

The Foreign Commission of the Soviet Writers' Union in 1950s-1960s: Boundaries, Obstacles, Tricks, Embarrassment, Impact

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FROM the very start of the Soviet Writers' Union in the 1930s, one of its departments was the Foreign Commission, responsible for relations between Soviet writers and their foreign colleagues. It replaced the dogmatic and rigid MORP, and competed for intellectuals with the more versatile VOKS¹. In this context, the Foreign Commission was a natural part of Soviet cultural diplomacy and propaganda. Studies of the early period of the Foreign Commission suggest it was an active institution, scanning the literary horizon, reaching out for new contacts, and expanding relations². The Commission presumably knew everything about everyone, maintained dossiers on everyone, and favoured 'progressive' writers. It could also be assumed that its work with foreign intellectuals was carried out in full accordance with the party's will, was systematic and quite effective.

On the other hand, scholars argue that the 'rules of the game' were never clear, that communication channels were convoluted, and that Soviet literary communities functioned on the basis of informal practices and backstage dealings³. The aim of my study is to examine whether this was true for the late Soviet Writers' Union Foreign Commission, by exploring the factors that determined its work, the

balance between formal and informal practices, and the real value of this institution.

Since I am limited by the format and length of the article, I will focus on an area of activity to which the Foreign Commission itself gave priority: receiving foreign writers and maintaining correspondence with them. Additionally, because of the Commission's Western orientation (and of Soviet cultural diplomacy in general)⁴, I will primarily use examples from the FC's communication with Western literatures.

Chronologically, the study covers the Thaw period in a broad sense. The 1950s and 1960s are clearly distinguished for several reasons. First, there is the framework provided by the FC's policy documents, from the Regulations of 1 July 1953 to the draft of the new Regulations in late 1968 (adopted a year later)⁵. The need to formulate new tasks in these specific years was driven by internal Soviet processes, ranging from the lifting of the Iron Curtain after Stalin's death to the narrowing of cultural ties after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. For the West, on the other hand, the Cold War and the generally prosperous stage of social development predetermined a fundamentally different character of pilgrimage to the homeland of the Bolshevik Revolution, compared to the pilgrimage of the 1920s

¹ L. Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920-40: From Red Square to the Left Bank*, London-New York 2006, pp. 6-8.

² Ibidem. Cf. also M. David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921-1941*, Oxford 2012.

³ I. Kukulin – M. Maiofis – M. Chetverikova, *Backstage Improvisation: Social Cooperation, Circumvention of the Rules, and Processes of Cultural Production in the Late USSR. Article One*, "Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie", 2002, 2, p. 86.

⁴ E. Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die: The Soviet lives of Western culture*, Cambridge [MA]-London 2018, p. 8.

⁵ *Polozhenie ob Inostrannoi komissii (1953)*, RGALI, f. 631 (Soviet Writers' Union), op. 26, ed. khr. 10. *Proekt polozheniia ob Inostrannoi komissii (1968)*, RGALI, f. 631, op. 27, ed. khr. 458. The draft Regulations of 1968 was approved in 1970, see *Polozhenie ob Inostrannoi komissii (1970)*, RGALI, f. 631, op. 27, ed. khr. 757.

and 1940s⁶. Scholars typically describe the practices of Soviet hospitality and cultural diplomacy during the early Soviet period, while the Thaw phase has previously been overlooked and has only recently attracted the attention of researchers.

BOUNDARIES

Few foreign writers who visited the USSR in the 1950s and 1960s fail to mention, either directly or indirectly, the Foreign Commission of the Writers' Union⁷. Hans Magnus Enzensberger (West Germany), who made contact with this institution in 1963 (and later married the daughter of the Soviet poet Margarita Aliger), described the Writers' Union as follows:

In the West, nobody really understands the political importance, power, and wealth of this institution. For Soviet writers, being affiliated with it is a matter of survival. Being excluded equals social death. The Union is a censorship body, travel agency, treasury, and welfare office all rolled into one. It decides on the authorisation of leisure trips and trips abroad. Authors turn to it when they need a travel document, a plane ticket, a refrigerator, a stay in a sanatorium or a clinic [...]⁸.

According to Enzensberger, the Writers' Union wielded an omnipotence that transcended its own members:

The institution kept detailed records of all foreign writers and [...] had experts for every country and every language who read everything they published. Not only their books, but also their political activities were recorded in the dossiers. A curriculum vitae was created [for each writer] and kept up to date; even reviews and newspaper clippings were included in the dossier⁹.

⁶ See section *Affluence, Security, and Individualism* in chapter *The Rejection of Western Society in the 1960s and 70s*, in P. Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China and Cuba, 1928-1978*, Oxford 1981.

⁷ Case studies on episodes of cooperation in the 1950s and 1960s rarely overlook the work of the FC and its staff. See for example H. Stead, "Comrade Doris": *Lessing's correspondence with the Foreign Commission of the board of Soviet writers in the 1950s*, "Critical Quarterly", 2021 (LXIII), 1, pp. 35-47; L. Kazakova (Zhdanova), *Steinbek v SSSR: triumf, "predatel'stvo" i zabvenie (1961-1968)*, "Rossika", 2023, 5, pp. 177-295; A. Dobryashkina, *Palomnichestvo v stranu Vostoka: Vizit Stefana Andresa v SSSR*, "ROSSICA. Literaturnye sviazi i kontakty", 2023, 4, pp. 67-98; M. Fonseca Damaros, *Caso Jorge Amado: O poder soviético e a publicação de Gabriela, Cravo e Canela*, PhD thesis, São Paulo 2020.

⁸ H. M. Enzensberger, *Tumulto*, Barcelona 2014, p. 34.

⁹ Ivi, p. 36.

A similar description could be likened to that of a totalitarian mechanism, but is this not an exaggeration? Researchers are generally not inclined to overestimate the influence of the Foreign Commission on Western intellectuals. Paul Hollander argues in principle that the "predispositions" of intellectuals played a far greater role in the fascination with socialism, and that receiving an "ego massage" in the USSR only encouraged these inclinations¹⁰. Ludmila Stern emphasizes the significance of psychological pressure over ideological or political influence, asserting that Soviet propagandists created an "illusion of genuine friendship" to coerce foreign intellectuals into refraining from criticism of the system, gradually seducing them into loyalty¹¹. Michael David-Fox examines the origins of the "cultural show" (*kultpokaz*), concluding that its impact was more pronounced on the Soviet Union itself¹².

At first glance, the FC archive, now housed in the Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts (RGALI), confirms the impression of contemporaries about the scope and seriousness of this institution's work. It is a large collection¹³, documenting cooperation with many writers, both famous and lesser known. FC documents, such as annual plans and reports, show increasingly ambitious targets at the start of the year and their moderate but enthusiastic overachievement by the end of the year. The emphasis was on quantitative indicators: the number of guests, the coverage of the 'capitalist' world, the so-called people's democracy countries and the Third World, the number of different events, and the amount of routine paperwork including summaries, briefs, and bulletins.

