

# The Geography of Revolutionary Art

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In August 1920, in the middle of the Polish-Soviet war, the people of Bila Tserkva had the rare opportunity to enjoy an experimental production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Bila Tserkva, about fifty miles south of Kyiv, was a small, Jewish-Russian-Polish-Ukrainian town—incidentally where aspiring writer Solomon Rabinovich first coined the pen name Sholem Aleichem. The Red Army had only just gained dominance in the region and the Treaty of Riga was still months off (hostilities would not end completely until 1922). Despite these infelicitous circumstances, the theater company of Les' Kurbas, confined to this provincial city in the south of the former Russian Empire, the erstwhile Pale of Settlement, was doing its best to survive. They performed Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, in a translation by nineteenth century writer Panteleimon Kulish, created with skills derived from three years of intensive group training that made this performance, if not the most experimental achievement of its day, a far cry from the melodrama that Bila Tserkva audiences may have been used to watching. Moreover, this was the first time that Shakespeare's play on the death of kings had resounded in the Ukrainian language. This was a huge theatrical milestone, in a provincial city, miles from any metropolis.<sup>1</sup>

My contention in this essay is that the Ukrainian-language performance of *Macbeth* in Bila Tserkva, in the midst of the Polish-Soviet war, is not a provincial anecdote. It offers rather an alternative geography of revolutionary culture. *Macbeth* in Bila Tserkva is studied, if at all, by scholars of Ukrainian history, or Ukrainian theater more particularly, because the first performance in Ukrainian of a Shakespearean classic constitutes an important cultural event, and because Les' Kurbas is one of the most famous Ukrainian theater directors. By focusing not on the play or its maker, but on the very fact of experimental art in a small, multicultural city, this story reveals the changing dynamics of culture in the years of revolution and civil war. A focus on Ukraine in these years of collapse and war shows the importance of place in understanding the explosion of experimentation in the arts that happened in the early twentieth century across the former Russian Empire and its successor Soviet republics and independent states.

## What Happened to Imperial Art?

Think about the myriad of exhibitions in the visual arts commemorating this fertile period: the Royal Academy of Arts' 2017 "Russian Art, 1917–1932"; the

1. Jeremy Dauber, *The Worlds of Sholem Aleichem: The Remarkable Life and Afterlife of the Man Who Created Tevye* (New York, 2013), 44–47; Irena R. Makaryk, *Shakespeare in the Undiscovered Bourn: Les Kurbas, Ukrainian Modernism, and Early Soviet Cultural Politics* (Toronto, 2004), 42–54; Inna Kozii, "Kyidramte v teatral'no-mystets'komu prostori Uman'i" in *Kurbasivs'ki chytannia*, vol. 2 (2007): 176–85; Natalia Iermakova, *Berezil'ska kul'tura: Istorii, dosvid* (Kyiv, 2012), 114–30.

Tate Modern's 2018 "Red Star over Russia"; or the Pompidou-Jewish Museum's 2018 "Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: the Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk."<sup>2</sup> The first two exhibitions completely erase the particularity of space, with no explanation of how artists, such as filmmaker Oleksandr Dovzhenko or painter Kazimir Malevich, were not ethnically Russian, but subjects of the Russian Empire, leading to misunderstanding of nation, empire, and place. The exhibit at the Jewish Museum, by contrast, reinserts place by looking to the richness of Vitebsk as an artistic center, and linking it—through its artists—with Europe and Moscow. All the while, however, the Jewish Museum categorizes these artists as "Russian," inadvertently erasing all the geographic and ethnic nuances in that imperial designation. In all the discussion of 1917 and its revolutionary artistic élan, where is the parallel discussion about how this explosion in artistic experimentation and production was happening all over the former Russian Empire, on the periphery as well as in the putative centers? Art of this period exploded in Moscow, but also in Vitsebsk and in Bila Tserkva, to take two examples. What does that tell us about the nature of revolutionary art and its interconnectedness (or lack thereof) across the former Russian empire? Examining revolutionary art in the context of these (dis)connections, I want to suggest, indicates how large-scale cultural infrastructures radically transform in periods of political and social collapse.

