

Soviet Culture goes to War

DRAMA

H. W. L. DANA

PRESS-RADIO

ALBERT RHYS WILLIAMS

MOVIES

HOWARD FISHER

IT WAS Midsummer Night in Moscow in 1941. The play was Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. The theater was the New Central House of the Red Army, a gigantic building shaped like a five-pointed star. A strange place, you may say, to have put on this delicate Shakespearian phantasy—on a huge stage across which cavalry charges dashed in military plays. But in this Red Army Theater are inscribed the words of Voroshilov: "Every Red Army man must learn to understand and love the culture he is fighting to defend." And Shakespeare was a part of the culture they were going to have to defend. During the two nights on the eve of the Nazi invasion, no less than five different Moscow theaters were saturated by the beauty of five different Shakespeare plays: *Romeo and Juliet*, *As You Like It*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*, as well as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. These had become a part of Soviet culture quite as much as Chekhov, whose *Three Sisters* was being acted that night in the moonlit, seagull-haunted Moscow Art Theater, much as it had been acted when it was first produced there forty years earlier at the beginning of the century.

In Moscow, then, that Midsummer Night of June 21, 1941, was as peaceful and beautiful and colorful as the opening strains of Shostakovich's *Seventh Symphony*. Then, on June 22, came the terrifying, monotonous, mechanical rat-a-tat-tat of the invading Nazi panzer divisions—seeming inhumanly static, even as they were advancing.

The very next day, June 23, meetings were held of theater people all over the Soviet Union to lay plans for mobilizing their forces, too, for national defense. Chekhov's widow, who had acted in *Three Sisters* at the Moscow Art Theater in 1901 and was still acting there, wrote in a letter:

"We actors and actresses in the Moscow Art Theater are preparing and rehearsing new

plays to be added to our repertoire. Daily we are organizing and dispatching brigades of actors and actresses to act our plays before the Russian soldiers at the front. We are mobilizing the spirit of resistance and steadfastness of our people. We are hammering out the spiritual instrument of victory. We are filled with a great calm, for we know the unswerving and resolute spirit of the Russian people."

Between each theater company and each company of soldiers at the front was arranged a sort of mutual interrelationship or "shevstvo." Groups of actors were sent from the theaters of drama to the theaters of war, troupes to the troops. Trucks were arranged with sides that let down to form improvised stages for use at the front. Sometimes the words were relayed to the firing line by loudspeakers. If they reached the Germans beyond, so much the better. The actors acted for the soldiers just before they left for battle and again after they returned. The actors were supposed to help inspire the soldiers, but it was often the Red Army in turn that inspired the actors. On one occasion the troops begged the theatrical company to go to a nearby peasant's hut where their company commander lay wounded and to repeat their whole performance for him alone. For the Island of Kronstadt, defending the harbor of Leningrad, theatrical companies arranged to do a series of one-act plays. For the Navy, plays have been performed with the tops of gun turrets or the bridges of battleships used for platforms. Everywhere actors are working as they had never worked before.

MEANWHILE in the great cultural centers of Leningrad and Moscow, the theaters, immediately after the invasion, continued to be packed with the civilian population, seeking not an "escape" from war, but a better understanding of it.

Leningrad felt the pinch of siege earlier

than Moscow. As the "white nights" of midsummer Leningrad shifted to the black nights of autumn, the Nazi air raids used to begin soon after dark. To enable the audience to leave the theatres before night set in and the raids began, the performances used to start at five o'clock in the afternoon and finish by eight. This was called "beating Hitler to it!" Sergei Radlov writes that, during one of the performances of Shakespeare's *Othello* at his Leningrad theater, an air raid began before the play was quite over. Just as *Othello* was about to strangle Desdemona there came the shrill warning of alarm. The cry that rose from the audience was not one of fear but of indignation that the bombers should have interrupted the play at just that moment. Could not they have waited until *Othello* had finished with Desdemona? The following night, through streets strewn with broken glass left by the air raid of the night before, the crowds flocked again to the theater—not from boredom or craving for mere amusement, but from the insatiable desire of all Soviet people for art and culture.