Is it true that there was a personal dossier for each writer in the Foreign Commission? Not if we base this observation on the organisation of its archives. We will not find actual dossiers with the names of the writers. We would, however, find precious correspondence with authors such as Heinrich Böll, Carlo

¹⁰ P. Hollander, *Political Pilgrims*, op. cit.

¹¹ L. Stern, *Western Intellectuals*, op. cit., p. 8.

¹² M. David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, op. cit., p. 315.

¹³ 36.440 folders according to the inventories available on the RGALI website: <https://rgali.ru/opis?fundId=7161> (latest access: 05.06.2024).

Levi, Arthur Miller, or Jorge Amado in a number of separate folders, and many times the original letter, its translation, or an attachment would be lost; notes on political views would be appended to the materials on the visit – but only occasionally; and an overview of the author's literary and political activities would have to be found in bulletins dedicated to the state of literature in the particular country the writer was from. In the Secretariat's papers, there is no evidence of cross-referencing to specific files or dossiers. Neither the state of the collection (meaning no reproach to the remarkable RGALI) nor its contents suggest meticulous organisation, proper storage while they were kept in the Writers' Union, or at least order. Overall, the collection is a bit chaotic. The only factor that seems to have contributed to some degree of systematisation is the country-by-country principle. Thanks to this approach, all materials regarding a specific country (or a region with a lingua franca, as in the case of Latin America) were managed by one individual, a so-called 'consultant'. The state of the documents depended on his, and much more often her, style of work.

Before examining the consultants' work in more detail, let's take a look at the founding documents. One might expect to find a statute, or internal instructions, for an institution like the Foreign Commission. In July 1953, such a document, the Regulations (*Polozhenie*), was indeed adopted. It delineates the mission of the FC as follows: "To carry out international relations of the Soviet Writers' Union of the USSR and individual Soviet writers with progressive writers' organisations and progressive writers from foreign countries". The document stipulates that the FC is responsible for the following duties: organising all work with foreign writers, from correspondence to personal visits; preparing informational materials on the state of foreign literature; consulting editors of journals and publishing houses; and helping to organise trips abroad for Soviet writers¹⁴.

However, the Regulations fail to provide a clear structure for the institution, do not name responsible persons, and do not allocate tasks. The words

'expansion', 'implementation', 'planning', 'organisation' are repeated from page to page, but there are few specifics. The internal structure and staffing are described in a vague manner, and the assignment of responsibilities, work procedures, and efficiency criteria remain undefined.

The three pages of typewritten text do not meet the criteria of a framework document. Rather, they function as a subtle articulation of a shift in the dynamics of international relations. The message conveyed is "now we can". The document does not however specify what exactly "we can", thus aligning with the fundamental spirit of what is known as the Thaw period. This ambiguity shaped a fundamental characteristic of FC's operations: its reliance on directives from the CPSU's Central Committee. Subsequently, the message was sent not only to the lower echelons involved in the formulation of the Regulations, but also to the leadership: "Now we can, can't we?"

Managing foreign contacts in the mid-1950s was a tricky business, and one had to be careful. Neither the staff of the Foreign Commission nor the members of the editorial boards of the publishing houses and journals, who received advice from the FC, knew exactly where the boundaries of what was permissible were. At the end of 1955, for example, it was still unclear how to deal with "foreign authors who had once been friendly to the USSR, but who in later years had compromised themselves by making anti-Soviet speeches and now adopted a more or less neutral position (U. Sinclair, J. B. Priestley)", or

[...] those bourgeois writers who are friendly to us, who play a certain role in the peace movement, but in their speeches, which are generally in our favour, allow certain deviations on certain questions, from the point of view of the ideological norms accepted here¹⁵.

In an effort to ascertain (or manipulate) the intentions of the higher-ups, the editor-in-chief of the newly established journal "Foreign Literature",

¹⁵ *Pis'mo A.B. Chakovskogo M.A. Suslovu o printsipakh raboty zhurnala "Inostrannaia literatura" ot 23 dekabria 1955 g.*, in *Apparat TSK KPSS i kul'tura. 1953-1957*, ed. by V. Afiani, Moskva 2001, p. 458.

¹⁴ RGALI, f. 631, op. 26, ed. khr. 10, l. 1-3.

which was engaged in direct collaboration with the FC, questioned the situation in the following manner:

Should their journalistic interventions be avoided, or, in particular cases, should one go so far as to print them simultaneously with an article by any of the Soviet writers or critics explaining the Soviet point of view on the subject?¹⁶

The Central Committee replied that they had considered the question of the attitude towards Upton Sinclair:

It has been recommended to objectively assess his work and literary heritage, to republish his realistic pieces that expose capitalism, but at the same time criticise the weak, reactionary aspects of his creative work. These principles should also determine the relationship of the journal "Foreign Literature" to U. Sinclair, J. Priestley and other similar bourgeois writers¹⁷.

Nevertheless, "other similar bourgeois writers" didn't mean all of them. According to the same document, the "neutralist" writers Sinclair and Priestley were to be distinguished from Mauriac and Hemingway, who were regarded as "standing apart from the progressive movement" and whose publications were identified as an ideological deviation. Even Sinclair's edition, published two years later, failed to meet the Central Committee's standards, because it had not been provided with an introductory article "criticising the positions of principle" [*printsipial'naia kritika*]¹⁸.

The conflicting and sometimes unpredictable messages from the Central Committee forced those involved in the literary process to seek clarification from the Party on every seemingly trivial issue. Ludmila Sinianskaia, an employee of the Theatre Department of the Ministry of Culture, testified that in the 1960s her boss started every morning by calling the Central Committee to await its instructions. If they refused to provide them, he would be outraged: "Whoa, think for yourself! It's easy for them to say:

think for yourself!"¹⁹. It could sometimes take a personal order from the head of the Culture Department of the Central Committee, the powerful Dmitrii Polikarpov, to recognise the 'appropriateness' of inviting this or that writer to the USSR²⁰. The expansion of the Foreign Commission staff by five members required a personal application from the 'literary general', Konstantin Simonov, to the Culture Department²¹. Not only were plans and reports sent to the Central Committee, but also routine paperwork such as translators' reports on foreign writers' visits – even those that caused no problems. Applying to the Party, FC employees would ask to rush the publishing houses, complain about Intourist, and request solutions for royalties' issues. There were no limits to over-insurance. Delaying the process, even by a few weeks or months, was preferable to taking the risk of showing initiative. On the other hand, these elaborate efforts communicated a clear message to the party: contacts were expanding, Soviet literature was being appreciated in the West, and further actions were necessary.

The Foreign Commission was therefore not free to exercise its competencies, but rather was responsible for the development of international relations. How did these relations develop?

LIVE TO SEE RETIREMENT

There were very few people working in the Foreign Commission. All the main work was carried out by the so-called consultants – philologists specialising in foreign literatures, who were assigned by country or region to deal with respective writers.

