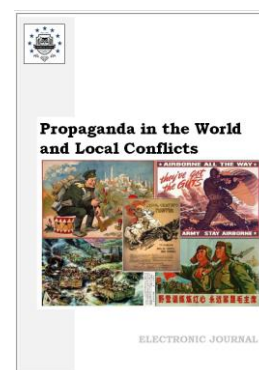


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The Russian Agitational Trains and Steamers Sector in 1918–1920: Apparatus, Practices, Challenges, and Solutions

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Abstract

This paper examines a unique phenomenon of the Soviet era – the use of agitational-propaganda trains and steamers subsequent to the 1917 October Revolution. Given the military-political situation at the time, the Bolsheviks, headed by V.I. Lenin, needed to have their statecraft agenda grounded in support from the wide masses of the nation's peasantry and working class. The search for ways to distribute agitational leaflets, brochures, and books among members of the Red Army in as mobile a fashion as possible would result in the launch of literary-instructional trains and steamers.

The paper offers an insight into the mechanics and practices behind the conduct of agitational work with local communities at the time. An attempt was made, based on the available statistical data, to identify the more common and effective propaganda techniques as well as the barriers in achieving the objectives for agitational vehicles. A noteworthy aspect touched upon in the paper is the Bolsheviks' interest, in this context, in the tenets of Taylorism, which found reflection in their plans to employ cutting-edge technical means.

Keywords: agitation, propaganda, agit-trains, agit-steamers, Soviet power, Bolsheviks, civil war, socialism building, V.I. Lenin, All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK).

1. Introduction

The establishment of Soviet power in Russia and in the future Union republics following the 1917 October Revolution was by no means an instantaneous and lightning-fast process. For several years, this process was also impeded by the large-scale Russian Civil War. In addition to military, economic, and organizational difficulties, a pressing objective was to win over and get the wider population to accept the new authority. One of the more interesting phenomena associated with the building of the Soviet state was the Bolsheviks' robust agitational-propaganda work, an area they would go on to be quite successful in.

Subsequent to the October Revolution, agitational-propaganda work was conducted by the Bolsheviks in an incredibly professional and well-orchestrated manner. Considerable attention was paid to it by leaders of the Russian Communist Party such as V.I. Lenin, L.D. Trotsky, and M.I. Kalinin. A major step forward in the cause of influencing the masses was the launch by the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK) of agitational trains and steamers, which were to be the mouthpiece of the newly established Soviet power across the country, including its most remote areas.

The purpose behind the research reported in this paper was to explore the operation of agitational trains and steamers in the early years of the Soviet state (1918–1920) and identify some

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of the key characteristics of this phenomenon. Consequently, the objectives of the study were as follows: 1) conduct a brief analysis of the emergence of the agit-vehicles sector and explore its apparatus; 2) identify the key forms and methods of work with the population and establish which of those were the most effective in producing desired propaganda results; 3) identify the key challenges that were faced by agit-vehicle campaign personnel; 4) explore in a structured manner some of the action plans and recommendations for successful propaganda from participants in the initial agit-vehicle campaigns; 5) explore the views of contemporaries, including Russian Communist Party leaders, on the role of agitational-propaganda trains and steamers in the cause of spreading the ideas of Bolshevism and the Socialist Revolution.

2. Materials and methods

The primary source employed in this work is the collection of articles “The VTsIK Agit-Vehicles Sector: History, Apparatus, and Work Practices”, published in 1920 during the 8th All-Russian Congress of Soviets under the supervision of the Agitational-Instructional Trains and Steamers Department. Most of the authors in the collection, including V. Karpinsky (editor), Ya. Burov, A. Oborin, M. Buravtsev, R. Arsky, K. Samoylova, and A. Izrailovich, were actual participants in and witnesses to the initial agit-vehicle campaigns. Of particular note is the Appendix to the collection, which contains quotes from speeches by V.I. Lenin, L.D. Trotsky, and M.I. Kalinin, as well as a letter of appreciation from the Bukhara Central Revolutionary Committee and a set of draft regulations on organizing the operation of the agit-vehicles sector ([Agitparpoezda VTsIK, 1920: 60-67](#)). The other sources employed in this work include the various leaflets, brochures, posters, opinion pieces, and texts of decrees that were distributed by agitational trains and steamers. These materials can be accessed via special websites dealing with archival documents ([GAOSO](#)).