It was in this same Leningrad at this time that the musician Shostakovich, serving as an air raid warden at his beloved Conservatory of Music, managed to compose the first part of his *Seventh Symphony* in honor of the heroic defense of Leningrad. An old Russian proverb had said: "When the guns begin to speak, music is silent." But Shostakovich cried: "Here the music speaks together with the guns!" The same was true of the theater: drama was speaking together with the guns. In the Soviet Union there was to be no blackout of the arts. On the contrary, music and drama were to play a powerful force in the mobilization of the minds of men.

It is a striking fact that in Solov'ev's new play, *The Citizen of Leningrad* is none other than the composer Shostakovich.

Even the art of the ballet, which might well seem the most conventional and arti-

ficial of all the arts, has its place in war-time. One of the most popular of the young ballerinas of the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow, Olga Lepechinskaya, writes how each night, after finishing her dancing at the Opera House, she went on duty on the roof top as an air raid watcher. At first, when a Nazi bomber appeared, her knees began knocking together so violently that she began to fear that she would never be able to dance again. Yet, when an incendiary bomb fell near her, she leaped over to extinguish it with all the grace and agility of a great ballet dancer and soon found that she no longer had time to be nervous.

Twice the great Bolshoi Theater, where she used to dance, was damaged by bombs. Symbolically enough, what the Nazis destroyed was the ceiling painting representing "The Triumph of the Muses."

While the Bolshoi was being repaired, this young ballet dancer toured the front, dancing on rough platforms, while Tschaikowsky's music was punctuated by the sound of German machine guns perilously near. Above the improvised stage were hung Russian banners that had been borne in battle under Suvorov and Kutuzov—an ancient glory hanging over the head of the new. The Red Army men closed their hands tighter around their weapons as they knew that here was a beauty that the Nazi invaders were trying to rob them of.

The new Russian plays that were produced came mostly in response to a two-fold demand of the Russian people. One was a demand for anti-Nazi plays—plays that would show how the ideology of the German fascists who had launched this attack on them was diametrically opposite to their own ideals in every respect: in the Nazi racial prejudice and anti-Semitism, in the Nazi distrust of culture, in the Nazi subjection of women and children, in the Nazi enslavement of labor. Many of these plays, contrasting Soviet life with that of Hitler's Germany, were already in existence during the non-aggression pact. The Nazis did not like it, but there was nothing they could do about it—nothing, that is, except finally invade the country of those who had always opposed everything the fascists stood for.

Those neutrals, who made the stupid mistake of identifying the Soviet point of view with that of the Nazis, should have seen how unrelentingly Soviet plays attacked Nazi ideas. Similarly, those who maliciously pictured the Soviets as having been hostile to everything British, should have seen the unbroken enthusiasm in Russia for all English drama, from Shakespeare, through Sheridan, to Shaw.

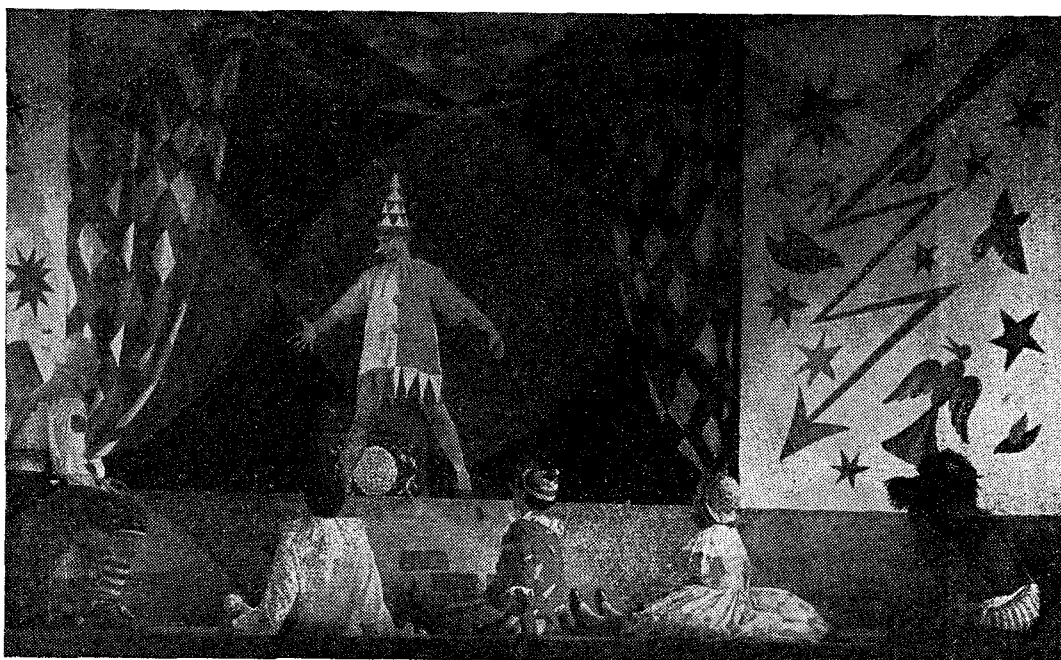
PARALLEL with the demand for anti-Nazi plays was the demand for pro-Russian plays. The Russian people wanted to see on the stage whatever had been great in their own past, whatever expressed their love towards their country, now menaced by foreign invasion, or their loyalty toward the United Nations, who were fighting fascism.



