Spartakus-Aufstand*; Rudenko, “The Making of a Soviet Hero,” 342–46. See also Shaw, *Spartacus and the Slave Wars*, 17. Spartak Mishulin (1926–2005) became a celebrated Soviet actor.

27 Rubinsohn, *Der Spartakus-Aufstand*, 9.

28 Luxemburg, “On the Spartacus Programme (December 1918),” 87–90; Rubinsohn, *Der Spartakus-Aufstand*, 9.

tion by the German radical left, all reserved for the humble Thracian gladiator a central place in the front rank of early Soviet pageantry.²⁹

Raffaello Giovagnoli's novel *Spartaco* (1874) was translated into Russian in 1881. It has been cited by Richard Stites as one of the key "radical propaganda stories" to which "conscious workers" in the Soviet Union were regularly exposed. As we shall see, this novel contributed significantly to the subsequent shaping of Spartacus' image, since it became an important source and model for the Soviet Spartacus plays and films in the 1920s.³⁰ A few decades after its composition, Giovagnoli's tale was to become in the Soviet Union an exemplary historical novel narrating an ancient uprising.

However, the plot of Giovagnoli's novel was more complex than any of the early Soviet plays. The plot begins during Sulla's dictatorship (82–79 BC) and features both Catiline and Julius Caesar as glorious heroes of the ancient struggle against the aristocrats. Giovagnoli introduced dozens of characters, both Roman and gladiator rebels. Thus, *Spartaco* may be seen as providing the sequence of events or the blueprint for the early Soviet dramas. Furthermore, we ought to remember that Giovagnoli presented Spartacus as a "parallel character to Garibaldi." His focus, therefore, was more on unification in the face of a common danger rather than exclusively on the social demands of freedom.³¹ For Giovagnoli, *unity* was the keyword of his novel, but for the Soviet authors, the key idea was the confrontation between slavery and freedom. Each playwright had to decide how closely his script would resemble the well-known Italian novel. There was considerable room for experimentation.

EDUCATING THE MASSES

Theater, mass performance, and cinema became essential channels of Bolshevik propaganda and communication for enlightening the masses.³² Immediately after the revolution, the very idea of the theater was reconsidered. The theater was now required primarily to convey

29 Michalski, *Public Monuments*, 108–12.

30 Siegelbaum and Sokolov, *Stalinism as a Way of Life: A Narrative in Documents*, 83; Gross, *Like a Bomb Going Off: Leonid Yakobson and Ballet as Resistance in Soviet Russia*, 244–5; Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 31. Further work on Giovagnoli's novel would be welcome given its importance in Soviet receptions. Short discussions appear, e.g., in Shaw, *Spartacus and the Slave Wars*, 20–22, and Rudenko, "The Making of a Soviet Hero," 340–2.

31 Lapeña Marchena, "The Stolen Seduction," 175; Hardwick, *Reception Studies*, 41.

32 For a discussion on mass performances, see Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*, 39–46.

Bolshevik narratives to the masses in a clear and simple manner. Anatoly Lunacharsky, the People's Commissar of Enlightenment for the Russian Federation (1917–1921), recognized the theater's utility in shaping the minds of the people.³³ He implemented the idea of “new content in old forms” and promoted ways of rethinking the classics of world culture in diverse formats: dance, theater, poetry, art, and translation.³⁴ Going to the theater became cheaper (sometimes free) in the 1920s, and the theater section of the Commissariat of Enlightenment was established as early as 1918.³⁵

Participation and accessibility were key factors in the prominence of theater in the broader cultural landscape. With levels of illiteracy remaining relatively high in some regions, the audiences for performed spectacles were significantly larger than the readerships of printed works. The key differences between theater and mass performance were: 1) the venue where the play was staged (i.e., in a theater building or in open spaces, such as public squares) and 2) the topic. Mass performance had the potential for large-scale and creative audience participation, which could produce an immersive effect.³⁶ As Natalia Murray has underlined, mass performances promised to bring art to common people, giving them a chance to participate in their very creation. Mass performances – even more than theater and cinema – brought a sense of belonging and immersion in the events the actors were reenacting.³⁷ Such grand spectacles were deemed revolutionary since they eliminated the border between the spectator and the participants, creating a mysterious, quasi-spiritual entity by the end of the performance. Mass spectacles in the early Bolshevik era fostered a specific sense of belonging and collective identity, similar to the role of mass celebrations or carnivals in the Middle Ages.³⁸

Soviet mass performances, however, never focused exclusively on the figure of Spartacus: he was merely one figure among many other revolutionaries. But due to his centrality in revolutionary history, he was one that could not easily be overlooked. These performances often had a peculiar, pageant-like format and their content was

33 Fitzpatrick, *Cultural Front*, 20–2. For more on Lunacharsky, see Fitzpatrick, *Cultural Front*, 90–5.

34 Von Szeliski, “Lunacharsky,” 419; Stead and Paulouskaya, “Classics, Crisis and the Soviet Experiment to 1939,” 129.

35 Von Szeliski, “Lunacharsky,” 416; Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*, 24.

36 Fischer-Lichte, *Transformative Power of Performance*, 37–39, 138.

37 See also Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*, 23.

38 Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*, 39–40; Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 97–100. See also Fischer-Lichte, *Transformative Power of Performance*, 32.

propagandistic, yet the role of contingency, or unpredictability, was significantly higher than in any theatrical play. For example, Spartacus frequently appeared alongside revolutionaries of different eras – French or early modern Muscovite rebels, and the viewers in the streets or city squares gladly joined in singing or marching during the performances. Such performances strove for grandeur and impact rather than historical accuracy, which resulted in historical events being presented in a simplified and unidimensional manner, easily digested by the new mass audience.

