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**Opera and Revolution: The Bolshoi Theatre
at the End of 1917**

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Abstract. Primarily based on archival materials from the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, the Russian State Archive of Economics, the Russian State Historical Archive, the Central State Archive of St. Petersburg and the A. A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum, the article provides the first detailed examination of a period representing a turning point in the history of the Bolshoi Theatre. During the two months between the end of October and the last days of December 1917, the Bolshoi Theatre experienced severe upheavals. The defeat of the Provisional Government during the October battles in Moscow was

a shock for the troupe. The Bolsheviks' cancellation of state financing in response to the failure on the part of the intelligentsia to recognise the legitimacy of their power created an atmosphere of complete uncertainty and lack of confidence in the future. However, even under these conditions, directors Leonid Sobinov and Feofan Pavlovsky strove to maintain the theatre's artistic output. As well as maintaining contact with the chief commissioner for state theatres, Fyodor Batyushkov, they sought support from the troupe itself, and began to use the proceeds from performances as a means of ensuring the continued functioning of the theatre. However, a split was brewing in the troupe: the ambitious conductor Emil Cooper, who effectively ran the orchestra, informally led the "opposition" to Sobinov within the theatre. The contradictions that had accumulated by the turn of 1917–1918 prevented the Bolshoi Theatre from continuing its activities without significant changes, including a recognition of Bolshevik power and consequent restructuring of the management system within the theatre itself.

Keywords: Bolshoi Theatre, Revolution of 1917, October Revolution, People's Commissariat of Education, Leonid Sobinov, Emil Cooper, Elena Malinovskaya

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*Музыкальный театр:
источниковедение*

Научная статья

**Опера и революция:
Большой театр в конце 1917 года**

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Аннотация. В статье, основанной преимущественно на архивных материалах из Российского государственного архива литературы и искусства, Российского государственного архива экономики, Российского государственного исторического архива, Центрального государственного архива Санкт-Петербурга и Государственного центрального театрального музея имени А. А. Бахрушина, впервые подробно исследуется переломный период в истории Большого театра. За два месяца, прошедшие между концом октября и последними днями декабря 1917 года, Большой театр пережил сильные потрясения. Разгром в ходе «октябрьских» боев в Москве стал

шоком для труппы. Последовавшее за ним прекращение государственного финансирования — ответ захвативших банки большевиков на непризнание со стороны интеллигенции легитимности их власти — создавало атмосферу полной неопределенности, неуверенности в будущем. Руководившие театром артисты Леонид Собинов и Феофан Павловский пытались и в этих условиях продолжать художественную работу. Они одновременно поддерживали контакт с главным уполномоченным по государственным театрам Федором Батюшковым, искали поддержки в самой труппе и начали использовать сборы со спектаклей в качестве денежного источника, необходимого для функционирования театра. В труппе назревал раскол: честолюбивый дирижер Эмиль Купер, фактически руководивший оркестром, неформально возглавил «оппозицию» Собинову внутри театра. Накопившиеся к новомуднему рубежу 1917–1918 годов противоречия не позволяли продолжать деятельность Большого театра без серьезных перемен, включавших признание большевистской власти и перестройку системы управления в самом театре.

Ключевые слова: Большой театр, Революция 1917 года, Октябрьская революция, рубеж 1917–1918 годов, труппа Большого театра, Наркомпрос, Леонид Витальевич Собинов, Эмиль Альбертович Купер, Елена Константиновна Малиновская, Феофан Венедиктович Павловский

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Introduction

The history of the Bolshoi Theatre is in the first place the history of Russian opera and ballet art, which manifested itself brilliantly on the famous stage. As such, it remains constantly in the focus of researchers:



Illustration 1. L. V. Sobinov.
Photo postcard. 1917
From the author's collection

new published works consider the main musical and theatrical genres [1; 2], as well as the life and work of leading artists and directors of the early 20th century [3; 4, pp. 68–94]. However, the history of the Bolshoi Theatre is not limited to a chronicle of its creative achievements.

In the present work, we will examine the “political” history of the Bolshoi Theatre from the beginning of November to the end of 1917. Despite its short duration (two months), this period represents a completely separate chapter in the history of the Bolshoi. The period commences at a time when Moscow theatres and audiences began to come back to life after a week of fierce “October” battles. The second marks the transition of the Bolsheviks to a decisive offensive against the “saboteurs” and the beginning of the collapse of the authority that had been established in the theatre under the Provisional Government, which was primarily personified in the persons of two leaders — the authorised representative Leonid Vitalyevich Sobinov (*Illustration 1*) and the manager Feofan Venediktovich Pavlovsky (*Illustration 2*)¹.

¹ However, this joint leadership position was below the commissioner in the hierarchy.

*Liquidation of the Consequences
of the Rout*

During the days of armed struggle in Moscow that followed the Bolshevik seizure of power in Petrograd, the building of the Bolshoi Theatre found itself in the thick of the fighting between the Red Guards and the forces of the Committee of Public Safety. Although it was not destroyed to the same extent as the Maly Theatre, it still suffered damage: windows were broken, dressing rooms and office premises were robbed, and “public money” was pilfered [5, pp. 56–57]. One of the guards, named Losev, was killed while returning home after duty (*Illustration 3*)².

Details about the aftermath of the destruction of the Bolshoi Theatre building were leaked to the press. At the very first meeting held following the revolution (apparently on 8th November), the issue of the need to replace the glass was raised. It was reported that “relatively little was broken, and the restoration of the glass should cost a thousand rubles”.³ The editor and publisher of *Novosti Sezony*, Semyon Lazarevich Kugulsky, noted that this “is really not much for the Bolshoi Theatre if we take into account that, in many of the private apartments that suffered, the installation of glass cost three hundred to four hundred rubles”.⁴



Illustration 2. F. V. Pavlovsky.
Photo postcard.
From the author’s collection

² Sobranie artistov Bol’shogo teatra [Meeting of the Bolshoi Theatre actors] (1917, November 9–11). *Teatr*, p. 4.