A theatrical performance at the front



Constantine Simonov (center), playwright and war correspondent, conversing with Red Army officers at the front



Children's Theater. A scene from Alexei Tolstoy's "The Little Golden Key"

For seven centuries Russia had been attacked by a long series of invaders; but in every case the Russian people had slowly, heroically, and decisively driven the aggressors out of Russia.

It was just 700 years ago, in 1242, that Teutonic Knights had attacked Russia and the voice of Alexander Nevsky—"Let them come to us as friends and we will receive them as friends; but let them come against us with arms and they will perish by arms"—either in Eisenstein's film or in Prokofieff's cantata, comes thundering across seven centuries to stir to action those who are defending Russia today.

Similarly Alexei Tolstoy's new play and Eisenstein's new film show *Ivan the Terrible* as being primarily "terrible" to the traitors of Russia. Again the plays and films about *Peter the Great* picture that gigantic figure striding along the dikes of the Neva river as a prototype of the spirit of construction, the organizer of the Russian Navy and of national defense, serving today to inspire the defenders of the city that he founded.

The Germans like to forget that Russian soldiers entered Berlin in 1760, but the play by Finn and Gus called *The Keys to Berlin* is a saucy reminder. *The Army Leader Suvorov*, either in the play by Bakhterev and Razumovski, or the film by Pudovkin, or now in the opera by Vasilenko, with his love of the rank and file and his feeling that "The soldier who knows what he is fighting for is worth three soldiers who do not know," is still the idol of the Russian people. When his dying words—"Suvorov is not dead; he will live in every Russian soldier"—ring every night through the great Red Army Theater, Red Army men jump to their feet to show that the spirit of Suvorov is still alive in them today.

The most powerful parallel from history, however, is the driving out of Napoleon's invading armies 130 years ago. The theme never fails to stir the Russians today who are rallying against a similar invasion. It is the theme of Lermontov's poem *Borodino*; Tchaikowsky's *1812 Overture*, Tolstoy's great historical novel *War and Peace* (now dramatized into two parts under the title *The Patriotic War of 1812* by the Maly Theater in Moscow and being turned into an opera by Prokofieff); the play by Lipskerov and Kochetkov, *Nadzhda Durova*, and A. Gladkov's *Long-Long Ago*, both written about the Russian heroine of 1812; and the magnificent verse play by Solovov called *Field Marshal Kutuzov*.

The Vakhtangov Theater, where *Field Marshal Kutuzov* was being acted, was completely destroyed by German bombs; but the play was produced by the same company later in Tashkent and was acted in many other theaters throughout the Soviet Union. Similarly the Bolshoi Theater, when its Moscow building was damaged, carried on in Kuibyshev. Again the Maly Theater, when the air raids endangered the audience, moved to Chelyabinsk, the Moscow Art Theater to Saratov,

the Kamerny Theater to Irkutsk, and the Moscow Soviet Theater and the Moscow Jewish Theater to Alma Ata. Just as the factories were moved eastward, not always to the next town, but, by careful planning, to the one beyond that, in leap-frog fashion; so the Moscow theaters by pre-arrangement had each one its own appointed city further East, to use as a temporary location while Moscow was under siege. Now, one by one, the theaters are beginning to return to Moscow. The Maly Theater, for example, has now come back from Chelyabinsk and is now acting its version of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* in its own well known theater building in the very heart of Moscow.