The study’s methodological basis was an interdisciplinary analytical approach and a set of socio-historical methods. A wide use was made of systems analysis, the cause-and-effect method, and the descriptive method. The study was conducted with observation of the following essential research principles – historicism, objectivity, and systematicity.

3. Discussion

The subject of agitational trains and steamers was researched by Soviet scholars quite extensively. This, in part, is associated with the fact that the nation’s agitational-instructional units, whose purpose was to help resolve critical socio-political issues at critical times in Soviet history, had not disappeared but had transformed, continuing their work. They were employed during World War II and during the nation’s major socialist construction projects (e.g., the use of the Red Echelon, the last agit-train in the history of the USSR, during the construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline Railway ([Elizarova](#))). Among the Soviet research studies on the conduct of agitational-propaganda work via trains and steamers, of particular note are the works by Ts. Gofman ([Gofman, 1948](#)), L.V. Maksakova ([Maksakova, 1956](#)), E.M. Mezhenina ([Mezhenina, 1958](#)), and A.T. Nasyrov ([Nasyrov, 1991](#)), which are distinguished by a rich source base, a detailed analysis of statistical documents, and an accurate insight into the operation of the nation’s most influential agit-trains.

Within Russian historiography, issues related to Bolshevik agitational-propaganda policy continue to attract the interest of researchers. Modern researchers have paid a significant amount of attention to the cultural and educational aspects of the use of agit-vehicles (e.g., [Tanin, 2002](#) and [Lezhen', 2013](#)). A major work focused on this subject was released in 2002 – the two-volume “Mass Agitation Art in Soviet Russia: Materials and Documents”, a colorful and informative collective publication ([Agitmassovoe iskusstvo Sovetskoi Rossii, 2002](#)). Research has also continued into the relatively little researched aspects of agitational-propaganda work conducted at the time. For instance, A.I. Karlyavina has explored the use of agit-vehicles to conduct antireligious propaganda ([Karlyavina, 2018](#)). Some of the researchers have focused on the effect of the use of agit-vehicles on regional history ([Filimonov, 2018](#)). In recent years, there has been increased interest in researching the way this sector was organized ([Timofeeva, 2016](#)) and the structure of the authority apparatus concerned with the Bolsheviks’ propaganda mechanisms ([Bochkareva, 2010](#)). Some interest has also been displayed in researching the use of such mechanisms against the White Guardsmen ([Konkin, 2015](#)).

4. Results

One of the key lessons derived by the Bolsheviks from the First Russian Revolution was the conclusion about the special significance of agitational-propaganda work, including within the nation's army and navy, which, both heterogeneous in composition, served as a firm support for the Tsarist regime to lean on (Gavrilov, 1955: 5-6). During that time, extensive use started to be made of leaflets and proclamations, with attempts even made to "have in place cheap canteens and reading rooms with games and relevant reading materials and organize all kinds of entertainment activities for officers" (Gavrilov, 1955: 17-18) – only to be clamped down on by the authorities. According to historian T. Shanin, the lessons derived from the army and navy uprisings did not go to waste for the revolutionary political parties (the Bolsheviks, in particular), who would put the best practices from the Revolutions of 1905–1907 and 1917 to good use. The issue of engaging all of the nation's armed forces in the process was just a matter of time, resources, and propaganda efforts (Shanin, 1997: 470). Consequently, subsequent to the 1917 October Revolution, the Bolsheviks were able to make a most effective use of the propaganda experience they had amassed over the years (Karlyavina, 2018: 112). The Russian Civil War provided a new impetus for the conduct of agitational work among the masses – all the more so given the aspiration of each of the conflicting sides to win over as much of the population and discredit the enemy as much as possible.

The year 1918 witnessed the launch of a new agitational apparatus – specially outfitted trains and steamers. The idea owed its inception to the Military Department of the VTSIK publishing house, which at the time was tasked with distributing Soviet literature at the fronts to boost the morale of members of the Red Army (Agitparpoezda VTsIK, 1920: 5). Transportation by rail was viewed as the most mobile of the delivery methods available at the time. To attract the attention of the locals to a literature-carrying train, it was to sport an eye-catching outward appearance. The solution was to "decorate the sides of the cars with illustrated posters". Later on, they switched to actually *painting* art on the sides, as paper posters were "vulnerable to damage by rain and wind" (Agitparpoezda VTsIK, 1920: 5).