New theater journals and magazines were published, highlighting the elevated role the Bolshevik leaders assigned to drama. These included: *Zrelishcha* [Spectacles] (1922–1924), *Vestnik teatra* [Bulletin of Theater] (1919–1921), *Vestnik teatra i iskusstva* [Bulletin of Theater and Art] (1921–1922), *Kultura teatra* [Culture of Theater] (1921–1922), *Zhizn iskusstva* [Art Life] (1923–1929), *Sovremennyi teatr* [Contemporary Theater] (1927–1929), *Novyj zritel* [The New Spectator] (1924–1929), and *Vestnik rabotnikov iskusstva* [Bulletin of Cultural Workers] (1920–1926), to name a few. *Zrelishcha* announced: “We are expecting from the theater something saturated with ideas and meaningful in a dramatical way. We are expecting a theater of a new organizational thought. A play should be a trumpet of new thoughts and feelings, a herald of the new universe.”³⁹ Theater critic Aleksandr Kugel (1864–1928) – who sometimes used the pen name *Homo novus* – claimed that the aims of a theatrical director and performance were “to amaze the audience with something previously unseen and with the originality, or the beauty and amusement of the show.”⁴⁰ These principles were implemented in Soviet plays based on the story of Spartacus.

Theater directors were, of course, crucial intermediaries between the script and the staging of the play. Their roles in early Soviet theater deserve critical attention.⁴¹ Due in part to the difficulty – caused by the Russian aggression against Ukraine and the continuing silence from many Russian scholars – in accessing sources, the following analysis limits its focus to the available published materials. The first Soviet-era Spartacus play appeared before the institutionalization of the image of Spartacus in the Soviet republics. Its author, Yurii Sandomyrskiyi (c. 1870–1927), published his play *Spartacus* in five acts in Odesa in 1917. It is said to have been closely based on Giovagnoli’s

39 Mass, “Nakaz Zimnemu Sezonu,” 4; translation mine.

40 Kugel, “Teatralnyie zametki,” 4; translation mine.

41 For performance reception studies see, e.g., Hall and Harrop, *Theorising Performance*.

Spartaco. Sandomyrskiy's play became the first Spartacus play to be staged in Soviet theaters.⁴² In his play, Sandomyrskiy appears to have employed the same characters, tropes, and narrative lines as Giovagnoli. Giovagnoli's text also stood as a key source for several subsequent dramatic portrayals of the Soviet Spartacus. The 1917 Spartacus play did not gain nearly as much popularity as the following one, written by Vladimir Mazurkevich (1871–1942) and published in Petrograd in 1920.

MAZURKEVICH'S SPARTAK

Giovagnoli's *Spartaco* was at the beginning of Bolshevik representations of Spartacus, yet his word was not the last to be said on the matter. Mazurkevich's *Spartacus: The Slave Uprising* was a short one-act drama (20 pages) about Spartacus and his revolt that craftily depicted the ancient gladiator as the main leader of a great slave revolt. While it was based on the famous novel, its truncated form granted it significant freedom from its source.

The first edition of the published play contains a four-page introduction of unknown authorship, which provided a brief overview of the historical circumstances of the Late Republic. It served as a justification for referring to the figure of Spartacus and established the link between the ancient gladiator uprising and the Bolshevik revolution. The author of the introduction focused on the social division between the patricians and the plebeians and emphasized the emergence of a separate "class of people who had nothing"⁴³ – i.e., a proletarian class (free but impoverished).

After an explanation of the division between patricians and plebeians, the author stated: "in fact, the entire population of Rome was divided into freemen and slaves," underlining once more the Bolsheviks' image of a bipolar world (divided into owners and slaves).⁴⁴ Beyond the inaccurate dating of the beginning of Spartacus' uprising (73–71 BC) as 72 BC, the introduction also provided a simplistic interpretation of Roman history. For example, the author claimed that together with seventy other gladiators, Spartacus headed to Southern Italy and destroyed the cells and prisons on their way, liberating the slaves. Soon after, Spartacus had command over an army of 50,000 soldiers, including

42 Unfortunately, the only readily available edition of Yurii Sandomyrskiy's play can be accessed at the Russian National Library in Saint Petersburg, so at the time of writing, an analysis of the play is impossible.

43 Mazurkevich, *Spartak*, 3; all English translations of the text are mine.

44 *Ibid.*, 4.

shepherds and peasants who were “languishing under the oppression of the landowner-patricians” and “joining Spartacus who saved them from slavery and dependence.”⁴⁵ Unlike Giovagnoli’s novel, credited as its source, the active phase of Spartacus’ uprising was, according to this introduction, limited to 72–71 BC; the introduction also does not go into details of battles, successes, and the various factions within Spartacus’ army.

The final battle, the reader is told, happened during “the siege of Rome” [*sic*], after the rebels persuaded Spartacus to attack the city, yet as it was unsuccessful, Spartacus died and six thousand of the slaves were crucified along the road leading to Rome.⁴⁶ The conclusion of the introduction states:

Spartacus fell, but the enterprise he began is alive and throughout the thousands of years it is resurrected every time in the fire of people’s uprisings. Today, Spartacus’ name is written on the banner of German communists who are leading their proletariat to a social revolution.⁴⁷

The brief historical introduction provided not only general contextualizing information but also offered a vision of continuity between the ancient ideas and the revolutionary reality. This imagined continuity argued for the play’s contemporary relevance, explaining why the figure of Spartacus should matter to the people supporting the Bolsheviks. There is no clear indication of who penned the introduction, since its title is simply “Introduction to Vladimir Mazurkevich’s play.” Given the numerous mistakes in dating and a schematic explanation of Spartacus’ uprising, it seems that the introduction was crafted by someone with limited knowledge of ancient Roman history – or with a desire to simplify the course of events for the audience.

