

ARTICLE

## Playing the Police with the Agitprop Troupes of Weimar Germany

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Germany's amateur agitprop theatre movement produced some of the most popular, pervasive, and politically contentious art in the Weimar Republic, not least because of the way performers inserted themselves into the fabric of working-class life with the unequivocal intention of politicizing audiences. Germany's first agitprop troupes formed within youth clubs affiliated with the Communist Party (KPD) around 1925, but the movement quickly grew beyond established club culture, with troupes sprouting up "like mushrooms,"<sup>1</sup> as one critic of the period put it. By 1929 police estimated there were about two hundred self-proclaimed agitprop troupes spread across Germany,<sup>2</sup> all pursuing a transparently aggressive political agenda: to turn the theatre into a site of revolutionary class struggle. If the Weimar period saw an unprecedented mixing of art and politics, agitprop took this tendency to the extreme by declaring theatre to be a weapon in the hands of the proletariat. As the slogan of the 1931 International Meeting of Agitprop Troupes in Cologne put it: "Workers' theatre is class struggle."<sup>3</sup>

Agitprop troupes consisted primarily of working-class youth in their teens and twenties, few of whom possessed any formal theatre training or experience. Taking their cue from Erwin Piscator's experimental "Red Revues" at the Berlin Volksbühne and the Soviet Living Newspaper troupes touring Europe in the mid-1920s, these amateur players combined aspects of both genres to devise their own procommunist, antifascist spectacles of scenes and songs, all done on a shoestring budget and performed at breakneck speed. In the final years before Hitler's rise to power, troupes with names like the Red Rockets (Rote Raketen), Storm Troupe Alarm (Sturmtrupp Alarm), the Riveters (Nieter), and Left Column (Kolonne Links) played to working-class audiences of mixed political affiliation on stages large and small, urban and rural, and often in nonconventional venues: at political rallies and strike meetings, public pools and neighborhood pubs, in streetcars, on street corners, and in the courtyards of drastically overpopulated workers' tenements.

These young performers rejected the idea that any aspect of life could be separated from class interest, and, fittingly, the performance genre they created was

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centrally concerned with exposing the “class enemy” in his various guises: as factory owner, judge, church father, military leader, politician, and union boss. Many of the short scenes that troupes devised during this period dramatized the economic motives animating these various incarnations of capitalism, as if to rip the veil off all the profit-driven corruption behind institutions of authority.

Although the scenes were usually funny and explicit—two qualities troupes recognized as essential to their agitational mission—they were also often overly simplistic, which is one of the reasons the German agitprop movement is often handled dismissively by theatre historians (when it is handled at all).<sup>4</sup> But agitprop players also had political cause for thinking beyond such caricatures. For one thing, top-hat-clad industrialists and duplicitous politicians made for good villains, but it was not always easy to draw a direct line from their machinations, set in elite chambers and shadowy boardrooms, to the quotidian struggles of agitprop’s working-class audiences. Provoking spectators to recognize and take up their place in the revolutionary project was the explicit end of agitprop performance, and the capitalist caricatures with which agitprop is usually associated were not necessarily the best means at the troupes’ disposal. In fact, as the agitprop movement gained popularity, most troupes quickly found a manifestation of class antagonism far more proximate to the lives of their working-class audiences—or, rather, a new “class enemy” found them.

Police forces across Germany had been surveilling agitprop troupes from their earliest performances, but by the time the agitprop movement reached its height in the late 1920s, police were pursuing some troupes with such vehemence that their presence at any given show was almost as certain as the audience’s. Confrontations with police could carry severe consequences for agitators, ranging from beatings with nightsticks to steep fines and prison sentences of several months. Despite these risks, agitprop troupes largely welcomed police as new, if unwitting, coperformers. By offering police a stage upon which to play the aggressor, troupes found a potent new weapon for their agitational arsenal.

This article traces the repertoire of creative resistance agitprop troupes developed in response to police efforts, from early confrontations in the mid-1920s until workers’ theatre faced a *de facto* ban in 1931. Although evading police efforts was a matter of necessity for the players, spontaneous responses to ever-shifting contingencies quickly became a distinguishing characteristic of agitprop aesthetics, while also providing troupes an opportunity to celebrate their ingenuity in the face of oppression. By turning a spotlight on the various strategies players employed to outmaneuver police, agitprop troupes turned these unavoidable interactions with state force into an integral part of their performances and, in the process, seized the opportunity to play the protagonist in a real-life scene of class struggle.

Police represented a kind of antagonism the average working-class citizen had likely already seen in action: uniformed officers, colloquially referred to as “*Schupo*” (*Schutzpolizei*, i.e., uniformed police), assisted in factory lockouts, raided houses in working-class neighborhoods in search of weapons, and put down street demonstrations with sometimes indiscriminate brutality. For agitprop troupes, the task was to construe this police hostility as a manifestation of *class* antagonism in particular—to frame police as the repressive arm of a capitalist state invested in ensuring workers remained docile and compliant. Although insisting the police

represented the interests of the capitalist class is precisely the kind of reductive rhetoric characteristic of much communist propaganda in this period, there is no question police forces across Germany expressed anticommunist bias with little reservation, as is nowhere more evident than in their dealings with agitprop troupes. Their motivation for doing so was undoubtedly more political than economic, but for the young communists who experienced the brunt of this force, that was a distinction without difference. If agitprop players could convince spectators that an attack on their troupe was an attack on the working class as such, then police promised to be a much more credible, immediate, and powerful way of staging class conflict than any capitalist caricature.

An analysis of these interactions between troupes and police demonstrates how agitprop's political purchase lay less in the performers' ability to propagate communist slogans than to put communist theory into negotiation with the realities of working-class life. This performative dimension of agitprop, which exceeds and at times even challenges the simplistic rhetoric of its procommunist "messaging," is largely overlooked by past studies of the movement, most of which either treat agitprop performers as mouthpieces of the KPD or posit the movement as a blip in the evolution of dramatic literature.<sup>5</sup> The two key exceptions to these tendencies are found in Richard Bodek (1997) and Matthias Warstat (2005), both of whom employ a performance studies approach in their analyses of working-class theatre in the Weimar period to advance arguments against the traditional conflation of agitprop performance and party message. Bodek's careful reading of agitprop as a form of youth culture in Berlin effectively disentangles agitprop performer from party cadre, tracing the many ways that participation shaped the affective lives and self-perception of young troupe members.<sup>6</sup> While Bodek casts these performative dimensions in largely individual and comparatively apolitical terms, Warstat, by contrast, highlights the political potential of approaching agitprop as a cultural practice. In his comprehensive study of Weimar Germany's various "theatrical communities" and the social models they embodied, Warstat argues that agitprop troupes understood themselves as staging an exemplary, progressive community, to which the audience was offered (at least theoretically) the prospect of joining.<sup>7</sup>

This article extends these lines of inquiry, considering agitprop not as a series of propagandistic scenes performed with the intent of one-way communication between knowledgeable functionaries and gullible spectators, but rather as a set of shifting constellations of social actors, including the players themselves, their working-class audiences, and the police sent to keep everyone in check. As a transient space that enticed participants to perform political commitments in the face of increasingly fascist state forces, the agitprop stage allowed working-class communities to rehearse strategies of collective resistance.

My reconstruction of these performance scenarios builds on a range of archival materials, primarily found in the Agitprop Theatre Collection (Agitprop-Theater-Sammlung) at the Akademie der Künste archive and the Foundation Archives of the Political Parties and Mass Organizations of the GDR (SAPMO) of the Federal Archive (Bundesarchiv), both in Berlin, Germany.<sup>8</sup> In addition to performance ephemera like programs, posters, photos and ticket stubs, and the dozens of short scenes that have been preserved, I rely heavily on three major forms of eyewitness account: press, performer statements, and police reports. These documents

are often explicitly shaped by the political agendas of their authors, perhaps none more so than those of the various officers and detectives tasked with surveilling and documenting agitprop activities. These reporters make little effort to hide the anti-communist bias that permeated most state institutions of the period,<sup>9</sup> and yet, it was this very commitment to putting an end to agitprop performance that led officers to take such copious and detailed notes of events.

As a grassroots, decentralized movement, no systematic accounting of every agitprop troupe or performance is possible, and the archives themselves are no doubt shaped by the agendas of the GDR administrators and researchers who compiled them. Nevertheless, the events of the case studies included in this article often appear in police reports and performer's own writing in multiple instances, in multiple locations, and with more than one troupe. Despite the antagonistic political positions held by the police and performers who authored these documents, there is a (perhaps surprising) degree of consensus in their descriptions of what interactions between the two entailed. Where accounts conflict, I highlight the discrepancies and make the source of information transparent. As Laura Bradley observes in her work on theatre censorship in the GDR, state documents are "inevitably filtered through the political perspective[s]" of their authors.<sup>10</sup> The project, then, is not to overcome the spin, but to rather to make it part of the story. Highlighting the ways various actors in these evolving constellations interpreted their interactions helps construct a clearer picture of agitprop as a socially embedded practice that was as much political as it was theatrical. Attending to these aspects enables a concrete understanding of how theatre has functioned historically as a vital site for disenfranchised communities to transform theoretical models of revolutionary action into their embodied realization.