During the Fourth Congress of Writers in Moscow in 1967, there were no more than twenty consultants for all countries (and 25–30 people in the FC, including administration and technical staff – typists). Twenty people wrote all summaries, briefs, and bulletins, drew up budgets, plans, and reports, handled all correspondence with writers, accompanied guests, or found translators for them if they

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ *Zapiska otdelov TSK KPSS po pis'mu glavnogo redaktora zhurnala "Inostrannaia literatura" A.B. Chakovskogo o printsipakh raboty i sotrudnichestva s zarubezhnymi deiateliami kul'tury. 12 ianvaria 1956 g.*, in *Apparat TSK KPSS*, op. cit., p. 478.

¹⁸ *Postanovlenie Komissii TSK KPSS "Ob ustranении nedostatkov v izdaniі i retsenzirovaniі inostrannoi khudozhestvennoi literatury". 5 april'ia 1958 g.*, in *Ideologicheskie komissii TSK KPSS. 1958–1964*, ed. by V. Afiani, Moskva 1998, pp. 45–47.

¹⁹ L. Sinianskaia, *Zapiski na pamiat'*, "Znamia", 2002, 12, p. 151.

²⁰ That was the case of the invitation of the Guatemalan writer Miguel Angel Asturias: RGANI, f. 5 (Apparat of the Central Committee of the CPSU), op. 36, d. 19, l. 141.

²¹ RGANI, f. 5, op. 36, d. 19, l. 150.

couldn't accompany them personally. Depending on the year, the FC received anywhere from a few dozen to several hundred foreign guests²². For such a modest staff, that was a lot of work.

In addition to their competence and efficiency, consultants were expected to be able to "organise a personal, warm-hearted approach" to guests²³. Naturally, pleasing the guest should not result in the displeasure of the higher-ups. The consultants were chronically overworked, often ill, and took long holidays (which they were entitled to as members of the Writers' Union), while there was nobody to replace them. When they returned to work, they barely had a chance to catch up. In her correspondence with Graham Greene, the English literature consultant Oksana Krugerskaia complained three times over the course of three years about prolonged illness²⁴. Germanist Vladimir Stezhenskii worked himself to a heart attack²⁵. The already mentioned Ludmila Sinianskaia, who worked in the FC after leaving the Ministry of Culture, recalled:

In the twenty years that I worked in the Foreign Commission, of the nearly three dozen consultants [...] one third died before reaching retirement age, most of them even before the age of fifty. The main reason for this was probably the nervous tension in which the consultants worked, doing their best to protect the fragile bridge of literary contacts amid the most difficult and sometimes destructive political struggles²⁶.

What they struggled with was the system: it took a lot of time, effort, and cunning manipulation to convince all levels of leadership that yet another writer

should be accepted, translated, and published in the USSR.

While working with delegations, the overburdened consultants could rely on the help of interpreters. Their duties were to accompany the foreign guests during their stay in the USSR and, after their departure, to account for expenses and write a free-form report for the Commission. The interpreters were found through word of mouth, most often among students and graduates of philology who agreed to work out of goodwill (they were not paid much)²⁷, and did not receive any special training. Their uncommitted and unsupervised enthusiasm constantly annoyed the upper ranks:

Due to the fact that the staff of the Foreign Commission of the USSR Writers' Union is extremely overloaded and [the consultants] cannot personally work with all the visiting writers, often this important aspect of our activities has to be entrusted to freelance translators, who are not always able to analyse the results of the work deeply enough and identify shortcomings. [...] The situation with translators, in light of the ever-increasing ties not only of the Writers' Union but also of many other organisations, is becoming *intolerable* and requires urgent action. In particular, the Writers' Union would consider it desirable to establish a Bureau of Translators at the GKKS, which could provide qualified interpreters at the disposal of the organisations²⁸.

While the question of special training for interpreters was raised repeatedly, until the dissolution of the Writers' Union, translation for foreign writers remained the responsibility of unsupervised freelance specialists.

Furthermore, another very important institution within the FC were the working groups (the so-called *aktivy*), formed of translators, editors, literary critics, and writers who specialised in a specific country or region and knew the respective language. They were formed on a 'voluntary-coercive' (*dobrovol'no-prinuditel'noi*) basis and occasionally met at the Foreign Commission. The members of a working group were not part of the staff, did

²² For example, in 1955 the Foreign Commission reported 60 foreign visitors, in 1960, 178, in 1963, 283, and in 1967, 568. Of course, these figures were manipulated. But even if the total number of guests included or subtracted the writers' family members, or, after 1967, foreign translators who had not previously been counted as writers, all of these people were still part of the Foreign Commission's employees' responsibility. Cf. K. Buynova, *Foreign Commission of the Soviet Writers' Union in the 1960s: Priorities, Work Features, Challenges*, "Studia Litterarum" 2023 (VIII), 4, pp. 344-369, p. 355.

²³ *Protokol proizvodstvennykh soveshchaniï konsul'tantov Inostrannoi komissii. 12 ianv.-18 noiabria 1953 g.*, RGALI, f. 631, op. 26, ed. khr. 27, l. 2.

²⁴ She was ill for two months in 1958 (RGALI, f. 631, op. 26, ed. khr. 855, l. 2); for two months in 1959 (RGALI, f. 631, op. 26, ed. khr. 882, l. 1) and for a few weeks — "it was not pneumonia, just overtiredness" — in 1960 (RGALI, f. 631, op. 26, ed. khr. 923, l. 8).

²⁵ RGALI, f. 2528, op. 8, ed. khr. 87, l. 1 ob.

²⁶ L. Sinianskaia, *Vo sne i naiavu sredi glyb*, "Znamia", 2003, 3, p. 151.

²⁷ Freelance translators were paid little in the Foreign Commission — 3 roubles per day in 1963 (RGALI, f. 631, op. 26, ed. khr. 142, l. 11). By comparison, Intourist paid 10 roubles a day (Ibidem), and an average worker's salary was about 100 roubles a month.

²⁸ RGALI, f. 631, op. 26, ed. khr. 111, l. 9. Emphasis added. GKKS (Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries) coordinated the work of Soviet institutions of foreign propaganda between 1957 and 1967. It reported directly to the CPSU's Central Committee.

not receive salaries, but had the duty of discussing foreign literary pieces.

At the meetings of a working group, its members decided whether to recommend to the publishing houses and journals the publication of a particular author or work. Apparently, the works to be discussed were chosen for their artistic qualities, but in the record (typewritten) it was necessary to emphasise the ideological correctness of the book and the political trustworthiness of the author.

GREY GRADIENT

As mentioned above, the ideological flaws of a book could require a 'corrective' introduction, if necessary. As for the author's trustworthiness, they had to be 'progressive', of course. But what did this term really conceal?