Inconsistencies between the stated source text (*Spartaco*), the introduction, and the text of the play itself occur several times, making it highly unlikely that the introduction was written by Mazurkevich. For instance, in a discussion about the next steps of the gladiator army, Oenomaus (mistakenly called Oknoman) persuades Spartacus that in the beginning of the uprising there were 150 gladiators who escaped from Capua, but their army now consists of 73,000 soldiers.

45 Mazurkevich, *Spartak*, 5.

46 *Ibid.*, 5–6. Mazurkevich preferred historical accuracy – for instance, his version of the final battle happens in Southern Italy instead of Rome – to the impression the play might have on the viewer.

47 *Ibid.*, 6.

The introduction, however, had counted 70 gladiators in the beginning, and their band had grown to an army of 50,000 soldiers; Giovagnoli, on the other hand, amasses an army of 60,000 from 600 gladiators.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, such inconsistencies need not have been conveyed to the viewer, due to the script's intensive focus on the last days of the uprising.

The play offered only a few protagonists: Spartacus, his sister Mirza (a fictional character adopted from Giovagnoli's novel), three gladiators of Gallic, German, and Greek origins, the Roman consul Lucullus, and two unnamed gladiators in the guard.

Mazurkevich continuously emphasized Spartacus' noble goal of world liberation, resembling Giovagnoli in the description of Spartacus' aims ("to install justice and equality in the entire world") and the illustration of treachery and infighting among the gladiators, which led to his ultimate downfall in the battle against the Romans.⁴⁹ Mazurkevich completely ignored the romantic relationship between Spartacus and Valeria Sulla that shines through Giovagnoli's text.⁵⁰ During negotiations with a Roman legate (who turned out to be consul Lucullus – another plot twist adopted from Giovagnoli's novel), Spartacus explicitly argues against the institution of slavery, harking back to times when "everyone worked their own land" in a world with "no proprietors, no slaves, no owners, and no servants."⁵¹

Mazurkevich presented Spartacus' agenda in clearly Bolshevik terms: it was a fight against slavery and landlords, and a struggle for equality among the people. Mirza expresses her opinion of her brother thus: "You, Spartacus, devoted your whole life to the noble aim of liberating the suppressed."⁵² The anthem that the gladiators sing when they are heading to their final battle transmits similar ideas, asking (rhetorically) whether the gladiators would prefer to die in the arena "for the entertainment of the flatulent rich" or during the fight for their freedom.⁵³ This anthem was Mazurkevich's invention. It does not appear in Giovagnoli's novel.

For reader and viewer of the play alike, the comparison between the Roman patricians and Russian imperial landlords must have been obvious. In the introduction, however, the author preferred to make the connection explicit using the technical terms *patritsii* [patricians]

48 Mazurkevich, *Spartak*, 5, 10; Giovagnoli, *Spartaco*, 196.

49 Ibid., 270.

50 Ibid., 129–32.

51 Mazurkevich, *Spartak*, 15; Giovagnoli, *Spartaco*, 264–70.

52 Mazurkevich, *Spartak*, 13.

53 Ibid., 20.

and *pomeshchiki* [landlords], a word used to define the landlords of the Russian Empire, thus a clear symbol of the fallen regime. Surrounding the 1917 Revolution, the theme of land ownership was crucial for the Bolsheviks.⁵⁴ This is perhaps why the vocabulary of landlordism features prominently in the introduction, while in the play the topics of freedom and slavery have center stage.

Later, quarrels in the camp between the gladiators and mistrust and accusations of treachery lead to an unsuccessful battle and the death of Spartacus.⁵⁵ Spartacus, wounded in the battlefield, delivers a speech more consistent with a Bolshevik politician bent on the emancipation of the international proletariat than with a leader of a slave uprising in ancient Rome:

A day will come when in the whole world the suppressed will rise against their oppressors ... They will destroy the old world ... And on the ruins of the past they will build a new world, bright and pleasant, where everyone will be equal, where liberty and equality will reign. Everyone fighting for freedom, for the better future of humanity, need put only one word on their placard – and this word is Spartacus.⁵⁶

This final speech appears to engage with Spartacus' speech from Giovagnoli's novel. Ahead of the final battle, Spartacus claims that "when we die, we will leave as revenge to our successors the flag of freedom and equality, stained with our blood as our legacy."⁵⁷

Mazurkevich's play bears several traces of traditional plays of the Russian Empire. As a transitional play, it is not yet fully fluent in communist parlance. Sometimes the author employs old spelling conventions, and his execution of these conventions is not always free from error. For example, years are counted as the Russian equivalent of BC "before [the birth of] Christ" [*do Rozhdestva Khristova*], instead of BCE "before the Common Era" [*do nashei ery*]; similarly, the interpretation of the goals and motives of the rebellion is simplified. Nevertheless, Mazurkevich was successful in conveying the main action of the Spartacus uprising to a large audience in a short one-act play.⁵⁸

54 Fitzpatrick, *Cultural Front*, 17–9.

55 In Giovagnoli's novel, quarrels occur between a Greek woman, Eutibida, and German and Gallic gladiators. In Mazurkevich's play, the German gladiators are at the origin of the quarrelling.

56 Mazurkevich, *Spartak*, 22.

57 Giovagnoli, *Spartaco*, 399; Hutcheon and O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 20.

58 The publication of Mazurkevich's play went almost unnoticed until the first plays were staged. It was published "on spec," or as literature, i.e., ahead of any

VOLKENSTEIN'S SPARTAK

The same year as Mazurkevich's play was published, *Vestnik Teatra* announced a competition for authors to write a play about a revolutionary character, and Giovagnoli's *Spartaco* was again mentioned as the primary example.⁵⁹ We should not, however, jump to the conclusion that the winner fully adopted *Spartaco* as a template without making his own unique contribution. The prize money was significant: 30,000 rubles for the runner-up and 40,000 rubles for the best revolutionary play. Next year, *Kultura Teatra* notified that the state printing agency accepted Vladimir Volkenstein's (1883–1974) tragedy *Spartacus* (5 acts in ca. 70 pages) for print and for staging in the First Theater of the Russian Socialist Republic.⁶⁰ Reinhold Gliere (1875–1956), one of the most famous composers of the era, was commissioned to arrange a musical accompaniment for the play's production in Moscow's Bolshoi Theater.⁶¹