The first experience in this area was the launch of the Mobile Military Frontline Literary Train Named after V.I. Lenin, which in August 1918 left Moscow to travel to Kazan under the command of Ya.I. Burov. Comprised of freight cars, it incorporated a books warehouse, a bookstore, a small front office, and a kitchen. This enterprise was a success and full of promise. The project participants returned to Moscow with a blueprint in hand for the design of a literary-instructional train (Agitparpoezda VTsIK, 1920: 6). Based on a directive from L.D. Trotsky, work would begin in the Moscow Railway District on the outfitting of five literary-instructional trains (the last of them, however, was ready to run only in 1920).

In 1919, the VTSIK issued a regulation on literary-instructional trains and instructors from the People's Commissariats on them. In charge of this sector was a special commission membered by Burov, Sosnovsky, Yeremeyeva, and Minina (Agitparpoezda VTsIK, 1920: 6). The main objective was to establish firm ties between the country's major cities (Moscow and Petrograd) and areas to which the young Soviet power was coming, as well as to help develop the country's economy, which would be so crucial to its recovery. The so-called "mobile network" had the various elements of its stationary counterpart mapped onto it – agitation, instruction, control, literature supply, and communication (Agitparpoezda VTsIK, 1920: 7). As a consequence, the sector's organizational establishment comprised following units: Political Department (split into the Instructional and Agitational-Lecturing Divisions), Complaints Office, Information Department, Cinema Department, Fairs Department, Technical Services Department, General Services Department, Budget and Accounts Control Department, Russian Telegraphic Agency (ROSTA), a books warehouse, and a bookstore. Action plans for work with a target region's local community were typically shared by political workers in advance, and agitators would work on the text of upcoming public addresses.

A few words will now be said about the technical side of the agit-vehicles business, which many view as a progressive phenomenon largely grounded in the teachings of F.W. Taylor concerning labor organization and production management (V.I. Lenin advocated employing in the building of the Soviet state what he saw as the positive part of Taylorism (Lenin, 1969: 187-190)). A typical agit-train was comprised of 16–18 freight or passenger walk-through cars with only minimal comfort for personnel and had an internal telephone link and a radio transmitter-receiver (capable of even receiving a signal from abroad). Each train had a staff of 15–18 political workers

and 80–85 technical assistants (agit-steamers employed 175–180 such staff) and a security team composed of members of the Red Army ([Agitparpoezda VTsIK, 1920: 8-9](#)). Internal life and routine on agit-trains were regulated via special written instructions.

Ya.I. Burov, a member of the VTsIK commission concerned with managing the operation of agitational trains and steamers, wrote the following on the matter: “Normally, a trip overlapped with a certain political event. Every time an area was freed from occupation, the Organization would instantly dispatch an agit-vehicle over there. These “uplifting” trains were intended to provide organizations and residents with assistance in building new Soviet power and Communist Party apparatuses” ([Agitparpoezda VTsIK, 1920: 10](#)). The first qualified instructional agit-train (which was named after V.I. Lenin as well) traveled in December 1918, under the command of Sosnovsky, to the country’s northwestern areas newly freed from German occupation. It would go on to become the nation’s flagship agit-train, making trips to Ukraine and Siberia in 1919–1920. The other agit-trains employed at the time were the October Revolution, Red East, Soviet Caucasus, and Red Cossack. Over the two-year period, these five agit-trains made a combined 18 trips, and the agit-steamer Red Star made two journeys. The agit-vehicles, combined, visited 96 governorates – from localities in Latvia and Belarus to areas in Turkestan, a combined 775 stops ([Agitparpoezda VTsIK, 1920: 18](#)).

The key types of propaganda activities that agit-vehicle personnel normally organized were open-air meetings, indoor meetings, nonparty conferences, congresses, lectures, fairs, cinema sessions, pieces of theater, and giving out literature. Concurrently, instructors were doing their share of the work too (mainly members of the People's Commissariats with significant political weight within the agit-vehicles establishment) – visiting local institutions, arranging meetings for the staff of the agency they represented, giving presentations, and tackling key issues of concern to a local community.