Tracing this shifting geography means putting revolutionary art in place, focusing on where art happens and why. Theater history in other regions has taken on the analysis of networks, place, and motion. Christopher Balme, for example, has explored how visionary entrepreneur Maurice Bandmann created a string of entertainments across the late nineteenth century British Empire, connecting imperial spaces and reinforcing the Empire itself; Balme's research suggests that transnationalism is crucial to understanding how theater works.<sup>3</sup> Debra Caplan has shown that the Vilne Trupe's success came precisely from their itinerancy; they were a network, not confined to a permanent location, and they can be understood only in a global context.<sup>4</sup> If we can (re) conceptualize theater not just as the performance taking place in one theater in the capital, but as a linked network of entrepreneurs, impresarios, artists, state entities, and audiences supporting a theater connected by reputations, trains, carriages, roads, and payments, then it becomes clear how the theatrical infrastructure is inextricably connected to political, social, and economic change. New work on theater history has revealed the ways that connections

2. <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition/revolution-russian-art> (accessed May 10, 2019); <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/red-star-over-russia/exhibition-guide> (accessed May 10, 2019); <https://thejewishmuseum.org/exhibitions/chagall-lissitzky-malevich-the-russian-avant-garde-in-vitebsk-1918-1922> (accessed May 10, 2019).

3. Christopher B. Balme, "The Bandmann Circuit: Theatrical Networks in the First Age of Globalization," *Theatre Research International* 40, no. 1 (2015): 19–36; Balme, "Theatrical Institutions in Motion: Developing Theater in the Postcolonial Era," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 31, no. 2 (2017): 125–40.

4. Debra Caplan, *Yiddish Empire: The Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theater, and the Art of Itinerancy* (Ann Arbor, 2018).

and circulation make theater, so why have so few been written on the infrastructure—the cultural geography—of Russian imperial theater?

The answer may lie in Piotr Piotrowski's argument that the entire canon of modernist art has been taken as happening primarily in major western European capital cities, ignoring the art of central and eastern Europe (and everywhere "non-western" as well). His notion of "horizontal" art history, then, challenges this "vertical" western European-dominated hierarchy and takes eastern European art on its own terms. Importantly, Piotrowski includes the Russian imperial capitals of Moscow and St. Petersburg in his list of "vertical" cities, since the category of "Russian" art often elides or erases ethnic or geographic specificity. Why, for example, is art produced in Paris or St. Petersburg "modernism," whereas art produced in Warsaw or Kyiv is further classified as Polish or Ukrainian modernism? Why do scholars classify art in some places as universal, and in other places as national? Decentering the traditional narrative of revolutionary culture uncovers a new geography that takes the cracked infrastructure of the Russian Empire into account.<sup>5</sup>

Let me suggest three ideas that this geography of revolutionary culture reveals. First, that Kyiv was an important cultural center during the civil war for later artistic developments in Europe and in the USSR. Second, that revolutionary culture is fundamentally wartime culture. Finally, that peripheral visions are central to a full geography of culture and reveal large shifts in how cultural infrastructures collapse and are reconstituted.<sup>6</sup>

With the vacuum of power emerging after February, and war soon after October, resources for making theater proved scarce. No one was investing in theater productions in an unstable situation. Fairly quickly, however, a Bolshevik theater network, however unstable, emerged in Moscow and Petrograd: decrees, commissars, and Old Bolshevik Anatolii Lunacharskii wielding whatever authority he could so that theater could still function. And indeed, in this however-unstable institutional network of new patrons and new audiences, familiar faces and themes emerge, such as Vsevolod Meierkhol'd and the battles over all things bourgeois at the Moscow Art Theater.

It all looks different, however, on the periphery of the Russian Empire. Here, in this region, a cultural infrastructure did not stabilize in 1918 as it did in Moscow or Petrograd. Rather multiple stakeholders at various times—such as the Central Rada during 1917, or the German occupation of 1918 after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, or the first Bolshevik attempt in January 1918 to take over the city, or the second in April 1919, or the military occupations of Anton Denikin's or Symon Petliura's forces—put forth various policies in an attempt

5. Piotr Piotrowski, "Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde," in Sascha Bru, Jan Baetens, Benedikt Hjartarson, Peter Nicholls, Tania Ørum, Hubert Berg, eds., *Europa! Europa?: The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent* (Berlin, 2009), 49–58; importantly, the visual arts scene in Poland has produced exhibitions that center on 1918—the creation of the Polish state—and bring in the connected centers of east European modernism, see <https://msl.org.pl/wydarzenia/wystawy-archiwalne/awangarda-i-panstwo-wystawa,2634.html> (accessed November 15, 2019). Yet this exhibit also seems to sidestep the collapse of the Russian tsarist state.