### Battle of the Technicalities

Germany already had a long history of state force being used to target socialist activities of all sorts, from the reactionary policies of the early-nineteenth-century *vormärz* period through the antisocialist laws that, between 1878 and 1890, effectively made any socialist activity a treasonable offense.<sup>11</sup> This antagonism shifted as the country's first major labor party, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), slowly climbed from underground resistance to powerful political force in the first years of the twentieth century, resulting in increased tolerance toward socialist ideas. But as the SPD proved its willingness to compromise with both moderate and conservative forces in the wake of Kaiser Wilhelm's abdication at the end of World War I, animosity grew between social democrats and more radical socialists, especially communists, who carried out the unsuccessful Spartacist Uprising in January 1919. In Germany's postwar political landscape, what had once been state opposition to labor organization in general was increasingly directed toward communists in particular.

The task of surveilling and, when necessary, curtailing communist activity fell largely to Germany's state and municipal police forces, none more active than the specialized "political police" of Berlin's Department 1A.<sup>12</sup> As an organization that often set the agenda for police efforts across the country, Department 1A kept a careful watch over all major forms of KPD propaganda, including posters,

press, and performance. However, from 1926 on, departmental reports betray an increasing anxiety about the danger posed by agitprop troupes in particular. Information gathered by the plainclothes officers charged with attending agitprop performances confirmed the growing threat, leading one internal report to conclude: “performances of this type are more apt than the most effective speech to convince the listeners of the truth of communist theories. . . . [T]here is nothing so provocative and inciting as these agitprop troupes.”<sup>13</sup>

As “provocative” and “inciting” as agitprop may have been, neither quality in itself justified police interference. With kicklines, erotic cinema, and the lewd song-and-dance numbers of *Tingeltangel* clubs dominating urban nightlife in this newly censor-free democracy, provocation was not only legal, it was positively de rigueur. The accusation of inciting to riot, on the other hand, was more serious but also more difficult to prove without actually allowing riots to break out—something police were (usually) unwilling to do. Thus, convinced of the danger agitprop troupes posed to “Peace and Order,”<sup>14</sup> but attempting to combat it within the limits of the Weimar Constitution, police were forced to take creative license in the application of diverse laws that might justify preventing or interrupting a performance. In fact, until constitutional rights were seriously curtailed by the Emergency Decree issued in March 1931,<sup>15</sup> the grounds police used to interfere in agitprop activity were primarily based on minor infractions of commercial and trade regulations.

Several of the most reliable technicalities were outlined in an internal memo, circulated by the headquarters of the Berlin police force in 1926, entitled “Methods for the Suppression of Performances of Revolutionary Workers’ Theatre.”<sup>16</sup> The memo is exceedingly direct in its stated objective to “forbid all theatre events hosted by various KPD-affiliated organizations,” and it provides a sequence of potential infractions for police to consult in order. It instructs officers to look first for any violations of building regulations, then to consider local codes for event registration, and only then, if these first tactics fail, to attempt an intervention on the basis of content. For this purpose, the memo suggests recourse to a remnant piece of legislation dating back to preunification Germany, the General State Laws for the Prussian States [*Allgemeine Landrecht*, or ALR], which gave police the right to intervene in any action that threatened public “peace, safety, or order.”<sup>17</sup> The memo’s author warns, however, that “In general, the content of these performances will not be such that the ALR will provide grounds for intervention. Additionally, one should note that interventions of this kind make for unnecessary publicity for these performances.”<sup>18</sup> Even at this early point in the agitprop movement, police officials recognized that if their interference garnered public attention, it had the potential to backfire.

While police memos suggesting these and other technical infractions circulated among different departments and districts, strategies for resistance likewise began to spread through the informal networks established among agitprop troupes and their host organizations. Performers quickly realized that by simply reframing performances, they could counter one technicality with another. For instance, in a letter from one Berlin-based agitprop troupe to their hosts in Württemberg, the author explains that if police demanded troupes produce a traveling business license<sup>19</sup>—something no amateur troupe would have qualified to receive, even if they could have afforded the application fee—performers and their hosts need

only inform police that ticket revenue from that particular performance would go to a local charity, since intervening on commercial grounds was not possible if the performers themselves were not being paid.<sup>20</sup> If, on the other hand, police found a reason to intervene in a performance for charity, a last-minute change in the details of revenue could again circumvent the tactic. For instance, when a state Minister of the Interior issued a blanket ban on performances for Rote Hilfe (Red Aid, a registered charity that supported political prisoners) in 1926, one agit-prop troupe responded the moment police arrived by announcing to the eight hundred spectators that, because the minister had banned performances for the charity, all proceeds would now go directly to the KPD campaign fund.<sup>21</sup>

Significantly, few such countertactics could be planned in advance. The ability to outmaneuver police was less about finding an enduring loophole in current law than it was about responding at the last minute to whatever tactic police had decided to use. It was not that agitprop performance for a charitable organization was any less vulnerable to repression than one raising money for the KPD, but rather that the bureaucratic apparatus of the police was often too cumbersome to respond to a spontaneous change—precisely the kind of change afforded by live performance. Despite its simplicity, such maneuvering seems to have exasperated police forces, as reports from the period admit. As one official at the State Ministry of the Interior and Economy in Thuringia wrote, “Although it is exceedingly obvious that the intention here is to circumvent the measures we’ve taken, it will nevertheless be difficult to prove that the proceeds haven’t been used as they claim. We are therefore doubtful that the ban can be maintained under these circumstances.”<sup>22</sup>

Another reframing technique drew on dependable strategies from political performances past. Before the 1919 Constitution ended censorship in Germany, new plays had had to be submitted for approval from the state censor prior to their stagings. If the submission was denied, or producers wished to avoid submission altogether, the play could be staged in a private rather than public theatre.<sup>23</sup> This required some extra planning, since a condition of private performances was that tickets could be purchased only by card-carrying members of that theatre who could prove they had paid membership fees. Although censorship laws no longer applied in the Weimar era, some agitprop troupes borrowed this strategy by declaring their performances, at the moment police arrived, to be part of a private gathering of whatever organization was hosting them, thereby rendering stipulations about public performances inapplicable.

For instance, when police attempted to prevent the Red Rockets from performing for a group of locked out steel- and ironworkers in Hamborn in 1928, the troupe had the union leaders hosting the event invite the four hundred and fifty workers who had already purchased tickets for the 8 P.M. show to a new “private event” three hours earlier in the same location. The police discovered the time change and still arrived, but when union leaders asked anyone not belonging to the union to leave, they had little choice but to comply, as the report notes: “Given the attitudes of most of the audience toward the police, staying longer would have given rise to incidents that would have been unjustifiable.”<sup>24</sup>

In this case, the private event tactic not only allowed agitprop troupes to evade laws governing public performances; it also positioned the local police as an

agitational asset by forcing them into a lose–lose situation. Either police would permit the performance to continue, knowing it would likely further agitate an already dissident workforce, or they would prevent the performance and thereby appear to align themselves with the antiunion factory bosses, as if to prove the agitators' claims. Thus, even if a performance was successfully hindered by police, players could use the cancellation as an agitational cause in its own right. In effect, police presence gave apolitical audience members, who might not have attended a political meeting if advertised as such, tacit justification for why political organizing was necessary in the first place.

### “We’re not theatre—You’re theatre!”: Staging Non/Compliance

Most of the technicalities police used to proceed against agitprop troupes pertained to regulations on theatre performances in particular, so one deceptively simple countertactic was for troupes to deny that they were theatre at all. Some troupes began advertising their shows not as theatre but rather as a “Celebration Hour” (*Feierstunde*) or “colorful evening” (*bunter Abend*). These terms had been used since before the First World War to refer to festivities involving song, dance, and food, but now they were combined with modifiers like “workers” and “proletarian” to signal their political edge.<sup>25</sup> One troupe even advertised themselves as a musical band called Balalaika, a Russian instrument associated with Soviet folk orchestras.<sup>26</sup> Anyone familiar with agitprop would easily decode the euphemistic language, and as result, such practices became a kind of open secret among performers and their audiences.

