

Theater in 19th-Century Russia: A Tool for Social Change and National Organization

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Abstract- The research explores the central role that theater played in 19th-century Russia as a cultural and social space that contributed to shaping public consciousness and strengthening national identity. During this period of significant political, economic, and social transformation, theater became more than a form of entertainment; it evolved into a platform for social critique and a venue for discussing issues such as poverty, corruption, class division, and authoritarianism. The study highlights how playwrights such as Gogol, Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Chekhov used dramatic works to expose contradictions within Russian society, express demands for reform, and influence audiences from various social backgrounds. It also shows how the state at times employed theater to reinforce its official narrative or to mobilize national sentiment, particularly as nationalism and reform movements gained momentum. Furthermore, the research analyzes the development of theatrical institutions, the rising status of actors, and the expansion of theater audiences to include the growing middle class—factors that strengthened theater’s role in education and public guidance. The study concludes that theater served as an effective tool for organizing Russian society by creating a space for collective dialogue and shaping a shared sense of identity, making it a vital element of the cultural and political life of the era.

Keywords: (Russia, 19th century, theater, culture, poets, stories)

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nineteenth-century Russia witnessed profound political, social, and cultural transformations, and theater emerged as one of the most influential tools expressing these changes. Its role extended beyond entertainment to become a space for public dialogue, reflecting societal concerns and addressing issues of reform and national identity. Through the works of leading writers and dramatists, theater became a powerful force in shaping collective awareness and organizing social life, making it a central element of Russian cultural life during this period. Significance of the Study: The study of Russian theater in the 19th century holds great importance as it reveals how art was used as a medium for social change and the formation of national identity. During this period, theater was not merely a form of entertainment but a powerful tool for critiquing society and raising awareness about social and political issues. By examining this era, we can understand how art interacted with historical events and social conditions, deepening our appreciation of the role of culture in driving societal transformation. Scope of the Study: This research focuses on the period from the early 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, with particular attention to prominent plays and well-known playwrights such as Anton Chekhov and Nikolai Gogol. The study primarily explores major

urban centers like Moscow and St. Petersburg, where cultural life flourished. However, it may overlook other theatrical forms that emerged in rural areas or smaller cultural communities, highlighting the need for future research to broaden its scope to include these aspects. Research Problem: The central issue lies in understanding the impact of theater as a means of social change and national organization within a complex historical context. The study raises questions about the extent to which theater could influence audiences and challenge authority at the time, and how society responded to theatrical works addressing their daily concerns and aspirations. Additionally, the research explores the relationship between art and politics during this period and how theater was influenced by historical and social events. Previous Studies: This research builds upon a valuable collection of studies and peer-reviewed articles that explore the history of theater in 19th-century Russia, its themes, and its impact on society and political realities. Key references include:

1. E. Anthony Swift (2002). *Popular Theater and Society in Tsarist Russia*. University of California Press.
2. Infurok(n.d.). *Анализ развития русского театра в первой половине XIX века*.
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the Theatre in Russia.

4. Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky (1999). *A History of Russian Theatre*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

These and other significant historical sources offer critical insights into the history of Russian theaters and their influence on society, public sentiment, and the state.

2. The History of the Emergence of Theaters in Russia

The origins of theater in Russia, according to historians, trace back to the early 17th century. At that time, the essence of theatrical performances was centered around storytelling, with plays often based on folklore and popular tales. However, the organizers and performers of these early theaters faced persecution from the Church, which regarded them as heretics deserving of punishment.

