Socialism is a Great Cultural Movement

The Eleventh Tricontinental Art Bulletin (January 2025)



Listen to Sunshine Day - Osibisa

Listen to '**Sunshine Day**' by Osibisa. This newsletter is dedicated to Ghanaian musician and saxophonist, Teddy Osei, founding member of Osibisa who just passed away at age 88.

Culture and class struggle have always been inseparable, with cultural programmes forming strategic components of working-class movements for national liberation and human emancipation. The history of Marxist and socialist-inspired movements offers numerous examples of the interconnection between organisational processes, political education, and cultural work coming together to serve a political project. This art bulletin reflects on some of these historical and contemporary experiences to stimulate the cultural work of the movements of today.

Culture was already integrated into the earliest workers' associations that led to the formation of the Communist League (1847–1852). In an **letter** dated October 1847, Karl Marx described how the Brussels League incorporated singing, poetry, and theatre into its activities. In the same year, Fredrich Engels wrote a

play performed by the league's workers, while Jenny Marx organised their cultural activities. These associations presented themselves as cultural spaces where organising, political education – including Marx's lectures on political economy – and artistic activities were component parts of effective participation in class struggle.

The Struggle between Socialism and Capitalism is a Great Cultural War



Soviet poster, 'From Darkness to Light. From the Battle to the Book. From Sorrow to Happiness', 1921.

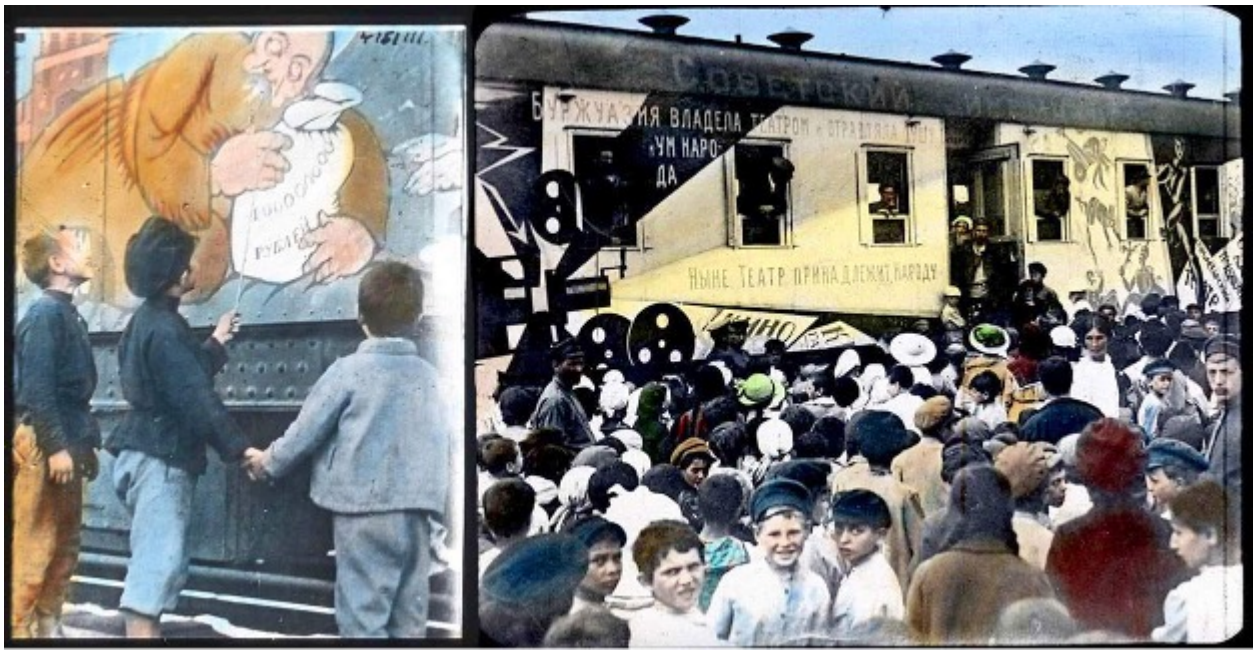
The Soviet experience deepened these efforts. During the historic Russian Revolution of 1905, which Vladmir Lenin described as a 'dress rehearsal' for the 1917 October Revolution, the first workers' councils (or 'soviets') were established. The first soviet, chaired by textile worker and poet Aleksei Nozdrin, hosted literary circles, theatre productions, and poetry readings.

One of the key figures in Soviet cultural and educational formulations, Anatoly Lunacharsky, argued in 1907, drawing on the 1905 revolution's developments, that 'Social Democracy is not just a party, but a great cultural movement'. He described scientific socialism as a 'new way of contemplating and feeling the world', asserting that 'the struggle between socialism and capitalism is the greatest *kulturkampf* ('cultural war')'. Lunacharsky encapsulates a fundamental conception of socialism as a cultural project that represents a new way of conceiving and experiencing the world, as a profound confrontation between two worldviews. It is no coincidence that fascist movements of the 1920s and 1930s, as well as today's **far-right** movements of a

special type, frame their actions as cultural wars.

Following the revolution, between 1909 and 1911, Lunacharsky and Lenin organised the first political education schools. In exile in Italy, with support from playwright and novelist Maxim Gorky, Lunacharsky's schools included courses on international history, the workers' movement, political economy, literary history, and museum visits for workers. Feminist Bolshevik leader **Alexandra Kollontai** contributed to these efforts, addressing patriarchy and women's issues. These educational processes regarded Bolshevism as a socio-cultural movement and emphasised its cultural hegemony.

The October Revolution of 1917 marked a significant expansion of cultural movements. In a short time, over 80,000 cultural spaces emerged, involving more than 450,000 people in the *Proletkult* ('proletarian culture') movement. The Red Army which reached five million members during the civil war, operated over 2,000 schools, 3,000 libraries, 1,300 clubs, 472 theatres, and 320 cinemas by 1920. These activities emphasised art in a variety of forms as a primary tool for political education.