The Complaints Office on an agit-vehicle served to help develop a relationship between the central government and a target area’s authorities, inspect the latter’s work, and document (and, where possible, try to resolve) key issues of concern to the local community. In his paper “The Complaints Office on Agit-Vehicles”, which was released as part of the collection “The VTsIK Agit-Vehicles Sector: History, Apparatus, and Work Practices”, A. Oborin notes the following: “Making a complaint is the simplest and most elementary form of protest against reality or perceived injustice. There, accordingly, exists a need to teach the average citizen how to complain, expose, and protest” ([Agitparpoezda VTsIK, 1920: 35](#)). Note that it is this specific institution that would often serve as the bulwark of public trust in Soviet power at the time. This assertion can be supported by the following statistics: a single trip undertaken in the summer of 1920 by the steamer Red Star saw its Complaints Office receive 3,000 complaints from the local community, with the figure being 1,500 with the train Red East (March through July 1920) ([Agitparpoezda VTsIK, 1920: 32-34](#)). The most complained-about issues at the time included poor social support, confiscation, impressment, arrests, and land disputes. There was commitment to resolving resident complaints “as soon as possible, preferably on the spot, so as to show the local community the fairness of Soviet power and that it cared about workers and the poor” ([Agitparpoezda VTsIK, 1920: 33](#)). Success stories of exposing and bringing the guilty to justice and dismissing corrupt or ineffectual officials were helping dispel a local community’s fears and distrust of the new authority. This particularly was the case in Turkestan, where the Muslim population was at first reluctant to make contact. However, it took just a few trials of the guilty for the situation to change radically, with collective complaints even starting to be lodged against high-level officials for abuse of power (e.g., the exposure and dismissal of the Chief of Police of the city of Samarkand).

In addition to investigating injustice, the Complaints Office would also engage in gathering useful material about all kinds of issues of concern to an area’s local community and about the work of its local authorities, with this information then analyzed and put to good use in future agitational-propaganda endeavors. Consultation was another service provided by the Complaints Office. This included legal assistance and guidance on the latest legal regulations.

Of particular note are the methods employed in 1918–1920 by the Women's Department of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (“Zhenotdel”) in working with women during agit-vehicle campaigns. Agitators and instructors sought to reach out to the entire female section of the proletariat. During World War I, the number of women working in factories increased significantly, and women increasingly took part in the country’s socio-political life.

However, not all regions witnessed brisk progress and success in engaging women in the building of the Soviet state. Zhenotdel agitators placed particular emphasis on the need to nurture women's organizational skills and develop in them the ability to form socio-political institutions, to which end particular use was made of instructors and agitators specializing in working with females. An interesting description of the reactions an agit-steamer campaign drew from women was provided by Zhenotdel member K. Samoylova: "To the children and women, the arrival of the Red Star was a real fiesta. They put on their best outfits to spend the entire day at the steamer, attending an open-air meeting, a maternity protection fair, and a concert by a violinist, a cellist, and a pianist, which they loved. Lastly, they enjoyed a movie session, which included "Brain of Soviet Russia" (a film showcasing the input of the People's Commissars), "Red Turnip" (a film about the attempts by the White Guardsmen to destroy the Red Army), and, finally, "Soviet Medicine" (a film depicting how community service helped "heal the bourgeois of their maladies")" ([Agitparpoezda VTsIK, 1920: 46](#)). In addition to agitational-organizational work, educational and coordination work was also conducted. In areas that already had a women's department in place, such work included identifying and remediating issues in its work and providing guidance on how to conduct work with female residents and what objectives to focus on. Issues discussed at women's conferences and congresses typically included food security, labor protection, combating abuse of power and corruption, support for hospitals caring for members of the Red Army, maternity and childhood services (e.g., child day care), and joining the Party. Statistics indicate that such activities were very popular and drew many female residents. For instance, in the summer of 1920, instructor K. Samoylova organized nine women's nonparty congresses and conferences in the Volga Region, with the cities Tsaritsyn and Saratov drawing 645 and 672 female delegates, respectively ([Agitparpoezda VTsIK, 1920: 47](#)).