Despite the absence of a formal concept of theater in ancient Russian culture, audiences enjoyed the performances of wandering artists and jesters. With the eventual establishment of theater and ballet under the patronage of royal families, Russian theatrical culture began to leave a significant mark on the literary and intellectual history of the country. One of the most notable influences of these early forms of theater on Russian society was seen during Christmas celebrations and certain religious festivities, where people would change their clothes to confuse or repel evil spirits, according to their beliefs. Additionally, many medieval Russian folk rituals included entertaining performances by musicians, acrobats, jesters, actors, and singers. These creative artist troupes, known as "merriment groups," traveled across the country to perform for audiences, contributing to the spread of theatrical culture in its rudimentary form. (advantour,N.D) In the 11th century, the monk Theodore of Pechersk expressed his horror upon discovering singers entertaining Prince Sviatoslav Yaroslavich and ordered them to stop singing. By the mid-17th century, the Tsar joined the Patriarch's stance and banned such activities through a decree, which stated: "*Dancing, playing, or watching such activities; singing or playing music at parties; indulging in sinful acts such as joking, mockery, and witchcraft are prohibited. The wearing of skomorokhi masks or costumes, or playing instruments such as the gusli, bubny, and gudok, is also forbidden. Offenders shall be punished by beating with sticks for the first and second offenses, and for the third and fourth offenses, they shall be exiled to border towns.*". This decree highlighted the alignment

of church and state in suppressing popular entertainment to enforce moral discipline and cultural conformity' (advantour,N.D) .Despite this persecution, some entertainment elements persisted in the lives of the people, partially fulfilling their need for theatrical performances. The oldest and most widespread of these elements among the peoples inhabiting Russia and Siberia were ritualistic ceremonies, which, as in other countries, lost much of their original character and evolved into primitive forms of entertainment. Russia did not witness the emergence of a proper theater until the reign of Emperor Peter I, who established the first public theater in Moscow in 1702. From that point on, drama began to take shape in Russian society, free from the dominance of the clergy (Malnick,1939) ,At the beginning of the 18th and 19th centuries, theatrical troupes in Russia consisted of peasants and workers who had not been trained in theatrical arts. The audience mainly comprised members of the noble landowner's family and their friends. By the late 18th century, the troupe of P. B. Sheremetev, one of the wealthiest individuals in Russia at the time, gained significant fame. Sheremetev hired instructors in crafts, theatrical speech, and choreography for his actors, spent vast sums on decorations, and presented operas, ballets, comedies, and tragedies in his theater. In (one thousand eight hundred and three) state-owned theaters were granted exclusive rights to hold masquerades and print theatrical posters. By the (1840), there were no longer any private serf theaters in Russia. The Directorate took control of theatrical content, the compositions of the troupes, and the management of financial affairs. (Кожевникова,N.D). The emergence of true theater in Russia dates back to the mid-19th century and was under the control of the central government. The primary inspiration for these theaters came from European theatrical phenomena, including melodramatic stories, Shakespearean works, and musical plays, which collectively formed the backbone of Russian theater until the late 19th century. The most notable productions came from the New Realist School. Until (one thousand eight hundred and eighty-three), Russian theaters operated under strict government supervision to prevent the staging of scripts that might incite rebellion or revolution against the state. Each theater had minimal resources for set designs, but the trend toward realism began to dominate stage settings, especially at the Maly Theater in Moscow. Historically accurate set designs started to appear in the (1860) when one theater hired a historian to assist

in the production of *The Death of Ivan the Terrible* by Alexei Tolstoy. (Tibbles,2018). The first major plays in the Russian language emerged in the 19th century with the rise of realism. Renowned classical writers such as Pushkin, Lermontov, and Gogol ventured into writing and establishing theater. One of the most notable plays of that era was Gogol's *The Government Inspector*. However, the most prolific playwright of the 19th century was Alexander Ostrovsky. His work marked a significant moment in Russian literature, as he developed the Russian realist genre, blending strong emotions, drama, and humor to create entertaining plays that also reflected the flaws and psyche of Russian society. Among his most famous and intriguing works are *Poverty Is Not a Vice* and *The Snow Maiden*, the latter of which was adapted into an opera (Tibbles,2018)

Notable advancements in the development of theater included:

- School Theaters: The first school theater was established in the Slavic Greek Latin Academy. It was known for its holiday performances involving all school members, where teachers wrote the scripts and students acted on stage.
- Serf Theaters: These performances became a unique phenomenon in Russian culture. Some noble families opened private theaters where serfs, including women, performed. It wasn't long before professional and amateur troupes began forming across various regions of



Figure :1 One of the traditional Russian dances' (Borovsky,199)