Soviet agitprop trains (*agitpoezda*), 1917–1920. Credit: University of Warwick.

To Build a Cultural Army

The Chinese Revolution, one of the first socialist revolutions of the Third World, built upon the Soviet experience. During the twenty-eight years from the founding of the Communist Party of China (CPC) to the 1949 Revolution, cultural work was fundamental to the many military, land reform, mass education, and party-building strategies. Cultural troops accompanied the Red Army wherever they went in their battles against both the Nationalist Party (KMT) and the Japanese imperialist forces. This historic journey of 10,000 kilometres, called the Long March, marks its **ninetieth anniversary** this year.

Arriving in the north-central city of Yan'an in 1935, the weary and war-torn soldiers and peasants established their new revolutionary base. Over the next few decades, 8,000 soldiers would mobilise the support of tens of millions of peasants in the region, gain popular support in the cities, grow active party membership to 1.2

million people, and build a Red Army made up of one million soldiers, supported by millions more armed peasants to usher in the revolution. Cultural work and the battle of ideas became fundamental in this victory.

As the political and cultural epicentre of the Chinese communist movement, Yan'an captured the imagination of artists, writers, and urban intellectuals from far and wide. By 1943, an estimated 40,000 intellectuals, many coming from privileged families in the peasant, landlord, aristocrat, and petty bourgeoisie classes, traversed harsh conditions to contribute to the communist cause. They lacked, however, political education and concrete experiences of the struggles of workers and peasants. So, a series of schools to address this were formed in Yan'an, including the College of Chinese Women (1939) and the Mao Zedong Young Cadre School (1940), which joined forces to become the first communist university in 1941. Housed in a former Catholic church, the Lu Xun Academy of Art, named after the revolutionary and 'founder of modern Chinese literature', became the main hub for training artist-cadres in Yan'an.



Left: Li Qun, 'Yan'an Lu Xun Academy of Art/Yesterday's Church', 1941. Right: Lu Xun Academy of Art students performing and drawing, 1940s.

Over a three-week period in May 1942, the country's top cultural workers, party leaders, and military strategists were invited to **Yan'an** to discuss the political and cultural programme forward. In his speeches published as the 'Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art' and which became a guide for the People Republic of China's (PRC) cultural policy, Mao Zedong emphasised that political work required not only an 'army of guns' but a 'cultural army'. Building such an army required a creative combination of efforts to increase mass literacy, artistic levels, and class conscientisation, in tandem with the political education and transformation of intellectuals.

'Art, drama, music, fine arts, and literature are the most powerful weapons for propaganda and organising the masses', said Zhou Yang, leading cultural theorist and dean of Lu Xun Academy of Art. 'Artists – this is an indispensable force for the current resistance war. Therefore, cultivating the artistic work cadre for the resistance war is a task that cannot be delayed at present'. From March 1938 to November 1945, the academy graduated 685 students, forming a generation of leading artists, composers, actors, musicians, literary theorists, and art educators that benefitted the PRC after it was established.

Ten months after the Yan'an Forum, the CPC's Central Committee decided to mobilise literary and theatre workers to go to the countryside, which Mao called the 'big school'. These cultural workers paid special attention to folk songs and dances, particularly *yangge*, or 'rice songs'. These songs, traditionally sung for the gods or landlords, were given new connotations and content to instil a revolutionary spirit and encourage soldiers on the frontlines. Transmitting revolutionary ideas in a familiar language and form was welcomed by the local people as a way of serving 'new wine in old bottles'. Works produced in the Yan'an period are still beloved by the Chinese people today. They became important cultural tools not only to build the organisational capacity and mass support for the revolution's victory, but whose long legacy underpinned the construction of socialism in the decades that followed.

Education as a Cultural Action for Freedom


40 ANOS
BRASIL

Poster by Dario Caneda Teixeira, a physical education and art teacher at the Nova Sociedade ('New Society') School in MST's Itapuí Settlement, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.

Legacies from the Soviet, Chinese, and Cuban revolutionary experiences can be found in world's largest social movements today, the **Landless Rural Workers' Movement** (MST) in Brazil. Over its forty-year history, the MST has developed a comprehensive process of political education that deepens its organising models, and strategic projects. Drawing from various historical struggles and reflecting on their practices, the MST arranged its own experiences in the 1990s into what is now known as the '**pedagogia do Movimento Sem Terra**' ('pedagogy of the MST'). Political education processes are part of 'formação humana' ('the political development and formation of a human being') which is rooted in organised struggle. Culture, as a praxis of struggle and social transformation, was an essential dimension of this process, serving as a way of life, a system of meanings and values, and a source of symbolic and artistic expression.

The MST's educational processes also draw from two additional pedagogical traditions in which culture plays a central role. The first is socialist pedagogy, whose cultural dimension was discussed earlier. The second is popular education, inspired primarily by Brazilian educator **Paulo Freire**. Emerging in Brazil during the 1950s and 1960s, popular education was closely tied to people's cultural organisations. Freire's 'pedagogy of the oppressed' saw education as a 'cultural action for freedom', proposing that the 'cultural invasion' could be combatted through fostering a new 'cultural synthesis', which employed and experimented with a variety of methodologies. In turn, Freire's pedagogical model was influenced by national liberation Marxist thinkers such as **Amílcar Cabral** and **Frantz Fanon**, who advanced the thinking and practice of cultural work as a vital component in the creation of a new and fuller human being.

From the Soviet Union to China to Brazil, we hope that our reflections inspire more cultural work in 2025, and beyond, that advances the causes and organisations of the global working class.

Warmly,

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