Of course, the open secret was also quite apparent to police, who eventually began devoting more effort to deciding for themselves whether what occurred at these events was in fact “theatre” and therefore subject to technical requirements stipulated in federal commerce and trade regulations. This resulted in absurd situations in which police, in order to determine whether an event was illegal, also needed to prove that it was *theatre* and not a speech, or a meeting, or any number of other live events involving an audience. The two characteristics on which officers most frequently relied to make this determination were the use of costumes, as opposed to street clothing, and mimetic speech, as opposed to recitation.<sup>27</sup> Unsurprisingly, this rather reductive attempt to define the essence of theatrical performance became a hurdle around which troupes could dance—now for the entertainment of an audience.

One police report, for example, recounts an incident in which a criminal detective was able to interrupt a performance because the venue failed to meet structural specifications required for theatre. The troupe complied, changed into street clothes, and informed the waiting audience that, since a theatre production would not be permitted, the actors would instead present the script “in recitational form, in compliance with the official mandate.”<sup>28</sup> Since the event was now a *Vorlesung* (reading) with only one or two individuals present onstage at any given time, it was not subject to the same stipulations as theatre proper, and the troupe was allowed to proceed. Over the course of the reading, however, the performers gradually reintroduced what the detective described as “gestures of scenic performance in violation of the ban,” compelling him to interrupt the performance

several times. Reading the officer's detailed account, one can almost imagine the frustration he faced, sitting in the wings, trying to determine whether that last gesture belonged the speaker or the character they were portraying, whether that glance belonged to the real world or to the fictional world of a scene, and jumping to intervene at the moment things became, in his own words, "somewhat more dramatic."<sup>29</sup> Needless to say, such police efforts often circled the mark.

Any regulation that depended on agitprop performance being legally defined as theatre was thus generally unsuccessful for two distinct reasons. First, it meant officers had to make judgment calls far beyond the usual scope of their duties. Police reports from the period frequently include statements like "in my estimation, this was not theatre" or "it was only a speaking choir,"<sup>30</sup> suggesting that drawing a line between theatre and not-theatre was not nearly as straightforward as anticipated. What's more, this uncertainty often set cumbersome bureaucratic protocols in motion, as requests for hard-line decisions were passed up the chain of authority until they reached leaders who, as it often turned out, were no more certain than their officers about what counted as "theatre." For example, a letter written to the Prussian Minister of the Interior by the Provincial Governor of the Province of Westfalen in 1930 asks the former for advice on how to proceed against the agitprop troupe Left Column. The letter states that neither he, nor the Police Chief of Essen, nor the Governor of Düsseldorf, nor the officer who wrote the report knew whether Left Column's show, which was "more of a declamation than an actual performance by real actors,"<sup>31</sup> was actually in violation of the federal commerce regulations on professional theatre. By the time such decisions were made and passed back down the chain of command, the troupe had long since moved on to the next district. In fact, the paths of the prolific touring troupes like Left Column and the Red Rockets can be traced in the flurry of paperwork that was sent back and forth between cities and across province lines, as police departments attempted to act in a both consistent and effective manner.<sup>32</sup>

The second reason lay in agitprop's tendency to favor indexicality over verisimilitude. Eschewing the kind of naturalism popular in Germany's professional theatres, agitprop troupes embraced a show-and-tell aesthetic that in many ways anticipates Bertolt Brecht's concept of "Gestus."<sup>33</sup> Agitprop performers made no effort to "become" their characters in the eyes of their audience, nor did they devote rehearsal time to exploring character psychology or coherence. Instead, they entered the stage as themselves: members of the working class with a political agenda they stated openly. This identity remained visible as performers slipped in and out of roughly sketched character types, based either on occupation (the Cop, the Military General, the Priest), political party (the SPD minister, the Nazi) or class (the Capitalist, the Aristocrat, the *Bonze*,<sup>34</sup> the Worker), all signaled through simple, cheap, and unambiguous props and costume pieces. Agitprop was less concerned with recreating realistic detail in a closed fictional world than in indexing familiar phenomena from the politically and socially situated position of the performers.

This indexicality, combined with a fourth wall that was exceedingly porous when erected at all, allowed agitprop performers to accommodate most police hindrances with ease.<sup>35</sup> Players could simply eliminate whatever criteria police used to define the performance as "theatre" by, for instance, swapping costumes for street clothes

and addressing dialogue to the audience instead of their fellow players, as in the “declamation” examples above. As evidenced by the many police reports detailing these encounters, players would reliably announce the details of such changes—and the intruders who forced them to be made—to their audiences directly. As a result of this transparency, agitprop troupes compensated for any potential losses to the performance by offering audiences the opportunity to witness performers dancing around the very rules meant to restrain them. Such tactics made agitprop exceedingly difficult to prosecute without infringing on constitutional rights, but it also turned police-induced hindrances, whether successful or not, into opportunities for the troupes’ self-referential celebration. In this sense, the indexicality of agitprop aesthetics created a scenario in which performers could visibly outmaneuver their *de facto* censors and, in doing so, win the support of their audiences.

The self-congratulatory tone of agitprop performance became especially pronounced in those instances that police attempted to intervene on the basis of content. Considered a last resort strategy by police officials,<sup>36</sup> proceeding against content raised a new set of challenges. First, prosecuting agitprop troupes on the basis of their satirical content meant police had to present convincing interpretations of the performance in question, which in turn opened new avenues of resistance. For instance, at one performance that included the recitation of several political poems, a local critic sat next to the onsite police commander, offering a “literary” interpretation of the texts, which “talked away every political valence” and left the commander unsure as to whether or not he should halt the performance.<sup>37</sup>

The difficulty police faced was also compounded by the lack of an official censor, which meant that police had no way to scrutinize a written script. As one police report from 1925 notes:

We cannot overlook the fact that the KPD has found a new form of effective mass agitation, the surveillance of which is very difficult because the texts are not known. This potentially places the onsite police surveillants in the position of having to make a decision about whether or not a performance is in violation of a law . . . the moment an unexpected word is spoken onstage.<sup>38</sup>

Not only did police have to catch the violation in the fleeting moment, they also faced the additional challenge of having to describe the nature of the violation convincingly in writing. Given the rapid pace of much agitprop, this was not always easy. In a report from January 1929, for instance, an officer describes a performance by the Black Smocks (Schwarze Kittel) as being especially “insulting to the SPD,” noting however, “because the verse was sung very quickly and no programs were provided, citations are not possible.”<sup>39</sup> Unable to consult scripts and unsure of which details would provide the best evidence to prevent future performances, the officers filing these reports frequently took pages and pages of notes. The result is an archival treasure trove: these descriptions offer some of the clearest documentation of agitprop performance available, despite the hostility of the reluctant ethnographers compiling them.

Despite these challenges, police were often left with little choice but to proceed on the basis of content. When they did so, they usually drew on a law so broad in

scope as to catch nearly all manner of political subversion: the 1922 *Republikschutzgesetz* (Law for the Republic's Protection), which, aside from mandating penalties for violent acts against government officials, also empowered police to arrest any person whose speech, writing or actions, whether done publicly or privately in the company of others, "insult and debase" the colors of the national flag, the form of parliamentary democracy, or any member of the government.<sup>40</sup> In theory, the law provided a basis to prosecute serious threats to national security; it was initially introduced to combat royalists opposed to the new democratic regime. In practice, though, it quickly became another tool to target any political activity the left-centrist government found threatening.

Given that communism by definition implied a desire for the (potentially violent) overthrow of the existing social and political order, any agitprop performance was almost guaranteed to violate the *Republikschutzgesetz* in some way, but some troupes took squarer aim at the government than others, and these were more likely to provoke police intervention. For instance, a popular scene created by the Red Rockets in 1927 satirized the feigned opposition between the two largest parties in the Reichstag: the left-centrist Social Democratic Party and the far-right militarist National People's Party (DNVP). The scene depicts a match between two boxers as they battle for the championship prize: the minister's chair. One boxer wears the black-red-gold colors of the new Republic's flag, and the other wears the black-red-white colors of the old Kaiserreich—and the (as-yet still fringe) Nazi Party (National Socialist German Workers' Party, NSDAP). The referee introduces each contender by his respective colors, adding political references in the form of a boxer's profile:

Referee: For the lightweight division  
(Enter black-red-gold boxer)

In your line of vision  
The Master known  
As black-red-gold.  
His reach is wide:  
From the Left to the Right side,  
As you can tell  
He's trained well.  
To your corner!  
And in the other corner

(Enter black-white-red boxer)

Black-white-red  
His stature:  
Aryan pure.  
A boxer without fear.  
His trainer: Hindenburg.  
To your corner!  
The goal of the fight