Volkenstein based his *Spartacus* on Plutarch's biography of Crassus, but he also refers to information sourced from other ancient texts.⁶² Volkenstein's sources might have been especially diverse because he was a graduate of Saint Petersburg University and spent a year at Heidelberg University in Germany, famous for its classical scholarship.⁶³ He mentions, for example, the wars with Mithridates and the figures of Lucullus and Gaius Marius, whose description is found in the works of Plutarch, Appian, Sallust, and Livy.⁶⁴ But he also worked from his imagination, creating several of his own characters, including two female advisers to Spartacus, Melissa and Julia, who do not feature in Giovagnoli's novel.⁶⁵

theatrical production. No significant reviews appeared following its publication.

Although the play was later staged in some local theatres, it was not reprinted, and thus only a few copies of the 1920 edition have been preserved.

59 "Konkurs Proletkulta," 19.

60 "Tragedii V. M. Volkensteina," 52.

61 "Bolshoi Teatr," 53.

62 Plutarch, *Life of Crassus*, 8–11.

63 Henry, "Les Errants de Vladimir Volkenstein au premier Studio du Théâtre d'Art," 80.

64 Plutarch, *Life of Pompey* 21.1–4; Plutarch, *Life of Crassus* 8–11; Appian, *Roman History: The Civil Wars* 1.14.116–21; Sallust, *Histories* 3, fr. 90–94, 96–102, 106; 4, fr. 22–23, 25, 30–33, 37, 40–41; Livy, *Summaries* 95–97; Shaw, *Spartacus and the Slave Wars*, 130–51.

65 Volkenstein, *Spartak*, 8–107. This edition was based on the original play staged in the Theatre of the Revolution in 1923 with only minor details changed since 1920 version.

The play takes place between 73–71 BC and unlike Mazurkevich's play or Giovagnoli's novel, they begin in the gladiator school in Capua. Here, Spartacus is ordered to kill his best friend Berisad in the gladiators' playfield – another departure from Giovagnoli's plot.⁶⁶ Berisad, however, persuaded Spartacus before the battle to make an oath that in case the bloodthirsty crowd of Romans should demand him to kill Berisad, Spartacus will organize a revolt and force the gladiators to escape their slavery.⁶⁷ In response Spartacus claims that “freedom must return to us; the sky and earth will be ours,” defending personal [*sic*] freedom as the highest value.⁶⁸

Counterposing Spartacus to the “old regime,” Volkenstein depicts the Romans as crude, petty and greedy people. Giovagnoli, by comparison, shows a fascination with the Roman army in his novel. In Volkenstein's *Spartak*, for example, the main concern of the praetor Toranius upon hearing of Spartacus' revolt is that it will result in the cancelation of the gladiatorial games that he was traveling to Capua to see.⁶⁹ Additionally, the least frivolous news discussed among the aristocratic characters is that Crassus has bought himself a new mansion.⁷⁰

The Romans are also characterized as cowards. Several candidates for consulships withdraw themselves for fear of Spartacus' army.⁷¹ The only Roman who dared undertake the military campaign against the slaves was Crassus, but even he was motivated more by envy of Pompey, who had been called back to Italy by the Senate, than by patriotism.⁷² The Romans exhibit no sense of patriotism or honor throughout: Crassus even claims that if Spartacus were to capture Rome, he would simply escape to his new estate on Crete.⁷³ Such a disparaging characterization of the Romans was a significant departure from Giovagnoli's novel.⁷⁴ In the latter, the Romans are

66 Volkenstein, *Spartak*, 24–26.

67 *Ibid.*, 20–21.

68 *Ibid.*, 28–29.

69 Although Toranius was a quaestor at the time, Volkenstein mistakenly calls him a praetor. See Sallust's account in Shaw, *Spartacus and the Slave Wars*, 145.

70 Volkenstein, *Spartak*, 32, 38, 73.

71 *Ibid.*, 39–41.

72 *Ibid.*, 75–77.

73 *Ibid.*, 76.

74 Discrepancy between Volkenstein's and Giovagnoli's representation of the Roman commanders became a reason for Stepun's critique of Volkenstein's

described as worthy opponents of the gladiators, putting the two armies on par. Spartacus invests much effort, for example, to model his army on the Roman legions. Moreover, he considered Crassus to be one of the most notable Roman commanders.⁷⁵

Meanwhile, Volkenstein describes Spartacus' intentions with a great deal of pathos, following the tradition established by Giovagnoli.⁷⁶ In Volkenstein's narrative, Spartacus' main desire was not merely to free the slaves who had joined his army, but rather to trigger the overthrow of slavery and tyranny worldwide and put power in the hands of the slaves. This would be a slave revolution to match the Bolshevik drive toward a worldwide proletarian revolution. Beyond simple freedom, Spartacus believed that "the world ought to belong to the slaves. The ground is fortified with their work, they created the roads, buildings, and temples." "Let the decrepit structure of Rome fail," implores Spartacus, "It was cruel. On its wicked ruins, I will erect a glorious state."⁷⁷ The desire to build a new state is shown more explicitly here than in Mazurkevich's short play. Spartacus, however, remains the key political agent compared to the depersonalized historiographic concept of a slave revolution (or mass agency) that would become more common in the 1930s. Spartacus, in the more pageant-like mass performances, for example, would feature as merely one of the many historical figures involved in an ancient fight for the "new order," which closely resembled Bolshevik aspirations.