The leaders of the Writers' Union "realised more and more clearly that the influence of Communist writers [...] was not as high as [they – the leaders] would like it to be, while it was necessary to expand the circle of intellectuals engaged in creative communication"²⁹. Furthermore, it was simply useless to keep "preaching to the converted"³⁰. In the end, the FC stated, "we can't have our people imagining that there are only hard-core reactionaries and orthodox communists out there"³¹. According to Enzensberger, who tended to exaggerate a little, communist writers, "although spoiled with large print runs and high royalties, were regarded as rather useful idiots"³². What would truly expand the influence of the Writers' Union was attracting the doubters who had not joined either camp of the bipolar world. They had to be convincingly doubtful in the eyes of the West so that they would be listened to when discussing socialism, and convincingly sympathetic to the USSR so that they could be labelled 'progressive'.

The Soviet concepts of 'progressive' and 'reactionary' are generally used in inverted commas and

with a certain irony, because "everybody understands everything". These labels were used to distinguish between the categories 'our' and 'other' in the capitalist world. Ideally, 'progressive' writers would be those who publicly identified themselves as anti-fascist, anti-imperialist, or at least anti-anti-communist. In the context of the Cold War, being openly anti-anti-communist in the West was dangerous because one could be accused of communism. That's why, in the eyes of the Foreign Commission, any writer without a public political position could be labelled 'progressive'. In some ways, that was even preferable. Yesterday's guest silence could be passed off as sympathy towards the USSR, forcibly concealed in an unfavourable anti-communist climate, while a politically active writer could formulate their position regarding a Soviet issue 'wrongly'³³.

There could be two reasons to adapt the writer's image to that of a 'progressive': the great international prestige, which concerned the higher-ups, and the artistic qualities of their works, which interested the specialists. If the author was willing to cooperate with the USSR, or at least did not make loud anti-Soviet statements, the only question was how to present their biography. For example, the past of British secret service agent Graham Greene was concealed, as was his involvement in the Second World War³⁴. The Spanish writer Camilo José Cela's participation in the Spanish Civil War on the side of the Nationalists was presented as a youthful mistake for which he had long since repented, becoming "the founder of a trend critical of the Franco regime in contemporary Spanish literature"³⁵, while his work

²⁹ *Dialog pisatelei. Iz istorii russko-frantsuzskikh kul'turnykh svyazei XX veka. 1920-1970*, ed. by T. Balashova et al., Moskva 2002, p. 405.

³⁰ E. Gilburd, *To See Paris*, op. cit., p. 26.

³¹ RGALI, f. 631, op. 26, ed. khr. 784, l. 54.

³² H. M. Enzensberger, *Tumulto*, op. cit., p. 36.

³³ For example, in 1958 it took Pablo Neruda three attempts to fully understand the matter of the Pasternak scandal for the USSR. He first rushed to congratulate Pasternak, then to scold the Swedish Committee for a politicised decision, and only on the third attempt did he 'succeed' in denouncing the poet who "had retired to his ivory tower". Cf. D. Schidlowsky, *Neruda y su tiempo: 1950-1973*, Santiago de Chile 2008, pp. 991-992.

³⁴ In the Soviet introductions to his novels, published between 1956 and 1967, there are hardly any biographical facts apart from his date of birth and nationality. The introductions became a way of securing the publication of the book (see the case of Sinclair and Priestly above), so the authors of such introductions tried to use the biographical facts to create an image of a progressive writer.

³⁵ RGALI, f. 631, op. 27, ed. khr. 1790, l. 4.

as a Francoist censor was coyly omitted. At worst, the promoters of the publication resorted to generalisations: “[John] is a very talented writer. His talent is stronger than his ideology or philosophy. [...] This writer does not debate capitalism, colonialism or Catholicism. But he shows their underside, their true face, with absolute ruthlessness”³⁶.

Determining a writer's place in the grey gradient from progressive to reactionary was thus a question of technique. Both the Foreign Commission and the Central Committee were aware of this. ‘Progressiveness’ was a label that helped keep up appearances. It allowed the Party to maintain control, and the Foreign Commission to recommend the writer for publication and invite them to the USSR.

“BY WAY OF STRICT EXCEPTION”

The invitation to the USSR was an important stage in FC work because the visit was a test of mutual understanding. Once this mutual understanding had been reached, the Soviet side perceived it as a commitment on behalf of a foreign writer. The visit often led to publication and negotiations over royalties.

Although a significant proportion of foreign visits were made by writers from ‘countries of people's democracy’, the Foreign Commission's main focus was on Western writers³⁷. That was the level to which Russian literature always considered itself to belong and to be equal to.

The interest in Western literature was reflected in the USSR's publishing policy. According to estimates from the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Central Committee of the CPSU, the Foreign Literature Publishing House primarily targeted the book markets of the USA, France, and Great Britain. In 1958, books from these countries could represent up to half of the total volume of books published within various categories, while

translations from socialist countries were “unacceptably few”, and those from the Middle East and Latin America, “totally insufficient”³⁸.

As mentioned above, the decision to publish a particular work was made by the publishers and editors in consultation with the Foreign Commission³⁹. There was usually no discussion with the author. Foreign rights holders were rarely informed either (unless they were ‘true friends’, i.e., there was a long-standing mutual understanding). Authors often found out by chance, through third parties, about a Russian edition of their book, often with vague comments about the censorship cuts.

Flattered, alarmed, or outraged, foreign writers usually wrote to the Soviet publishers. The publishers then redirected them to the Foreign Commission. The FC acted as a go-between, explaining to the complainant the terms of receiving royalties. The consultants answered questions about copyright in a completely nonchalant and friendly manner. They made it clear that, of course, money could not be an important reason for cooperation, expressed their pleasure at being able to start communication, and invited the author to visit the USSR, assuming (but not guaranteeing) that, in this case, the author would be able to receive royalties in Soviet roubles. To those who were only in it for business and demanded the fulfilment of obligations to the author, the FC employees shamelessly replied that they were “not obliged” to pay, since the Soviet Union had not signed the international copyright convention⁴⁰; but

³⁶ The writer in question was obviously not John, but Graham Greene, forcibly stripped of his entire background, but it could be any other name, if needed. N. Sergeeva, *Predislovie*, in G. Greene, *Sut' dela* [The Heart of the Matter], Moskva 1961, pp. 8-9.

³⁷ The FC also worked with writers from the Middle East, Africa, South-East Asia and the Far East, although on a much more modest scale.

³⁸ *Zapiska otdela propagandy i agitatsii TSK KPSS po soiuznym respublikam 28 apreliia 1959 g.*, in *Ideologicheskie komissii*, op. cit., p. 176.

³⁹ Prior to the joint discussions, the consultants studied the panorama of contemporary literature. They could get an idea of it, first of all, from the available foreign critical literature (the Writers' Union subscribed to a wide range of newspapers and journals of the socialist and capitalist world). In addition, the consultants themselves read or immediately passed on to the editors the books they had received through exchanges. In 1960, for example, the Commission's library was enriched by dozens of volumes received in 70 packages from foreign publishers. RGALI, f. 631, op. 26, ed. khr. 86, l. 4-5.