³ My [We] [Kugulsky S. L.] (1917 November 18–19). U rampy [At the Footlights]. *Novosti sezona* [News of the Season], p. 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*

However, it turned out that, “as they say, there were not a thousand rubles in the theatre box office, and the banks, as is known, were closed in those days”.⁵ The ballerina Alexandra Mikhailovna Balashova, who “brought the necessary sum to the meeting”, saved the troupe from a difficult situation.⁶ Speaking on 15th November at a general meeting of the orchestra’s artists held in the presence of Sobinov, conductor Emil Albertovich Cooper (who was in opposition to the theatre’s management) expressed surprise “at how they found it possible to receive money from a private individual (Balashova) for the repair of a state institution”.⁷ As it turned out, the conditions at the beginning of the Civil War turned out to be no time for such accounting niceties. The administration even had to resort to borrowing. On 8th January 1918, Pavlovsky told a general meeting of artists and employees: “There was no money for repairs to the theatre, and Sobinov said that he would not allow the theatre to open if the necessary repairs to the roof were not carried out. And for this reason I borrowed money for repairs”.⁸

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Protokoly zasedanij soveta starost orkestrovoj korporatsii i obshchikh sobranij artistov baleta za sezon 1917/1918 gg. [Minutes of meetings of the council of elders of the orchestral corporation and general meetings of ballet dancers for the season 1917/1918]. In *RGALI* [Russian State Archive for Literature and Art]. F. 648, Inv. 7, File 1, p. 22v.

⁸ Protokoly: obshchego sobraniya rabotnikov Bol’shogo teatra; zasedanij chrezvychajnoj komissii po peresmotru kontraktovykh uslovij artistov-solistov opery teatra [Minutes: general meeting of employees of the Bolshoi Theatre; meetings of the emergency commission for reviewing the contractual terms of the opera soloists of the theatre]. In *RGALI*. F. 648, Inv. 2, File 23, pp. 5–6v.

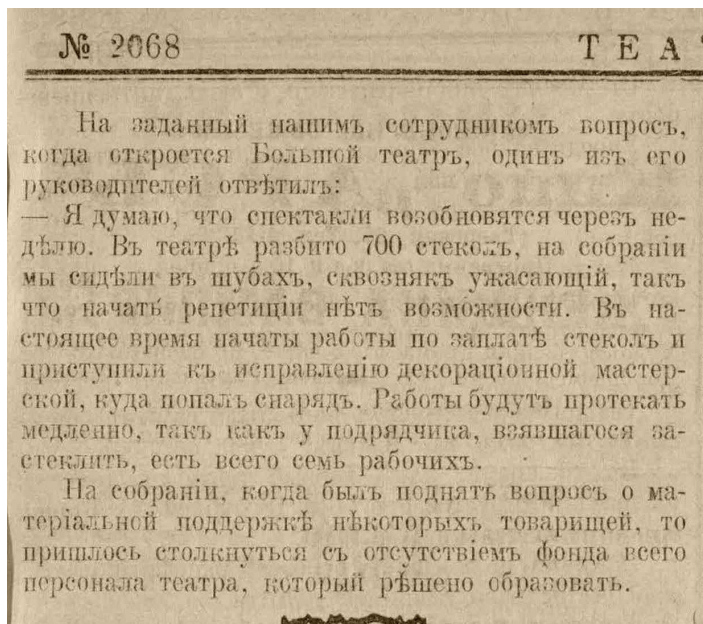


Illustration 3.

Clipping from the newspaper *Theater*.
Meeting of the Bolshoi Theater actors (1917.
November 9–11). *Theater*, p. 5.

The complete renovation of the theatre, which ended up costing several tens of thousands of roubles, was far from complete at the end of 1917.⁹

Much less expense was required to compensate those who suffered while on duty at the theatre during the fighting. On December 22, the Provisional Council of the Bolshoi Theatre resolved to “provide five rubles for each day of duty and ask the workers’ representatives to urgently find out who was on duty during the riots”.¹⁰ However, this decision turned out not to be final. On 8th January 1918, Pavlovsky recalled the need to “fix in a final form the amounts of compensation that we promised to give to all those on duty at the theatre during the civil war”.¹¹ At the meeting of delegates on 17th January, the received application for the issuance of 1,500 rubles to the “son of the murdered Losev” was approved, “partly in advance, and the rest by deduction from the artists’ salaries”.¹² At the same time, it was decided to compensate the technical staff who were working during the October Revolution with twenty-five rubles for each day on duty.¹³ On the 19th of January, at a meeting of the Provisional Council of the Bolshoi Theatre, the first item on the agenda was a request from the heirs of the murdered Losev to issue his family with the promised 1,500 rubles (despite numerous requests, they had not yet been paid).¹⁴ Thus, the noble and humanly understandable gesture of the general meeting turned out to be difficult to reconcile with the provisions of the current budget, which, of course, did not provide for such expenses.

⁹ Peregiska po administrativnym, finansovym, khozyajstvennym voprosam i po lichnomu sostavu moskovskikh teatrov [Correspondence on administrative, financial, economic issues and on the personnel of Moscow theatres]. In *GARF* [State Archive of the Russian Federation]. F. 497. Inv. 18. File 441, pp. 22–23v.

¹⁰ Protokol zasedaniya soveta Bol'shogo teatra [Minutes of the meeting of the Bolshoi Theatre Council]. In *State Central Theatre Museum*. F. 154, No. 264, p. 1.