The play presents the slave camp as internally divided on the question of Spartacus' motivation: Is he motivated by revenge or the desire to construct a new world? Predictably, as a heroic leader of the revolution and as a tragic hero, Spartacus is shown to follow the second, idealistic path, driven as he is to "create a new law" and urging his comrades that even if their uprising fails, "another army will gloriously finish our affair," again hinting at the Bolshevik present.⁷⁸ Similarly to Mazurkevich's play, Volkenstein's drama depicts the camp of the slaves as being ravaged by mistrust and treason, resembling the earlier description in Giovagnoli.⁷⁹ The Gauls and the Germans are strongly

drama, reviewed below. See Stepun, "O Suschnosti Tragedii," 37–43.

75 Lapeña Marchena, "The Stolen Seduction," 175; Giovagnoli, *Spartaco*, 265, 386.

76 "Is it the freedom we are bringing to all the slaves?" wondered Spartacus in Giovagnoli's *Spartaco*, 210.

77 Volkenstein, *Spartak*, 43–44, 52, 103.

78 *Ibid.*, 72, 98–99.

79 Giovagnoli, *Spartaco*, 314–27.

implicated, although Volkenstein also describes drunkenness and the abuse of wine as the key factors which led to the slaves' defeat.

Unlike Mazurkevich, Volkenstein did include a romantic line in his plot. He introduced Julia, the daughter of an unnamed Greek free-man, who rebels against the Romans and is killed by the gladiators because of her tremendous impact on Spartacus' decision-making.⁸⁰ By inventing Julia, Volkenstein moved closer to representing Spartacus as a tragic hero, driven both by his high ideals of liberating the oppressed and his more mundane romantic feelings for his lover. Julia's role mirrors Giovagnoli's Valeria, who presents Spartacus with a letter containing an appeal to abandon the uprising in favor of their love.⁸¹ Spartacus, however, driven by idealistic beliefs and the pursuit of a noble aim, declines Valeria's offer.

Volkenstein's play was performed regularly in the largest theaters of the Soviet republics, such as Moscow's Theater of the Revolution (whose director at the time was Vsevolod Meyerhold), where it was staged on September 6, 1923, directed by Valery Bebutov.⁸² Volkenstein's *Spartacus* was well received as a literary text and was reprinted in the USSR in 1921, 1927, 1962, and 1971.⁸³ However, the critical reception of the play on stage (and through it Volkenstein's text itself) was mixed. One of the first reviews, published in October 1923 about the production in the Theater of Revolution, claimed that the play was "boring and does not possess any specific merits ... It is staged in such a way that not only is the modest artistic dignity of the play not sustained, but its revolutionary sense is also darkened. The hero of Rome, Publius Crassus, is depicted as a foolish *Polizeimeister* or a petty tyrant."⁸⁴ This perception of 1923 play was backed up by 1922 review of the text itself, written by the philosopher and sociologist Fyodor Stepun (1884–1965), who began his attack on Volkenstein with a remark on the presentation of Roman backwardness: if the Romans were so backward, why had Spartacus lost and what was the value of his entire uprising?⁸⁵

80 Volkenstein, *Spartak*, 52–53.

81 Giovagnoli, *Spartaco*, 392–93.

82 Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*, 153.

83 Vladimir Volkenstein, *Spartak: Tragediia* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatelstvo, 1921); Vladimir Volkenstein, *Spartak; Novyi Prometej; P'esy* (Moscow: Sovetskij pisatel, 1962); Vladimir Volkenstein, *Spartak – Papessa Ioanna – Smert Linkolna: Tragedii* (Moscow: Sovetskij pisatel, 1971).

84 Kugel, "Teatralnyie Zаметki," 3–4.

85 Stepun, "O Suschnosti Tragedii," 40–41. The discrepancy in the representation of the Romans as backwards in Volkenstein compared to Giovagnoli's *Spartaco*

It is not clear whether Volkenstein's play was billed as a tragedy per se. Even so, drawing loosely on Aristotle's *Poetics* and the European philosophical tradition engaging with it,⁸⁶ Stepun argued that Volkenstein's play was not a tragedy "from the point of view of theatrical tradition," since the tragic hero is always "guilty without guilt," unlike Spartacus, who had no sin.⁸⁷ Stepun followed the Aristotelian tradition, where "authentically tragic guilt is ambiguously 'guiltless,'" and therefore could not comprehend Volkenstein's ignorance of this factor.⁸⁸

Moreover, Spartacus in Volkenstein's play did not have a strong opponent (such as Crassus in Giovagnoli) and important causes for which he was fighting, hence Stepun concluded that "no unsolvable problem is solved with Spartacus' death" and the drama "turns out to be an artistically defective thing, not a bronze but a plaster cast painted like bronze."⁸⁹ This criticism, combined with Stepun's general opposition toward Bolshevik policy, led to his forced exile in 1922 together with other representatives of the early Soviet intelligentsia.⁹⁰ The negative review, however, did not diminish the popularity of Volkenstein's play, which was henceforth called "a heroic drama" rather than a tragedy. Twenty-five years later (1947), under the oppressive cultural doctrine of Zhdanovism, the play would be criticized for its simplistic ideas of drama and incorrect "social characteristics."⁹¹

Other magazines and reviewers were more generous. For instance, the review in the September 1923 issue of *Zhizn iskusstva* praised the experimental character of the drama, asserting that: "Spartacus staged in the Theater of Revolution is the first cornerstone in the construction of a new theater. The staging, play, and acting are marked on a completely

might possibly fuel Stepun's dismay. Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing if Stepun was acquainted with Giovagnoli's novel.

86 The leading figures on the side of that tradition, on whom Stepun also appears to be leaning, are Hegel and Kierkegaard – *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) and *Either/Or* (1843), respectively. For discussion on both philosophers and their engagement with tragedy, see Billings, *Genealogy of the Tragic*, esp. 143–45 and 161–88, and Greenspan, *The Passion of Infinity*, 140–57, with full bibliography.

