Literature as “a Little Bridge”: Exchange Between British and Soviet Writers in the Post-War Period

E. Lygo

Abstract

The article is dedicated to the history of contacts between the British and Soviet writers in 1945—1956. The major thrust is put on activities of the Writers’ Group in the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR and especially on the figure of its leader — the British novelist and scriptwriter John Boynton Priestley. On the basis of new documents from the archive of the Society for Cooperation in Russian and Soviet Studies (London) the author analyzes both the inner discussions between the critics and defenders of contacts with Soviet writers during the most severe years of the Cold War and the outer contacts with Soviet counteractors threw the system of VOKS in the USSR (the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries), paying special attention to the so-called “questionnaires” which became one of the major forms of interactions between the two sides. The central issue during these interactions was the issue of a writer’s role in the post-war society. The author comes to a conclusion that despite of the obvious formal restrictions in the existed contacts and the Aesopian language of Soviet answers, the activities of the Writers’ Group one can consider to be successful. The irony of fate was that it just failed to wait a little bit till the beginning of the “thaw period” in the USSR and disbanded itself in the middle of 1950s.

Keywords list (en): USSR, Britain, writers, cultural exchanges, literature, VOKS, Union of Writers, John B. Priestley, Agatha Christie, Doris Lessing, Society for Cooperation in Russian and Soviet Studies (SCRSS), Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR (SCR)
Cultural relations between Britain and the USSR were constrained by political differences at the best of times; in the early cold-war period they were hampered by suspicion and intransigence as well. There had been a rapprochement between the countries during the war; indeed, at the time of the wartime alliance, the British government was anxious lest the fraternal feeling and moral support that British people were encouraged to feel for Soviet soldiers and citizens should develop into curiosity about the Soviet political system and political sympathy. With one hand the Ministry of Information popularized stories of Soviet heroism, while with the other monitored pro-Soviet organizations and sought to minimize their influence. After victory, however, the fear of public enthusiasm for communism grew into the beginning of the Cold War, and cultural relations occupied an increasingly precarious position. For a group of writers that formed under the auspices of the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR (SCR) at the end of the war, cultural exchange seemed to some to present a way to resist growing hostility and maintain the connections of the war years. In 1948, J. B. Priestley described an exchange of questions and answers between Soviet and English writers as “a valuable little bridge between the Soviet people and ourselves”. In fact, Priestley’s leadership of the Writers’ Group of the SCR in the late 1940s suggests he had faith in cultural relations as more than just a little bridge: he seems to have believed that communication between British and Soviet writers could lead to mutual enlightenment and understanding, and that from this grass-roots activity real political rapprochement could be achieved. His view put cultural actors in the political arena, giving them status and significance similar to those enjoyed by those famous Soviet writers who climbed the career ladder in Soviet society and became its emissaries and spokesmen (it was usually men). It seems that Priestley’s aspirations for the achievement of cultural relations were intertwined with his admiration for the prominent public role he saw Soviet writers playing, and his ambition for British writers to forge a similar role for themselves in the post-war world.

The SCR was one of the first established societies for friendship and cultural relations with the USSR. Its history belongs to the history of British Fellow Travelling and the reception of Soviet culture in Britain. The SCR was never a mass
membership organization like the Left Book Club, but it grew in the late 1920s and 1930s in both membership and in the reach of its influence. At the height of its existence during the Second World War it had 4,000 members, but it engaged with a wider public than this: at that time its information service was dealing with an average of 150 enquiries a week, in total 7,500 a year, it supplied information materials to organizations around the country, and organized exhibitions such as the “Hero Cities: Leningrad and Stalingrad” which travelled to galleries around the country in 1944; in the Whitechapel Art Gallery alone, it attracted 7,250 visitors.