6. For a larger investigation of cultural dynamics in this period, see my book, *Beau Monde on Empire's Edge: State and Stage in Soviet Ukraine* (Toronto, 2017).

to create culture. Histories of Soviet theater focus on the rise of Meierkhol'd or the Moscow Art Theater, or amateur groups in the capitals, but entirely different activity was happening in the periphery.<sup>7</sup>

### Kyiv as Multi-Ethnic Artistic Capital

Previously understood notions of center and periphery vanished when the Russian empire collapsed during World War I; the war had already caused a mass movement of people, including theater artists, but the connections woven together between funders, artists, and audiences vanished with political instability and continued war. Connections between cities were broken, and new places emerged as new centers.<sup>8</sup> Kyiv was one such, and art made in Kyiv, connections made in Kyiv, facilitated later developments in Europe and the USSR.

It is not only Les' Kurbas whose career took off in revolutionary Kyiv, where he worked with a group of amateurs called the Young Theater (*Molodyi teatr*) and transformed what could be done in theater in Ukrainian—eventually making *Macbeth* in Bila Tserkva.<sup>9</sup> Kurbas was part of a generation of young people in this multi-ethnic city pushing the boundaries of art— theater, dance, literature, visual arts—in Ukrainian, Polish, Yiddish, and of course Russian. They were revolutionary artists, even as they understood radical change differently, whether their art spoke to political, national, or artistic revolution. Many of these artists knew each other, or even collaborated professionally, sometimes crossing linguistic or ethnic borders. These Kyiv connections have been lost, however, as these artists have come to be known primarily for their work created later in Paris, Warsaw, or Moscow. Nevertheless, these artists and their work show how, with the collapse of the Russian Empire, Kyiv became a multi-ethnic artistic center.

Think of dancer Bronislava Nijinska (1891–1972; Polish, born in Russian imperial Minsk), whose Kyiv years, as Lynn Garafola argues, provided the platform for her later modernist choreography in Paris and beyond. Or painter Aleksandra Ekster (1882–1949; Russian, born in Russian imperial Białystok) whose set and costume designs and paintings became known worldwide.<sup>10</sup> Another example is Polish actress and director Stanisława Wysocka (1878–1941; Polish, born in Russian imperial Warsaw), who noted that the separation

7. For more on early Soviet theater, and how it is explained, largely ignoring place, see Laurence Senelick and Sergei Ostrovsky, eds., *The Soviet Theater: A Documentary History* (New Haven, 2014).

8. In this case, reemerged, since of course Kyiv was a cultural capital in the years of Kievan Rus', and was an important provincial city in the Empire.

9. Virlana Tkacz, "The Birth of a Director: The Early Development of Les Kurbas and his First Season with the Young Theatre," *Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 12, no. 1 (Summer 1987): 22–54.

10. Georgii Kovalenko, "Alexandra Exter," in John E. Bowlt and Matthew Drutt, eds., *Amazons of the Avant-Garde* (New York, 2000), 131–53; Lynn Garafola, "An Amazon of the Avant-Garde: Bronislava Nijinska in Revolutionary Russia," *Dance Research* 29, no. 2 (2011): 109–66; Maria Ratanova, "The Choreographic Avant-Garde in Kyiv, 1916–1921: Bronislava Nijinska and her Ecole du Mouvement," in Irena R. Makaryk and Virlana Tkacz, eds., *Modernism in Kyiv: Jubilant Experimentation* (Toronto, 2010), 311–20.