¹¹ Protokoly: obshchego sobraniya rabotnikov Bol'shogo teatra; zasedanij chrezvychajnoj komissii po peresmotru kontraktovykh uslovij artistov-solistov opery teatra [Minutes: general meeting of employees of the Bolshoi Theatre; meetings of the emergency commission for reviewing the contractual terms of the opera soloists of the theatre]. In *RGALI*. F. 648. Inv. 2. File 23, p. 13.

¹² Protokoly № 1–16 zasedanij Soveta teatra za 1918 g. i materialy k nim [Minutes No. 1–16 of the meetings of the Theatre Council for 1918 and materials for them]. In *RGALI*. F. 648. Inv. 7. File 8, p. 17.

¹³ *Ibid.*, L. 17v.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

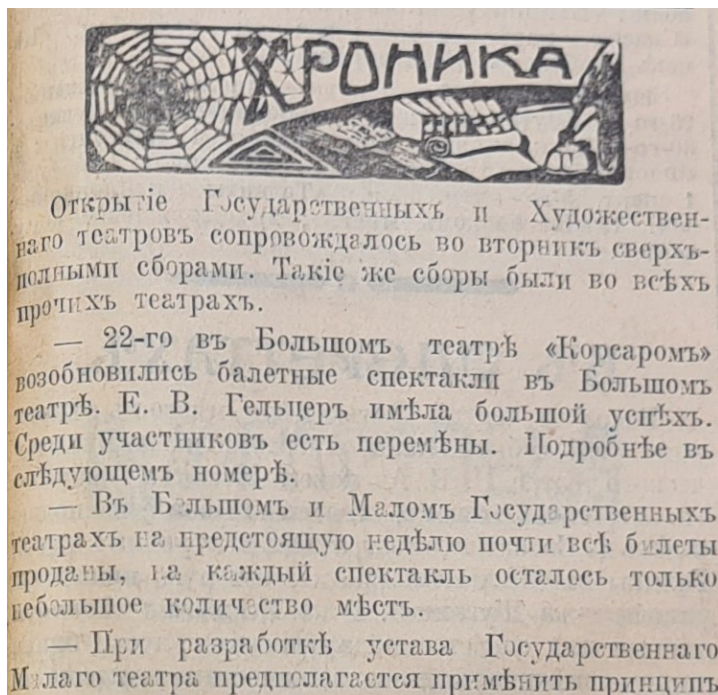


Illustration 4.

Clipping from the newspaper «News of the Season». Chronicle // *News of the Season*. 1917. November 23–25. P. 3

As a result, the Council decided to issue money “from financial penalties so that the said amount would be withheld from the maintenance of all artistic personnel for the month of February in proportion to the maintenance received”.¹⁵ It was decided to “suggest that the Accounting Department write out the allocation of 1,000 rubles immediately,” and to “postpone the payment of the remaining 500 until the accumulation of fines”.¹⁶

Despite numerous problems, the Bolshoi Theatre reopened to the public on 21st November, the same day as the Maly and Art Theatres, with all three opening with “over-full capacity” (*Illustration 4*).¹⁷ Although the public demonstrated their support

in terms of their anticipation of the performances, thus inspiring the artists and employees with some confidence in the future, this was, of course, overshadowed by the complete uncertainty of the situation in the country.

Emil Cooper and the Opposition in the Orchestra

Already on the eve of the October Revolution, the musicians of the Bolshoi Theatre were presenting some opposition to the leadership. In another letter to Sobinov written the day before the coup, Pavlovsky complained about the unrest

¹⁵ From here on in quotations from archival documents, punctuation is given in accordance with modern rules.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Chronicle (1917, November 23–25). *Novosti sezona* [*News of the Season*], p. 3.

in the orchestra and the intrigues of the conductor E. A. Cooper.¹⁸ Here it will be relevant to consider the figure of Emil Cooper in more detail. A native of Kherson from a Jewish family, who would later be described as a “Minsk bourgeois” of the Evangelical Reformed faith, Emil Albert Cooper created the impression of a major musician.¹⁹ A collection published in 1988 about this important artist included articles and notes of an apologetic character written by his contemporaries. The conductor was described as “one of those artists who, following the revolution, immediately joined the front ranks of the architects of a new, socialist culture”.²⁰ However, the “smooth” reviews selected by the author do not provide a complete picture of this extraordinarily complex and ambitious person.

An interesting, although certainly subjective, characterisation of Cooper was set out in the memoirs of the wife of the pianist, conductor and composer Alexander Ivanovich Labinsky. “Conductor Emil Albertovich Cooper [...] loved A[lexandr] I[vanovich]ch like a son and taught him not only music, but also something else! — how to live. “The theatre is a place (a temple of art!) where people “eat” each other... Don’t wait for others to eat you but start yourself... learn”.²¹ “They say he was an intelligent man and understood the ‘wisdom of this world’”, the memoirist reasoned. — [...] He was a man of great industriousness, knew how to “eat” and make a name for himself. “He never thought about the wisdom of the other world, the one that is spoken of in the Gospel”.²² The struggle that Cooper waged against the administration of the Bolshoi Theatre at the end of 1917 to a certain extent confirms Labinskaya’s words. His main target was Sobinov, to whom Cooper gave his photograph in 1901 with the inscription “To the most handsome Leonid Vitalyevich from an admirer of his talent” (*Illustration 5*)²³.

¹⁸ Pis'ma Pavlovskogo Feofana Venediktovicha L. V. Sobinovu [Letters from Pavlovsky Feofan Venediktovich to L. V. Sobinov]. In *RGALI*. F. 864. Inv. 1. File 649, pp. 16–17.

¹⁹ Lichnoe delo Kupera Emilya Al'bertovicha, kapel'mejstera [Personal file of Emil Albertovich Cooper, conductor]. In *RGALI*. F. 648, Inv. 1. File 1737, p. 89v.