The fact that many SCR members were prominent in British intellectual and professional circles added to its influence. Names associated with the establishment of the SCR and its first executive committee include, in alphabetical order: Ashley Dukes, Ruth Fry, Margaret Llewellyn-Davies, Leonard Woolf; while prominent vice-presidents who lent at least their names included many others of the British intellectual elite. At various times the Society had specialist sections under its auspices, which provided a meeting point for left-leaning individuals in professions and interests including education, architecture, science, chess, ballet, social science. At the end of the war, a writers’ group and a theatre group were formed. The latter group had a particularly illustrious membership; prominent figures involved included stars such as Laurence Olivier and Dame Edith Evans.

The Writers’ Group of the SCR was formed in 1944, possibly at the instigation of J. B. Priestley; certainly he was a key figure in the establishment of the group and its agenda. Documents preserved in the Group’s archive set out its planned aims and activities:

Aims:
1. To bring about a closer link and better understanding between Great Britain and the USSR in the literary sphere by encouragement of personal and organizational contacts and exchange of information and materials.
2. To work in collaboration with Writers’ Group of VOKS.

Activities:
1. raising the standard of translation of Soviet literature published in Great Britain.
2. arranging for a series of Soviet works to be published here and British works in the USSR, illustrating all that’s best in each literature — a kind of “Everyman” series.
3. publishing an anthology of British literature for USSR and other publishing projects.
4. arranging for visits of authors to each other’s countries.

These aims were not realized on a significant scale. There were a few exchanges of writers, including Priestley’s extended visit in 1945, but the trips were
mostly formal and exchanges politically correct. The Group produced a recording of poetry read by contemporary poets that was sent to the Soviet writers, but did not publish much beyond short stories in translation in the Society’s *Anglo-Soviet Journal*. A translator’s group was set up in association with the Group, but it, like the Group, was relatively short-lived.

Initially, the Group attracted a good number of writers, extending well beyond the circles of pro-Soviet intellectuals. Priestley himself was certainly pro-Soviet, included — albeit with some indecision — by Orwell in his list of writers unsuitable for work with the IRD; but others were not or no longer in the thrall of Moscow. Stephen Spender, for example, had by this time moved away from his earlier pro-Soviet position, but was nonetheless a member. In 1945 the Group’s Council included H. G. Wells, Walter de la Mare, Maurice Baring, and committee featured Stephen Spender, Jack Lindsay, Mrs Cecil Chesterton, and V. S. Pritchett, among others. From the available transcripts of discussions, it can be seen that members tended to divide into pro-Soviet and critically questioning camps. In 1946, for example, a Soviet speaker who may have come from the Embassy, Madame N. V. Ignatyeva, gave a paper on Soviet literature which, although the text is not preserved, clearly related to the recent attacks on the writers Anna Akhmatova and Mikhail Zoshchenko in the USSR. Indeed, she read out the Central Committee resolution that expelled them both from the Writers’ Union. There were challenging questions from many English writers including S. Davis, Agatha Christie, Mrs Cecil Chesterton, George Reavey and Alec Brown, about the political control of literature in the USSR, freedom of expression for Soviet writers, and the involvement of a politician such as Zhdanov in literary judgements and criticism. Soviet anti-Western rhetoric was also challenged: the Austrian writer in exile Robert Neumann referred to a recent assertion that Somerset Maugham was “undesirable” in the USSR, and asked how Maugham, who was on the Council of the SCR Writers’ Group, and other “undesirables” could continue relations with Soviet writers effectively. There were also voices defending often rebarbative Soviet positions including Priestley, John Lawrence, Pat Sloan, Herbert Marshall, John Lewis and Jack Lindsay. Altogether, in spite of some polarization of writers into critical and defensive camps, there seems to have been healthy debate at meetings.