In addition to the patriotic plays about the earlier Russia, there are also plays and films aplenty about the heroes of the Russian Revolution twenty-five years ago and Red Army leaders such as *Chapayev*, *Shchors*, *Parkhomenko* fighting against various attempts of foreign invasion to overthrow the Soviet Union. Here the loyalty of the Russian workers towards heroes that have come from their own country is doubly reenforced by loyalty towards heroes that have come from their own class. Moreover these plays, many of them already produced before the German invasion, are often directed against the Germans: so they combine with the purely anti-Nazi plays into building up a spirit of continuity and unity, a morale in the Russian people today such as is not to be found anywhere else.

A year ago, on the eve of the twenty-fourth celebration of the Russian Revolution, during an air raid on Moscow on Nov. 5, 1941, a high explosive Nazi bomb killed one of the most promising young Soviet playwrights, Alexander Afinogenov. At that very moment his play *Distant Point*, in English translation, was stirring London audiences, especially with the scene in which the dying Red Army general cries:

"We all have a 'distant point,' a world in which men shall live their lives in freedom and happiness. We all think of that, live for that to the very last second of the last hour. And when death comes—why, we'll die alive!"

Afinogenov himself "died alive." Just before his death, he had finished a play called *On the Eve* dealing with the splendid spirit of patriotism with which the family and friends of a Moscow foundry worker rise to the defense of the Soviet Union the moment it is attacked.

There have been a number of new Soviet plays about the defense of Moscow, such as Tardov's *Moscow* and Nikulin's *Soul of Moscow*. It is, however, from further south, from the Ukraine, which has suffered most by invasion, that the subjects of the greatest number of war plays have come, starting with Pervomaisky's *Beginning of the Battle*. The very powerful Ukrainian playwright Korneichuk has followed up his prize-winning play of 1941, *On the Ukrainian Steppes*, in which he introduced the lovable leaders of

two rival collective farms, with a sequel showing how these same characters acted when their farms had been invaded by the German hordes. In this later and still more powerful play, *Partisans on the Ukrainian Steppes*, first acted in the Ukraine itself by the Red Army Theater of the Southwest Front and later by the Moscow Maly Theater, Korneichuk shows the indomitable courage of those in the guerrilla warfare behind the German lines. The guerrillas, either in earlier wars or in this war, seem to be favorite subjects for thrilling dramatic action. Many a play, like Krapiva's *Partisans*, deals with this exciting theme—as does *The Smoke of the Fatherland* written by Sheinin in collaboration with the Tur brothers.

NOT only the Red Army but the other branches of the military are the subjects of new Soviet plays. *Commanders at the Helm* gives us the story of the Red Navy and *The Winged Tribe* the exploits of the Red Air Force. Civilians, too, have inspired plays about their indispensable contributions to the war effort. The innumerable adventurous roles that the Soviet women are playing in modern warfare is the subject of Nikulin's play *Women*. Pride in the splendid morale of the civilian population of the Soviet Union and faith in its ultimate victory is the theme of Constantine Finn's *Ruzov Forest*. In George Mdivani's *The Battalion Goes West*, every member of a Soviet family is represented as doing his bit in one way or another to help along the war of liberation.

The play, however, which best shows the marvelous concerted action of the whole Russian populace is the play which has recently opened with great success in Moscow, which is being acted in over a hundred theaters throughout the Soviet Union, and is being prepared in English translation for production by the Theater Guild in New York. This is Constantine Simonov's *Russian People*. Last year the young poet and journalist won one of the Stalin prizes for drama, 100,000 rubles, for his play called *A Fellow From Our Town*. In this play Simonov dealt with a single individual, an eccentric intellectual, who under the pressure of war develops into such a hero that a statue is put up in his honor, to which the small boys can point and say: "That is a fellow from our town."