²⁰ Kuznetsov, A. M. (1988). Ot sostavitelya [From the compiler]. In E. A. Cooper, *Stat'i. Vospominaniya. Materialy* [Articles. Recollections. Materials]. Soviet Composer, p. 4.

²¹ I. A. Labinskaya. “Moi vospominaniya poslednikh mesyatsev zhizni V. I. Polya” i zametka ob E. A. Kupere [“My memories of the last months of V. I. Paul’s life” and a note about E. A. Cooper]. In *RGALI*. F. 2678, Inv. 1. File 61, p. 5.

²² Ibid.

²³ Photograph by Emil Albertovich Cooper with a dedication to L. V. Sobinov. In *RGALI*. F. 864, Inv. 1. File 1573, p. 1.

However, during the intervening period, the relationship between the two musical figures had changed quite significantly.

At the general meeting of artists on 8th November, which took place immediately following the destruction of the theatre, anti-Bolshevik sentiments mainly prevailed. The troupe adopted a resolution in which, “recognising ourselves as part of a great democracy and deeply grieving over the spilled fraternal blood,” it expressed “a protest against the wild vandalism that did not spare the centuries-old shrines of the Russian people, churches and monuments of art and culture.”²⁴ The Bolshoi Theatre, this resolution stated, “as an autonomous artistic institution, does not recognise

the right of interference in its internal and artistic life by any authorities not elected by the theatre and not part of it” (in the latter case, without naming it directly, they meant the power of the Bolsheviks).²⁵ But already at this meeting, a telling incident occurred. One of those present “raised the issue that the State Theatres had hitherto only been accessible to the bourgeoisie”.²⁶ Of course, this remark did not go unanswered (“part of the ticket allocation always went to the disposal of democratic organisations,” they responded to the comrade, who was complaining about bourgeois

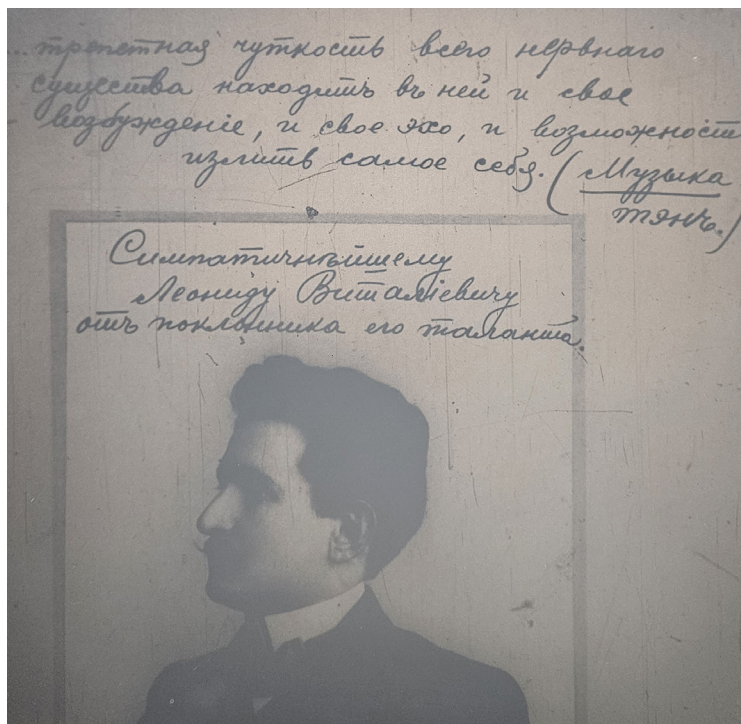


Illustration 5. E. A. Cooper.
Portrait with a dedication to L. V. Sobinov.
RGALI. F. 864. Op. 1. D. 1573. L. 1

²⁴ Rezolyutsii [Resolutions] (1917). *Rampa i zhizn'* [*Ramp and Life*], (44–46), pp. 5–6.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 6.

²⁶ Sobranie artistov Bol'shogo teatra [Meeting of the Bolshoi Theatre actors] (1917, November 9–11). *Teatr* [Theatre], p. 4.

dominance).²⁷ However, it soon became clear that there was no real unity within the theatre, which at the time was preparing to confront the “Huns” and “thugs”. One of the major problems for the theatre’s management would soon be revealed in the form of the increasingly critical mood that had taken hold in the orchestra.

Six days later, on 14th November 1917, a full meeting of the orchestra’s artists (76 people were present²⁸), held under Cooper’s chairmanship revealed the group’s dissatisfaction with the actions of the theatre’s administration. One of the orchestra leaders, Dmitry Aleksandrovich Shmuklovsky, conveyed to the meeting “L. V. Sobinov’s request to select one representative from each troupe of the Bolshoi Theatre to help him form a “committee” that will be the final authority on all matters of the entire theatre”.²⁹ The tone for the discussion of this request was immediately set by Cooper, who, warning those gathered “against hasty decisions”, proposed that the issue be “thoroughly discussed”.³⁰ He was supported by an influential member of the orchestral corporation, Yakov Konstantinovich Korolev, who spoke out “against the need for this kind of ‘executive committee.’”³¹

Of course, there were also those at the meeting who shared the position of Sobinov, who was popular in the theatre. The musician Sergei Andreevich Loginov proposed choosing a representative to the committee, expressing surprise that “many” see the central government as “some kind of bogeyman.”³² Cooper immediately entered into a spat with him, arguing: “Since the theatre already has an artistic-repertoire committee and a director’s board, why do we need another committee?”³³

Much later Cooper wrote of his time during the revolution that, having no “social experience,” he felt “confused” and “always went to all