⁴⁰ Eleonory Gilburd argues that in the Central Committee “they saw no benefits there, only liabilities”, being the most uncomfortable among them the need to pay expensive royalties in hard currency, let alone the risk of ideological exposure. E. Gilburd, *To See Paris*, op. cit., pp. 112-113. Even when the USSR joined the Convention in 1973, this act, opines Carol Any, “was taken not to protect Soviet writers but to protect the party from the embarrassment of having

“our publishing houses, when they have the opportunity, try to pay royalties to foreign writers in Soviet roubles if the writer comes to the Soviet Union”⁴¹.

Most writers would prefer hard currency to the inconvertible Soviet rouble, but royalties were rarely paid in hard currency. Foreign writers were unaware that each publishing house had limited reserves of it, which were planned a year in advance for the most essential expenses (and copyrights were not). Even the favourites of the Writers’ Union usually received their royalties in Soviet roubles in Moscow, with some having a bank book waiting for their next visit. But there were exceptions. Formally, the initiative to pay had to come from the Soviet side. If the writer respectfully appealed to the Soviet side’s understanding and generosity in a private conversation with powerful writers like Konstantin Simonov, Aleksei Surkov or Boris Polevoi, for example, the FC would make a formal request to the publisher for payment in foreign currency, claiming that the writer was suffering from “financial difficulties”, “serious illness” or both, as in the case of James Aldridge in 1960:

During the stay of the famous English novelist James Aldridge in the USSR [Crimea] this summer, it became clear that the writer is facing serious financial difficulties; besides, Aldridge’s state of health is alarming. In view of this, the Union of Writers of the USSR urges you [Director of the Publishing House for Foreign Literature] to consider by way of exception the question of paying J. Aldridge an advance in hard currency for a new novel accepted for publication by you at a possibly higher rate⁴².

From this source, we can deduce that some authors could receive an advance as well as royalties, and that there was no fixed rate for foreign writers. What we can’t deduce is the real financial situation or state of health of the 42-year-old Crimean holidaymaker. The fact is that ‘helping’, i.e., appearing

any more banned works appear in the West” after Siniavskii and Daniel’, as well as Solzhenitsyn: C. Any. *The Soviet Writers’ Union and Its Leaders: Identity and Authority under Stalin*, Evanston [IL] 2020, p. 233.

⁴¹ RGALI, f. 631, op. 26, ed. khr. 36, l. 75–79.

⁴² RGALI, f. 631, op. 26, ed. khr. 938, l. 6. Most probably the publisher agreed to pay the advance in hard currency, because this was not the last time Aldridge casually asked the FC consultant to remind another editor of his promise to send him his royalties in currency, see RGALI, f. 631, op. 27, ed. khr. 491, l. 31–32. We should realise, though, that Aldridge was one of the most loyal sympathizers who did not turn his back on the USSR either after the Siniavskii-Daniel’ trial or the introduction of troops into Czechoslovakia.

caring and generous, was the only acceptable justification for paying a foreign writer real money for the copyrights. Indeed, one could not pay royalties simply because the author had asked for them, or had accused the publisher of an unauthorised translation and publication! It is another matter that the ‘aid’ was usually given to the most useful contacts (and also to the most cunning, who managed to ‘crack the code’ of Soviet generosity), not to the sickest and neediest.

In the Writers’ Union, everybody understood that the situation was awkward and embarrassing. As early as 1955, FC chairman Boris Polevoi called for a “radical” solution to the problem of royalties, complaining that he was constantly blushing when talking to his foreign colleagues⁴³. A decade later, Aleksei Surkov, secretary of the Board of the Writers’ Union, stated at a meeting of the Commission:

We should [...] send it [UNESCO’s recommendations] to the Central Committee with our proposals. I still can’t prove [to the CC] that we don’t pay royalties to foreign authors, but give them handouts, and it’s humiliating when they have to beg for these handouts. They get 60 percent of our authors’ minimum royalties, even though the state makes a fortune on some of these books⁴⁴.

But understanding the problem did not lead them to condescend to the irritation of the deceived writers. A demanding tone noticeably annoyed the FC bosses. For example, in 1963, when Norwegian writer Øivind Bolstad tried to get money from the USSR for his plays and turned to the embassy for help, the same Surkov informed the publishing house that

The tone and character of the letters in which Bolstad states his request are so peremptory and unbridled that it looks more like a demand and is absolutely unacceptable. [...] It is time [...] to explain to Bolstad the Soviet legislation on copyrights and to impress upon him that only by way of strict exception had he been paid royalties in foreign currency [before]⁴⁵.

The task of ‘impressing’ was the responsibility of the FC consultants, and they did not like it at all. They felt embarrassed. They often tried to soften

⁴³ RGALI, f. 631, op. 26, ed. khr. 46, l. 7.

⁴⁴ RGALI, f. 631, op. 27, ed. khr. 5, l. 10. Surkov refers to UNESCO’s recommendations for bilateral copyright agreements, which could be an alternative solution for the copyright problem.

⁴⁵ RGALI, f. 631, op. 26, ed. khr. 152, l. 31.

the blow by using their personal charm, for example starting the conversation about a refusal with “I hate to do it, but I have to tell you...”⁴⁶.

MINDERS

The refusal of foreign writers to comply with Soviet copyright laws not only saved the budgets of Soviet publishing houses, but also filtered out potentially problematic guests. Those who did humble themselves and decided to come were received according to ‘hospitality techniques’ developed over several decades by various Soviet propaganda institutions, carefully adapted to the sensitive nature of writers⁴⁷. What a Western writer might perceive as the establishment of a business relationship (although not without ideological overtones) quickly crossed the boundaries of business etiquette and turned into ‘friendship’ followed by an exchange of courtesies and favours.

Once in the USSR, foreign writers were treated like children. The FC gave them “great attention and care, providing medical treatment, medicines, transport and money”⁴⁸. The FC would ‘steal’ its guests from Intourist if the trip happened to be organised by the latter. It was unacceptable to entrust writers to the famous (and only) Soviet travel agency, because “Intourist’s low level of service, as in previous years, had a negative *psychological* impact on foreign writers’ impressions of the Soviet Union”⁴⁹. The Intourist guides, they thought in the Writers’ Union, could scare the writers away with “a non-personalised approach”, i.e., poorly concealed control, well-trodden routes, and insufficient attention to the ego of the distinguished guest. Moreover, it was nearly impossible to find among their guides “a translator who could meet the high demands of

working with writers”⁵⁰.

Unlike most Intourist guides, the Foreign Commission staff were not just philologists and translators, but ‘minders’. They handled money, transport, hotels, food, as well as cultural and work agendas. They engaged in conversation, kept company, showed admiration, and painted prospects for cooperation. They were interpreters, confidants, and nannies. And, just like a nanny, at the end of the day they reported back to the ‘parents’, i.e., the Foreign Commission and the Writers’ Union Secretariat, about where the guest went, with whom they communicated, what they said and how they behaved.