Now, however, Simonov has turned to a larger theme, that of the whole Russian people, as exemplified by the inhabitants of a city in the south of Russia, which has been surrounded by the invading Germany army. Busy as Simonov was with his brilliant reports from the front, some of which have been gathered together under the title *From the Black Sea to the Barents Sea*, he found time, while in Moscow for a couple of days, to dictate this play to a stenographer. It is based on what he had actually seen in besieged Russian towns. The girl tankist Valya, for example, is based on a real girl whom he had met at the front only a few weeks earlier.

In *The Russian People* Simonov depicts a

besieged Russian town that is rationed to one glass of water a day per person, but the spirits of the inhabitants do not flag. Captain Safonov, who is in charge of the defense, has lost so many younger officers in the war that he is forced to name as chief of staff a taciturn, severe old man, Vasin. As head of the Special Department he has to appoint a young poet and correspondent, Panin—Simonov himself, if you wish. Valya, the young girl tank driver, with whom Captain Safonov is falling in love, is to be sent to the dangerous work behind the German lines. The captain's own mother, Marya Petrovna, is sent to the gallows by the Germans. No one thinks of surrendering arms. Each one, without hesitation, is ready to give up his life. As the cap-

tain says, each one is prepared "to die with a purpose." The fearlessness of the people stems from their love of life, of their fatherland, of all that was created by their own hands, by their common labor. In the zero hour each one thinks back to his own past, to his friends, to his native place. Valya says that for her the word fatherland suggests the three white birch trees that used to stand in front of her father's house. For others the fatherland suggests other images, but they all love it and they are all united in their willingness to die for its defense. As the captain says, there is something of the poet in all of them. The very menace of death intensifies the love of life. On the eve of their destruction, they dream of the future, appreciate the

little jokes they share together, value the other's well placed word, and tenderly love each other.

Tragic as is their lot, it seems really happy in comparison with that of the one traitor in their midst, Kharitonov, a Russian who has betrayed Russia to the Germans. For in his moral fall, he has ceased to be a man. In betraying his country, he betrays his own family. His Nazi masters force him to rejoice at the killing of his own son—a Red Army commander.

The Russian People gives us, in a cross-section of a single besieged town, a microcosm of the Soviet Union—of the whole heroic struggle of the Russian people.

H. W. L. DANA.

THE PRESS: 5,000,000 CORRESPONDENTS

The 859 papers of czarist days have expanded to 8,000. Albert Rhys Williams on the Soviet's newspapers and radio.

THE function of the press is not to make money or to entertain the reader, but to inform him and stimulate his interest and zeal in building the new society. This is done in the peculiar Russian manner, by way of erudite editorials, reports from the various "fronts"—cultural, economic, as well as military—and interminable statistics. The opening of a new blooming-mill in the Urals is often front-page news. An abstruse discussion on Marxism may take the headlines. Chess problems occupy more space than do cross-word puzzles abroad.

To the average foreigner, the papers are dry and colorless. There are no big display advertisements; no gossip columns, comic strips, stock exchange quotations; no "society" news, unless the deeds and pictures of "200 Percenters," women drivers of tractors and locomotives, and parachute jumpers come under that rubric; no sensational stories of crime and passion, unless they can point a socialist moral.