Priestley’s first concern, on becoming president of the newly-formed Writers’ Group, was to put together an account of British Writers’ relationship to literature. Still in 1944, as he was setting out to establish some forms of cultural exchange with the Soviet Writers’ Group at VOKS, Priestley brought members of the Group together for a discussion. He explained that the Soviet writers found it easy to set out their position towards literature:

It is accepted widely among Russian writers that the main purpose of literature is helping the chief task of the community at any given time. This could be the development of industry, for example. This is not a view widely
He wanted to be able to communicate to Soviet writers a sense of their British counterparts’ position, and took from Soviet practice the idea of having a discussion between writers in order to elucidate this. The transcript of the discussion held in December 1944 shows that the practice did not come entirely naturally to English writers. Those taking part tended to comment on the Soviet model of the writer in society, rather than formulating anything about their own position; several times, in his capacity as chairman, Priestley had to rule out criticisms of the Soviet system as irrelevant.

Even though Priestley ruled out comments about Soviet literature, much of the discussion can be seen as a response to the challenge this very different literary system presented. On the one hand, this challenge was the knowledge that Soviet writers appeared to be secure in their identity and clear in their purpose. Underlying many writers’ comments, in particular in discussion of how English literature after the war might struggle to understand or indeed fulfil its role in post-war British society, was the assumption that literature had a role and function in society, and this certainly echoed Soviet literary theory and criticism. V. S. Pritchett, for example, seemed to be defending the difficulty that English writers had in defining their position when he said that it was a bad moment for English literature, that writers had had no time to write during the war and as a consequence they were stuck in the 1930s. In his vision of the post-war writer in society he seemed to be responding to the challenge not only of the war, but also of Soviet literature when he talked of “the people” and suggested literature could have a role in healing “divisions” which sound like the divisions of social class:

We have certainly become more aware that the writer’s role is going to lie in providing “the people” with an outlet for their imaginative life. We are aware that there are dangerous splits in our culture and without knowing exactly how these splits can be made whole, or even whether they could be done in our life time, we do think the writer ought to respond, immediately, imaginatively, non-journalistically, to the situation in which the human being finds himself.

On the other hand, comments concerning the English writers’ independence and sense of their freedom were clearly responding critically to the conditions under which published literature was produced in the USSR. Phyllis Bentley’s contribution was more subtle than abhorrence of censorship and state control over literature that some writers expressed, but even so she underlined the importance of a writer’s independence and integrity for English literature, and was perceptive about the careerism the Soviet system invited:

[...] this lack of regimentation does make for enormous sincerity. No one ever plunges into literature in this country merely as an ordinary profession or occupation of because of the kudos attached to it, or simply as an honest way of
making a living. There is in it here so much of hardship to go through, of adventure that only those attempt it who deeply love it.

A minimally edited transcript of the discussion was sent to the VOKS group of writers in the USSR, and Priestley wrote a covering letter explicating some of the comments and giving background on the writers who took part. He said it was difficult to sum up the discussion due to the many different points of view, but also argued that this in itself was significant. There was a split, he identified, between writers mainly of the older generation who insisted on the individualism of the writer, and writers of the younger generation who stressed the author as interpreter of community with social responsibility and engagement. He suggested, however, that there was not such a great difference between their works in practice, and concluded, “[w]hat is finally clear from this discussion is, I think, is that we are at present in a stage of transition and of more rapid transition than our literature has known for some generations”.

This first discussion of the Writers’ Group was the beginning of Priestley’s efforts to introduce some Soviet practices to English writers. His knowledge and experience of Soviet literary life and organization greatly increased in 1945, when he travelled to the USSR as a distinguished guest of VOKS. The trip coincided with the premiere of An Inspector Calls, staged in the USSR before England, and Priestley travelled extensively for more than a month. His trip was organized by VOKS; they arranged for him to meet writers, visit theatres, address audiences, and see the devastation of the war and efforts to reconstruct Soviet cities. Because of his status, VOKS would have made sure that the trip was tailor-made for Priestley’s personal and professional interests, and, in particular, that he met with Soviet readers of his work. On his return, as VOKS would have hoped, he described his very favourable impressions of his trip in the pamphlet “Russian Journey”, published with the Writers’ Group of the SCR. The account is primarily another “What I saw in Russia” account similar to the many published in the 1930s. It has chapters on “Moscow”, “Collective Farms”, “Southern Republics”, “Stalingrad”, “Leningrad”, and finally “Russians and Ourselves”. It does not focus specifically on Soviet literature at any length, but in the section “Leningrad” he refers to the organization of literature and other creative arts in the USSR, and specifically to the creative unions, again comparing English practice with Soviet:

Possibly writers or composers or scientists see rather too much of each other there — for they even appear to go on holiday together at times — but here in Britain we meet too infrequently and have too little professional-cum-social life. This partly explains why Soviet hospitality to visiting writers or scientists is so much better than ours, which badly needs organizing and improving.

Priestley’s leading role in the Writers’ Group was his way of trying to
remedy this English backwardness. His interest in the USSR was no doubt motivated by his interest in socialism (in “Russian Journey” he defines his position as socialist but not communist), but it was also in part, I believe, because he was so impressed with the organization and status writers in Soviet society.

19 As well as Priestley’s visit to Russia, exchange continued between the Writers’ Group and VOKS in the form of visits to Britain by Soviet writers; the other project undertaken was an exchange of questions and answers. Early in 1946, three Soviet writers were received by the Writers’ Group: Nikolai Bazhan, a Ukrainian poet, Kondrad Krapiva, a Byelorussian novelist and playwright, and Arkadii Perventsev, a Russian dramatist. The exchange of questions began in 1945, whereby writers in each group put together and exchanged lists of questions on subjects such as the production of literature, publishing, the writer and society, and readership. Each group undertook to answer collectively the questions received. In Britain, the discussion of the questions took place during a number of Brains Trusts. These were held in October 1945 simultaneously in a number of different cities; the London panel was broadcast live on radio. In the USSR, the questions were apparently discussed at a meeting of the Literary Section of VOKS held on January 3rd and 15th, 1947. It is not clear where the translation of the answers took place, but given the SCR’s limited capacity for translation it seems likely it was provided by the Soviet side. This would also have enabled the Soviet authorities to be confident they had approved what was to be published abroad. The answers to British writers’ questions were published in the pamphlet “Soviet Writers Reply to English Writers’ Questions” 1948. The answers that the London panel of British writers gave to the Soviet writers’ questions were broadcast and published in the Anglo-Soviet Journal; the transcripts of all the Brains Trusts are preserved in the Writers’ Group archive.

20 The exchange of questions achieved communication between British and Soviet writers at a time when most channels were closing, and politics and censorship were obstructive. How meaningful the exchange really was is difficult to say, given the political constraints on the Soviet writers. There is a striking contrast between British and Soviet answers, of course, because they were produced under very different conditions: the Soviet writers speak as representatives of their country who know they are required to put forward certain views on Soviet and Western literature, while British writers give individual responses and do not necessarily concur with one another. The difference in attitude is found in the forewords to “Soviet Writers Reply” by Priestley and Konstantin Simonov. Priestley hopes the British writers will glean information about something they know little about, and emphasises the present lack of understanding between the two sides: “We all blunder about in a thick fog of prejudice, ignorance, and cross-purposes” (P. 7). Simonov focuses on his hope that the exercise will help others understand Soviet writers, who have been historically misunderstood. He underlines the homogeneity
of his writers’ views: ‘I agree with everything the Soviet writers in this book say’ (P. 9). The difference between the contexts in which the answers were formulated needs to be acknowledged, but does not necessarily mean that the exchange was meaningless for those involved, or that it has no significance for understanding the impact of cultural exchange in this case and more generally. As Priestley’s balanced introduction explains, at that time there were tendencies for Soviets to be harshly critical of literatures and societies they knew little of, and for westerners to distrust everything Soviet writers said, assuming all was propaganda. Even this acknowledgement of the Cold-war situation was a move towards more open communication; the new information about writers exchanged was still preferable, from the point of view of cultural relations, to no exchange at all.