A crucial form of agitation on trains and steamers were art painting and posters – intended to have a visual effect on the masses. At first, artists had some freedom in what they chose to paint on an agit-vehicle. Consequently, many of the illustrations were too futuristic and figurative to have the right effect on the wider public. This would result in such art getting more realistic. In charge of all activity related to the development of poster slogans and inspection of poster art was a special editorial team headed by V.A. Karpinsky. The artists' team was headed by I.I. Nivinsky. The well-known artists whose services were enlisted for the purpose included K.S. Malevich, M.Z. Shagal, K.S. Petrov-Vodkin, D.S. Moor, and M.M. Cheremnykh ([Karlyavina, 2018: 115](#)). The choice of themes such as fighting both external and internal enemies, combating capitalist oppression, boosting labor productivity, restoring the economy, and doing away with illiteracy was in keeping with the political agenda set for the young Soviet state ([Konkin, 2015: 105](#)). The significance of posters and art painting to the success of agit-vehicle campaigns has been stressed by researcher E.E. Lezhen', who is convinced that this type of art "played at that time a significant educational role in a low-literacy, impoverished country that had virtually no other means of informing people about what was going on" ([Lezhen', 2013: 123](#)). While there were other channels for informing the population (e.g., leaflets, newspapers, theater, and cinema), what sets "mobile posters" ([Tanin, 2002: 59](#)) apart is that such images are known to remain photographically fixed in one's mind for long periods of time.

The majority of responses to the questionnaire (a special questionnaire that typically had to be filled out by local government officials to assess the effectiveness of agit-vehicle campaigns) concurred that agitational art painting was a critical and indispensable means. Firstly, such "mobile posters" easily caught the eye with their colorful artwork. Secondly, images could be understood by members of all social groups, including the illiterate. Thirdly, clear and catchy slogans were easy to commit to memory as a means of keeping up one's revolutionary ardor. A questionnaire from the stanitsa of Kavkazskaya dated June 12, 1920, contains the following answer: "Brightly colored, expressive revolutionary images are indispensable in influencing the masses. They can get even the most apathetic and indifferent people interested. Even detractors recognize that the Bolsheviks are exceptional at agitation" ([Agitparpoezda VTsIK, 1920: 63](#)). Thus, art painting was a cutting-edge method of agitation.

Despite the significant effort put into it, the general conclusion about the operation of the agit-vehicles sector in Russia in 1918–1920 was that there was a need to reconsider the methods used to conduct propaganda work. It turned out in practice that many agitators did not know the true state of affairs in a region and would employ a one-size-fits-all approach, setting priorities that

were out of step with the real needs of local communities. In an effort to help advance the cause of building socialism in the country, the central leadership also suggested paying more attention to industrial propaganda.

A key problem with agitational trains and steamers was a shortage of suitably skilled personnel, political workers, and instructors. Careful attention to the activity of instructors was drawn in the article “The Significance of Instructional Work within the VTsIK Agit-Vehicles Sector” by M. Buravtsev ([Agitparpoezda VTsIK, 1920: 36-40](#)). It was stressed that, being a representative of a particular People's Commissariat, instructors ideally had to be responsible, experienced individuals with comprehensive knowledge of the activity of their commissariat who were prepared to engage in joint work with other political workers within the agit-vehicles sector and practice joint decision-making.

Another problem was the relationship with the central leadership – over the two-year period, no special commission was established to manage and coordinate the work of political workers within the agit-vehicles sector and no statutory documents were created for the purpose – leaving personnel overloaded with work ([Agitparpoezda VTsIK, 1920: 11](#)). The mission had been affected by neglect, ignorance, and heedlessness on the part of the employees of the People's Commissariats and other central public agencies, many of whom viewed going on an agit-vehicle trip as going to a “resort” to relax and unwind from the stresses of their day job ([Agitparpoezda VTsIK, 1920: 11](#)).