(Unleash your might  
But don't cheat!):  
The minister's seat!<sup>41</sup>

Following the introduction, the boxers begin duking it out over their irreconcilable political beliefs, exchanging insults and blows, and appearing to do one another significant damage in the process. When the round is over, they return to their corners where their coaches tend to them, using their respective flags as towels. The referee then offers a “replay” of the fight, enacted by the performers in slow motion, which reveals that punches were pulled and the whole match had been fixed in advance. The scene concludes with the two boxers sharing the minister's chair—a symbolic seat of government authority. This was a stage picture that, in essence, accused the SPD-led government of cooperating with the proto-fascist militarists behind a public facade of enmity. This accusation apparently awakened the ire of the SPD-appointed police chief in Duisburg, Dr. Meyer. Although it was not illegal to insinuate that Meyer and his party were in cahoots with the fascists, the police chief was able to ban all future performances of the scene because it defamed the German flag—a violation of the *Republiksschutzgesetz*.<sup>42</sup>

When police appeared at the next performance, threatening arrests if such defamation occurred again, the troupe voiced their acquiescence. Instead of removing the scene from the repertoire, however, the group continued to stage it; only now the coach of the black-red-gold boxer (still introduced as such) used a scrap of yellow fabric in place of the German flag. Before the scene began, the troupe's emcee informed the audience of the change, announcing, according to the police report, “that the Social Democratic police chief in Duisburg, Dr. Meyer, has forbidden the use of a cloth in the colors of the Republic.”<sup>43</sup> The same report records how the audience responded with whistles and cries mocking Meyer for not being able to take a joke.

The indexical aesthetics of agitprop, which allowed players to incorporate last-minute changes and fill the audience in on the details through direct address, gave performers a pragmatic edge when dealing with police interference in instances like the one described above. Such changes made agitprop exceedingly difficult to prosecute successfully. More important, though, because of how troupes framed police activity to their audiences, whenever police attempted to intervene, they risked embodying precisely that stereotype of the killjoy “social fascist” that the agitators made them out to be. In other words, the optics were bad, and troupes knew how to use it to their advantage.

There are countless police reports detailing this kind of pseudocompliance performed to the delight of onlookers. For instance, Boleslav Strzelewicz of the Red Troupe, a protoagitprop performer active even before World War I, was infamous for his ability to comply with police demands in comical ways. When police banned him from spreading “Bolshevik ideas,” he performed his show with improvised language that avoided any of the buzzwords for which police were waiting (as one frustrated officer reported, “you could nevertheless tell that's what was behind his words”).<sup>44</sup> At other venues, Strzelewicz had the emcee inform the audience of the police order, and then his wife took the stage to provide the communist

commentary (after all, the police order was against him, not her).<sup>45</sup> As with the battle of business license technicalities, such strategies were not permanent. The police would soon return with a more extensive ban, but agitprop performers were not looking to outwit police for all times; it was much more effective—and entertaining—to stay one step ahead by reacting spontaneously to whatever methods police used. For agitprop troupes, the aim was not so much to hide subversive content cleverly as it was to flaunt explicit references to the act of subversion that followed the letter of the law.

### Playing the Police

Although police usually tried to confront troupes behind the curtain, agitprop performers made great efforts to ensure these interactions, which were not only entertaining but also politically advantageous, took center stage. Since agitprop thrived on being as current as possible, the onslaught of ever-changing police tactics offered troupes a surfeit of material to transform into satirical song and dance numbers. Troupes tended to work with loose scripts that could easily be updated to reflect current events, and this allowed them quickly to integrate material about the latest police actions into their performances.<sup>46</sup> In early agitprop performances, troupes would often insert a joke or insult into an existing scene or preshow banter, but by the late 1920s, emboldened by their successes, troupes became more direct in their mockery, devoting entire numbers to police activities.

For instance, in 1930, when police departments across Germany issued blanket bans on any events featuring the Red Rockets, a faction of the group changed its name to Storm Troupe Alarm. A new poem the troupe wrote not only announced the continuity but also ridiculed the local police chief of whatever district they were playing in:

Mister Police Chief!  
 You've banned the  
 Red Rockets [. . .]  
 Now your petty informants tell you  
 We've switched brands.  
 Nothing gets by you, Mister Chief!  
 Storm Troupe Alarm was once the Rockets—  
 You could have read that in the newspaper.  
 In Berlin, Mister Chief, you're what we'd call  
 A little "slow on the uptake"<sup>47</sup> [. . .]  
 Well, ban us as much as you want:  
 We'll find different rooms to rent  
 We're staying in Rurhpott!<sup>48</sup> [. . .]  
 We're from Berlin, Mister Chief!  
 Your ban won't bear fruit with us.  
 You've only created some surefire recruitment  
 For the Red Aid!<sup>49</sup>

Making a bit about the police's unsuccessful attempts to hinder agitprop activity referenced real-life examples of communist persecution while at the same time juxtaposing the flexible ingenuity of working-class communities with a centralized

bureaucratic authority tied up in red tape. The text positions police not only as having acted unjustly but also as ineffective, even pitiable, opponents. The microcosmic scale of these clashes provided a rare opportunity for the working-class protagonists to be victorious. Agitprop performers effectively framed these events as a competition between cleverly dexterous workers and bumbling bureaucrats, as if to ask the audience, Which side are you on?

Performers consistently found ways of drawing the audience's attention to the absurd image of armed police brigades lining up against a small troupe of amateur theatre makers. In his memoir, Helmut Damerius of Left Column recounts a colorful example. When Left Column was set to perform at a large hall in Dresden in 1930, police arrived moments before the curtain was raised and insisted that the front row of audience seating be evacuated to accommodate the thirty uniformed officers brought in preparation to intervene the moment any part of the show violated a law. As the front row of spectators begrudgingly made space for the uninvited guests, Damerius took the stage to express not outrage but *gratitude*, on behalf of all present, to the captain for allowing thirty police officers to see the show—during work hours no less (“sogar dienstlich”)!<sup>50</sup> The captain rose to confront him, but Damerius recounts responding only with a friendly smile in well-lit view of the audience. Technically, Damerius had done no more than thank the captain, but the subtext framed him as a waster of taxpayer money in a bad economy. Tickets for touring shows like this generally cost between 20 Pfennig and 1 Mark, but given that the average working-class family had about 2.5 Marks to spend on entertainment per month, this was still a substantial expense.<sup>51</sup> And here was a police captain ordering paying customers out of their seats to make way for officers who not only earned higher wages as part of Germany's growing middle class, but who were also granted entry to the show free of charge. Damerius seems to have given the captain little choice; moments later, he ordered his officers to leave the hall.<sup>52</sup>

This anecdote illustrates the style of combat most favored by troupes engaging police in a real-life scene of class struggle. Rather than clashing with police through an equal show of force, troupes sidestepped the blows, allowing police to lose their footing through their own momentum. The more aggressively police pursued agitprop troupes, the more they strengthened the agitators' case—especially as audiences increasingly understood themselves to be the targets of police action.

From 1930 onward, framing police action as targeting both performers and their spectators became a central objective, as players attempted to direct the audience's presumed revolutionary potential toward an opponent that was sitting in the room. Because police could not always be expected to follow a script, one of the first strategies for framing them as the audience's opponent involved performers imitating acts of the police “repertoire” as part of the show. For instance, in 1930 the Red Smiths (Rote Schmiede) developed a scene called “Hello!—State Violence Here!” which begins, quite typically for agitprop scenes, with an emcee greeting the audience:

Emcee: Red Front! Comrades! Now the Red Smiths take the stage. We greet you under the banner of the antifascist party contingent with three strong cheers of “Ready to fight!”

(A warning shot; a police officer and Kripo [detective] appear in the hall's entrance.)

- Officer: Sweeping laws and billy clubs  
Police force and no chance to plea  
All protect the German Nation  
Here, not even speech is free.
- Kripo: Severing-esque socialists<sup>53</sup>  
Nazis with their licensed guns  
Set against the Bolsheviks  
(*fearful*) Man, this place does not look fun!  
Killers lurking in every corner  
Red guards of a bloodthirsty brood  
I've got to keep my house in order
- Officer: You're putting me in an angry mood!  
Cans of tear gas, fast revolvers  
Physical violence and nightsticks  
Always ensure peace and order  
So (*whistles*) reinforcements! Come on, quick!