3. The Impact of Theatre on Social Reality in Russia

During the 19th century, theatre was a public

platform where the most pressing issues of the time were addressed, while simultaneously serving as a creative laboratory that welcomed experimentation and creative matters. Prominent artists turned to the theatre and sought to blend different forms of creativity. Since (one thousand seven hundred and fifty-six), Empress Elizabeth Petrovna issued a decree to establish Russian theatre in St. Petersburg. Soon after, students from Moscow University opened a new theatre and became its actors. In (1759), a public Russian theatre was opened under the authority of Moscow University, managed by the university's director, poet, and playwright Mikhail Matveyevich Kheraskov. By the early 19th century, carnival theatres, which emerged in the 18th century, became an integral part of the popular holiday culture in St. Petersburg and Moscow. This created a striking contrast with the imperial theatres in terms of their simplicity in form and content, their temporary structure, market-oriented approach, and the diversity of their audiences. These temporary wooden theatres, called "balagany," were set up during the carnival season and dismantled afterward. They offered a wide variety of entertainment, including comic sketches, puppet shows, trick horseback riding, gymnastics, magic performances, wild animal shows, and more. (Swift,2002). The issues addressed in the content of the theatre performances were focused on the struggle against slavery. The critical edge of the Enlightenment's emotionalism was primarily aimed at condemning the system of slavery. The development of the theme of serfdom played a significant role in advancing the progressive aspects of Russian emotional drama aesthetics and shaping its democratic and humanistic directions. One of the most striking works of this type was the play "*The Soldier's School*" by director N.N. Sandonov. In his play, Nikolai Nikolaevich Sandonov (1768-1832) honestly portrays the poor life of serf villages, the humiliation of peasants, their lack of rights, and the abuse of power by landowners. Before Sandonov, no one had written such bold and sharp plays about rural Russia, and his portrayals also contained elements of true social models' (Родина,1961). In (one thousand eight hundred and six), the Petrovsky Theatre troupe became state-owned and a part of the Imperial Theatres, and it was renamed the Imperial Moscow Theatre. In 1824, architect Joseph Bové rebuilt the Vargin Palace next to the Bolshoi Theatre. The premiere took place on (October 14, 1824), and the Imperial Moscow Theatre troupe got its permanent home at the Bolshoi Theatre. The theatrical

movement in Russia began to resonate beyond being just an artistic movement, influencing the culture and society of the country. The public started responding to the advertisements about theatre performances, which were published in official newspapers. For instance, the *Moscow Vedomosti* (Moscow Gazette) published an announcement for the first play at the Bolshoi Theatre: "The management of the Imperial Moscow Theatre announces that next Tuesday, (October 14 of this year), at the newly opened Bolshoi Theatre, in the newly rebuilt Vargin Palace on Petrovskaya Square, there will be a new production of *The Lily of Narbonne* or *The Knight's Vow* by Alexei Verstovsky, a new dramatic performance of equestrian ballet." (maly,N.D). The second half of the nineteenth century drew the attention of researchers as a period of transformation and hope for an effective solution to educational issues, economic reform, changes in the spiritual image of the population, and democratization of culture, which also had an impact on art. Intellectuals and creatives lived in search of new ways to develop painting, literature, and music. It became clear that previous techniques and methods had become outdated; advancements in science and technology played an important role in this, as cinema introduced new ways to organize leisure time, which attracted the attention of a broader audience (the viewer). There were practically no permanent theatrical companies; the prevailing interest of public taste dominated almost all theatrical works, shaping their opinions, moods, and demands. Entrepreneurs who made contracts with building owners or local authorities assembled troupes with the participation of one or two stars from the capital. Given the relatively small population and the constant formation of an audience, frequent changes were required not only in the repertoire but also in the performers (vrnbiz,2020). The nineteenth century, in general, represented the golden age in the history of theater's influence on the reality of Russian society. During this period, works by prominent Russian writers were presented, thus opening the world of theater to a wider and more democratic audience. The cultures of the audience varied, and they began to engage with and adopt the ideas and perspectives presented in these plays, which reflected the way of life of those communities. People started to use the terms and expressions that were included in these theatrical works.