The term ‘minders’ was used by foreign writers to refer to consultants and translators. The minders themselves would probably have been surprised to see their role described this way. Objecting, they would list their direct job duties: writing reviews, preparing reports, submitting budgets, answering letters, translating. They would not deny that they were also tutoring, caring for, and anticipating guests’ wishes, but to them it was simply natural, it was part of the job. The ‘cordial’ attitude was a way to soften the impression of the less favourable aspects of Soviet life. The guest had to leave satisfied.

‘Minding’ was an important part of the political work with writers. However, the concern for the guest’s positive impressions was matched by a relentless concern for the ‘correct’ image of the USSR. They wanted the mirror of foreign opinion to reflect not just a likeable and unique country, but exactly the one that existed in the imagination of the Soviet leadership. To straighten the distorted mirror, consultants and translators often wrote sterile reports, into which nearly any name could be inserted:

[John] has a great interest in the USSR and in the life of our people. [...] [John] saw with his own eyes how much is being done in our country to spread culture to the masses. [...] During a conversation with Iu. Bondarev, which lasted more than four hours, [John] remarked that the term ‘socialist realism’ is often used as a swear word in the West, and that he himself does not really know what it means. [...] [John] expressed his desire to visit Lenin’s Museum in the Kremlin. He commented on the amazing modesty and simplicity of the environment in which the Soviet leader lived. [...] [John] spoke on the radio and gave an

⁴⁶ Beginning of a letter written by Krugerskaia, RGALI, f. 631, op. 27, ed. khr. 250, l. 93.

⁴⁷ It was Paul Hollander who came up with the term ‘techniques of hospitality’, see chapter *The Techniques of Hospitality: A Summary*, in P. Hollander, *Political Pilgrims*, op. cit.

⁴⁸ RGALI, f. 631, op. 26, ed. khr. 4858, l. 3.

⁴⁹ Emphasis added. RGALI, f. 631, op. 26, ed. khr. 142, l. 9. The competition with Intourist over the guests was a legacy of the times when the FC had to look after foreign writers together with VOKS, that held a “firm grip” over the visitors. L. Stern, *Western Intellectuals*, op. cit., p. 176-177.

⁵⁰ RGALI, f. 631, op. 26, ed. khr. 142, l. 10.

interview to a TASS correspondent. He spoke very warmly about the Soviet Union, Georgia, and the many impressions he took away, and expressed a desire to come back⁵¹.

Comparing Soviet reports with foreigners' memoirs predictably reveals discrepancies, suggesting that at least one of the authors involved was not truthful. For example, the account of Juan Goytisolo's visit to the USSR is strangely dry and politically correct (too correct!)⁵². The suspicion that the 34-year-old writer and his 27-year-old Soviet translator could not have spent a month discussing the understanding of Marxism-Leninism by the Spanish Communist Party in exile is confirmed by Goytisolo's own memoirs. One detail alone — how he and his 'minder' almost missed their flight, due to a few drinks and a discussion about sexual culture in the USSR — shows the gap between the two versions of the same experience⁵³.

But there is no need to catch the FC staff in a lie to understand that it was obviously impossible to tell the whole truth in their reports. Some facts would jeopardise further cooperation with the writer, others might even harm the author of the report. It was much more convenient to please higher-ups. Problems were only reported when the guest was deemed unpromising, or when there was a risk of counterclaims either from him or from potential witnesses, and translators wanted to absolve themselves of responsibility. These cases are particularly interesting because they offer insight into the tricks used to salvage the situation.

For example, in 1954, a Brazilian delegate to the Second Congress of Writers, Marques Rebelo, wrote an article for the Soviet press that could not be published because it covered the history of Brazilian literature "from a completely alien, anti-Marxist position". The consultant, Kolchina, couldn't directly tell the author this, so she kept stalling. She also had to 'forget' her purse or complain about her heart condition when the delegation assigned to her wanted to go for a walk in Moscow, visit the metro or go

shopping instead of attending the boring sessions of the Congress as they were supposed to⁵⁴. In 1959, when Stefanova, the FC's specialist in Arab literature, didn't know what to do with the constantly disgruntled poet al-Jawahiri, her boss thought that her job should be to pay him "just a little bit more attention", referring to her feminine charm⁵⁵.

From time to time, guests wanted to go places where foreigners were not allowed. In 1967, for example, William Golding thought of an exciting water route from the Baltic to the Black Sea, planning to sail it and later publish his impressions. The chairman of the FC replied him personally, saying that it was not possible that year⁵⁶. Of course, this was a standard answer in which 'this year' meant 'never'. Sometimes, foreign writers wanted to meet Soviet *personae non-gratae*, and the FC staff had to invent excuses, like a long illness or business trips of the disgraced authors. John Steinbeck was so concerned about the fate of Viktor Nekrasov, after being refused a meeting with him several times on various pretexts, that the "unreliable" Nekrasov was ordered to "recover" from his "illness", come urgently and save the situation⁵⁷.

From 1958, FC staff constantly had to answer questions about Pasternak. The interest in his case flared up again and again in the 1960s, with each new trial against writers. Guests not only asked questions but were eager to visit Pasternak's grave in Peredelkino, writers' dacha complex in the outskirts of Moscow. It was impossible to put this on the agenda, but neither could the guest be disappointed or made aware of unspoken prohibitions. Thus the FC developed an informal practice: trips to Peredelkino were not to be mentioned in the reports, they had to be disguised as a routine visit to an exhibition. They should only be made by taxi, not with the driver assigned to the delegation (who also submitted a report detailing the visited addresses). Blunders only happened to newcomers⁵⁸. To give an example, a rare record of a visit to Pasternak's grave in 1964

⁵¹ This time, it's not a John but a William Golding, RGALI, f. 631, op. 27, ed. khr. 240.

⁵² RGALI, f. 631, op. 26, ed. khr. 2063.

⁵³ J. Goytisolo, *En los reinos de Taifa*, in Idem, *Memorias*, Barcelona 2002, p. 581.

⁵⁴ RGALI, f. 631, op. 26, ed. khr. 4458, l. 4-5.

⁵⁵ RGALI, f. 631, op. 26, ed. khr. 4865, l. 4.

⁵⁶ RGALI, f. 631, op. 27, ed. khr. 249, l. 111-114.

⁵⁷ L. Kazakova (Zhdanova), *Steinbek v SSSR*, op. cit., pp. 196-197.

⁵⁸ L. Sinianskaia, *Vo sne*, op. cit., p. 151.

was made because the whole trip was the idea of an American embassy official who suggested it to John Updike. For the FC consultant Frida Lur'e, this was an emergency situation. To save face and avoid the mediation of the American diplomat, she explains in her report, she had to personally take Updike to the cemetery, accompanied by the Peredelkino librarian⁵⁹.