between Cracow and Lemberg (L'viv) in the Austrian Empire and Warsaw in the Russian Empire meant that Polish theater had two different spheres of influence—which were then brought together in World War I by Polish artists forced to move to the Russian interior. They then came together, productively, largely in Wysocka's Kyiv theater studio. Moreover, Ekster's Kyiv salon served as a fertile meeting ground where these three innovative artists, among many others, developed their ideas in dance, visual arts, and theater before they moved to Moscow, Paris, or Warsaw.<sup>11</sup>

Yiddish, culture, too, flourished in revolutionary Kyiv. The creation of the Jewish secular organization the *Kultur-Lige* in 1918 in Kyiv, funded at first by the Ukrainian Central Rada, inspired a generation of Jewish artists in the visual arts and design, music, literature, and theater. Writer Dovid Bergelson, editor Moshe Litvakov, and painters El Lissitsky and Isaac Rabinovich, among others, all worked in Kyiv, in the *Kultur-Lige*. The *Kultur-Lige* and its artists moved to Warsaw, Moscow, and beyond, but Kyiv witnessed its start. Kyiv, then, was the place where young artists made Jewish art, or Ukrainian art, or Polish art—but more importantly they made innovative art, in this wartime post-imperial space. Their vision was international, modernist, and utterly avant-garde.<sup>12</sup>

Many people we associate with Russian-language Soviet theater actually got their start in Kyiv. One of the names that surfaces time and again is Georgian Kote Mardzhanishvili, or Konstantin Mardzhanov, a product of the Russian imperial theater network and a perfect example of someone, like Balme's Maurice Bandmann, whose biography highlights the importance of circulation and connections in culture.<sup>13</sup> Starting his career in the early twentieth century in Georgian troupes around his native Tbilisi, he soon advanced to Russian-language theaters in the provincial cities of Riga, Kharkiv, and even Kyiv. His renown eventually secured him a position as assistant director at the Moscow Art Theater; he then tried to start his own company, but the venture failed. After fighting in World War I, Mardzhanov found himself back in Kyiv during the 1919 Bolshevik occupation, where he directed a celebrated production of Lope de Vega's *Fuente Ovejuna*.<sup>14</sup>

Mardzhanov “discovered” future filmmakers Grigorii Kozintsev and Sergei Iutkevich, and connected them with painter Isaak Rabinovich (of the

11. Hanna Veselovs'ka, “Kyiv's Multicultural Theatre Life, 1917–1926” in Makaryk and Tkacz, eds., *Modernism in Kyiv*, 249; on Wysocka's studio, see, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, “Stanisława Wysocka i jej kijowski teatr ‘Studyja’: Wspomnienie,” in Iwaszkiewicz, *Teatralia* (Warsaw, 1983), 7–72; on avant-garde in Kyiv, see, Myroslav Shkandrij, “Politics and the Ukrainian Avant-Garde,” in Makaryk and Tkacz, eds., *Modernism in Kyiv*, 219–41.

12. *Kul'tur-lige: Khudozhnii avan-hard 1910–1920 rokiv* (Kyiv, 2007); Aleksandra Podoprigrorova, “Puti stanovleniia evreiskogo profesional'nogo teatra v Ukraine v 20e gody XX stoletia” in *Evreis'ka istoriia ta kul'tura v Ukraini—materialy konferentsii u Kyevi 21–22 Serpnia 1995* (Kyiv, 1995), 154–60; Gennady Estraiikh, “The Yiddish Kultur-Lige,” in Makaryk and Tkacz, eds., *Modernism in Kyiv*, 197–212.

13. Kote Mardzhanishvili, “Vospominaniia,” in Konstantine Aleksandres Mardzhanishvili-Mardzhanov, *Tvorcheskoe nasledie* (Tbilisi, 1958), 8–68.

14. The production of *Fuente Ovejuna* has inspired much scholarship, see, Marsel' Horodys'kyi and Volodymyr Nelli, eds., *Spektakl', zvavshii v boi: Sbornik statei i vospominanii* (Kyiv, 1970).