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Protokoly zasedanij soveta starost orkestrovoj korporatsii i obshchikh sobranij artistov baleta za sezon 1917/1918 gg. [Minutes of meetings of the council of elders of the orchestral corporation and general meetings of ballet dancers for the season 1917/1918]. In *RGALI*. F. 648, Inv. 7. File 1, p. 17.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., p. 17v.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

the meetings” to which he was invited.³⁴ *Post factum*, the conductor was clearly downplaying his role: as the minutes show, he firmly led the discussion towards the single goal of undermining the authority of the theatre management. He suggested asking Sobinov a number of questions: “(1) Why is the “Committee” being created now? (2) For what purpose will it exist? (3) Will the members of the “Committee” have an advisory or decisive vote? (4) What is the state of our relations with Petrograd?”³⁵. These suggestions were accepted by the assembly, which then adjourned to await Sobinov.³⁶ However, Shmuklovsky reported that he would not be able to attend since he had “a very important meeting at the Maly Theatre”; for this reason, he requested that the orchestra members gather the next day.³⁷

On 15th November, Cooper suggested asking Sobinov the questions from the previous day’s meeting with “some clarifications”³⁸ (probably thought up overnight), for example: “Has the administrative apparatus that has existed to this day proved to be insolvent? If the Commissioner needs help, then how is the activity of Mr. Pavlovsky, elected as deputy and assistant to the Commissioner, expressed?”³⁹ After Sobinov was summoned to the meeting, according to the protocol, Cooper asked him all the prepared questions.⁴⁰

The famous artist, who had chosen the thorny path of administrator in 1917, responded with a “lengthy speech”. He explained that “the Committee is being created to assist him, and it will also serve as a supervisory apparatus over his activities. Since there is no possibility of talking to each employee of the Bolshoi Theatre individually, the delegate of each group must serve as an intermediary

³⁴ Cooper, E. A. (1988). *Nezakonchennaya avtobiografiya muzykanta* [Unfinished autobiography of a musician]. In Cooper, E. A., *Stat'i. Vospominaniya. Materialy* [Articles. Recollections. Materials]. Soviet Composer, p. 165.

³⁵ *Protokoly zasedanij soveta starost orkestrovoj korporatsii i obshchikh sobranij artistov baleta za sezon 1917/1918 gg.* [Minutes of meetings of the council of elders of the orchestral corporation and general meetings of ballet dancers for the season 1917/1918]. In *RGALI*. F. 648. Inv. 7. File 1, p. 20.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 21v.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

between his group and him”.⁴¹ Sobinov tried to convince the orchestra members that the common cause was suffering as a result of “each troupe and group of employees pulling only its own side, without taking into account the interests of the common cause”,⁴² and that the theatre’s management was in disrepair. He stood up for Pavlovsky, whom, due to his own frequent departures to Petrograd, he planned to continue to keep as his deputy. In response to other questions, Sobinov stated that the activities of the proposed Committee would be limited “only to matters of a general nature”, and the work of its members (who were supposed to be given an advisory vote) would not be paid (“there is nowhere to get money, and it is impossible to get it now”).⁴³

Sobinov also paid attention to the issue of relations with “Petrograd”, which occupied a significant part of his time starting in March 1917: “A group was founded in Petrograd, which stands for preserving the unity of all State theatres”: it included “Merezhkovsky, Benois, Filosofov, Chaliapin, Batyushkov and others”.⁴⁴ Sobinov did not share this ideal, instead defending the autonomy of the Bolshoi. More than six months earlier, on 29th–30th March, a conference of theatre figures had taken place in the Winter Palace [6, pp. 233–252]; however, by November most of the named persons had withdrawn from the management of the state stage; only the chief commissioner for state theatres, Fyodor Dmitrievich Batyushkov remained in post. It was with him that Sobinov argued in absentia, wanting “on the basis of the autonomy won by the spring strike to separate in every possible way with the sole condition of receiving money from the centre (Petrograd).”⁴⁵ The artist probably believed that such a (albeit rather selfish) position would increase his popularity among the orchestra members.

This goal might have been achieved if not for the intervention of Cooper, who immediately following the end of Sobinov’s speech and his departure from the meeting stated that “all the answers received to the questions asked were not entirely clear to him.”⁴⁶ “If the Committee is created for the real democratisation of the existing administrative apparatus (and not a fictitious one⁴⁷), then why

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 22.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 22.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ As in the text.

not give the members present in it a decisive vote”, Cooper reasoned.⁴⁸ In his critical speech, one passage is especially interesting: “It is also incomprehensible⁴⁹ that the members of the Committee are not given any decisive vote. Mr. Sobinov believes that if any friction arises between him and the Military Revolutionary Committee, he, having representatives of all groups behind him, will be able to give a proper rebuff, even if for this the members of the Committee have to bear responsibility (up to and including arrest)”.⁵⁰ Although the protocol recording of Sobinov’s speech does not imply an expectation that the Committee would provide support in a possible clash with the Bolsheviks, it is not credible that Cooper, speaking in front of the musicians who had just listened to Sobinov, would have invented this notion. This means that the latter almost certainly did have such a possibility in mind. As a result, both Sobinov’s speech and Cooper’s sabotage of his efforts acquire certain political overtones.

It cannot be ruled out that Cooper was already at that point consciously acting in favour of the Bolsheviks. In his confused (at least in the “revolutionary” part) memoirs, he wrote that soon after the October Revolution, he privately met Elena Konstantinovna Malinovskaya, “a very cultured and interesting woman,” who had been appointed by the Moscow Military Revolutionary Committee as the commissar of Moscow theatres, and who soon invited him to join the committee for the management of the Bolshoi Theatre.⁵¹

In any case, on November 15, following Cooper’s speech, a discussion broke out. Some of its participants shared Sobinov’s position, believing that with general moral support “it would be easier for him to fight the Bolshevik tendencies of the workers’ groups”⁵² (this opinion was expressed by Leonid Yakovlevich Yanovsky). Others proposed “not to elect anyone, seeing no point in the Committee”⁵³ (Daniil Georgievich Ard), and emphasising that “it is impossible to play only the role of servants”⁵⁴ (Shmuklovsky); others were in favour of holding

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 22–22v.