In addition, instructors and agitators often witnessed high levels of incompetence by local officials – more specifically, ignorance of the contents of VTSIK decrees and directives, a lack of knowledge about the essence and functions of the People's Commissariats, and a lack of organizational skills. The work of the Complaints Office helped spot cases of inactivity, negligence, and gross abuse of authority on the part of local officials in the discharge of their duties. V.A. Karpinsky cited the following as key causes behind poor Party work in regions: 1) local organizations being detached from the people; 2) inability to combine Soviet and Party work (e.g., holding important activities without explaining anything to the population, which might have been met with aggression); 3) organizing work in a wrong way (forcing one to attend an activity, which might have been met with repugnance); 4) conducting nonparty conferences in an incompetent manner or absenting oneself from such events on a regular basis, which surely did not help to bring new members into the Bolshevik party – in fact, this even caused the numbers to drop (declines of up to 50%); 5) wrong interpretation of the idea of national autonomy; 6) overlooking many important aspects of life in a region (e.g., the women and youth problems); 7) reprehensible practices by Party organizations (e.g., giving approval to illegal conduct by local residents) ([Agitparpoezda VTsIK, 1920: 21-22](#)). Tackling these challenges and deficiencies and straightening the Party line was seen as a key objective for the agit-vehicles sector.

Another difficulty that faced Bolshevik agitators and propagandists at the time was a change in the consciousness of the masses, with people, who, for the most part, were concerned with basic everyday issues, as opposed to their government's international policy, getting increasingly demanding, selective, and critical. Of particular note in this respect is the following suggestion by V.A. Karpinsky addressed to political workers: “Try to picture, for a moment, the psychological state of peasants or workers attending a meeting in hopes of learning of the possibility of some kind of improvement in their life – and you will easily see that... amid a fireworks display of obscure words and phrases used to talk about things that are so alien to them, their eyes may go funny and they may get groggy – and they will either fall asleep or just leave. And chances are they'll never come back” ([Agitparpoezda VTsIK, 1920: 24](#)). Therefore, political workers and instructors had to be good communicators and be well-versed theoretically in the social, political, economic, and other aspects of life in a target region.

The key technical challenges that faced the agit-vehicles sector included the trains having to sit idle for too long in Moscow – for up to a month and longer (in addition to red tape, there was a civil war going on, which complicated travel on the railroads), insufficient funding for fit-out of trains, and the need for additional means of transportation (e.g., two-wheeled carriages, automobiles, longboats, motorboats, wagons, and barges).

The following initiatives were proposed by contemporaries and participants to help tackle the challenges facing the agit-vehicles sector:

1) Put in place regulations and standards for the operation of agit-vehicles; reorganize the Agitational-Instructional Trains and Steamers Department; centralize the operation of agit-vehicles and have the sector's accumulated best practices serve as a model for future campaigns.

2) Ensure a rigorous and thorough staffing process and seek to hire more well-qualified staff; have them design schemes for working with target communities and write topical content; get the People's Commissariats and other government institutions interested in getting these processes going in order to help remediate the existing imperfections; enlist various specialists to work within the sector, including musicians, actors, poets, and artists.

3) Make active use of technical tools – from the various modes of transportation (horses, air, water, and rail) to floating theaters (with a seating capacity of up to 1,500) and mobile fairs by the People's Commissariats; “Taylorize” agitational-propaganda methods and forms of influencing target audiences (Agitparpoezda VTsIK, 1920: 17) – employ as many mechanisms to streamline the work process as possible (e.g., mobile printing presses, radio stations, movie theaters, slide viewing, and slogans in the sky); set up socially significant facilities focused on assisting the masses and local authorities in advancing the cause of building socialism (e.g., show workshops, ambulatory care clinics manned by experienced nurses, and veterinary stations); provide humanitarian aid to the population (e.g., bring over linen, shoes, toys, kitchenware, glass, nails, textbooks, and paints (Agitparpoezda VTsIK, 1920: 30).

4) Adapt one's choice of agitational-propaganda methods to the changing reality, paying close attention to both public sentiment and needs; employ major methods of reasoning (e.g., induction) to get the thoughts of members of a target audience headed in the right direction; put to use one's knowledge of the statutory instruments of Soviet power.

5) Vest agit-vehicle staff – as direct representatives of the nation's highest authority – with appropriate authority in order to ensure their maximum involvement in the life of a local community; make the roles of agitator and instructor complementary to each other (these measures were to help enhance public administration in remote areas, with a focus on bolstering the position and standing of the Bolsheviks' there based on coordinated influence on an area's major local institutions); maintain sustained contact with a local population to obtain feedback on the implementation of initiatives launched during agit-vehicle campaigns (e.g., through the Complaints Office).