Kultur Lige) to create the sets for *Fuente Ovejuna*. The two young artists soon met another aspiring artist, future filmmaker Aleksei Kapler, with whom they created a small children's theater. Their first show, a performance of Aleksandr Blok's verse drama *Balaganchik*, was a resounding failure, but the experience brought these young artists together. The collapsed Russian imperial infrastructure, the exigencies of war, and the networks of figures such as Mardazhanov made Kyiv a center of revolutionary art. Importantly, while these young artists—Kozintsev, Kapler, and Iutekvich—were Jewish, their goal was not national art, but simply innovative art. Isaak Rabinovich was both part of the Kultur-Lige and the Russian-language theater milieu run by the Georgian Mardzhanishvili. In short, categories of nation or ethnicity seem less productive here than networks, connections, or places. These Kyiv examples suggest the benefits of further research for other cities—Kharkiv? Riga? Tbilisi?—to examine how the Russian imperial collapse created cultural connections.<sup>15</sup>

### Wartime Theater

Revolutionary theater was also wartime theater. Kyiv had been removed from the frontlines of World War I, but became a frontline city as the empire collapsed into civil war. From 1917 to 1922 artists struggled, throwing themselves into new projects, writing petitions to various state entities that exist in the archives today, alerting scholars to the utter inability to predict what would emerge in this region.

Because of the lack of food and prospects in Kyiv, Kurbas, with his new company, the Kyiv Dramatic Theater (*Kyidramte*), went foraging around the frontlines in 1920. The company trekked around Bila Tserkva, Uman', and surrounding villages during the tail end of the Polish-Bolshevik fighting—which Isaac Babel' describes so evocatively in *Red Cavalry*. They eventually acquired Red Army patronage, which facilitated the actors' survival, including support from the highest Red Army echelons. War brought together soldiers and actors who may never have encountered each other in new places.<sup>16</sup> Scholars Irena Makaryk and Natalia Ermakova have pored over materials on the 1920 *Macbeth* production, but much remains unknown. Kurbas played Macbeth, the actors all created the sets and costumes themselves (with some assistance from Soviet authorities in Kyiv), and actress Valentyna Chystiakova (who was also Kurbas's wife) choreographed the witches inspired by her dance studies with Bronislawa Nijinska. The show ran for an entire week, a rarity in the world of provincial theater.<sup>17</sup>

Focusing on the place of this *Macbeth*, however, highlights the importance of war for revolutionary theater. Indeed, we know so little about this production because contemporaries note the danger and hunger far more than acting choices. After all, extreme violence and political unrest are at the

15. Sergei Iutekvich, *Sobranie sochinennia*, vol. 1, *Molodost'* (Moscow, 1990), 32–53; Aleksei Kapler, *Dolgi nashi* (Moscow, 1973), 322–35; Grigorii Kozintsev, *Glubokii ekran* (Moscow, 1971), 10, 21–23.

16. On the Berezil' theater and Kurbas more generally, see Makaryk, Ermakova, and my own book.

17. See Makaryk and Ermakova for descriptions of the production.

heart of the play, and were at the heart of the everyday wartime experience for actors and audience. *Macbeth* must have resonated with the local Bila Tserkva audience; in fact, the company arrived in town precisely during the change of power from the Poles to the Bolsheviks. Moreover, this region was also a site of anti-Jewish violence during the war. In one diary entry, Kurbas noted that they were preparing Satan (based on Jacob Gordin's 1900 *God, Man, and the Devil*) and he hoped the Jews in the audience would "bray (*revity*) when listening to it." Like *Macbeth*, this was a theatrical production to which a local audience could relate. The poor scribe of Gordin's play lost everything, just as had many Jews in the 1919 pogroms. This allusion to anti-Jewish violence further grounds Kurbas's revolutionary theater in place, however, reminding scholars that the audience was multi-ethnic and that the local community, including its artists, witnessed local violence. The sound of wailing—a sensory experience of violence—must have been widespread throughout this region. Theater's connections with wartime violence are inseparable from creative innovation.<sup>18</sup>

Kurbas's experience ultimately changed Bila Tserkva, linking it with larger theatrical infrastructures. After a failed attempt by the fledgling Bolshevik outpost in Kharkiv to recruit Kurbas, he returned to Bila Tserkva to translate *Macbeth* into Yiddish for a local Jewish troupe. In fact, once Kurbas founded his celebrated "Berezil" theater company in Kyiv in 1922, experimental theater in Bila Tserkva, in both Yiddish and Ukrainian, remained.<sup>19</sup>