(*Troupe members enter, armed with nightsticks and wearing police shakos*)

- [. . .]
- Officer: All right! Gentlemen! If your troupe, the Red Smiths, so much as sneers at the *Republikschutzgesetz*, I'll order this gathering be dispersed. And if any of you don't obey my command, then:  
Officers! Time to end them!  
Watch your backs! Weapons out!  
Hit without discrimination!  
Smoke the dirty riffraff out! [. . .]
- Kripo: Shako helmets on heads of bobbies  
Reckless violence well-dispersed!  
Drive up the number of prolet bodies  
Like in Berlin on May the First.<sup>54</sup>

Although written in rhyming verse and spoken by performers wearing hand-made costumes, this fictional send-up depicted a situation that was all too familiar to working-class spectators. The verse cites the actual legal grounds police used to prevent all kinds of labor organizing, and the reference to proletarian corpses evokes the infamous Labor Day celebrations on 1 May 1929, when police quashed street demonstrations by shooting indiscriminately into crowds, resulting in thirty deaths and more than two hundred injuries—many suffered by unaffiliated passersby. Although police claimed their use of violence was justified by the rowdiness of the communist demonstrators, historians concur that the state violence was disproportionate.<sup>55</sup> In fact, as a doctor who treated the injured observed: “Almost all bullet wounds are in the back.”<sup>56</sup> The events of *Blutmai* (Bloody May), as it came to be known, seemed to suggest that police were always looking for an excuse to beat and kill communists (and anyone in their vicinity), and agitprop troupes were able to use this to frame the police's interference at their shows as a continuation of the same brutality. The scene concludes with a chilling reminder of the reality in which this satire is grounded:

Officer: Ok, gentlemen, we'll step back so you can begin. But we'll be waiting. Mr. Detective please take your seat. Listen to every spoken word. One word against the Republic—and we'll put an end to this event.<sup>57</sup>

At this point, the performers playing the police troupes would retreat out of the doors (where a *real* squadron of police usually waited) and the performer playing the *Kripo* would take a seat in the house, just as the *real* detective surveilling the performance had. As buffoonish as these police villains may have been played by the agitprop performers, having this figure in such proximity to his real-life inspiration would have reminded audiences of the real danger beneath the mockery. After such a setup, any intervention by the real detective risked confirming the accusations of police bias against workers implied by the number, which in turn risked inciting the gathered crowd. In fact, audiences so dependably reacted with furious catcalls and threats to the “police entrance” staged by performers that their reaction became a scene in its own right, designated as a distinct number in the program.<sup>58</sup> In effect, the Red Smith’s imitation of police functioned as a way of inviting audiences to rehearse their response in anticipation of the real thing.

### Rehearsing Resistance: Police as Coperformers

As police numbers became a staple of agitprop in the late 1920s, it became increasingly difficult for audiences to be sure whether real police were actually intervening in the scene or these interventions were only staged. The confusion proved useful for troupes intent on provoking spectators to take up their place in a class struggle staged before their very eyes, as was evident in a 1929 performance in Essen by Left Column. According to a police report filed by a detective present in the hall that day,<sup>59</sup> the performance began with Helmut Damerius, the troupe’s emcee, taking the stage and welcoming the audience with the cheer: “*Rote Front!*”—a greeting frequently used in communist circles, evoking the typically militaristic concept of a “red” frontline united in solidarity. “Rote Front,” however, was also the official greeting of the KPD paramilitary organization, the League of Red Front Fighters (Roter Frontkämpferbund, RFB),<sup>60</sup> which had been banned by the federal government in the wake of *Blutmai*. In effect, Damerius’s greeting was toeing the line of provocation: at once a phrase as innocuous as any other communist idiom and also a reference to a now-illegal KPD militia.

According to the report, Damerius’s greeting was not initially returned by the audience—whether due to the illicit connotations or a general lack of enthusiasm it does not state. Unsatisfied with the audience’s lackluster response, Damerius spouted a few sarcastic comments and informed the audience they would have to try that entrance again. After leaving the stage for a moment, he returned and greeted the audience once again with “Red Front!”—met this time with an enthusiastic “Red Front!” in return. Satisfied with the response, Left Column launched into their opening song, followed by several revue scenes, including one satirical number in which thirty performers dressed in police uniforms stormed the stage waving their batons. At least one newspaper was under the impression that these

thirty officers were actual police,<sup>61</sup> likely because of what happened a few scenes later. The police report describes what followed:

[there was a] disturbance in the auditorium, where the leader of “Left Column” had in the meantime been apprehended [*sistiert*]<sup>62</sup> by the *Schutzpolizei* [uniformed police] for questioning. A member of the Column announced to the audience that their “comrade” had been arrested because he had used the Red Front greeting. (loud boos). Despite the presence of police and informants, the program would go on. (Cries of “Kick the rascals out”).<sup>63</sup>

Following on the heels of a satirical scene about unjustified police violence, the announcement might well have been a written part of the show: another joke about how police were grasping at straws in an attempt to suppress communist organizing. The police report confirms, however, that Damerius had indeed been approached and reprimanded by police. The report continues by describing how Damerius then took the stage once again:

He said, I quote: “I was arrested because I greeted the comrades of Essen with the well-known greeting, Red—you’re not allowed to say it. But despite police shenanigans, we won’t be stopped, the show must go on, and in the future we’ll just greet each other with ‘Red Sport!’” This “Red Sport” greeting was then immediately rehearsed, and it was returned by the audience very loudly and with much enthusiasm.<sup>64</sup>

Although “Red Sport” was a plausibly innocent phrase, Damerius’s stunt framed it as an act of defiance—one the police were ill-positioned to combat. Thus, rather than hindering the troupe’s agitational intentions, the repressive action became a point around which performers and spectators could rally, effectively remapping the relationship between stage and auditorium. Although the confrontational tone of much agitprop performance has led scholars like Matthias Warstat to theorize troupes as insular communities from which audience members were literally and symbolically excluded,<sup>65</sup> situations like this one show that police presence functioned as a catalyst to bring players and audience into a united (if not necessarily “red”) front against the intruders. Whether audiences believed this was all in the realm of fiction or not, eight hundred people gleefully defying police orders signals, at the very least, the political potential of the gathered masses. By reacting spontaneously to police interference and integrating it into the show, troupes like Left Column enticed their audiences to perform a real, if temporary, solidarity that prefigured the red front envisioned by communist politics.

Just as spontaneous resistance had become a planned part of the agitprop repertoire, there is evidence that some audiences soon found themselves reacting to real police presence alongside their agitprop troupes, sometimes with surprising success. For instance, according to the communist press, when police blocked the entrance to an auditorium in Rheydt where the Red Rockets were set to play, the “masses who had arrived to see the show persevered nonetheless. A strong demonstration formed and, while singing revolutionary songs, moved to a different venue, where the Red Rockets could perform as part of a private event.”<sup>66</sup> The end result: twenty new memberships in the KPD.<sup>67</sup>

Such events were, unsurprisingly, a fixation of communist journalists, who tended to romanticize triumphant narratives of working-class audiences rising to defend the communist cause and intimidating police into backing down.<sup>68</sup> To what extent audiences were moved to confront police, effectively championing agitprop as a cause in itself, is unclear. Certainly not all agitprop performances resulted in spontaneous mass demonstrations, but some did—especially when police stepped up coordinated efforts to target a particularly prolific group like Left Column. In one instance, when police banned a performance in Bochum and no alternative locale could be arranged to accommodate the audience of a thousand people, some four hundred and fifty angered theatregoers formed an impromptu demonstration, marching through the city to a central square.<sup>69</sup>

On the other hand, several police reports emphasize that communist events, including agitprop performances, were frequently used as a pretense for the organizers to start a demonstration, and that these attempts were rarely very successful. One officer, reporting from Koblenz in 1930, even claimed that when they did occur, such demonstrations were “staged” and that “obviously they in no way have the kind of wished-for mass influence claimed afterward by the communist press.”<sup>70</sup> Given troupes’ penchant for making police look as ridiculous as possible, there is some cause to take such reports as an attempt to save face through dismissal. Indeed, neither the communist press nor the police could be said to offer unbiased accounts of such events, and there is significant discrepancy in their respective estimations of agitprop’s political power. Were they, as the Koblenz officer stated, the kind of event that simply *staged* agitated masses but generally failed to excite a crowd into political action? Or were they, as other officers (and the communists) claimed, a powerful catalyst of revolutionary fervor?<sup>71</sup>

Undoubtedly, the truth lies somewhere in between. What is clear, however, is that for a police force faced with the monumental task of controlling political extremism at arguably the most polarized moment in Germany’s history, it devoted an inordinate amount of time and resources to combating agitprop. Despite this disproportionate attention, police efforts were met with spontaneous, creative resistance by performers and, at least at times, their audiences. What police needed was a more sweeping law that could justify intervention on the basis of content—even better, a law that would allow them to stop performances before they commenced on the basis of suspected content, thereby heading off the potential of a mass demonstration in response. As the Weimar government became increasingly fractured, with strong gains by both the far left and far right in the 1930 federal election, new legislation was introduced to do exactly that.