The Soviet writers sent only twelve questions to the Writers’ Group, in contrast to the thirty-three they received; they asked only about pedestrian topics. They wanted British writers to reflect on recent literary developments, and in particular to consider the importance of the war and fascism for English literature. The replies from British writers were mostly congenial, although at times irritated with the assumptions that the Soviet questions carried. Three questions concerned the war, fascism and post-war problems, two asked about which writers enjoyed most popularity with readers; the others asked about genres, traditions, and the balance of modern and traditional principles in contemporary literature. In essence, every question asked for a list of names and works, and for a schematization of contemporary English literature. On the face of it, this seems a rudimentary approach to an exercise that could have produced far more interesting results, but given the lack of access to foreign literature in the USSR under Stalin, it is quite likely that the answers were genuinely of interest. It was also important, most likely, that the questions did not invite any contentious or unwelcome replies. It was presumably natural for Soviet writers to ask about the war, since it had been so important for them. When they asked ‘‘What part should British literature play in defining and solving post-war problems?’’ they did not define the problems they had in mind, presumably because they were self-evident to the Soviets. The British writers made somewhat pointed replies to this question, suggesting they saw in its formulation the heavy hand of the State forcing literature into its service. Arthur Bryant posited that writers should ‘‘represent the nature of man in face of the influence of ideas and machinery’’, while Marjorie Bowen argued literature should play no role whatsoever, since ‘‘literature cannot be a carry-all for any sort of morals, ethics, or plan’’. While on this point writers respond less to the question and more to the Soviet state control, in general this is not the case: the questions are discussed openly and with interest, with writers putting forward various suggestions of writers and works that exemplify the theme or style under discussion.

The Soviet answers to the thirty-three British questions include a good number of factual replies listing authors and works, but the British also asked a
range of questions that touched upon Soviet literary life and careers, publishing conditions, translation, and women’s literature. Some of these were clearly provocative, some implicitly critical of the Soviet system, and they could prompt aggressive assertions of the Soviet line. Indeed, the Soviet writers’ careful, defensive and aggressive countering of any possible criticism, even when probably none was intended, demonstrate the writers were well versed in how to answer foreigners’ difficult questions. Although Priestley was not present at theBrains’ Trust, since he was in the USSR at the time, in his foreword to the 1948 publication he suggested that the Soviets were too quick to criticize English writers when they did not understand the system they were taking to task. He gave as an example Antokolsky’s assertion that amateur theatre is not as democratic in West as in USSR, for which he gave no reasons. Similarly barbed responses include the explanation that the detective novel has no place in Soviet society because the Soviet reader has no morbid curiosity about crime and the assertion that Zoshchenko, recently vilified in the press and expelled from the Writers’ Union, was never very popular or important, and that his work was marred by his principal characters because they were “‘insignificant people, philistines socially and spiritually, money-grubbers and careerists’”. When Marjorie Bowen asserted that the only Soviet women’s novels she’d read could have been written by men and asked if there was any women writers who write from the point of view of women, she received a prickly reply that challenged the validity of English women’s writing:

I believe it is true that England is the classic country of the women of letters. This, of course, is a very good thing so long as these women write because of an innate urge to do so, and do not pursue literary ambitions as compensation for a frustrated private life.

I am not sure what is meant by the specific “women’s point of view”. Does this imply only the destinies of women portrayed in novels, or does it refer to men as through the eyes of women?

Does the “women’s point of view” signify a book which will be read by women only?

No, here we pursue no such aims. Our women writers take far broader themes. They naturally include love and family relationships, questions of motherhood, and so on. All of this is included in our themes, but does not dominate them.