⁴⁹ As in the text.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 22v.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Protokoly zasedanij soveta starost orkestrovoj korporatsii i obshchikh sobranij artistov baleta za sezon 1917/1918 gg. [Minutes of meetings of the council of elders of the orchestral corporation and general meetings of ballet dancers for the season 1917/1918]. In *RGALI*. F. 648. Inv. 7. File 1, p. 23.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

elections to the Committee, but on the condition that its members be given a decisive vote (Loginov, Abram Aleksandrovich Khalip).⁵⁵ It was this point of view that was eventually accepted.⁵⁶

The next meeting of the orchestra members, which took place on November 18, was mainly devoted to the issue of delegating representatives of the theatre to Petrograd. It was considered necessary to ensure that the budget of the Bolshoi Theatre orchestra not be inferior to that of the Mariinsky Theatre.⁵⁷ At the very beginning, Cooper called for “every effort to coordinate our economic demands, as well as our legal position, with those of the Mariinsky Orchestra”.⁵⁸ This exhortation did not require further justification — those present at the meeting indicated their willingness to receive no less than their Petrograd colleagues. The meeting participants also found time to discuss the “Sobinov Committee”. Although the time allocated to this discussion was short, opponents of Sobinov’s proposal once again made their presence known. As a result, it was decided that two representatives of the Orchestra Management would join the committee.

The minutes of the orchestra meetings of 14th–18th November reveal that Sobinov as the director of the Bolshoi Theatre still enjoyed a certain amount of authority among the musicians, but their support was by no means unconditional, and it could hardly be counted on in the event of a serious clash with the Bolshevik authorities. The opposition to Sobinov and Pavlovsky on the part of the leaders of the orchestra was led by Cooper, whose motives in this case seem to have been mainly personal. Over the next few months, the ambitious conductor would become one of Sobinov’s most active opponents in the Bolshoi Theatre troupe.

End of the Year: the Crisis Mounts

Soon after the Bolsheviks came to power, the press wrote that Malinovskaya approached the leaders of the Bolshoi “with a proposal to introduce greater democracy into the general character of the matter.”⁵⁹ At a time when the theatre was still staggering from the revolutionary coup, the Bolshevik tactics towards the “sabotaging” artists had already been worked out: the new government tried

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., L. 23v.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 26–26v.

⁵⁹ Khronika [Chronicle] (1917, November 9–11). *Teatr* [Theatre], p. 5.

to discredit the previous leadership, insisting on the transfer of administrative functions directly to the “collectives” (that is, effectively decapitating the latter). In the case of the Bolshoi Theatre, however, a serious obstacle to achieving such a goal was Sobinov’s continuing authority.

Years later, in one of her unfinished attempts to write a history of the Bolshoi Theatre, Malinovskaya honestly noted that “the enthusiasm shown by artistes following the February Revolution was replaced by caution, even fear.”⁶⁰ However, in comparison with the events in Petrograd, where “artists joined in the general sabotage” and “it was even necessary to resort to arrests”, the situation in Moscow was more conciliatory: while “the mood was clearly hostile to the Bolsheviks, there was no organised sabotage”.⁶¹ Malinovskaya, not without some justification, attributed this merit to herself: “The enormous work carried out by art workers in the Art Department of the Moscow City Council together with Malinovskaya had a very great influence”.⁶² It was to her (Malinovskaya wrote about herself in the third person) that “it was necessary to immediately turn for all explanations and help in connection with life’s difficulties. Since assistance was provided in each individual case, the relationship quickly improved again”.⁶³

Malinovskaya’s desire to be useful to theatres and artistes certainly played a role, albeit far from decisive, in preventing “sabotage” on the part of the latter. A more significant factor was the brutal pressure combined with the monetary leverage that the new rulers obtained following their seizure of the banks. Already in November, financial problems began to pile up in the theatres that were boycotting the Bolsheviks. The press noted that “at the Bolshoi Theatre, artists were not given percentage increases to keep up with inflation; many major artists did not receive a salary at all and were only now accommodated when 35,000 rubles were taken from the advance sales box.”⁶⁴ This source turned out to be the only one, and they

⁶⁰ [“Bol’shoj teatr po imeyushchimsya materialam”]. Vospominaniya. Chernovik ([“Bolshoi Theatre based on available materials”]. Recollections. Draft). In *RGALI*. F. 1933, Inv. 2. File 12, p. 8.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8v.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 8v.

⁶⁴ Sh. [Kugulsky S. L.?]. (1917, November 28–29). Finansovyj krizis Gosudarstvennykh teatrov [Financial Crisis of State Theatres]. *Novosti sezona* [News of the Season], p. 4.

intended to resort to it more than once, in violation of the previous rule (by the end of 1917, one could speak of legality only in a nostalgic context): “In the future, all revenue from the State Theatres will not be sent to the former Ministry of the Imperial Court, but will be spent right there on the spot.”⁶⁵ “We live from hand to mouth,” Pavlovsky admitted on the 7th of December in a letter to Sobinov, who had left for Petrograd.⁶⁶

While the cash that flowed into the box office had become a lifeline for the theatre, the obligations, for which money had already been taken in advance, started to become especially burdensome. Season ticket holders were among the first to feel this. “Whereas before the ‘second revolution’ there were 3–4 opera subscription performances per week, now only one is given”, another reviewer noted in December, informing readers that “necessity forced us to resort to this”.⁶⁷ Since the money received for subscriptions has long been spent by the theatre, “there is no possibility of giving more than one subscription performance per week; one-off performances must be put on so as not to completely run aground on the financial sandbank...”⁶⁸ However, the journalist did not foresee the possibility of depriving season ticket holders of performances they had already paid for, but only pointed out that their “satisfaction” at this rate “would last almost until the end of the season”.⁶⁹