### The *Notverordnung* of March 1931

In an attempt to check polarization and limit further fractioning of the government, President Paul von Hindenburg passed the “Presidential Decree for Fighting Political Extremism” on 28 March 1931.<sup>72</sup> First and foremost, the decree qualified the right to assembly by stipulating that all outdoor gatherings, and all political gatherings regardless of venue, required a permit from the police to have been issued at least twenty-four hours prior to the event. Moreover, it stipulated that

this permit would be denied if police *suspected* the event would prompt “disobedience” or “insult or express malicious contempt toward the institutions, departments, agencies or officials of the state” (§1). The *Märznotverordnung* (March Emergency Decree), as it came to be known, ostensibly targeted “extremism” of all stripes, but notes from the meeting of Germany’s various state Ministers of the Interior, where the bill’s details were first sketched, indicate that, from the start, its primary aim was to fight “religious incitement (Godlessness) and cultural Bolshevism.” The ministers present readily agreed, however, that the law’s title must “be geared toward national security, so as to avoid appearing as a law purely about cultural battles.”<sup>73</sup> Despite the prevarication of the law’s title, both the KPD and the police were quick to recognize what the decree meant in practice.

Three days after it was signed into law, the KPD released an official statement in their press organ, *Die Rote Fahne*, declaring the decree “a fascistic attack on the last freedoms and rights of the people.”<sup>74</sup> Of course, the red press had been calling the German state “fascist” or “social fascist” for several years by this point, so whether its readership recognized the radical shift this law actually entailed is questionable. The police, on the other hand, had no doubt that it marked a watershed moment. Five days after the law was passed, Prussian Police Chief Albert Grzesinski wrote a classified directive to the Political Police in Department 1A with a simple instruction: “Ban all gatherings in which agitprop troupes perform on the basis of §1 of the Emergency Decree, until further notice.”<sup>75</sup> The following day, the memo was circulated with an additional endorsement from the Head of Political Police Fritz Goehrke:

On the basis of experience up to this point, it is precisely the agitprop troupes who carry out exorbitant agitation against the state and religious societies during events held by the KPD and their associated organizations. Moving effectively against agitprop troupe activity has, however, been impossible—until now. The Emergency Decree fills in this sensitive gap.<sup>76</sup>

The March Emergency Decree of 1931 was one of the most significant legislative acts of the Weimar Republic; it was arguably the Republic’s first decisive step toward fascism. But for Goehrke and Grzesinski, having been given *carte blanche* to crack down on almost any activity of the KPD, the decree was a way of putting an end to agitprop.

The decree’s broad scope affected nearly every aspect of political activity in Germany, but it contained specific stipulations that, whether purposefully or coincidentally, affected agitprop theatre in particular. For instance, it guaranteed a minimum three-month prison sentence for any violation, with potential for an additional monetary fine, but it also expanded the scope of who could be considered guilty of these violations: “Whoever takes part in a forbidden gathering or provides space for one to occur will face prison or a monetary fine” (§3). While venue managers willing to host agitprop troupes had always had to contend with legal consequences, this new law meant that *watching* an illegal event was now also punishable. In effect, it made agitprop’s audience guilty of the same crime as the agitators themselves.

The law also took aim at other aspects of agitprop performance. Section 4 quite literally banned the go-to mobile stage of many troupes by forbidding the use of trucks belonging to political organizations, such as those used by troupes on tour and during street performances. Section 8 empowered police to ban a political organization from wearing “uniform clothing or insignia”—a law that was undoubtedly aimed at the RFB, but that also applied to troupe uniforms. The law also forbade the production and distribution of print material with political content unless that material had been approved by the police, effectively curtailing the possibility of advertising planned performances (§12). Most sweepingly, it enabled police permanently to dissolve and ban any political organization in violation of this or other laws (§7).

Grzesinski’s enthusiastic embrace of the decree led to an uncompromising police crackdown on all agitprop activity during the months that followed. Players who openly flouted the law and performed without a permit faced arrest followed by monetary fines, imprisonment, or both.<sup>77</sup> Those who attempted to comply with the law found themselves facing blanket refusals from civil servants carrying out Grzesinski’s directive with zeal. For instance, when a group of organizers dedicated to “workers’ culture” filed a request for permission to host what they claimed was an explicitly apolitical theatre event, they were informed by multiple officials that any event suspected of communist affiliation would now be forbidden on the basis of the decree.<sup>78</sup> When Karl Schulz, a KPD member of the Prussian Landtag, sent a formal complaint to Prussian Minister of the Interior Karl Severing detailing the indiscriminate bans that had been placed on all manner of workers’ theatre in the two months following the decree,<sup>79</sup> Severing’s advisor denied none of it, writing in his report to Minister Severing: “I would consider it extraordinarily welcomed if through a general order the performances of agitprop troupes could be prevented across all of Prussia, since they systematically cause exorbitant incitement among broad swaths of the population.”<sup>80</sup>

The risk of incitement posed by agitprop troupes was not new information, but prior to this point police had always attempted to control, censor or curtail agitprop activity within the limits of the constitution. This balancing act was precisely what made troupe efforts to engage and provoke police such a compelling part of agitprop performance: the game was always to push police just far enough for the veil of “Peace and Order” to drop and reveal the class antagonism communists were certain lurked behind it. If agitprop was a genre that sought to mobilize audiences by blurring the line between politics and art, then the March Emergency Decree fulfilled that mission. With agitprop now illegal, the tenuous line between aesthetics and politics was dissolved entirely. Any aesthetic practice that manifested a critical attitude toward the status quo was now an unequivocally political act against the state.

## Endnotes

1 K., “Rote Raketen,” *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* 7.36 (1928): 13. All translations in the present article are mine.

2 The exact number of troupes is a question of some debate, with estimates ranging from two hundred to five hundred. See Richard Bodek, *Proletarian Performance in Weimar Berlin: Agitprop, Chorus, and Brecht*

(Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1997), 81; and Matthias Warstat, *Theatrale Gemeinschaften: Zur Festkultur der Arbeiterbewegung 1918–33* (Tübingen: Francke, 2005), 342.

3 “Internationales Grenztreffen der Agitproptruppen in der Kölner Messehalle, 1931,” [photo] IV-9-B-8.60: 2141/66, Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR (SAPMO), Bundesarchiv.

4 John Willett’s *Theatre of the Weimar Republic*, for instance, devotes a short chapter to agitprop, focused primarily on its relation to established theatre and some analysis of extant scripts. Willett ultimately concludes that “much of the satire was stereotyped and simple minded,” though he admits that “politically, it worked.” John Willett, *The Theatre of the Weimar Republic* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), 135. Even historians who focus explicitly on the political function of theatre in this period tend to place agitprop outside of their scope. Despite its title, Friedrich Knellessen’s *Agitation auf der Bühne* [Agitation on the stage], for example, notes that the study “must” exclude “all those stagings that were degraded to a battlefield of political opinions through an audience that was in part easily riled, in part paid off. There were many such extra-aesthetic declarations [*außerkünstlerische Kundgebungen*] from theatre audiences, where, for instance, the color red was already enough to elicit strong expressions of approval or displeasure.” Despite Knellessen’s dismissive intentions, a “battlefield of political opinions” is a remarkably accurate description of a genre that relied on confrontation with its specific audience, including police. Understanding agitprop’s unique model of audience engagement demands a consideration of precisely such “extra-aesthetic declarations” and the many strategies troupes cultivated to provoke them. Friedrich Wolfgang Knellessen, *Agitation auf der Bühne: Das politische Theater der Weimarer Republik* (Emsdetten: Lechte, 1970), 3.

5 German agitprop has been the primary focus of about a dozen volumes, and a partial focus of a dozen or so more, written almost exclusively in German. See Daniel Hoffmann-Ostwald and Ursula Behse, *Agitprop 1924–1933* (Leipzig: F. Hofmeister, 1960); Gudrun Klatt, *Arbeiterklasse und Theater: Agitprop-Tradition, Theater im Exil, sozialistisches Theater* (Berlin: Akademie, 1975); Karin Sporkhorst, “Arbeitertheater als Instrument politischer Propaganda und als proletarischer Kulturausdruck der KPD während der Weimarer Republik” (Ph.D. diss., Abteilung Sozialwissenschaften [Department of Social Sciences], Ruhr-Universität Bochum, 1976); Richard Stourac and Kathleen McCreery, *Theatre as a Weapon: Workers’ Theatre in the Soviet Union, Germany and Britain, 1917–1934* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986); Richard Weber, *Proletarisches Theater und revolutionäre Arbeiterbewegung 1918–25*, 2d ed. (Köln: Prometh, 1978).