The above list is only a small selection of the proposals put forth by agit-vehicle campaign organizers and participants. All of those proposals were based on the practical experience gained and the material gathered through agit-trips, which is of significance for future research. Note that, actually, most of those proposals were passed into law by V.I. Lenin on January 25, 1920 (Agitparpoezda VTsIK, 1920: 60).

When it comes to contemporaries' assessment of the role of the agit-vehicles sector in spreading Communist ideology and the ideas of socialism building, there was no unanimity among them on this. An analysis of the materials in the collection “The VTsIK Agit-Vehicles Sector: History, Apparatus, and Work Practices” revealed the following two major standpoints on the subject: 1) viewing the use of agit-vehicles as a worthwhile approach (e.g., participation from foreign delegations and journalists from England and Czechoslovakia; unconditional support from Bolshevik leader V.I. Lenin and his colleague M.I. Kalinin, who took part in a trip on the train October Revolution); 2) treating the use of agit-vehicles with skepticism and staying true to the old ways. While no specific names have been identified, there is one circumstance meriting attention here. While the October Revolution train, which ran under the supervision of VTsIK Chairman M.I. Kalinin, is known to have made the largest number of agit-trips across the country (22 as at 1925), it was stated by Ya.I. Burov, a member of the VTsIK commission concerned with managing the operation of agitational trains and steamers, to have actually failed its principal mission. First, no preparatory work had been conducted with the political workers, with the plans discussed just a few days before the trip and only over the phone. Second, while it was a fairly speedy campaign (three-week-long trips with 10–12-hour stops), which helped visit a large number of cities and localities, this took a toll on efficiency. Third, according to Ya.I. Burov, “work on the October Revolution trips was reduced to political demonstration and superficial instruction” (Agitparpoezda VTsIK, 1920: 13). Being insufficiently immersed in agit-work and detached from the realities faced by local residents was stressed by many of the authors in the collection as the most painful aspect of agit-vehicles activity at the time.

5. Conclusion

The Bolsheviks' agitational-propaganda activity was firmly rooted in, and shaped by, historical events such as the First Russian Revolution, World War I, the February and October Revolutions, and the Russian Civil War. The principal objective was to reach out to and win the support of the wider population, especially during the conflict with the White Guardsmen. To this end, a unique mechanism was devised – agitational trains and steamers.

The study examined the apparatus and practices of the agit-vehicles industry in Bolshevik Russia. It was established that this element of the Bolshevik agitational-propaganda machine was concerned with functions such as coordination, consultation, control, and education and was expected to cover as wide a spectrum of local issues as possible.

The key methods employed by the sector's political workers and instructors in their work with target communities in 1918–1920 included open-air meetings (which drew a combined 2.75 million people), lectures (25,500), mobile fairs (166,500), cinema sessions and concerts (2.21 million), giving out literature (newspapers and leaflets) in Russian and other languages (more than 3 million copies), and dealing with resident complaints and grievances (14,500 complaints) (*Agitparpoezda VTsIK, 1920: 18*). The principal forms of agitation at the time included posters and art painted on the sides of a train car, which were eye-catching and could grab people's attention from a distance with their realistic images and compact and relevant slogans. Agitational posters and art painting would go on to become an independent type of Soviet-era art. Of particular note is that agit-vehicles served as a source of inspiration for local political and cultural-educational organizations owing to the way they were organized and the unconventional methods of persuasion they employed, with some regions even attempting to emulate this kind activity. For instance, the Lenin Agit-Train's 1919 visit to Pskov produced such a stir that a year later the local leadership undertook a similar project. The result was an outfitted streetcar for local use (*Filimonov, 2018: 254*).

An analysis of the insights offered in the collection of articles "The VTsIK Agit-Vehicles Sector: History, Apparatus, and Work Practices" leads one to conclude that contemporaneous participants concurred on there being both deficiencies in the way the agit-vehicles industry was run and a lack of understanding and appreciation of the value of such work on the part of the government. There were various technical and staffing issues. Nevertheless, all those passionate about the agit-vehicles business would not give up and would continue to search for ways, and share in presentations to the government their ideas on how, to enhance the agitational apparatus and reach the remotest parts of the country. More so that the Bolshevik military-political authorities did have an interest in doing it – given the devastating effects of the Russian Civil War on the population. Going forward, well into the Soviet period, agit-vehicles would long remain the engine for the Bolsheviks' agitational-propaganda agenda.

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