Under these conditions, the theatre’s artists and employees developed their own personal survival strategies. Some sought recompense in private practice. Director Vasily Petrovich Shkafer, for example, placed an advertisement in print for his opera lessons.⁷⁰ The idea of going abroad had become increasingly popular among artistes.⁷¹ The desire to leave, if not the Bolshoi Theatre, then at least his administrative position, even took hold of the theatre manager Pavlovsky “Tomorrow I am officially resigning”, he informed Sobinov on 7th December,

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Pis'ma Pavlovskogo Feofana Venediktovicha L. V. Sobinovu [Letters from Pavlovsky Feofan Venediktovich to L. V. Sobinov]. In *RGALI*. F. 864. Inv. 1. File 649, p. 26.

⁶⁷ Rodya (1917, December 10–11). Arabeski [Arabesques]. *Teatr* [Theatre], p. 6.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ [Ob'yavleniya] [Announcements]. (1918, January 6–8). *Novosti sezona* [News of the Season], p. 3.

⁷¹ Tyaga za granitsu [The allure of exile]. (1918, January 6–8). *Novosti sezona* [News of the Season], p. 4.

explaining that he had “no physical strength left.”⁷² However, the group did not want to let him go. “The troupe hopes”, the press noted, “that it will be able to persuade Mr. Pavlovsky to at least temporarily remain in his responsible and difficult post and not leave the business”.⁷³ As a result, the theatre manager agreed to remain in his position for another month.

Provisional Council and New Year’s Upheavals

In the second half of November, at a general meeting of all artists and employees, Sobinov, having overcome Cooper’s resistance, established a “Bolshoi Theatre Council under the Commissioner for information, consultation on current affairs, distribution of benefits, loans, etc.”, as indicated in the resolution published in the official *Bulletin*.⁷⁴ According to Malinovskaya’s memoirs, the council included representatives of all the theatre groups, consisting of eight people”.⁷⁵ Vasily Vasilyevich Osipov (from the opera soloists; he was elected chairman), Filipp Semenovich Lyapokhin (from the choir), Alexander Mitrofanovich Gavrilov (from the ballet), Korolev (from the orchestra), G. K.⁷⁶ Slashchev (from the watchmen, janitors, firemen, couriers, ushers), F. I. Morozov (from the stage orchestra, employees, office of the authorised representative”), Leonid Lvovich Isaev (from the costume workshops, wardrobe, lighting technicians, machine and scenery and props departments).⁷⁷ From the last group, in addition to Isaev, there was another delegate, whose name Malinovskaya was unable to establish. According to a later report, the eighth member of the council was Count Vladimir Viktorovich

⁷² Pis’ma Pavlovskogo Feofana Venediktovicha L. V. Sobinovu [Letters from Pavlovsky Feofan Venediktovich to L. V. Sobinov]. In *RGALI*. F. 864. Inv. 1. File 649, p. 25.

⁷³ Moskva [Moscow]. (1917, December 12). *Teatralnaya Gazeta*, p. 4.

⁷⁴ Bulletin of the Office of the Commissioner for the State Moscow Bolshoi Theatre and Theatre School. From November 15 to 27, 1917. In *State Central Theatre Museum*. F. 486. No. 1583, p. 1.

⁷⁵ [“Bol’shoj teatr po imeyushchimsya materialam”]. Vospominaniya. Chernovik ([“Bolshoi Theatre based on available materials”]. Recollections. Draft). In *RGALI*. F. 1933, Inv. 2. File 12, p. 7v.

⁷⁶ Initsialy ustanovleny po: Vestnik kantselyarii i proekty prikazov L. V. Sobinova po Bol’shomu teatru i Teatral’nomu uchilishchu [Initials established according to: Bulletin of the Chancery and draft orders of L. V. Sobinov for the Bolshoi Theatre and Theatre School]. In *RGALI*. F. 864. Inv. 1. File 1029, p. 25.

⁷⁷ [“Bol’shoj teatr po imeyushchimsya materialam”]. Vospominaniya. Chernovik ([“Bolshoi Theatre based on available materials”]. Recollections. Draft). In *RGALI*. F. 1933. Inv. 2. File 12, pp. 7v.–8.

Rostopchin, elected, however, not by the workers, but by the employees of the Office of the Commissioner.⁷⁸ After 9th January, Loginov, who replaced Korolev (in accordance with the orchestra members' resolution of 18th November on sending representatives to the council from among the leading trio consisting of Loginov, Korolev and Shmuklovsky), also took part in the council's work.⁷⁹

Although the Provisional Council clearly played a significant role in the transitional period in the history of the Bolshoi Theatre, its activities remain almost completely unstudied. It is not even clear what its official name was — in the January publication of the *Bulletin* and in some of its protocols, it is referred to as “Provisional”, while in others it is simply called “the Council”. It was finally formed no later than the beginning of December: Pavlovsky informed Sobinov, who had left for Petrograd, on December 7: “...temporarily, until your arrival, the Chairman of the Council of the Bolshoi Theatre will probably sign the papers for the Commissioner.”⁸⁰ The minutes of the meeting of the Provisional Council on December 22, which was devoted to financial issues, have been preserved. In particular, the council members instructed their colleagues, “representatives of the employees Mr. Morozov and Mr. Slashchev, to explain to their groups that the petition for the dispensation of Ryudman's increases⁸¹ depends on the Ministry of Finance, which has intimated permission and satisfaction of this petition in the near future”.⁸² Of course, the discussion was not about the “Ministry”, but about the Bolshevik People's Commissariat, with which specific negotiations had apparently already been conducted. Delegates from the technical staff in the Provisional Council were used for direct communication with the theatre workers, who were constantly worried about their financial situation.