87 Stepun, "O Suschnosti Tragedii," 40. Daniel Greenspan aptly formulated this concept for ancient Greek tragedy as follows: "Tragic guilt must be of a specific kind and its parameters are a matter of character and action." See Greenspan, *Passion of Infinity*, 92.

88 *Ibid.*, 144–5.

89 Stepun, "O Suschnosti Tragedii," 40–41.

90 See his memoirs, Stepun, *Byvshee i nesbyvsheesja*, 617–28.

91 Osnos, *Sovetskaja istoricheskaja dramaturgija*, 46; Fitzpatrick, *Cultural Front*, 177–81.

different scale.”⁹² In October 1923, the Theater of Enlightenment in Petrograd (now Saint Petersburg) also staged “the revolutionary play *Spartacus* [by Volkenstein], written in sincere, lively, colorful tones, rich with beautiful and courageous claims, saturated with activity.” The reviewer suggested that it might be difficult to stage, “yet it has brilliantly organized mass scenes,” an important demand for plays, which became even more prominent in the 1930s when the concept of the slave revolution rather than the heroic uprising of Spartacus became the preferred narrative.⁹³

The play, therefore, corresponded to the growing requirement for the presentation of mass agency, in contrast to a revolution led by a single intellectual. This was the revolution of the proletarian/enslaved masses. While scholars argue that early Soviet plays tended to emphasize the success of any enterprise coming from the efforts of a collective of people rather than a single individual,⁹⁴ Spartacus was a figure who attempted to lead a proletarian uprising alone and thus always deserved a separate, idealized, and somewhat awkward place in Soviet theater. This feature marked both Mazurkevich’s and Volkenstein’s dramas. Spartacus is alone in his struggle, especially after the treason. In Giovagnoli’s novel, Spartacus is surrounded by advisers and friends in the gladiator camp. In the 1930s, a solitary hero like Spartacus did not fully represent the participation of the people to the level the Bolsheviks aspired to achieve.

SPARTACUS IN THE EARLY SOVIET REPERTOIRE AND MASS PERFORMANCE

Plays about Spartacus were popular in early Soviet theaters. Soon theatrical seasons, especially the autumn season, were being opened by one of the three Spartacus plays (i.e., Sandomyrskiy, 1917, Mazurkevich, 1920, and Volkenstein, 1921) in many theaters across the Soviet republics. The famous Bolshevik theatremaker Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874–1940) invited Valery Bebutov (1885–1961) to produce Volkenstein’s play in Moscow on September 6, 1923, at the Theater of the Revolution.⁹⁵ When the new Khamovnicheskii district theater was opened in Moscow in 1923, Yurii Sandomyrskiy’s *Spartacus* was selected for production as the key

92 IA. A., “Moskva: Teatr Revolyutsii ‘Spartak,’” *Zhizn Iskusstva*, September 18, 1923, no. 37: 21.

93 S. M., “Teatr Prosvescheniya,” *Zhizn Iskusstva*, October 16, 1923, no. 41: 16.

94 Michalski, *Public Monuments*, 114; Von Szeliski, “Lunacharsky,” 417.

95 Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*, 153.

dramatic play.⁹⁶ The selection of which version of Spartacus to produce is likely to have been dictated by practical issues. Mazurkevich's play would have been considerably easier to stage than Volkenstein's. Smaller theaters tended to prefer shorter plays, involving fewer characters and requiring less elaborate set design.

The First State Moscow Circus in 1924 announced the staging of a "propagandistic-educational" pantomime called *Spartacus*.⁹⁷ Smaller theaters followed suit. In 1924, the Proletarian studio at the Theatrical College performed a preview of Spartacus in Odesa, and in Ivanovo-Voznesensk one of the few plays staged in the local theater was *Spartacus* (although the play's author is not mentioned).⁹⁸ A new small district theater in Petrograd in 1923 also staged *Spartacus*.⁹⁹ In 1928, a letter to the editor of *Novyi Zritel* [The New Spectator] from Kharkiv, which was the capital of Ukraine at the time, announced that *Spartacus* would soon take place in the Odesa Opera House.¹⁰⁰ Such dispersed archival findings are not the result of an exhaustive survey, but they do suggest that Spartacus enjoyed a central position in the early Soviet repertoire.

The figure of Spartacus appeared not only in the theater but also in the streets and other urban spaces as a part of broader mass performances. He might not have received as much attention as in the dramas dedicated solely to him, but his appearances still form an important aspect of his reception.¹⁰¹ In the main square of Astrakhan, on May 1, 1921, the Second City Theater initiated a performance entitled *A Revolutionary Mystery*.¹⁰² Around 500 workers and Red Army soldiers were dressed as rebels from the times of Spartacus and the insurrections led by Stenka Razin (1630–1671) and Yemelyan Pugachev (1742–1775). As the local journalist described:

At 9 p.m., the signal came. The director and writer comrade Dolev made an introduction and the 10,000- to 15,000-person crowd began to contemplate [the spectacle]. The mystery, of course, was not a literary work, but it recounted, in an epic manner and using a very primitive

96 "Khronika: Moskva," *Zhizn Isskustva*, 1923, no. 31: 28.

97 "Khronika," *Rabochii i Teatr*, 1924, no. 4: 20.

98 M. Shumskij, "Po Federatsii: Odessa," *Zhizn Isskustva*, 1924, no. 4: 24; "Ivanovo-Voznesensk," *Zhizn Isskustva*, 1924, no. 3: 27.

99 "Kto-Gde," *Zrelishcha*, 1923, no. 60: 25;

100 Maksakov, "Teadelo na Ukraine," 20.

101 Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*, 23.