Figure: 2 The building of the Maly Theatre in Moscow, the photo dates back to the (1890) (maly,N.D)

Such factors had a different impact depending on the social class, as the plays and written texts began to focus on the cultural aspects and the consolidation of customs and traditions within Russian society. Some of them criticized these traditions and called for openness to global cultures, starting with food, drink, and traditional clothing. This perspective was echoed by one of the Russian theater critics, Vissarion Belinsky, who went as far as to say that this way of perception truly defines nationality: "The secret of nationality in every nation does not lie in its clothing or food, but in the way it perceives." (Thurston,1983). The artistic innovations of the Moscow Theatre are well-known, and it was one of several theatres that catered to the intellectuals, offering plays that underwent special censorship. These works were particularly focused on preventing the depiction of religious figures on stage, as well as protecting the "adult" audience from dangerous ideas. The cultured theatrical audience in the capitals enjoyed the best European dramatic literature, as well as contemporary plays that entertained with sharp dialogues and tackled provocative themes. This was one of the primary messages the theatre sought to convey to its audience, and, as such, there was a difference in the nature of these messages depending on the city or the community.

The realistic trend in the work of theatre actors became firmly established, and the goal of the playwrights and scriptwriters was to encourage the actor to behave as if their situation was completely real, even if it was happening on stage in front of thousands of people. The truth of performance lay in the actor's belief in the authenticity of the moment,

and authenticity in the given circumstances. Such performances were achieved by focusing on the inner life and psychology of the character, rather than just external traits like costumes, decorations, and props. The goal of this type of theatre was not to imitate reality, but to provide the audience with an experience they could emotionally relate to, conveying the true depth of the characters and the relationships behind them (Wan,2024). The primary goal was to adhere to the idea that theatre has a social purpose, and almost all writers believed that the best way to achieve this purpose was through the principles of realism. They viewed theatre as an essential part of the spiritual life and health of society, especially for the working class, which formed the majority of Russian society. To make theatre more accessible, those responsible for these performances decided to offer free admission to the working class. Sentimentality, with its focus on the inner world of the individual and its democratic aspirations, naturally gained popularity in the theatre. At the time, theatrical performances focused on condemning the classical traditions of the moral and rhetorical nature of classical tragedy, calling for liberation from the constraints of the past within both the family and society. (infourok,N.D). A revolutionary development in Russian theatre began in the second half of the nineteenth century, with many critics, educators, and theatre experts showing a growing interest in the subject of children's theatre. Initially, it was intended that plays for children would be performed in a domestic or school context, with the primary goal being educational or for home entertainment. One of the leading critics in this field was Andrei Timofeevich Bolotov (1738–1833), who began writing dramatic works with a strong educational focus directed at children. The primary aim of these texts was for home entertainment, but over time, this evolved into a clear call for education and attending school classes. However, some important experiments in this field were carried out, with the pioneer Nikolai Bunakov (1837–1904), who in the 1880s organized a peasant school and theatre in the village of Petino (in the Voronezh region), where his students performed on stage after reading the scripts in class. By the end of the nineteenth century, in order to provide access to some form of entertainment for children from lower classes, so-called "people's houses" were organized, hosting "children's sections" with theatrical experiences that differed from regular theatre. From 1894 to 1904, there was a special children's section in the Nevski Society for Organizing Popular

Entertainment, which also provided performances for children, with a troupe consisting of teenagers from working-class families. (Florio,N.D). These circumstances led, in one way or another, to a societal struggle between Westernization and the preservation of old traditions. Russian women became part of this conflict as an integral component of Russian society during the nineteenth century. Literary and theatrical works emerged calling for women's liberation, urging them to break free from poverty, deprivation, and to free themselves from outdated traditions. From this standpoint, a number of institutions and societies advocating for the adoption of Western culture through theatrical performances and literary texts began to appear. Since (November 1870), the Society of Traveling Exhibitions was established, and its members shared the common belief that art must serve the people. In fact, the suffering of the people became the preferred subject for this society and others, as it carried hopes for social progress, influenced by Tolstoy's ideas and the country's gradual political development, marked by the abolition of serfdom in (1861). The itinerants expressed their ideological realism through various forms (muse,2006). With the end of the 19th century, the imperial theaters began to shed their traditional reputation, as modernist influences infiltrated them, and they started presenting works by Chekhov, Gorky, Ibsen, and other playwrights who were considered socially progressive (Swift,2002). One of the most prominent manifestations of society's influence by theatrical performances was the call for compulsory education. Education in Imperial Russia was exclusive, religious, and limited in duration, and no form of universal public education was established at that time, leaving only those with financial means able to attend educational institutions at the secondary and university levels.(sites,N.D) .As the phenomenon of the spread of theaters intensified, signs of influence and mutual impact began to take shape within Russian society, and calls for the establishment of a compulsory education system started emerging, even within official government institutions.