⁷⁸ *Izmeneniya v sostave vremennogo soveta Bol'shogo teatra (zametka)* [Changes in the composition of the temporary council of the Bolshoi Theatre (note)]. In *State Central Theatre Museum*. F. 154. No. 307, p. 1.

⁷⁹ *Protokoly № 1–16 zasedaniy Soveta teatra za 1918 g. i materialy k nim* [Minutes No. 1–16 of the meetings of the Theatre Council for 1918 and materials for them]. In *RGALI*. F. 648. Inv. 7. File 8, p. 4.

⁸⁰ *Pis'ma Pavlovskogo Feofana Venediktovicha L. V. Sobinovu* [Letters from Pavlovsky Feofan Venediktovich to L. V. Sobinov]. In *RGALI*. F. 864. Inv. 1. File 649, p. 25v.

⁸¹ Developed by a commission led by the manager of the former Cabinet of His Majesty, Nikolai Eduardovich Ryudman.

⁸² *Protokol zasedaniya soveta Bol'shogo teatra* [Minutes of the meeting of the Bolshoi Theatre Council]. In *State Central Theatre Museum*. F. 154, No. 264, p. 1.

Meanwhile, at the turn of 1917–1918, important events for the theatrical world were taking place in Petrograd. Their consequences soon affected Moscow. On 2nd January 1918, a detachment of soldiers led by the commissar appointed by the Soviet government, the Left Socialist Revolutionary V. V. Bakrylov, occupied the historic building of the former Directorate of Imperial Theatres, driving Batyushkov and the officials who supported him out of their offices.⁸³ The suppression of “sabotage” in theatres had entered a decisive phase. Despite Sobinov’s numerous disagreements with Batyushkov, the latter’s fall was also a blow to Sobinov, who had so far avoided an explicit recognition of Bolshevik authority. Sobinov’s opponents at the Bolshoi Theatre immediately came to life.

On 2nd January, the orchestra’s musicians gathered once again for a general meeting under Cooper’s chairmanship. On the day when the new authorities in Petrograd were literally subjugating the theatre department at bayonet point, the orchestra members were discussing Loginov’s report on his trip to the capital. In this report it was stated that the idea of raising the salaries of the Bolshoi musicians and equalising them with the salaries of the Mariinsky Theatre orchestra members had been rejected by Batyushkov due to a lack of funds⁸⁴. This news predictably caused indignation among those gathered. Shmuklovsky, who took the floor “on behalf of the orchestra’s management and the Council of Elders”, proposed to independently “approve a new budget, based on the fact that the old figures are no longer able to satisfy us”.⁸⁵ Despite its obvious illegality, the proposal was unanimously approved by the assembly.⁸⁶ Shmuklovsky’s next speech, which, while recommending the development of such a budget and its submission to Pavlovsky, also threatened the musicians with “freedom of action”, raised objections, although it ended up being supported by the majority.⁸⁷ An ultimatum-based negotiation with one’s own elected leadership probably felt like a radical measure; moreover, the meaning of “freedom of action” was not entirely clear.

⁸³ Bertenson, S. L. (1957). *Vokrug iskusstva [Around Art]*. Hollywood: (n.p.), pp. 242–243.

⁸⁴ Protokoly zasedanij soveta starost orkestrovoj korporatsii i obshchikh sobranij artistov baleta za sezon 1917/1918 gg. [Minutes of meetings of the council of elders of the orchestral corporation and general meetings of ballet dancers for the season 1917/1918]. In *RGALI*. F. 648. Inv. 7. File 1, p. 33.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, L. 33v.

As a result, Cooper, in his role of chairman, proposed to postpone the decision on this issue to an extraordinary general meeting on 4th January.⁸⁸ It began, like the previous one, with Loginov's report on his trip to Petrograd and more generally on the situation in the capital's theatres in connection with the political situation in the country.⁸⁹ The meeting then passed a resolution "on the recall" of representatives from the "Council under the Commissioner".⁹⁰ Korolev's address outlined the "vague character of the Council, in which the representatives of the groups, not having a decisive voice, thereby nullify" its significance and make its work "utterly fruitless".⁹¹ The orchestra members demanded that Pavlovsky officially publish in the bulletin an order indicating the status of the Council as an organ of the "Management of the Bolshoi Theatre under the Commissioner with the right to vote".⁹² Under Cooper's incitation, the orchestra's increasingly strident demands intimated to Sobinov and Pavlovsky that the leaders of the Bolshoi Theatre should not only not count on the musicians' support in any confrontation with the Bolsheviks but should also be prepared to open a "second front" with them.

Conclusion

During the last two months of 1917, the Bolshoi Theatre experienced unprecedented upheavals. The defeat of the Provisional Government during the October battles in Moscow and cessation of state financing in connection with the seizure of banks by the Bolsheviks shook the foundations of the former imperial stage. The result was a deepening rift in the troupe and general sense of despondency on the part of artists and employees regarding their future prospects. Under such conditions, the actual practice of musical and theatrical art had receded into the background. Although the theatre's directors, Sobinov and Pavlovsky, tried to conduct business as before and avoid direct subordination to the Bolsheviks, with each week, the possibilities for successfully maintaining such a policy diminished. By the turn of 1917–1918, the contradictions in and around the theatre had reached a critical level.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 35.

⁹⁰ Ibid., L. 35v.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 36.

⁹² Ibid.

This crisis was followed by the collapse of the previous management system and the formation of a new one, which was integrated into the political hierarchy of the emerging Soviet state. These events would take place at the Bolshoi Theatre during January 1918.

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