102 "R.S.F.S.R. Pervoe Maya v Provintsiyah," *Vestnik Teatra*, June 15, 1921, no. 91–92:

and non-developed dialogue, the events of separate moments in the Russian, French, English, and other revolutions. But the impression was great. Every tirade against the yoke of the capitalists caused a storm of applause. In the final moment, when the slaves rush on the czar, his family, and the ministers, the crowd of workers and children, inspired by the revolutionary spirit, joined the choir in singing the proletarian anthem *The International*.¹⁰³

A similar performance, involving around one thousand participants, took place in Moscow in 1928, when the Bolshoi Theater organized a pantomime about Spartacus during the Spartakiad competition.¹⁰⁴ However, the grandest and the most famous mass performance was *The Mystery of Liberated Labor*, staged in Petrograd on May 1, 1920.¹⁰⁵ The aim, as Natalia Murray points out, was to “legitimise the revolution, implying that it was inclusive and mass in nature.”¹⁰⁶ *The Mystery* employed strong symbolism and an emphasis was placed on the quintessentially Marxist division between the “oppressors” and “oppressed.” A number of figures from unrelated historical eras (“Roman slaves led by Spartacus ran toward the red banners, followed by peasants with Stenka Razin ahead of them . . .”) were united under an imagined umbrella of fighting for proletarian ideals.¹⁰⁷ This eclectic symbolism was underlined when “in the grand finale, the Kingdom of Socialism was revealed in the form of a rising sun, a red star, a tree of liberty around which the victors reveled, red banners and a figure of Liberated Labor in front of which the soldiers exchanged their weapons for the implements of peace.”¹⁰⁸ Reports claim that thirty-five thousand people watched the mystery, and this was exactly the kind of impact the Bolsheviks envisioned for outdoor mass performances.¹⁰⁹ While Spartacus did not hold a leading role in such cases, the mere presence of his figure in mass performances and mysteries strengthened that image of his which the theater was promoting in the 1920s.

103 “R.S.F.S.R. Pervoe Maya v Provintsiyah,” *Vestnik Teatra*, June 15, 1921, no. 91–92: 5.

104 “Teatralnaya Zhizn v Moskve,” *Sovremennyi Teatr*, July 29, 1928, no. 30–31: 519.

105 Also translated as *The Mystery of Freed Labour*. See its description in Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*, 40–1, and Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 94–5.

106 Murray, “Street Theatre,” 230.

107 Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*, 40; Murray, “Street Theatre,” 236.

108 Murray, “Street Theatre,” 236.

109 Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*, 40; Murray, “Street Theatre,” 236.

CONCLUSION

Spartacus served as a symbol of the revolutionary proletarian myth throughout the Soviet era. His name became so widely disseminated throughout early Soviet popular culture that newborn babies were often named Spartak. In the utopian sci-fi novel *The Coming World* (1923) by Yakov Okunev (1882–1932), for example, Spartacus is used as a revolutionary name.¹¹⁰ Spartacus' name even became celebrated in lullabies. The following was sung to a child in a 1928 play:

Sleep Spartacus, my dear boy, hush-hush,
From the wall Bukharin looks into your cradle.¹¹¹

Theatrical plays, mass performances, and numerous reprintings of Giovagnoli's novel promoted a specific image of Spartacus: a brave leader of the slaves, a hero acting in the name of the ancient proletariat, and the only ancient precursor to the Bolsheviks.

To define the early Soviet dramas about Spartacus as mere adaptations of Giovagnoli's *Spartaco* would risk underestimating the creativity of the 1920s playwrights, especially Volkenstein. The setting and political coloring of Giovagnoli's novel (a tale intended for its own historical moment) did not align with the propaganda needs of early Bolshevism, therefore significant levels of originality were required by both Soviet writers.¹¹² Mazurkevich's *Spartacus* turned to his Italian source for several plot points and inspiration for his eponymous hero's programmatic speeches. Volkenstein's text followed Giovagnoli's novel more closely, yet he still diverged significantly from it, engaging also with other sources, including ancient historical ones. He excluded certain elements that would have been impractical for staging and completely omitted Giovagnoli's final battle scene.

Neither of the Soviet writers drew upon Giovagnoli's description of Spartacus' learning from the example of the Roman army: the old world could not offer anything beneficial for the new order under con-

110 Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 174–5; Heller and Nekrich, *Utopia in Power*, 217.

111 Arkhangelskii, Pustynin, Alekseev, "Konkurs na Luchshuyu Semyu," 25. Bukharin was a member of Politburo and one of the Soviet leaders of the era.

112 "This explains why, even in today's globalized world, major shifts in a story's context – that is, for example, in a national setting or time period – can change radically how the transposed story is interpreted, ideologically and literally." See Hutcheon and O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 28.

struction by Spartacus, and thus the Bolsheviks.¹¹³ Both Mazurkevich and Volkenstein changed the primary focus: the concept of unity, while remaining essential, became secondary to the theme of fighting for the liberation of the oppressed masses. The Soviet authors also tended to divert attention away from Spartacus' idealistic image toward the ideals for which he was fighting.¹¹⁴

While theater, toponymy, and sport were important in shaping the image of Spartacus in the Soviet epoch, there were also attempts to introduce Spartacus to ballet and cinema,¹¹⁵ both of which would deserve critical attention. The libretto for *Spartacus* the ballet was completed as early as 1933, but it was not performed until the celebrated Leonid Yakobson's premiere in 1956.¹¹⁶ In the 1920s, it was generally believed that ballet could not fulfill the aims of Bolshevik propaganda in terms of accessibility and appeal for the masses.¹¹⁷ As the practice and performance of dance was state-sponsored in the early Soviet Union, the importance and utility of ballet was reconsidered in the decades following World War II.¹¹⁸

The first Soviet films telling the story of Spartacus were also produced during the 1920s. In 1926, the All-Ukrainian Photo Cinema Administration (1922–1930) filmed its own version of *Spartacus*, based on Giovagnoli's novel. Sadly, the film is now lost.¹¹⁹ The premiere took place in December 1926 in Kyiv and more than a year later (January 1928) in Moscow. After several favorable reviews, Soviet theatrical reviewer Khrisanf Khersonskii (1897–1968) criticized the film for being “an opera, high-style product.” He denounced its superficial handling of the subject and its “oversimplification of the gladiators, their causes and aims.”¹²⁰ His review was part of a general shift of attitude, coinciding with Stalin's

113 Lapeña Marchena, “The Stolen Seduction,” 175.

114 Hardwick, *Reception Studies*, 41.

115 One of the first mentions of the ballet on the theme of Spartacus and his uprising is in *Sovremenyi Teatr* 1928, no. 36. See also Searce, “The Recomposition of Aram Khachaturian's Spartacus at the Bolshoi Theater, 1958–1968,” esp. 362, 368.