6 Bodek, *Proletarian Performance*, 81.

7 Warstat ultimately concludes that agitprop’s antagonistic relationship to the audience resulted in a theatrically staged social model built on exclusion and elitism; *Theatrale Gemeinschaften*, 350–7.

8 For SAPMO, see note 3. A selection of these documents is reprinted together with contextual introductions in Ludwig Hoffmann and Daniel Hoffmann-Ostwald, eds., *Deutsches Arbeitertheater 1918–1933*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1977).

9 Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 20–1.

10 Laura Bradley, *Cooperation and Conflict: GDR Theatre Censorship, 1961–1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 26.

11 Friedrich Wilhelm, König von Preußen, *Gesetz gegen die gemeingefährlichen Bestrebungen der Sozialdemokratie* (1878), <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/netzquelle/sozialistengesetz.pdf>, accessed on 16 March 2023. *Vormärz* (lit.: “before March”) refers to the period between 1815 and the wave of revolutions across Europe in 1848, including the March Revolution in the states of the German Confederation.

12 A milder forerunner of the *Gestapo*, the “politische Polizei” operated prior to 1933 as a section of the police force in most German states, tasked specifically with investigating and preventing crimes of a political nature. His-huey Liang, *The Berlin Police Force in the Weimar Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 6.

13 Polizeipräsidium Berlin, Abteilung 1A, “Bemerkenswerte Parolen und Agitationsmethoden der KPD und ihrer Hilfs- und Nebenorganisationen,” June 1931, in Hoffmann and Hoffmann-Ostwald, *Deutsches Arbeitertheater*, 2: 305–8.

14 “Ruhe und Ordnung” (“Peace and Order”) was a phrase made (in)famous in the first months of the Weimar Republic by the SPD, who used it to justify their cooperation with reactionary paramilitary forces. It was also a favorite target of artists, parodied for instance by the dadaist poster that read “Dada ist für Ruhe und Orden” (a pun that can be translated as “Dada is for peace and medals”). See Debbie Lewer,

“Revolution and the Weimar Avant-Garde: Contesting the Politics of Art, 1919–1924,” in *Weimar Culture Revisited*, ed. John Alexander Williams (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1–21.

15 Article 118 of the Weimar Constitution largely guaranteed the right to express opinions in speech, written word, print, and image. Reichspräsident Friedrich Ebert et al., *Die Verfassung des Deutschen Reiches* (1919), [www.verfassungen.de/de19-33/verf19-i.htm](http://www.verfassungen.de/de19-33/verf19-i.htm), accessed 16 March 2023.

16 N., Polizeipräsidium Berlin, “Methoden der Unterdrückung revolutionärer Arbeitertheater-Aufführungen betreffend,” 20 November 1926, in Hoffmann and Hoffmann-Ostwald, *Deutsches Arbeitertheater*, 1: 219.

17 *Allgemeine Landrecht für die Preußischen Staaten* (1794), II.17.10, <https://opiniojuris.de/quelle/1623>, accessed 16 March 2023.

18 N., “Methoden der Unterdrückung revolutionärer,” 1: 219.

19 Requirements for the *Wandergewerbeschein* are outlined in *Gewerbeordnung für das Deutsche Reich* (1869), §32, <https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/view/bsb11174892?page=38&q=%C2%A732>, accessed 16 March 2023.

20 Alarm [Sturmtrupp Alarm] to Bezirksvorstand der Roten Hilfe Württemberg, n.d., Arbeiterth. I-e-4: 15, Agitprop-Theater-Sammlung, Archiv der Akademie der Künste (Berlin) [hereafter: ATS]. The success of this tactic is also confirmed by a police report about another troupe in 1930. Thiele, Düsseldorf, “Betreff: Die Rote Wanderbühne,” 1 April 1930, Arbeiterth. I-e-2: 7, ATS.

21 Thür[ingische]. Ministerium für Inneres und Wirtschaft, “Sonderakten KPD Rote Truppe Strzelewicz,” 1926, Rote Truppe I-e-2, ATS.

22 Ibid.

23 Gary D. Stark, *Banned in Berlin: Literary Censorship in Imperial Germany, 1871–1918* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 19.

24 Polizeipräsidium Duisburg, “Bericht über Rote Raketen am 1.12.1928,” 4 December 1928, KPD I-e-11: 6945, ATS.

25 This information is based on ticket stubs collected in Veranstaltungen I-e-1–90, ATS.

26 See Otto Bochmann, “Agit-Prop-Truppe ‘Rote Raketen,’ Dresden, Daten und Fakten” [interview notes], n.d. [ca. 1950s], Rote Raketen Dresden, I-b-1, ATS. Government officials also noted the strategy, stating that even bans on particular troupes “do not promise success, considering that some agitprop troupes are not affiliated with any definite organization, and are therefore easily in a situation to circumvent the ban by renaming themselves and moving their activities to a new city.” Polizeipräsidium Berlin, Abteilung 1A, “Bemerkenswerte Parolen und Agitationsmethoden,” June 1931, in Hoffmann and Hoffmann-Ostwald, *Deutsches Arbeitertheater*, 2: 308.

27 The terminology of mimesis was not used in police reports. Instead, officers rather awkwardly attempted to distinguish dialogue spoken by characters from speech simply being read without character assignments by inserting vague words like “stagelike” (*bühnenmässig*) or “dramatic.” See, for instance: Polizeipräsidium Berlin to Herrn Standow, Hilfskomitee der IAH, 4 February 1928, Veranstaltungen I-e-1–90, ATS.

28 Polizeipräsidium Berlin, “28.2.32 im Morbider Gesellschaftshaus,” 29 February 1932, Gr. jg. Schausp. (i.e., Gruppe junge Schauspieler) III-e-2, ATS.

29 Ibid.

30 Polizeipräsidium Berlin, “Proletarische Versuchstheater,” 31 October 1927, Veranstaltungen I-e-91–138, ATS.

31 Weber, Oberpräsident der Provinz Westfalen, “Betrifft: Theatertruppe ‘Kolonie Links’ der Internationalen Arbeiter-Hilfe,” 10 June 1930, Arbeiterth. I-e-2: 18, ATS.

32 Evidence of this bureaucratic machinery can also be found in the requests for protocols on how to handle agitprop troupes, which can be traced as they were forwarded from local precincts up several supervisory levels until landing on the desk of the Prussian Minister of the Interior. See files in Kolonne Links I-e-4, ATS.

33 Bertolt Brecht, “On Gestic Music,” in *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. Marc Silberman, Steve Giles, and Tom Kuhn, 3d ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 167–9.

34 *Bonze* referred to the “fat cat” or class traitor of middle management or union leadership. In KPD propaganda, the *Bonze* is almost always affiliated with the SPD.

35 Jessi Piggott, “Acts of Commitment: Prefigurative Politics on the Agitprop Stage” (*Theatre & Performance Studies*, Stanford University, 2019), 92–102.