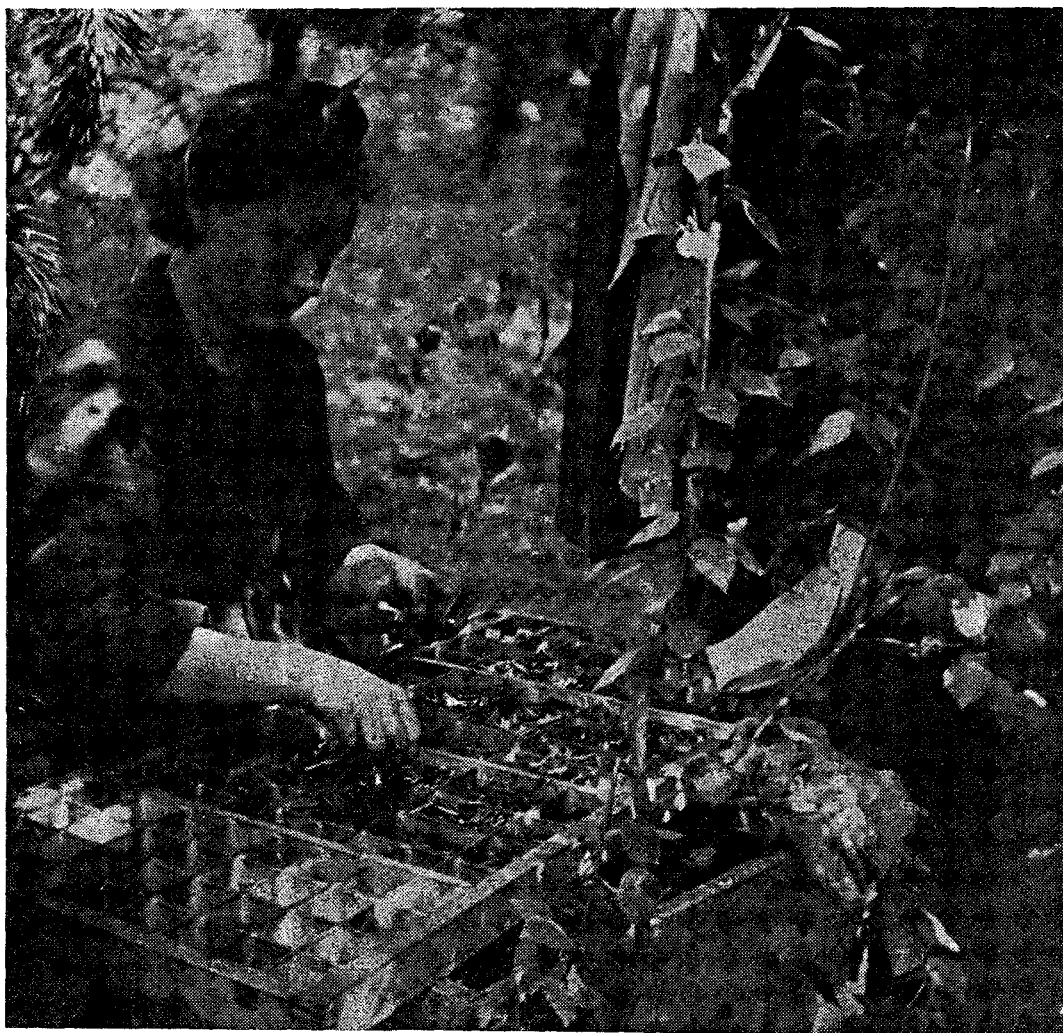
On the lighter side there are cartoons, topical verses, or witty feuilletons with a sting or laugh; and of course, now there are stories of the war. While these "human interest" features are on the increase, to the average outsider the Soviet papers still seem dull and monotonous. But not to the Russians. With such avidity do they turn to them that they queue up in front of the newsstands; big editions are sold out as fast as they come off the press; and only shortage of paper prevents the Soviet press from being the largest in the world.

The 859 papers of czarist days have expanded to over 8,000—an increase of more than tenfold in number and fourteenfold in circulation. And sometimes there are up to 100 readers to a copy, thanks to out-loud reading to groups at rest hours in the harvest fields, Red Army camps, and factories. Type is cast and papers are published in 120 languages,

realizing the Soviet's goal: "For every people its own paper in its own language."

At the same time they are seeking to make them of and by the people. "A paper will be strong and vital," said Lenin, "when the five men of letters directing it are supplemented by 500 or 5,000 labor correspondents, workers

who are not professional writers." "Why," asked *Pravda*, "should we send reporters to the village to write about you peasants? Write about yourselves. Never mind if you are semi-literate and must use capital letters or 'chicken-marks.' Start that way and you may end a columnist. But don't send in such items as



Setting the type for the frontline newspaper "Boyevoi Dozor" ["Military Patrol"].