4. The national aspect in theatrical performances

The events of the 19th century and the growth of self-awareness and nationalism had a significant impact on the development of theatrical art. The theater successfully staged plays dedicated to the struggle for the homeland, glorifying the feats of heroes, and celebrating heroic images. This remarkable work stirred passionate national sentiments. National

characteristics began to appear in the theater as early as the mentioned century. Progressive theater presented an honest portrayal of life, condemned serfdom and despotism, promoted high civic ideals, love for freedom, and many playwrights advocated for true national principles in Russian theater. One such example is Pushkin's tragedy *Boris Godunov*, which serves as a vivid reflection of these ideals. (infourok,N.D)

The Russian government attempted to exploit the form of literary texts and the content of theaters to its advantage and to encourage national sentiment within Russian society. Since the reign of Empress Catherine (1762–1796), the state made efforts to bring theater to the masses, as she was well aware of the propaganda value of theatrical plays and performances. Shortly after she usurped the throne from her husband, Peter III, Catherine organized a series of symbolic performances in street theaters, where she adapted popular performance styles to celebrate her qualities as Russia's newly crowned queen, "Minerva the Victorious." Furthermore, to commemorate the first anniversary of the end of the Russo-Turkish War (1768–1774), Catherine constructed fortresses and mock cities for a grand exhibition in Khodinka Field, outside Moscow, where free food and drink were offered to thousands of people, alongside theatrical performances and a large fireworks display depicting the sinking of the Ottoman fleet. (Swift,2002). At the beginning of the 19th century, in 1803, during the reign of Alexander I, the imperial theaters were first divided into dramatic and musical troupes; the musical troupe was further divided into opera and ballet. As a new development in national theaters, military theaters or "soldier theaters" emerged in the large barracks, where performances were presented for the officers based on orders from the leadership, aimed "to please the soul and entertain the common people." Soldiers of lower ranks, citizens, poor merchants, the lower classes, and peasants attended the military theater performances. These performances were popular traditions, usually showcasing three or four plays. Among the most famous comedies were "King Maximilian," "King Herod," and "The Boat." Religious play texts like "King Maximilian" and "King Herod" were preserved through tradition. "The Boat" celebrated the free life of thieves. Other performances included "Kidril-The Greedy," "Madman's Guilt," the opera "The Mill – The Sorcerer, the Impostor, and the Suitor," and so on) (Wikipedia,N.D). In the early decades of the 19th