Vera Inber concludes her energetic riposte by challenging that “‘if women’s literature is to mean those endearing drawing-room novels of the flippant and sentimental type, we don’t regret not having this’”. Such replies are fiercely defensive of Soviet literature and the values it was supposed to promote, such as equality between the sexes, and maintaining focus on the great forces in history rather than petty-bourgeois individualism. However mendacious these statements may be as descriptions of Soviet writers’ true attitudes, they do provide a contrast to
English writing that, for individuals such as Priestley inclined to engage with Soviet literature, seem to have been thought-provoking.

The whole project of intercultural communication that the Writers’ Group and VOKS undertook went against the grain of politics and culture in Britain and the USSR in the years immediately after the war, when the division between the countries was widening at a dramatic rate. The exchanges were an attempt to preserve the contact and communication that had existed during the wartime alliance, and also to show that literature could make a significant contribution to improving the increasingly hostile political relations. They seem to have been driven by J. B. Priestley, and his comments and writings about the Soviets suggest that his affinity with them was motivated in part by political conviction and in part by admiration for the apparent status and significance of writers in Soviet society. Writing as an advocate of the USSR, in his ‘‘Russian Journey’’ and introduction to ‘‘Soviet Writers Reply’’ Priestley tries to explain Soviet suspicion and hostility towards the West as a consequence of past relations, and plead with readers to be friendly and encouraging towards the Soviets. In 1946 he described his efforts to improve relations and exchange while in the USSR:

In every public speech I made there, and I made a great many, I pleaded for the building of bridges between them and us, the opening of doors and windows. This plea was never once coldly received, and at my conference with VOKS in Moscow on the subject of cultural relations between the Soviet Union and Britain my suggestions were most sympathetically welcomed.21

His characterisation of Soviet writers in 1948 emphasises their seriousness, and in particular their identification with the USSR’s political and cultural aims. He warns against seeing their replies as ‘‘merely so much propaganda stuff and […] not an honest attempt to grapple with our queries.’’ (P. 5). The writers, he argues, ‘‘are earnest men and women of integrity, authors who regard their work and calling with a high seriousness not always found among our own colleagues’’ (P. 5). This calling — essentially an alignment with the State and therefore a position as spokesperson for it — is key to Priestley’s promotion of writers as people of consequence. The exchange, he declares, is ‘‘more than […] an exchange of information between two sets of writers […]. It can be read with profit by people who have no concern with authorship’’22.

The exchange was not repeated, nor did any Writers’ Group project achieve such public prominence again, possibly because Priestley became less involved. The Group continued to be active, holding meetings, discussions and events in Britain, but, as the Cold War developed, its atmosphere of debate seems to have been lost, probably because writers prepared to criticize Soviet policies and interested in genuine exchange gradually left. Increasingly, the Group took the role of promoter and defender of Soviet literature in Britain, though it was also involved in sending
writers on exchanges. In 1952, the annual report records that the SCR sent a delegation of A. E. Coppard, Arnold Kettle, and Doris Lessing to the USSR; this visit is described in detail in Lessing’s memoirs, which reveal that the delegation of six writers in total was put together for the Authors World Peace Appeal; the role of the Writers’ Group in organizing it is not entirely clear, but Coppard, Lessing and Kettle wrote short accounts afterwards for the *Anglo-Soviet Journal*. Lessing explains that the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) delayed issuing her Party card to preserve the sense that the British delegation, which included the high-ranking British communist Kettle, was not dominated by the Party. It appears that there was considerable overlap between the Appeal, the Writers’ Group, and the Party, since the rather small group of pro-Soviet writers in Britain at this time tended to know each other and belong to more than one of these organizations. That the Writers’ Group became a forum less for discussion and more for uncritical support for the Soviets is seen in its new bulletin, launched in 1952. It aimed to ‘keep members informed of developments in Soviet writing and literary criticism’ and to record some discussions of the Writers’ Group, but seems to have focussed on the first aim rather than the second. By 1954, ironically when the USSR was opening up to discussion, it consisted mainly of translations of articles from *Literaturnaia gazeta* and digests of recent Soviet novels, and lacked any interesting input from English members. In 1956, the Group ceased to be listed among the SCR’s sections; it probably lost so many members that year that it could not continue.