## Art in Place

Focusing on art in place during wartime highlights the geography of revolutionary culture in motion, since people moved, voluntarily or involuntarily, creating new connections. Kurbas himself came to Kyiv in 1916 because war and occupation in Galicia had destroyed his first solo theatrical venture. His work brought new artistic influences, such as German expressionism and Polish modernism, which would differentiate him from other Russian-trained artists. In Lemberg (L'viv), Kurbas would have seen the Polish theater run by Tadeusz Pawlikowski (1861–1915). Both Pawlikowski and Konstantin Stanislavskii had seen the troupe of the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen that toured all over Europe in the late 1800s. The Meinings shocked a generation of theatergoers with life-like accuracy in sets, costumes, and crowd scenes. Stanislavsky and Pawlikowski interpreted the Meiningen example differently, however: Stanislavsky towards realism, making the theater like-life; Pawlikowski

18. Les' Kurbas, "Shchodennyk," in Mykola Labin's'kyi, ed., *Les Kurbas: Filosofija teatru* (Kyiv, 2001), 51; my thanks to Harriet Murav for pointing out the intriguing choice of the word *revity*. As Larysa Bilous argues elsewhere in this forum, the Jewish experience is inseparable from the "Ukrainian" experience.

19. Vasylyl' Vasylyl'ko, *Teatru viddane zhyttia* (Kyiv, 1984), 204; Oksana Halons'ka, "Rezhyser Ianuarii Bortnyk: Shliakhy formuvannia svitohliadno-mystets'kykh pohliadiv ta perekonan," *Kul'tura narodov Prychernomor'ia*, no. 154 (2009): 78–82; Iryna Meleshkina, "Les' Kurbas i evreyskyi teatr," in Bohdan Kozak, ed., *Zhyttia i tvorchist' Lesia Kurbas* (L'viv, 2012), 346.

towards a symbolic unity of sets, lighting, and acting skill.<sup>20</sup> Although both Kurbas and Meierkhol'd were interested in the actors' body and the ways that physical gestures could convey meaning, the "genealogy" of these ideas was different. Meierkhol'd's turn to the body was a reaction against Stanislavsky's realism. Kurbas, however, was building on Pawlikowski's technical perfection in order to oppose nineteenth century Ukrainian-language melodrama. Moreover, Kurbas's explorations of physicality happened in conditions where the actor's body was under duress from hunger and bullets. Further research would explore how awareness of the body in danger shaped the actors' awareness of the body on stage. Both directors' productions in the 1920s featured the physical gesture, but the context of that physicality differed.

The case of Ukraine challenges the general understanding of culture in the revolutionary period, which either focuses on artists working in Moscow making (early) Soviet art, or on non-Russian (whether Ukrainian or Jewish or Polish) artists making "national" art. Neither paradigm captures the radical shift in infrastructure during the imperial collapse and civil war. My point is not to prove that there was modernist experimentation in what is today Ukraine. By ascribing national or imperial belonging ("Russian" or "Ukrainian" avant-garde) we miss place, and we miss the dynamic process that happened in the 1920s, whereby places became centers and peripheries in a larger cultural infrastructure. *Macbeth* in Bila Tserkva should change our understanding of culture in revolution: that it is wartime culture built on contingency and motion; that the revolutionary period was a collapse of the imperial infrastructure in its entirety, across an entire empire; that local art was not only national, but universalist in its aims. Ultimately, a focus on art in Ukraine might suggest the need to revisit constellations of artists, identify connections, trace movement, and zoom in on individual stories. This task holds not only for theater, but also for literature, the visual and performing arts in general, and even film. The question, then, is not to "Ukrainianize" artists such as Malevich or Babel', or cities such as Kyiv or Odesa, but rather to figure out why artists made the art that they did, in the places that they did, in this time of deep instability, violence, and elation.

20. Franciszek Pajęczkowski, *Teatr lwowski pod dyрекcją Tadeusza Pawlikowskiego* (Crakow, 1961); John Osborne, *The Meiningen Court Theater, 1866–1890* (Cambridge, Eng., 1988).