From the mid-1960s onward, more and more difficult situations arose where minders weren't sure how to proceed since they had not been informed in time. A major blow to the Writers' Union was the Siniavskii-Daniel' trial. Even the experienced official Surkov admitted:

Despite the fact that we had repeatedly protested against the arrests, for the majority of the intellectuals, who thought that political oppression had ended in the Soviet Union, the trial of Siniavskii and Daniel' was a bugbear [*zhupel*] in the sense that we were returning to the old days. *The essence of the trial was not only not explained to foreigners, but not even to us.* Eremin's article not only caused a wave of protest abroad, but in many ways triggered the "collective protest letters" we received in connection with the case. The foreign journalists' exclusion from the trial fuelled the fire. We failed to explain the case thoroughly through the press channels, through the closed information channels that we have. Instead, we published the verdict and very biased material in the press⁶⁰.

No sooner had the Commission recovered from the affair, than a letter from Alexander Solzhenitsyn demanding the abolition of censorship set the Fourth Congress of Writers ablaze. Solzhenitsyn sent 250 copies of this letter to the participants⁶¹, but the FC staff only found out about it from foreigners:

At the end of the Congress, Jorge Salamea, Elvio Romero and María Teresa León began to ask me questions about A. Solzhenitsyn's letter to the Bureau of the Congress. I must say that I first heard about this letter from our foreign guests, and I think that an interpreter working with a foreign delegation should be informed in good time about events of political importance, so that they are not caught off guard by unexpected questions⁶².

Solzhenitsyn's letter was immediately published

in the West, and further fuelled the controversy over artistic freedom in the USSR⁶³. Throughout 1967, the passions surrounding Siniavskii and Daniel', who had already been sentenced to the camps, did not abate. Having failed to achieve results through personal letters and collective protests⁶⁴ that had once helped Pasternak and later, for example, Valerii Tarsis⁶⁵, some of the Western writers favoured by the Soviets decided to break ties with the USSR. In September 1967, Graham Greene wrote to the Writers' Union:

I would like all the royalties due to me on my books, and all the money deposited in my name at the Grand Hotel, Moscow, for past royalties, to be paid to Madame Siniavskii and Madame Daniel' to help in some small way to support them during the imprisonment of their husbands⁶⁶.

To this laconic letter, he received an even more laconic reply, which showed no trace of the former cordiality:

Dear Mr Green!
In reply to your letter dated 1/09-67, we would like to inform you that the Writers' Union has no right to dispose of citizens' deposits in savings banks.
Yours sincerely,
Secretary of the Board of the Writers' Union of the USSR
Sergei Baruzdin⁶⁷

In fact, Greene had a very warm relationship with Oksana Krugerskaia, the English literature consultant, and usually kept in touch with her. On more

⁶³ *Soljenitsyne a réclamé la suppression de toute censure et demandé à l'Union des écrivains soviétiques de Moscou de défendre les auteurs persécutés*, "Le Monde", 31.05.1967. The collective letter in support of Solzhenitsyn before the Bureau of the Congress became known abroad from another communication: *U.R.S.S. Quatre-vingt-deux écrivains demandent un débat public sur la lettre de Soljenitsyne*, "Le Monde", 09.06.1967. Also, in 1967, in Frankfurt am Main, Alexander Ginzburg's "White Book" was published, thanks to which the details of the trial became known for the first time: *Belaia Kniga po delu A. Siniavskogo i lu. Danielia*, ed. by A. Ginzburg, Moskva 1967.

⁶⁴ For collective protests from writers from Denmark, Chile, the Philippines, India, Italy, Mexico, and India, see: *Tsena metaforij ili prestuplenie i nakazanie Siniavskogo i Danielia*, Moskva 1989. See also the sections *Zarubezhnye protesty i petsitii po povodu aresta A. Siniavskogo i lu. Danielia* and *Zarubezhnye otkliki na osuzhdenie A. Siniavskogo i lu. Danielia*, in *Belaia Kniga*, op. cit.

⁶⁵ In 1962, Soviet writer Valerii Tarsis was placed under coercive psychiatric treatment. He was soon released after international protests.

⁶⁶ RGALI, f. 631, op. 27, ed. khr. 250, l. 77.

⁶⁷ Ivi, l. 79.

⁵⁹ RGALI, f. 631, op. 26, ed. khr. 4215, l. 44.

⁶⁰ RGALI, f. 631, op. 27, ed. khr. 5, l. 14-15. Emphasis added. Dmitrii Eremin was the author of the propaganda article *Perevertysii* ("Izvestiia", 13.01.1966), which for the first time brought the trial to the public's attention and launched an official campaign against Siniavskii and Daniel'.

⁶¹ A. Tvardovskii, *Novomirskii dnevniki*, II (1967-1970), Moskva 2009, p. 39.

⁶² RGALI, f. 631, op. 27, ed. khr. 223, l. 2.

than one occasion, he had used her help to manage the royalties in his Moscow bank account from afar⁶⁸. However, when he decided to break off his official relations with Moscow, he wrote not to her but to the Secretariat of the Writers' Union ("Dear Sir..."). A deal-breaking reply from the Foreign Commission would always come from an official or a secretary, but never from a consultant: it was important to maintain a semblance of personal friendship in case there was a chance of resuming cooperation in the future. An example of this is the case of Mario Vargas Llosa, who maintained a friendly relationship with the Latin American literature consultant Nina Bulgakova even after he had publicly condemned the Soviet invasion of Prague. A few years later, he wrote to her to inquire about royalties due to him⁶⁹.

Judging by the correspondence, as well as travelogues and memoirs, the consultants usually succeeded in charming their guests⁷⁰. The 'friendship' continued in letters, which the Foreign Commission turned into its own special method and, eventually, into a fine art⁷¹. The idea was to conduct correspondence on behalf of the institution, but always with a personal touch. The consultants were reprimanded for "formality" and "mere letter writing" because "the *personal artistic originality* of such a response is thereby lost: by becoming formal, the correspondence often fades away"⁷².

It's true that the writers were happy to accept the privileges that such friendship afforded. Consultants

and translators, who were fined if a guest went over budget, complained that "our guests ... are more than spoiled by the fact that their every move is paid for in our country, they have long got used to it and take it for granted"⁷³. Indeed, many writers eagerly took advantage of the opportunity to improve their health free of charge, undergo a complete check-up, and spend a few weeks in a sanatorium. Taking families to Crimean resorts was very popular. Not all of the guests went on holiday at the expense of the Writers' Union⁷⁴; in many cases it was a way of spending their royalties in roubles.

EFFICIENCY

Whatever the reasons for this loyalty, every manifestation of it was recorded by the Foreign Commission as the result of "great political efforts" made by its team⁷⁵. But was their work actually effective?

Evaluating the effectiveness of an institution like the FC is more difficult than it seems. Writers critical of the USSR rarely developed close relations with the Writers' Union, and those who did visit always had their own, in Hollander's terms, "predispositions". If we say that yesterday's guest criticised the USSR because the work done by the FC was not good enough, or that they praised the USSR because the FC did a good job, are we not likening our assessments to those of the CPSU Central Committee, which was convinced that impressions could be controlled?