- 36 N., "Methoden der Unterdrückung revolutionärer," 1: 219.
- 37 Bochmann, "Agit-Prop-Truppe 'Rote Raketen.'" 38 Hessische Polizeiamt, Landeskriminalzentrale, Bericht 30 December 1925, quoted in Hoffmann and Hoffmann-Ostwald, *Deutsches Arbeitertheater*, 1: 186.
- 39 Polizeipräsidium Recklinghausen, "Betrifft: RFB," 31 January 1929, KPD I-e-12, ATS.
- 40 Reichspräsident Friedrich Ebert et al., [*Erstes*] *Gesetz zum Schutze der Republik* (21 July 1922), §8 [www.documentarchiv.de/wr/repschutz\\_ges01.html](http://www.documentarchiv.de/wr/repschutz_ges01.html), accessed 16 March 2023.
- 41 Rote Raketen, "K.o.—Ein Boxkampf," in *Rote Raketen: Textbuch der Berliner Spieltruppe des Roten Frontkämpfer-Bundes* (Berlin: Rot-Front-Verlag, n.d. [after 1928]), 8–9.
- 42 Meyer, Polizeipräsidium Duisburg, "Betrifft: Verlauf der Antikriegskampagne der K.P.D.," 27 August 1928, KPD I-e-11, ATS.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Anonymous, Jena, "21. Juli im grossen Volkshaussaal," 22 July 1926, KPD III-e-2, ATS.
- 45 Riede, Gotha, "Saal des Schießhauses," 8 February 1927, KPD III-e-2, ATS.
- 46 References to these practices abound in performer accounts. For examples, see Willy Harzheim, "Die Agitproptruppe Probt," *Die Linkskurve* 2.9 (September 1930): 27–8; KJVD, "Wie wir unseren Berliner Roten Rummel machten," *Der junge Bolschewik: Zeitschrift für Theorie und Praxis der Kommunistischen Jugendbewegung* 25 (October 1925), in Hoffmann and Hoffmann-Ostwald, *Deutsches Arbeitertheater*, 1:198–200; Arthur Korn [interview notes], 30 June 1958, Rote Werber III-d-1, ATS; Genossen Adam (Rote Raketen) [interview notes], n.d., Rote Raketen, Berlin, I-b-1–2, ATS.
- 47 "Sie haben so etwas, Herr Präsident, / Was man in Berlin 'lange Leitung' nennt." The phrase "Lange Leitung" (literally, a long telephone line) is an idiom characteristic of the infamous *Berliner Schnauze*—a slang known for its insults and biting humor.
- 48 The name of whatever town or region in which the performance took place would likely have been slotted in here, as troupes regularly updated material to reflect the context of each performance. See, for instance, "An alle Agitprop-Truppen, Truppenleiter, Spieler und Mitarbeiter!" *Das Rote Sprachrohr* 1.3 (March 1929): 3.
- 49 Sturmtrupp Alarm, "Wir schlagen Alarm," *Arbeiterbühne und Film* 17.8 (1930): 12.
- 50 Helmut Damerius, *Über zehn Meere zum Mittelpunkt der Welt: Erinnerungen an die "Kolonne Links"* (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1977), 112.
- 51 Corey Ross, "Cinema, Radio, and 'Mass Culture' in the Weimar Republic: Between Shared Experience and Social Division," in *Weimar Culture Revisited*, ed. Williams, 23–48.
- 52 Damerius, *Über zehn Meere*, 112.
- 53 Carl Wilhelm Severing (1875–1952) was a career politician in the centrist faction of the SPD. He held various positions in the Weimar Republic, including Federal Minister of the Interior from 1928 to 1930 and Interior Minister of Prussia from 1920 to 1926 and again from 1930 to 1932.
- 54 Rote Schmiede, "Hallo!—Die Staatsgewalt!," in Hoffmann and Hoffmann-Ostwald, *Deutsches Arbeitertheater*, 2: 63–5.
- 55 Thomas Kurz, "Blutmai": *Sozialdemokraten und Kommunisten im Brennpunkt der Berliner Ereignisse von 1929* (Berlin: Dietz, 1988).
- 56 Quoted in Carl von Ossietzky, "Zörgiebel ist schuld!," *Die Weltbühne* 25.19 (7 May 1929): 691.
- 57 Rote Schmiede, "Hallo!—Die Staatsgewalt!," 65.
- 58 Ludwig Hoffmann and Daniel Hoffmann-Ostwald, "Einführung" [Introduction] to "Hallo!—Die Staatsgewalt! Leuna! Die Rote Schmiede, Halle (1930)," Hoffmann and Hoffmann-Ostwald, *Deutsches Arbeitertheater*, 2: 58–61, at 61.
- 59 Müller, Essen, "Betrifft: 10-Jahr-Feier der Kommunistischen Jugend Internationale," 29 November 1929, Kolonne Links II-a-1–9, ATS.
- 60 Nearly every political party in Germany during this period had its own paramilitary organization. See Dirk Schumann, *Political Violence in the Weimar Republic, 1918–1933: Battle for the Streets and Fears of Civil War* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012).
- 61 "Polizeiprovokation auch im Essen," *Rote Fahne*, 29 November 1929, 4.
- 62 The officer thus writes that Damerius had been "suspended"; Damerius explains in his memoir, "in good German, that means arrested." It seems likely that he was briefly held and questioned before being released a few minutes later. *Über zehn Meere*, 65.
- 63 Müller, "10-Jahr-Feier der Kommunistischen Jugend Internationale."

64 Ibid.

65 Warstat, *Theatrale Gemeinschaften*, 353–7.

66 “Verbot der Roten Raketen in Rheydt und München,” *Die Rote Front* 40 (1928), in Hoffmann and Hoffmann-Ostwald, *Deutsches Arbeitertheater*, 1: 275–7, at 275.

67 Ibid., 276. Most touring troupes were sponsored by one of several KPD affiliates, such as newspapers like *Die Rote Fahne*, the KPD-paramilitary League of Red Front Fighters (RFB), or a chapter of the Young Communist League of Germany (KJVD), and the troupe would solicit new members, donations, or subscriptions from among the audience. Matthias Warstat, however, warns against reading too much into such statistics since “newly acquired members of the advertised organizations left just as quickly and lightheartedly as they joined.” *Theatrale Gemeinschaften*, 360–1.

68 Examples abound in the major communist press organ *Die Rote Fahne*, as well as in smaller monthlies. A particularly dramatic example was written in response to police interference at a Red Megaphone (Rote Sprachrohr) performance in Hamburg: “An official and two beat cops approach the stage: The performance is canceled! That’s what the bureaucrats want. They also issue a fine. But no, the performance will not be canceled! In terrible rage, in frightening fury, blackened hands rolled into fists, the blokes block the path to the stage. You think you’ll go deaf from the roar ringing from hundreds of throats. For a moment, bloodshed seems unavoidable. Surrounded on all sides, white with fear, the police reach for their weapons. The movement makes everyone freeze, as a shiver runs down the spine. A moment longer . . . the police turn on their heels. They move toward the door, quickening their pace, and the shouts thunder again behind them, mixed with whistling, jeers, and ironic applause.” Michail Kolzow, “Die Vorstellung wird nicht abgebrochen!,” *Das Internationale Theater* 3 (1933), in Hoffmann and Hoffmann-Ostwald, *Deutsches Arbeitertheater*, 2: 232–4, at 234.

69 Regierungsrat Westhoff, “Ortsgruppe Bochum der IAH,” 22 August 1930, Kolonne Links I-e-5, ATS.

70 Gotthard and Flach, Oberpräsident der Rheinprovinz, Koblenz, *Entwicklung der K.P.D. und ihrer Nebenorganisationen in der Rheinprovinz*, 22 April 1930, KPD I-e-7, ATS.

71 Sometimes such conflicting ideas were present within single reports, as here, for instance: “The revues were purportedly pieced together by the workers’ cabaret ‘Onwards to the Left’ (‘Links Ran’) themselves and the content is quite lacking in spirit. The performance itself also initially leaves much to be desired, even if it has recently, I must admit, improved substantially, so that it is increasingly capable of achieving its goal of clearly denouncing political opposition. The propagandistic effect of the cabaret ought therefore not to be underestimated.” Friedberg, Oberpräsident der Provinz, Hannover, “Betrifft: Kommunistische Propaganda durch Theaterstücke,” 10 December 1928, Arbeiterth. I-e-2: 44, ATS.

72 Reichspräsident Paul von Hindenburg, Reichskanzler Heinrich Brüning, and Reichsminister des Innern Wilhelm Wirth, *Verordnung des Reichspräsidenten zur Bekämpfung politischer Ausschreitungen* (1931), [www.documentarchiv.de/da/fs-notverordnungen\\_reichspraesident.html](http://www.documentarchiv.de/da/fs-notverordnungen_reichspraesident.html), accessed 16 March 2023.

73 “Konferenz der Innenminister in Berlin,” 18 March 1931, Box 23, ATS.

74 Sekretariat des ZK der KPD, “An der Spitze des Volkes für Brot, Arbeit, Freiheit!,” *Rote Fahne*, 31 March 1931, 1.

75 Albert Grzesinski, Polizeipräsidium Berlin, “Tgb. Nr. [journal entry number] 719,” 2 April 1931, Arbeiterth. I-e-1, ATS.

76 Fritz Goehrke, Polizeipräsidium Berlin, Abteilung IA, “Vermerk zu Tgb. Nr. 179,” 3 April 1931, Arbeiterth. I-e-1, ATS.

77 Maxim Vallentin, for instance, was sentenced to six months prison and a fine of 400 Marks after his involvement in an agitprop performance that had not obtained a permit. The judge reportedly refused to hear testimony from any working-class witnesses. Arthur Pieck, “Polizeiknüppel über Deutschland,” *Arbeiterbühne und Film* 18.4 (1931), in Hoffmann and Hoffmann-Ostwald, *Deutsches Arbeitertheater*, 2: 271–5.

78 Anonymous, “. . . das klingt doch kommunistisch!,” *Rote Fahne*, 28 May 1931, 9, in Hoffmann and Hoffmann-Ostwald, *Deutsches Arbeitertheater*, 2: 276–7.

79 Karl Schulz to Karl Severing, “Betr. Polizeimaßnahmen gegen den Arbeiter-Theaterbund,” 29 May 1931, Box 22, ATS.

80 Dr. Schnitzler, Regierungs-Assessor, report to Karl Severing, “Betr. Polizeimaßnahmen gegen den Arbeiter-Theaterbund,” 13 June 1931, Box 22, ATS.

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