century, the peasant theaters were replaced by "free theaters" – both government and private. State-owned or government theaters appeared in Russia's capitals, with many of them in Saint Petersburg. The state's expenditures on these theaters exceeded 40,500 rubles for the Russian troupe in (1803), with 114,400 rubles allocated to the French opera and drama troupes and 46,000 rubles to the Italian troupes (infourok,N.D). The message of theatrical art at that time heavily emphasized the national aspect. The 19th century was primarily marked by the years of the Great Patriotic War against Napoleon Bonaparte's army. Theater performances dedicated part of their repertoire to solidifying the idea of fighting for the homeland. For instance, there were performances that opposed any form of agreement with the enemy, even if it were through a treaty. A performance opposed the signing of the Treaty of Tilsit in (1807), which many viewed as humiliating to Russia. Nationalistic phrases were embedded in the texts of these performances, such as the line, "Ah! It is better to die in battle than accept an undignified world!" This resonated strongly with the audience, evoking intense nationalistic emotions. The heroic images created by Yakovlev and Simenova on stage stirred patriotic feelings. The work of these actors shattered the old acting traditions and paved the way for modern theater. Another significant historical event that influenced the development of theater in the 19th century was the Decembrist uprising. The Decembrists demanded the theater to portray life authentically, condemn serfdom and despotism, promote high civic ideals, and foster a love for freedom. The theatrical aesthetics were further developed by Pushkin, who defended the principles of true nationality in Russian theater. Notable innovative works from this period include Griboedov's comedy *Woe from Wit* and Pushkin's tragedy *Boris Godunov* (biblioteka,N.D). The network of state-controlled theaters in St. Petersburg and Moscow was the dominant force in Russian theatrical life throughout the 19th century. These imperial theaters indirectly influenced the repertoire available to popular theaters, as most of the plays chosen for production by the popular theaters had first been staged at the imperial theaters. These theaters were managed by a department of the Ministry of the Court, the Imperial Theaters Administration, and were official state institutions that received substantial financial support. The theaters were powerful symbols of the tsarist authority and their patronage of elite culture. The grand buildings of these theaters

occupied prominent locations in the centers of both cities.

In St. Petersburg, there were three imperial theaters. The Alexandrinsky Theater, used for drama productions, faced Nevsky Prospect across from Catherine's Garden. The Mariinsky Theater, opened in 1860 in Theatre Square, served as the headquarters for the imperial ballet and opera troupes. The Mikhailovsky Theater, located in Mikhailovsky Square, primarily staged French plays. In Moscow, the Maloy Theater, sometimes referred to as the city's "second university," housed a dramatic troupe, alongside the Bolshoi Theater, where ballet and opera were presented. There was also a third imperial theater, the Novoi Theater, which existed from (1898) to (1907) in Moscow, offering a mix of drama and opera. (Swift,2002)

As the 19th century came to a close, theater was significantly influenced by the social upheaval brought about by the liberation movement since the late (1850), the country's rapid economic growth, and the philosophical and journalistic works of Dobrolyubov. Criticism of theater evolved, and the expression of opinions from enlightened theater pioneers gradually shifted to professional criticism. Articles about theater began appearing in almost all journals of the time; some of them even had a dedicated theater section, such as in *The Europe Journal* and *The Son of the Fatherland*. The theatrical life was regularly covered by *Moscow Courier*, *Moscow Mercury*, *Moscow Spectator*, *The Dramatic Magazine*, *The Northern Bulletin*, *The Russian Literature Journal*, *The St. Petersburg Bulletin*, and others. (biblioteka,N.D). Therefore, it can be said that theater in Europe played an important role, particularly in shaping several theatrical texts that glorified love for the homeland, called for struggle and liberation, opposed enemies, and glorified the ruling authority. It was, in fact, a key

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driving force in the emergence of Russian society.

Conclusion

At the end of this research, it is evident that theater in 19th-century Russia was not merely an art form for entertainment, but a powerful tool for social change and national organization. The theatrical works of this period addressed important social issues such as injustice, poverty, and class conflicts, which helped raise public awareness and directed attention toward issues that affected people's daily lives.

Moreover, theater played a significant role in shaping Russian national identity, as it expressed the tensions between tradition and modernity and served as a platform for discussing liberal ideas and reformist movements rising in society. Through the works of prominent writers like Anton Chekhov and Nikolai Gogol, theater became a reflection of the feelings and thoughts of the Russian people, mirroring their aspirations and pains.

Additionally, the study reveals the complex interactions between art and politics, as major historical events shaped the theatrical landscape, providing artists with new opportunities to express diverse ideologies. The theatrical productions proved the importance of the arts as a means of resistance against oppression and as a platform for addressing issues that directly affected the public, thus giving theater a profound political and social role.

Anyone who traces the history of theater during this period can observe how theatrical performances reflected the concerns and aspirations of the people for a better society. As the 20th century approached, theater continued to evolve, building on the foundations laid in the 19th century, making theatrical art an essential part of social change and national consciousness.

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