In 1956, ten years after the publication of ‘‘Russian Journey’’ and in the year of the Secret Speech that unleashed so much change in Soviet society and its relations with the West, Priestley gave the Heman Ould memorial lecture (Ould, too, had been in the Writers’ Group ten years previously). The lecture was entitled ‘‘The Writer in a Changing Society’’, and gave a disappointed and frankly miserable account of how he saw society developing. Priestley discussed changes in politics and intellectual life in Britain he believed were to the detriment of the country, producing ‘‘a civilization in which innumerable men with anxiety neuroses sit cursing in new and larger cars that cannot move, just because other men, with stomach ulcers, are also out in their new and larger cars’’25. Priestley’s disappointment and frustration seems to have been focussed on the way that mass communications and consumerism were turning society away from intellectual culture and, not surprisingly, from writers. He characterised the consuming society of the 1950s as an ‘‘ant-hill idiocy’’ which allowed people to ‘‘spend more and more money making gigantic bombs and exploding them and — let us note in passing — where society is less and less concerned about its authors and its literature’’26. This note ‘‘in passing’’ is telling: Priestley was clearly aggrieved at the writer’s dwindling status and influence in society, and his tone of bitterness is opposite to the optimism expressed a decade earlier, when Soviet literature seemed to offer a model for a society where writers commanded attention, whatever the cost
may have been. The date of this lecture is surely significant: the revelations about Stalin made in the secret speech early in the year were shocking and disappointing to many people who, like Priestley, had put faith in the Soviet system. In 1946 he had asserted that ‘‘in spite of political police, sudden arrests, labour camps, and all the grim tactics of suppression’’ there was a ‘‘deep drive of emotion’’ behind the revolution, and that he returned from the USSR ‘‘far more hopeful and confident than when I went about the future of mankind’’.

In this lecture ten years later, he reasserted the writer’s significance, but at the same time called into question Soviet communism and the model of the writers working alongside the state:

Some of you here […] may be asking now if we scribblers are not taking ourselves too seriously, over-estimating our importance to the community. To which I would reply at once: Probably, for it is an old habit of ours. But then I would add two qualifications. What is struggling to come through our scribble, if we are honest, undefeated, still on fire somewhere, may be of great consequence. And secondly, if this question of importance to the community has any real depth, we too can ask it elsewhere. In the last two weeks I must have seen a hundred pictures, not one of which I wanted to see, showing me two Russian visitors to India, and millions of Hindoos [sic] swarming cheering, throwing flowers, as if Krishna himself had arrived and not two cards that happen to be on top of a rather soiled pack’. And if we are putting the brutal question, then — What have these two done for those Hindoos? — or, for that matter, for the rest of us? Yes, we can start asking questions, too.

Priestley is referring to Khrushchev and Bulganin’s visit to India that year: he now sees these Soviet politicians as no better than their Western counterparts. He looks back to Stalin in this lecture, too, and describes him as one of the ‘‘men of power […] cutting us [writers] down even when pretending to praise us’’. Priestley’s view of writers in society has changed completely: he now asserts that they should not be allied with the state but outside it, critical voices cooperating with and supporting each other as they try to provide the ‘‘decency and dignity and full humanity […] to help the community in its bitterest need’’. Instead of looking to another system for a better model, he rejects being part of the system at all.