The Foreign Commission focused mainly on quantitative indicators. Qualitative criteria were never clear due to fluctuations in the party's political line. It is not surprising, therefore, that the annual reports are full of statements like "the work has become more complicated in substance"⁷⁶.

The annual report of the FC always looked the same: lists of visits, events, and business trips, gen-

⁶⁸ See their correspondence with Krugerskaia: RGALI, f. 631, op. 27, ed. khr. 36, l. 90-99; RGALI, f. 631, op. 27, ed. khr. 37, l. 22.

⁶⁹ C. Aguirre – K. Buynova, *Cinco Días en Moscú. Mario Vargas Llosa y el socialismo soviético*, Trujillo 2024, p. 84.

⁷⁰ FC consultant for over 30 years, Oksana Krugerskaia "was clearly someone who left an impression" and to whom some of the writers referred as "nanny", see H. Stead, "Comrade Doris", op. cit., pp. 38-39. The Italians admired Georgij Brejtburd, whom they even called "my good Virgil", see O. Gurevič, *Georgij Brejtburd: Translator, Author, and Official (1921-1976). The First Step of Archive Studies (1954-1957)*, "România Orientale", 2021, 34, pp. 93-107. The French writers had the pleasure to communicate directly to francophone Il'ia Ehrenburg, and could always count on the help of the charming translator Lenina Zonina, friend of Louis Aragon and Elsa Triolet, as well as Jean-Paul Sartre's muse, see *Dialog pisatelei*, op. cit., p. 492. Latin Americans spoke in high praise of consultant Nina Bulgakova and even dedicated poems to her, see C. Aguirre – K. Buynova, *Cinco Días*, op. cit., p. 54.

⁷¹ L. Stern, *Western Intellectuals*, op. cit., pp. 8-9.

⁷² RGALI, f. 631, op. 26, ed. khr. 111, l. 12. Emphasis added.

⁷³ RGALI, f. 631, op. 27, ed. khr. 223, l. 3-4.

⁷⁴ According to the report on the reception of foreign writers in the USSR in 1967, 111 writers (not counting their family members, of whom there were another 109 people) came to the country on holiday during the year. 49 of them vacationed at the expense of the Writers' Union, and 62, at their own expense. RGALI, f. 631, op. 27, ed. khr. 197, l. 54.

⁷⁵ RGALI, f. 631, op. 26, ed. khr. 111, l. 7.

⁷⁶ See, e.g., RGALI, f. 631, op. 26, ed. khr. 109.

erously sprinkled with amateurish and unreliable statistics; complaints about obstacles to the Commission's work, which were then compensated by ritual self-criticism, recognition of 'shortcomings', and promises to overcome them. Year after year, the Foreign Commission asked for the same things: more staff, more hard currency, professional training for translators, a solution to the royalties issue, and, finally, permission to engage in a real dialogue with foreign colleagues, rather than a 'formal and protocol' one. These proposals were best articulated in the early 1960s⁷⁷, against the background of Khrushchev's policy of peaceful coexistence⁷⁸ and a general belief in the CPSU's genuine willingness to engage in dialogue with the world. But as the decade drew to a close, there were fewer opportunities to demand help from the system.

The desire to organise the work better was partly reflected in the draft of the new Regulations, which was drawn up in the autumn of 1968. What had previously been explained to the staff in three pages now took up 21 pages. The new document detailed the structure of the Foreign Commission and the duties of each staff member, from the chairman to the junior typist. The Regulations were adopted in 1970⁷⁹. Thus, a short period of exuberant growth in literary relations with foreign countries forced the FC to formalise its work. Whether these changes had an effect in the future is a topic for a separate study.

And yet, dialogue with the West did occur. We can argue whether it could have been more intense, more authentic, or richer, but the Foreign Commission moderated it to the best of its ability. It acted as an intermediary between foreign and Soviet writers, the Soviet authorities, and publishers. It established for the superiors, the censor, and the reader whether the writer was 'ours' or 'other', progressive or reactionary. The FC's judgments were based not so much on propaganda goals, but mainly on artistic value.

The FC's mediation, from writing bulletins and briefs to hosting a writer's personal visit and maintaining correspondence, helped to publish foreign literature in the Soviet Union. Beyond all the manoeuvring, an important aim of the FC's activities in the 1950s and 1960s was to convince the Central Committee that the USSR belonged to Western culture. With the mediation of the FC, Soviet writers gave the Party the illusion that Soviet literature was needed and appreciated in the West, and the Party gave Soviet writers the illusion that they were allowed to communicate with the West (for the time being). Despite all the successes, the Central Committee was in no hurry to authorise the expansion of the FC's staff or to increase its budget and resources: what had been achieved was *enough*. Allowing more meant allowing Soviet writers more communication with the West, more real exchange, a wider and more attractive market for their works, and more freedom. That was not *expedient*.

In the meantime, foreign writers' visits, which were often the result of the FC negotiations and management, inspired their admirers among Soviet translators and literary critics to a new round of struggle for the publication. Furthermore, meeting the author made like-minded working groups – the *aktivy* – stronger and, consequently, more effective. Besides, the visit itself was a worthy occasion to publish a translated work as a separate volume or in a journal. In the end, it was the Soviet reader who benefited from it.

⁷⁷ See, e.g., RGALI, f. 631, op. 26, ed. khr. 109.

⁷⁸ The policy of peaceful coexistence and the struggle for universal peace was officially adopted by the 22nd Congress of the CPSU in October 1961.

⁷⁹ RGALI, f. 631, op. 27, ed. khr. 757.

◇ *The Foreign Commission of the Soviet Writers' Union in 1950s-1960s: Boundaries, Obstacles, Tricks, Embarrassment, Impact* ◇

Kristina Buynova

Abstract

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Foreign Commission of the Soviet Writers' Union occupied the niche of mediator in relations between Western literature and the USSR. It was essentially a propaganda institution that inherited the traditions of MORP and VOKS. This alone suggests an active, perhaps even aggressive, style of recruiting among foreign writers. In this article I will show that the reality was different. Party patronage and the constant manipulation of the 'rules of the game' excluded any proactivity on the part of the Commission. Although the aim of the Foreign Commission was to 'broaden contacts', it tended to concentrate on strengthening existing ones. In selecting new contacts, the FC relied on the assessments of translators, writers and critics rather than on party preferences, and then presented itself as a 'progressive' entity. The visit of the latter would become a kind of consummation of the relationship. The FC was keen to please its guests, so any awkward situations were carefully smoothed over by the consultants, or 'minders', as the foreigners called them. There could be no official instructions, but a number of tricks and stratagems – evasion, stalling, shifting attention, citing temporary circumstances – were more or less clear to the staff.

Keywords

Foreign Commission, Soviet Writers' Union, Minders, Sympathizers.

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