116 Fernández, “Choreographies of Violence,” 111; Janice Gross, *Like a Bomb Going Off*, 48. For more on Yakobson's ballet *Spartacus*, see *ibid.*, 241–300.

117 Murray, “Street Theatre,” 239. Ballet dancers were involved in several mass performances, such as *The Storming of the Winter Palace* in 1920.

118 Stead and Paulouskaya, “Classics, Crisis and the Soviet Experiment to 1939,” 136–37.

119 “Spartacus,” ВУФКУ (All-Ukrainian Photo Cinema Administration), available online. See also the brief analysis in Rudenko, “The Making of a Soviet Hero,” 340–2.

120 Khrisanf Khersonskii, “Cinema: ВУФКУ at the Break,” (1928), ВУФКУ, available online. See also an overview of the reaction to the movie in Rudenko, “The

accession to power during the 1920s and 1930s, when several earlier artistic innovations were abandoned.¹²¹ What had been a prerequisite for the early-1920s “proletarian” theatrical depiction of Spartacus, i.e., the simple clarity of ideological messaging, was therefore condemned less than a decade later in the new medium of film.

The October revolution had provided both the stimulus and opportunity to radically rethink society’s relationship with antiquity. More work is required, but the general pattern may already be perceived. From the mid-1930s “Spartacus’ uprising” gave way to the idea of a slave revolution, i.e., it went from the narrative of an individual hero to one of mass agency and the overthrow of a whole economic system. Government policy, scholarly practice, and public perception rarely work in unison, but this general pattern tracks suggestively if not definitively with contemporary discussions among Soviet historiographers.¹²² It was no accident that this shift occurred in the early 1930s when the idea of building socialism in one country replaced the idea of the worldwide proletarian revolution.¹²³

Early propagandists (and utopian revolutionaries alike) wanted to open up the previously restricted cultural realm of classical antiquity and make it accessible to the people. All three plays appearing in the first few years after the 1917 coup – written by Sandomyrskiy, Mazurkevich, and Volkenstein, respectively – remained popular for the next few decades of Soviet theater. Theater and mass performances (and later cinema and ballet) continued to shape and transform the image of Spartacus after cementing his popularity in the 1920s. Early Soviet theater showed Spartacus striking the flint for a worldwide proletarian revolution in the modern era. Gracchus and Brutus, Spartacus’ parallel figures on Lenin’s list of heroes, could not establish the continuity that the Bolsheviks sought to create between the “ancient proletariat” and the oppressed workers of the modern world. On the other hand, Spartacus (or at least his theatrical image in the early 1920s) could. His heroic example would shape the perception of Greek and Roman antiquity in the popular imagination for several decades to follow.

Making of a Soviet Hero,” 340–2. [In this article, the transcription of Khersonskii’s surname is corrected.]

121 Platt and Brandenberger, *Epic Revisionism*, 8–9.

122 Rudenko, “The Making of a Soviet Hero,” 337, 344–6.

123 *Ibid.*, 343–6.

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ABSTRACT

Spartacus became one of the key figures of Soviet dramaturgy in the 1920s. He was presented as the only ancient predecessor of the Bolsheviks and his theatrical image significantly shaped the later icon of the gladiator as a brave leader of the oppressed masses and a hero acting in the name of the proletariat. This article explores the image of Spartacus in early Soviet theater and mass performance and outlines the correlation between the template of Spartacus' portrayal, Raffaello Giovagnoli's novel *Spartaco* (1874), and the first dramatic adaptations by Vladimir Mazurkevich (1920) and Vladimir Volkenstein (1921). The article examines the use of the ancient hero in Bolshevik propaganda and traces the ways in which Spartacus' image morphs and maps onto wider shifts of Soviet political and cultural policy in the early decades of the USSR.

KEYWORDS: Spartacus, Soviet Union, Raffaello Giovagnoli, Vladimir Mazurkevich, Vladimir Volkenstein

Spartak in njegova zgodnjesovjetska gledališka reprezentacija

IZVLEČEK

Spartak je v dvajsetih letih prejšnjega stoletja postal ena ključnih osebnosti sovjetske dramatike. Predstavljal je edinega antičnega predhodnika boljševikov in njegova gledališka podoba je pomembno oblikovala poznejšo ikono gladiatorja kot pogumnega voditelja zatiranih množic in junaka, ki deluje v imenu proletariata. Članek raziskuje podobo Spartaka v zgodnjem sovjetskem gledališču in množičnih predstavah ter sledi povezavam med predlogo za upodobitev Spartaka, romanom Raffaella Giovagnolija *Spartaco* (1874), ter prvima dramskima priredbama Vladimirja Mazurkeviča (1920) in Vladimirja Volkensteina (1921). Članek tudi prikazuje, kako so antičnega junaka uporabljali v boljševiški propagandi, in preučuje, kako se je Spartakova podoba spreminjala in prilagajala širšim premikom sovjetske politične in kulturne politike v prvih desetletjih ZSSR.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: Spartak, Sovjetska zveza, Raffaello Giovagnoli, Vladimir Mazurkevič, Vladimir Volkenstein