The SCR Writers’ Group was an experiment in cultural relations during the difficult years of the early Cold War, and, for Priestley at least, an enquiry into the role that a writer might play in post-war society. The seriousness with which Soviet writers apparently conducted their public lives seemed to him not a sign of intense scrutiny and pressure from the authorities, but a willingness to take on responsibility and statesmanship. Priestley, along with many other intellectuals in the twentieth century, was too quick to dismiss shortcomings in the Soviet experiment in his eagerness to find a better alternative to his own society and system. Notwithstanding his misinterpretation of the Soviet position, and later disillusionment, the existence of the Writers’ Group and the exchanges that it organized were one of few channels.
of communication at all open during these years. Though only the most trusted Soviet writers were able to come to Britain on an exchange, and their communications with the British would have been necessarily formulaic, the effect of the visit may have been significant for the individuals’ perceptions of the West and Britain specifically. Lessing indicates that the experience for some of the British writers on the Authors World Peace Appeal in 1952 challenged their preconceptions about the USSR. Similarly, the exchange of questions and answers between the writers’ groups may not have been frank, but it did provide British writers with some information about the Soviet literary system, and, if the answers sent from Britain were indeed made available to the VOKS writers, then the same was true for them. The exchange certainly did nothing to hinder relations or make them worse, and by the standards of the times it is fair to say they were quite successful. In the years under Khrushchev, just after the Writers’ Group dissolved, exchanges along these lines became more frequent and were hailed as successes for the governments that now endorsed them; had it formed just a few years later, the Writers’ Group and its attempts at cultural relations should have flourished as part of this Thaw instead of struggling against a tide of worsening British-Soviet relations, and intense public criticism of the USSR and its friends.

Remarks:


6. For details of this part of the so-called “Leningrad affair” see: Горяева Т. М. «Исключить всякіе упоминанія…» Очерки советской цензуры в СССР. М.: РОССПЭН, 1997. С. 164—182.

7. Writers’ Group Discussion, 12 December 1944 // Writers’ Group archive, SCRSS.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. J. B. Priestley to the Writers Group of VOKS, letter, 12 February, 1945 // Writers’ Group Archive, SCRSS.

11. For an account of VOKS’s methods up to 1939 at least, see: Stern Ludmila. Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920—1940. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2007. It is likely the methods had not changed significantly by 1945.


15. By the 1970s, the ability to answer such questions became an established Soviet skill, and studying the correct answers
was a requirement for most Soviet tourists before they could travel abroad. The publication “SSSR: 100 questions and answers” was first published in 1977 and republished regularly until the fall of the USSR. I am grateful to Katya Rogachevskaia for pointing out the similarity between the Soviet attitude towards this exchange and the later standard practice.

17. Ibid. P. 32—33
18. Ibid. P. 41.
25. Ibid. P. 5.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid. P. 29.
Литература как «маленький мостик»: обмены между британскими и советскими писателями в период после Второй мировой войны

Лиго Э.

Аннотация

Статья посвящена контактам британских и советских писателей в период 1945—1956 гг. В центре изучения деятельность секции писателей при «Обществе культурных связей «СССР—Великобритания» и в особенности фигура возглавлявшей ее британского драматурга и режиссера Джона Бойтона Престли. На новых документальных материалах из архива Общества содействия русским и советским исследованиям (Лондон), автор анализирует как внутренние дискуссии между критиками и защитниками контактов с советскими писателями в наиболее острый период холодной войны, так и формы контактов с советскими писателями через систему ВОКС, в особенности «вопросники», через которые осуществлялся диалог между советскими и британскими писателями. В центре дискуссий был вопрос о роли писателя в послевоенном обществе. Автор приходит к выводу, что несмотря на очевидные формальные ограничения в контактах и «эзопов язык» советских ответов, деятельность писательской группы на уровне личных контактов в условиях железного занавеса следует рассматривать как успешную. По иронии судьбы она чуть-чуть не дождалась начала «оттепели» в СССР и самораспустилась в середине 1950-х гг.

Ключевые слова: СССР, Британия, писатели, литература, культурный обмен, ВОКС, Союз писателей, Джон Престли, Агата Кристи, Дорис Лессинг, Общество культурных связей с СССР, Общество сотрудничества в русских и советских исследованиях

Дата публикации: 25.12.2015

Ссылка для цитирования:
