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Was the Left's Thunder Stolen? Soviet Short Films on British Wartime Screens

When the Soviet Union entered the war against Nazi Germany, following the 22 June 1941 invasion, it and Great Britain unexpectedly found themselves on the same side facing a common foe. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill spoke on the radio on the day of the invasion, saying that while Nazism and Communism are equally bad, and that he “will unsay no words” of criticism on the Soviet system: “we shall give whatever help we can to Russia and to the Russian people.” He ended his speech: “The Russian danger is therefore our danger [...] just as the cause of any Russian fighting for his hearth and home is the cause of free men and free peoples in every quarter of the globe” (Churchill 1948-54: 333). Within weeks, on 12 July a joint declaration was issued, followed by agreements for British civilian aid to the Soviet Union on 16 August, military aid in September 1941, and the signing of the Anglo-Soviet Agreement on 26 May 1942 (Ross 1984: 14-15).

In parallel to the governmental declaration of support and agreements, there was a widespread, unprompted upsurge of public sympathy for and interest in the Soviet Union in Britain (Soames 1981: 437). As one government memorandum put it: “[t]he most striking feature of the Anglo-Russian Weeks has been their spontaneity. People are anxious to show their appreciation of what Russia has done and are whole hearted

in their admiration”.¹

However, just as Churchill made no mention of the Soviet Union, and did not “unsay” his criticism of Communism, so the British government was faced with the task of delivering on their promise to help “Russia”, and of communicating their support to the wider British population, but at the same time dealing with what Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden called “the more difficult question” of controlling the political character of this support (Eden 1965: 270).

It was the Ministry of Information that had the primary task of translating this stance into policy. Concluding that “the Russian motif is now more important than any other,”² the Ministry of Information and the British government established and conducted its own campaign of pro-Soviet propaganda, in order not to let such activities fall under the control of British Communists, thereby, as they put it, “stealing the thunder of the Left” and, they hoped, counter the potential attraction of Communist ideas and the Communist model of society.³ Paradoxically, however, at least one of those charged with negotiating this fine balance, Peter Smollett, was himself a spy working for the Soviets, with the result that their portrayal ended up being even more friendly to the Soviets than the British intended (Miner 2003).

Yet, while the activities of the Ministry of Information, and the Anglo-Soviet Alliance have drawn very little scholarly attention, a great emphasis has been put on diplomatic relations, the military and economic realms (Bell 1990; MacLaine 1979; Fenby 2006; Ross 1984). This emphasis has been so overwhelming that the widely acclaimed new abridgement of Maisky’s diaries, based on the whole manuscript, completely excludes almost all references to his engagement in the soft diplomacy of culture and propaganda (Maisky 2015). Until recently, considerations on films have occupied a very marginal place in considerations concerning the British cultural policy during the war. This omission is paradoxical when we consider film’s prominence in this period. Writing in 1935, British documentary pioneer John Grierson argued that contemporary society needed “more imaginative and widespread media of public address” than “public speech and public writing”, and that propaganda tendencies in cinema would increasingly offer this (Grierson 1966: 185). While there have been

1 Anon, “Anglo Soviet Publicity, unsigned memo 19.02.1942,” National Archives INF 1/677.

2 “Draft Action Points Arising from an Inter-Divisional Conference in Room 136 at 11.30 on Tuesday 21 October 1941 to Discuss Methods of Implementing the Ministry’s Propaganda Policy in Regard to Russia,” National Archives INF 1/676. It is of course possible to overstate the extent to which the government was reacting to public opinion, as some Soviet sources do (Volkov 1964: 348).

3 R. H. Parker, “Memo from Parker to Briggs, 03.12.1941 (unsigned, undated),” National Archives INF 1/676.

important cinema studies in wartime Britain, these have paid scant attention to the British wartime reception of Soviet films (Chapman 1998). However, during the Anglo-Soviet alliance years cinema film proved an especially important medium for the communication of the British government's complex policy on Soviet Russia: it was attractive with audiences for its combination of immediacy with authenticity, but also attractive to governments as a reliable transmission belt for a carefully calibrated message. No other medium could offer quite this package. Yet it is only through a comparative approach, examining the films themselves through the prism of both Russian and British archival and memoir sources, as well as historical accounts, that we can grasp the specific and important role that film played in the Anglo-Soviet alliance, as an arena where the bigger tensions between the respective regimes contrasting political perspectives were played out. As is clear from a comparison of the role of short films with that of other prominent media of the time, when it came to the government's policy on communicating its support for the Soviet Union in the first eighteen months after the Soviets entered the war, short films played a crucial role as an authentically Russian source the message and distribution of which could still be controlled. As such, analysis of it can tentatively suggest whether the Ministry of Information really succeeded, as they intended, in stealing the thunder of the Left, and what effects this had on British society.

1. "Speak objectively and with authority on Russia": The Role of the Short

The key to the Ministry of Information's strategy to curb a grassroots or uncontrolled movement for solidarity with the Soviet Union, was to work with the Russian Embassy from the outset, to ensure that their speakers and materials, and hence events, having come direct from Russia, were implicitly assumed to enjoy greater legitimacy than those of British Communists:

The Ministry will need to lead propaganda for Anglo-Soviet co-operation so skilfully that the thunder of the extreme Left is stolen, and, in developing the closest liaison with the Soviet Embassy, our attitude to the British Communist Party as one of non co-operation will be strengthened. Above all things the Russians are realists and they know that any assistance they get from Great Britain is due to the existence of the Capitalistic System.⁴

The stress was on factual information about Russia so as "to let each other's populations draw as much inspiration from their Ally's effort as possible. In order to do so, the Ministry encourages and assists the distribution of factual information

4 R. H. Parker, "Propaganda Policy of the Ministry in regard to Russia (1941)," National Archives INF 1/676.

about Russia in Britain and about Britain in Russia.”⁵ An obvious way this factual orientation could be delivered was by the translation, reprinting, and reuse of Soviet press reports. Soviet ambassador Ivan Maisky suggested that the Soviets’ decision to produce print publications *Soviet War News* and *Soviet War News Weekly* (circulation 50,000), followed by *Soviet Weekly*, was taken with the purpose of giving the Soviet side of things to balance that presented by the British, and to counter, in particular, an initially defeatist atmosphere in Britain with regard to the USSR’s capacity to withstand the Germans in Summer 1941 (Maisky 1967: 206). This started with war news solely, but moved to other spheres including culture, science, and economics. While Claire Knight points to a shift, during the summer of 1941 from the distrust of Soviet sources, to a tendency to quote communiqués verbatim, (Knight 2013: 484), most articles required substantial adaptation, and Maisky discusses the difficulties faced by the editors of these publications in transforming the items sent from the Russian press into something that could be read and appreciated by the British (Maisky 1967: 207). In part this was a question of format: Maisky cites a British distaste for long articles and figures by comparison with the Soviet press, but there was a need to adapt Soviet newspaper articles, not only in stylistic but also in ideological terms.

While reprinting the Soviet press was fairly straightforward, widely practiced, and easily controllable, it did not offer the emotive appeal and direct presence possible with a live speaker at a public meeting. Consequently, the Ministry of Information, and a number of other organisations intent on promoting friendly relations with the newfound Soviet ally, immediately started sourcing speakers for public meetings. Maisky referred to the enormous number of invitations to speak that he received in this period, one hundred in January 1942 alone, and wrote that it was obviously impossible to attend to them all (Maisky 1967: 212, 250). Other than Maisky, there was, however, a shortage of suitable speakers who could, in the opinion of the Ministry of Information, “speak objectively and with authority on Russia”⁶ in the opinion of the Ministry of Information.

The desire for speakers from Russia is stressed in an internal discussion of the Ministry of Information as follows:

The provision of some Russian speakers direct from that country at this time would completely eclipse any efforts under “C” of Mr Parker’s statement and the effect might

5 R. H. Parker, “Propaganda Policy of the Ministry in regard to Russia (1941),” National Archives INF 1/676.

6 R. H. Parker, “Propaganda Policy of the Ministry in regard to Russia (1941),” National Archives INF 1/676.

well be electrical of having some Russians “direct from Moscow” to visit factories and speak at demonstrations throughout the country.⁷

What is being referred to here (“under ‘C’”) are the efforts of Communists, who unlike the Ministry, could not get “Russians” directly from Moscow through the Embassy, and would thus evidently be eclipsed by any such speakers. Unfortunately, to compound the difficulties involved, particularly in 1941-42, in getting speakers from Moscow, the Soviet Embassy was reluctant to permit any officials other than Maisky to speak in public, for fear that they might say the wrong thing (Miner 2003: 376). Eventually, the Ministry of Information decided not to go ahead with the idea of inviting speakers directly from Russia, as impractical at this point in the war. This left them overwhelmed: “Demands for speakers on Russia have been almost more than the Ministry could meet. Interest in Russia at one period was greater than the interest in all the other Allies put together — in December 1941 there were 128 Ministry meetings on Russia compared with 123 on all the other Allies”, and those sometimes included Russians.⁸

Evidently the main concerns were to have speakers with the authority of first-hand experience of Russia, and the correct politics. Indeed, what they ideally needed, suggested Briggs, more than actual Russians, would be MPs who have visited Russia: “It would be particularly useful to have 20 or 30 Conservative M.P.s willing to talk on the subject”.⁹ However, given the dearth of suitably prepared Tory MPs, or speakers from Russia, those organising activities in support of Russia continued to be besieged with offers to speak about Russia from Communists, including the leader of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Harry Pollitt.¹⁰ Needless to say, given the whole thrust of its policy, the Ministry rejected such offers, but this selectiveness did nothing to solve the problem of the lack of speakers.

This picture was further complicated by the fact that the Soviet Relations Division of the Ministry of Information, was being run by Soviet mole Smollett, who was vetting speakers, stopping émigrés or anyone potentially critical of Stalin from speaking (Miner 2003: 248). This extra check upon potential speakers protracted matters further and did little to dispel the impression, indeed fostered the suspicion,

7 Briggs, “Speakers on Russia (letter to Hackett) (1941),” National Archives INF 1/676.

8 “Anglo Soviet Publicity, unsigned memo 19 February 1942,” National Archives INF 1/677.

9 Briggs, “Speakers on Russia (letter to Hackett) (1941),” National Archives INF 1/676.

10 “Draft Action Points Arising from an Inter-Divisional Conference in Room 136 at 11.30 on Tuesday 21 October 1941 to Discuss Methods of Implementing the Ministry’s Propaganda Policy in Regard to Russia,” National Archives INF 1/676.

that the British Government was not really doing enough, as a memorandum put it on 21 October 1941:

It was generally agreed that we are not conducting a campaign in the sense of Press advertisements, billposting and the other usual commercial methods. It was agreed that there is a great market of interest in all things Russian at the present, but as there is a great section of the population which believes that the government itself does not share the enthusiasm of the country for our Russian Ally our primary purpose is to convince the public that the Government is going all out in its policy of aid to Russia.

It is urgently necessary that immediate steps be taken to this end as other organisations of Left Wing tendency are capturing public sympathy. The Ministry must, accordingly, out-produce all other organisations which are trying to satisfy the present interest in Russian affairs.¹¹

To fulfil the urgent need for material, the Ministry of Information made extensive use of film, especially short films, to get across its pro-Soviet message.

2. The Rise of Soviet Short Films

By 1943 Soviet footage amounting to 40,000 feet had been included in British commercial newsreels shown to weekly audiences of 24 million in public cinema from the very first weeks of June 1941.¹² Soviet features, both documentary and fiction, soon followed onto British screens, and were by far the most widely consumed expressions of Soviet cinema, but British commercial filmmakers were very conservative when it came to the Soviet subject matter, despite one or two efforts (Chapman 1998: 220). Moreover, the British were initially cautious of feature length films in general for propaganda purposes, and therefore tended to prioritise the distribution of shorts at the beginning of the war (Fox 2007: 33). During the whole course of the war, 1,400 'official' short films, including at least 20 Soviet ones, were distributed by the Ministry of Information be it for the commercial cinemas or non-commercial network (Chapman 1998: 86).

In this context, it is clear why so strong an appetite for adapting and distributing Soviet short films emerges from the correspondence in the Ministry of Information files, and later from conversations held between the British Embassy in Moscow and representatives of the Russian film industry, at the bidding of the Ministry of Information. It seems, however, that these films were largely for the non-commercial

11 "Draft Action Points Arising from an Inter-Divisional Conference in Room 136 at 11.30 on Tuesday 21 October 1941 to Discuss Methods of Implementing the Ministry's Propaganda Policy in Regard to Russia," National Archives INF 1/676.

12 John W. Lawrence, "Letter from Press Attaché at British Embassy, Moscow to Erofeev, People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, 18.03.1943," Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), f. 2918, op. 1, d. 50.

travelling network later dubbed, the Ministry of Information's "Celluloid Circus." This comprised a network of 70 mobile projectors which moved from town to town each giving 10 shows a week "to every sort of audience from large factory canteens holding 1,500 people to small village shows of about 80 people" with an average audience of 150. By early 1942, the Ministry estimated that 3,000,000 had seen these shows at some time.¹³

While this dimension of wartime British propaganda film consumption was long held to have little value by historians compared to more celebrated features, and it has been estimated that whereas the cinemas reached 24 million a week, the non-theatrical distribution reached 0.36 million a week at its peak in 1943-1944 (Thorpe, Pronay, and Coultass 1980: 37-38), James Chapman, however, has persuasively made the case that the short documentary films "were no less important than commercial feature films; they just served a different purpose." However, this account too hesitates to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of the non-theatrical network due to the difficulty of determining audience size (Chapman 1998: 112-13).

Nevertheless, from the point of view of the Ministry of Information, distributing Soviet films in this way had a whole host of advantages: they were able to respond to the appetite for Soviet-themed materials relatively quickly. Moreover, given this appetite, the Soviet films were more attractive to the public than most short films, they cost little or nothing to prepare, and distribution on the non-theatrical circuit fulfilled the policy need to be seen to do something about the Soviet Union, with a minimum of investment and without the risk of directly endorsing, of doing too much and popularising the Soviet Union or the ideas of Communism unduly.

Finally, as a medium, which in this period required enormous investment, the resources required by film made it even better suited to countering the influence of the British Communists, who could rarely afford to make such films, even if they had distributed Soviet films earlier on their own non-theatrical, film club, circuits. Thus the government, with the help of the Soviet Embassy, turned Soviet film from a weapon in the hands of the Left in the 1920s and 1930s, into a crucial tool to counter the influence of the left, and further their own approach:

The Ministry intended, however, that the country's interest should not be engrossed by the Communist presentation of Russia and from this it followed that the Ministry must present Russia factually and more interestingly than any private enterprise did.

Films

- a) It was noted that Films Division are going ahead with the production of films on Russia and that material is gradually becoming available.

13 "The M.O.I.'s Celluloid Circus, 1942," National Archives INF 1/677.

b) The need for films to be made available for the non-theatrical scheme was stressed and it was noted that arrangements for this were already in hand.¹⁴

The remit to be factual, implying that it was not to articulate an explicitly political message, was repeated, and strongly echoes the understanding of policy at a governmental level, as summed up in a conversation between Eden and Maisky in June 1941:

[Maisky] thought it would do the British public no harm to be given some information about the nature of the peoples that made up the Soviet Union, their ways of life, their traditions and so forth. [Eden] replied that as long as we vigorously eschewed political propaganda [he] thought there might be some advantage to such a course (MacLaine 1979: 197).

This emphasis was particularly suited to the non-theatrical circuit. Whereas shorts oriented towards regular commercial cinemas were fitted into a five-minute slot, and heavily oriented towards “the MOI’s immediate propaganda and instructional needs” (Chapman 1998: 93), the Soviet films served a different, less time-sensitive goal of acquainting the audience with some background information about the Soviet Union, Britain’s powerful new ally. This purpose meant films could be shown for months, since they did not relate to specific campaigns, but, rather, suited long-term, “on-going” themes. So it did not matter that it took these films a long time to get round the network.¹⁵ They were also less time sensitive in another sense: they did not need to fit into a rigid five-minute slot, and often took up around ten minutes, a whole reel.

However, it was not until November 1941 that any such films were ready.¹⁶ While most of the shorts were adapted in London by The Soviet War News Film Agency, under Russian speaking VGIK graduate, Herbert Marshall, one of the first five films prepared at the request of the MOI, by British Pathé, was a compilation entitled *Salute to the Soviet*. It possessed topical qualities that enabled it to be shown theatrically as well as part of the “Celluloid Circus.”

3. Salute to the Soviet

The emphasis in *Salute to the Soviet* upon the factual and instructional is immediately evident from its initial description of the Soviet Union’s geographical features:

14 “Draft Action Points Arising from an Inter-Divisional Conference in Room 136 at 11.30 on Tuesday 21 October 1941 to Discuss Methods of Implementing the Ministry’s Propaganda Policy in Regard to Russia,” National Archives INF 1/676.

15 “The M.O.I.’s Celluloid Circus, 1942,” National Archives INF 1/677.

16 Helen de Moulpiéd, “Copy of reply to Mr Mercier, 27.10.1942,” National Archives INF 1/676.

“occupying a sixth of the World’s earth surface. Its coastline borders seven seas.” This fairly anodyne opening was precisely kind of thing that the British governmental circles were looking for, as is evident from a 1942 letter from British Embassy press attaché, John W. Lawrence, to the Soviets specifying the kinds of subjects they wanted to see in Soviet short films:

What is familiar to a Soviet audience is, however, often strange and (at first sight) incomprehensible to a British audience, for instance the extremes of heat and cold and the great size and flatness of the country create conditions utterly strange to our people.¹⁷

While the film contains lots of factual statement of the kind it opens with, it is not long before the border between fact and political interpretation becomes blurred, as the voice-over narration states: “Not long ago it was a prosperous and peaceful land, where everyone went about their daily tasks happily and contentedly.” Most of this is highly contentious, of course, since the previous decade had seen forced collectivisation, famine, mass terror, and the Soviet Union’s own invasion of a number of neighbouring countries all of which belie notions of a peaceful, prosperous land or a happy and contented populace. Indeed, despite Britain at this point refusing to recognise the annexation of the Baltic States in 1940, the film presents a catalogue of ethnic diversity, listing Lithuanians as one of the national groups of the USSR. This approach to the Soviet Union’s multiple constituent nationalities was itself at odds with the overwhelming tendency in Britain, legitimised from the top by Churchill’s 22 June 1941 speech, to refer to the USSR as Russia, rather than the Soviet Union, so as to underplay, and not to invite sympathy for, the political character of its Socialist regime. The film continues in this vein, talking up life in the USSR and remaining silent over its problems, creating a temporally vague, but relentlessly idealised picture of Soviet society. The film ends with Maisky giving a speech, which brings the apparently generic factual and instructional survey up-to-date, referring to the Nazi invasion. His message was that Russia is strong, and is fighting the same fight as “you”: a more overtly propagandistic message delivered straight to camera. It was *Salute to the Soviet*’s combining of the factual and instructional with the topical and overtly political that enabled it also to appeal to audiences in theatrical release.

However, *Salute to the Soviet* immediately illustrates the problem with the Ministry’s policy: as Bell has argued with regard to Soviet material in British newsreels of the period, the dividing line between the factual presentation of the Soviet ally and the political endorsement was not a clear one, since emphasis on the successes of Soviet military was not without political implications: “here was not just a great

17 John W. Lawrence, “Letter from Press Attaché at British Embassy, Moscow, to A. Andrievsky, Soiuzintorgkino, 03.04.1942,” Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), f. 2918, op. 1, d. 50.

army but a strong society, drawing inspiration from its ideals” (Bell 1990: 73). The Minister for Information, Duff Cooper, was also aware of the problem, as he put it: “It is difficult to see how we could boost modern Russian culture without implying some approval of the experiment that has been going on there for these last 24 years” (MacLaine 1979: 197). It was almost impossible to resolve this dilemma: if Soviet films were going to be shown, they were bound to have some effect on the public.

4. Women in Soviet Shorts

One theme in Maisky’s speech that particularly resonated with British audiences was that of the role of women. In *Salute to the Soviet*, the diplomat frames his account in relatively traditional and familiar terms of women replacing men in factories and tending to the wounded at the front. However, as the role of women expanded during the conflict, this would be a dimension of Soviet portrayals that was to have deeper impact on British audiences. In view of this, it was no accident that another of the first five short films acquired by the MOI was a film called *Soviet Women*.¹⁸ It is probably indicative of its success, that this was followed by an apparently similar 1942 film titled *100 Million Women* (Directed, or re-edited from Soviet footage, by Jiri Weiss) (Thorpe, Pronay, and Coultass 1980: 119). Part of these films’ appeal was the context of their reception: while the British had already begun the mobilisation of women in March 1941, when all women between 19 and 40 were required to register at employment exchanges, female conscription was only introduced from December 1941 (Rose 2003: 109). This was echoed in the media by an uncertainty as to whether to emphasise women’s traditional roles as carers and mothers, or to celebrate and promote women’s participation in the war effort in more novel, active roles. Indeed, there was even an indecision as to whether to address women directly at all in propaganda (Chapman 1998: 202-03), an ambivalence that reflected hostility even in the trade union and labour movements as to advances in women’s employment rights (Branson 1997: 41-42).

The Soviet film depictions of women both bypassed this hesitancy, and exposed its limitations. On seeing the film’s images of women working the land and the especially striking images of women fighting in the army, one reviewer of *100 Million Women*, Edith Manvell, was not just full of praise for the film, contrasting it with British short documentary films devoted to women in the Royal Navy and British Army: *W.R.N.S.* and *W.V.S.* Manvell also argues that, whereas the British films pay great attention to creating an image of women as refined middle class types in smart uniforms, the

18 Helen de Mouilpied, “Letter From Miss de Mouilpied, Films Division to Mr Dowden, Home Division, 21.10.1941,” National Archives, INF 1/676.

Russian film, for the most part, shows “tough, working-class types.” What impresses Manvell most about the film, though, is its attempt to suggest the women’s motivations:

Several times during the film we are made aware of their indomitable courage [...] Those parts of the film which deal with military and defence services are not represented as parades in uniform but show us the grim determination on women’s faces and the arduous nature of their work (Manvell 1942).

Inspired by the contrast in such representations to reflect on the barriers holding women back in Britain, Manvell concludes that one of those obstacles was precisely the lack of propaganda of this very welcome kind, which inspired women’s belief in the importance of their tasks. In Manvell’s view the dearth of such images had the consequence that:

People are not yet quite sure whether they are working for a victory that will take us back to 1939, or whether victory will bring an opportunity for righting the social and economic evils of the past. This is the problem that makes so much of our propaganda ineffectual (Manvell 1942).

While *100 Million Women* might not have been deliberately conceived of as political propaganda, but rather as a film showing women’s participation in the Soviet war effort, depictions like this evidently did have an effect beyond the mere bolstering of support for the Soviet ally: they also stimulated domestic British thoughts and concerns, serving to promote social change and debate. The Ministry’s own files note this process:

The M.O.I’s “Celluloid Circus” [...] is creating again the market place discussion; the public forum is returning to village and town alike with a new orator-film, to lead a lively and well-informed discussion of the country’s wartime problems.¹⁹

Curiously, both *100 Million Women* and *Salute to the Soviet* end with direct addresses to the audience from a Russian in heavily accented English, in the second person form, mimicking live speech, or the oratory in terms of which these films are described above. Here film was perfectly suited to conveying the authority and authenticity, as well as the directness and immediacy, of a speaker direct from “Russia”. It seems this was vital in the context of such culturally and geographically distant allies, and evidently, this could stimulate much debate.

However, unlike a live speaker, a film can be relied upon to relay the same message time after time: this was key when delivering the complex and at times contradictory nature of the Anglo-Soviet alliance to spectators. Probably the most controversial subject of pro-Soviet propaganda in Britain that the government wanted to avoid was mention of the second front. As Churchill told Maisky on 5 September 1941, the “only result would be rough reaction and recrimination all would wish to avoid”

19 “The M.O.I.’s Celluloid Circus, 1942,” National Archives INF 1/677.

(Eden 1965: 276). A live speaker, especially one direct from the USSR might well end up mentioning this, but film could be vetted beforehand. Thus, later in the war, the Ministry refused to distribute Stalin's 25th anniversary of the Revolution speech unless mention of the second front was cut. The Soviets refused to show an edited version, and produced their own 16 mm print, to be shown to "organisations friendly to us".²⁰

Despite, or perhaps because of such censorship, the success of these Soviet short films with the viewing public was clear. By February, the Ministry were able to boast that "Russian films have been a tremendous success throughout the country".²¹ *Salute to the Soviet* and *Soviet Women* were among 5 Soviet films in the non-theatrical programme, and, although figures vary, by March 1942 had been seen by more than half of the three million who saw these films: "all these films have been very popular indeed at the shows. As long as we have new films on U.S.S.R., they will go into every programme put on in factories".²² Consequently, the MOI sought to obtain more Soviet short films through Ivor Montagu, described in a letter from Smollett as "film affairs adviser of the U.S.S.R.,"²³ and then through the British Embassy in Moscow. Despite the British appetite for Soviet short films, and the Soviet appetite to show them as widely as possible, finding new ones proved difficult.

5. The Decline of Soviet Shorts

In the understanding of British officials, there existed from the moment the Soviets entered the war as an ally of Britain, a principle of barter for short films and newsreels between the two countries.²⁴ However, while this had effectively been the case, it had marked a significant shift in approach, as Petr Brigadnov was appointed the new representative of the Soviet film export organization, *Soiuzintorgkino*, in Britain in

20 P. A. Brigadnov, "Letter to Bol'shakov and Andrievskij, 25.01.1943," Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, RGALI, f. 2918, op. 1, d. 45.

21 "Anglo Soviet Publicity, unsigned memo, 19.02.1942," National Archives INF 1/677.

22 "Non-theatrical Distribution of Soviet Films, 1942," National Archives INF1/677. Lawrence, at The British Embassy, estimated to the Soviets, that the figures were 12 million a year for the non-theatrical circuit: John W. Lawrence, "Note about Improved Interchange of British and Soviet Films in 1943," Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), f. 2918, op. 1, d. 50. Of course it would have been in Lawrence's interests to overstate audience figures.

23 H. P[eter] Smollett, "Letter from Smollett to Miss Leonard, 10.11.1941," National Archives, INF 1/676.

24 John W. Lawrence, "Note about Improved Interchange of British and Soviet Films in 1943," Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), f. 2918, op. 1, d. 50.

November 1941, he took the step of combining the organisations for the distribution of newsreel and documentary film on the one hand, and of fiction feature films on the other. The latter were under the control of the trade commission, and put under the political control of the Embassy. As Brigadnov put it:

From past experience it was completely clear, that the basic mistake of “Soiuzintorgkino” was that films were treated as normal export goods such as timber, oil or manganese ore, and consequently the whole operation was based solely on commercial considerations. Yet practice had shown that this approach to the matter restricted the already limited possibilities that existed for the promotion of Soviet films abroad. Officials needed to understand that films are not commercial products, but profoundly ideological ones, because our films reflect the struggle for socialist rebuilding of our country according to completely different principles and methods than those of capitalist countries. This is why capitalist countries do not want Soviet films to be shown on a mass scale, because our films revolutionise the laboring classes. For these reasons I rejected the old methods of trading films as a normal export, and made the political question central: to get our films onto British screens any way we could (Brigadnov 2005).

Whatever changes Brigadnov did or did not introduce, by January 1942, *Three in a Fox Hole* (*Troe v voronke*) had already become the first Soviet film to appear as an MOI five-minute short in the commercial cinema network (Anon 1942). It may be that following this success, the Soviets were no longer interested in distributing their films through the non-theatrical network. Certainly the supply of films for non-theatrical distribution worsened. Lawrence expressed his anxieties over the supply to Britain of short films:

Short films are not easy to dispose of in the British commercial market, and yet the requests of the Ministry for short films and film material for its own non-commercial distribution have not been met satisfactorily. It is realised that the Soviet War News Film Agency makes no profit on films supplied to the Ministry, but their general publicity value, taking a long term view, would possibly outweigh immediate commercial considerations. The Ministry’s experience suggests that the Soviet War News Film Agency could in many cases make commercial contracts which allowed concurrent non-theatrical use.²⁵

He even goes as far as to say that the main concern of the Soviets is now to exploit these films commercially, and were no longer willing to supply these films to the non-commercial network, something the British Embassy officials had already complained about the previous year.²⁶ It seems that, despite a peak of 11 films in 1942, rising from 7 in 1941, the MOI was unable to source new Soviet films for 1943, and this is

25 John W. Lawrence, “Note about Improved Interchange of British and Soviet Films in 1943,” Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), f. 2918, op. 1, d. 50.

26 John W. Lawrence, “Letter from Press Attaché at British Embassy, Moscow, to A. Andrievskij, *Sojuzintorgkino*, 03.04.1942,” Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), f. 2918, op. 1, d. 50.

presumably why the most comprehensive catalogue of films distributed by the MOI during the war contains no Russian shorts for 1943 (Thorpe, Pronay, and Coultass 1980).

This tension may also be seen in the light of a wider reversion in Anglo-Soviet relations to pragmatism, and suspicion. In the cultural sphere, it seems that both sides suddenly realised the potential in the other market for the penetration of their products, and hence their influence. The British thought that they might continue to obtain the Soviet films virtually free, as Left-wing organisations had done prior to the war, but the Soviets, seeing a market, immediately wanted to exploit it economically. They were much more pragmatic, committed to *realpolitik* and the bottom line in economic terms, and much less ideologically driven, than the British tended to imagine.

While this can be seen as related to the turn away from internationalism and towards “National Bolshevism”, discussed below, in fact this logic also stretches back to the 1930s, when the exporting of film to Britain was primarily seen as an economic opportunity, rather than an opportunity to exert political and cultural influence: the Soviets would only give films away if they could not sell them, and only then after waiting some years (Hicks 2005: 283). The desperate straits of the war’s initial existential threat shook that logic, but not for long, and not irreversibly, so that after military success at the 1942 Battle of Moscow had ensured the USSR’s survival, normal business resumed; the need to make economic rather than just political capital soon prevailed once more.²⁷ That this commercial option had become a reality was confirmed not only by the success of *Three in a Fox Hole*, but also by the film *The Defeat of the Germans Near Moscow* (*Razgrom nemeckih voisk pod Moskvoj*, 1942), which reedited as *Moscow Strikes Back* for the US market, won an Oscar. This focused attentions away from non-theatrical shorts (Kapterev 2015).

For their part, the MOI had hoped to “steal the thunder of the Left,” and in so doing had also inherited the same problems faced by the Left in dealing with the Soviets’ unique cocktail of cynicism and idealism. The British themselves combined these qualities in their own way by evidently hoping that they could supply their economically loss-leading non-theatrical circuit with effectively free Soviet films, which was obviously better than having to spend a lot of money on their own productions (Chapman 1998: 270, n. 69). Distributing Soviet films in this way might also have the advantage of being seen to be “sparing no effort” whereas, had these films been distributed in commercial cinemas they might run the risk of exerting more influence. The sense that the British are interested more in “the impression”

27 This logic was also evident in military exchanges: while British fighter planes had been invited to Murmansk in 1941 to protect the Arctic convoys, all such proposals were rejected by Stalin from 1942 (Ross 1984: 28).

of promoting Russia, than in actually doing so comes across in some MOI internal correspondence:

The argument is this. We are not trying to sell Russia to the people. They are already sold to the idea. What we are trying to do is to make it crystal clear that the Government is going all out in its policy of aid to Russia. If we, as a Government Department working in the interests of the Government stage an inferior exhibition, people will say, "That is exactly what we have been maintaining all along, that the Government is not really heart and soul in this business." But if we stage a really first class show it will give the impression that we are after, i.e. that we are sparing no effort in a matter which is something of vital importance to the British Government, i.e. the whole question of Russia and its War Effort.²⁸

For their part, the Soviets never overcame their suspicion of British motives: even in August 1941, Stalin described Britain as objectively helping Germany by not immediately opening a second front (Stalin 2015: 639). Thus, the Soviets barely even gave the *impression* of promoting Britain, and rarely showed any of the short films dubbed into Russian that the British sent them, apart from to a specially invited audience of industry figures, and only then after the British Embassy had hectored them to do so.²⁹ One exception to this was the inclusion of a dubbed version of probably the most celebrated British short film of the war: "London Can Take it", which was combined with a Soviet film about the bombing and defence of Moscow under the title in Britain of *A Tale of Two Cities*. This was shown as part of *Fighting Film Journal* (*Boevoj kinosbornik*) No. 5, released in the USSR in October 1941. However, despite aspirations, particularly by the British, to expand into co-productions, the mutual suspicion and differences between the two sides was such, that no such productions ever proved possible.

6. Conclusion

In attempting to assess the effects of the Ministry of Information's policy on Soviet propaganda, Steven Merritt Miner criticises previous considerations of the Ministry of Information by Bell and McLaine for taking at face value the claim that the Ministry was "stealing the thunder of the Left" when Smollett, the Soviet mole, was in fact working behind the scenes to undermine this very policy, and promote Soviet interests as far as possible (Miner 2003: 375, n.9). Certainly, at times anxieties were raised that the Ministry was going too far in promoting the USSR, and there were repeated calls to stress the differences between British and Soviet positions. No one seems to respond to them, and it may well be that this was a result of the influence

28 Briggs, "Briggs to Parker, 23rd October 1941," National Archives, INF 1/676.

29 John W. Lawrence, "Note about Improved Interchange of British and Soviet Films in 1943," Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), f. 2918, op. 1, d. 50.

of Smollett, leading us to agree that the Soviets exerted at least some influence over British policy. However, on the evidence of film propaganda, it is hard to agree with the claim that: “Smollett gave events a shove in the right direction, more important than the Cambridge spies” (Miner 2003: 278).

Certainly, while it is probable that Smollett did further the interests of the Soviet Union, ensuring British portrayals were even more positive than would otherwise have been the case; this is not the same thing as the side effect most feared by British governmental officials:

The great danger that lies before us at the moment is that the popularisation of Russia (or its popularity) must, if it is not interfered with, equally popularise Communism as a method of living.³⁰

Miner’s study certainly gives us no evidence that Smollett’s actions helped forward the Communist ideal of living, even if membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain reached a historic peak of 56,000 by the end of 1942, it was in decline thereafter (Branson 1997: 252).

However, it has been claimed that the positive portrayal of Russian feats of arms, and the British media and public’s “hysterical magnification of their successes” had the unexpected effect of boosting Russian self-belief and made negotiations difficult for British diplomats (Ross 1984: 93). Here we are confronted with the paradox that the British line on the Soviet war effort, whereby the whole country is identified as Russia, and the Communist system is downplayed, was one that was very much a part of how the Soviet ruling elites themselves were starting to see and portray things — perceiving the war as essentially a Russian enterprise that reflected Russian martial endeavour, and had little or nothing to do with Communism and the Marxist way of thinking. While, as David Brandenberger has argued persuasively, what he calls the wartime escalation in Soviet propaganda of “etatist”, “neonationalism” was “a tendency rather than an articulate central line”, it was no less pronounced for all that (Brandenberger 2002: 120).

An illustration of this evolving situation was the fate of the Internationale, which was the National Anthem of the Soviet Union and which the BBC refused to play on its Sunday slot for broadcasting the national anthems of allied powers. Duff Cooper tried, in June 1941, to persuade Maisky that “to call the ‘Internationale’ a national anthem was a contradiction in terms” (MacLaine 1979: 200-01). Yet this obstacle to the Soviet Union’s rising international prestige was removed within 18 months, as it was replaced by the more statesmanlike “Hymn of the Soviet Union,” the second line of which referred to “Rus” as uniting the other republics into the Union.

30 R. H. Parker, “Letter to DG (through Lord Davidson), 24.07.41,” National Archives, INF 1/676.

The policy of referring primarily to Russia, and not the Soviet Union, far from depoliticising it, was itself, of course political, since a nationalist vision of timeless Russia is also a political idea, just as much as Communism. The irony was that this idea gained ground in the Soviet Union too, as this russocentric vision of the Soviet state, the one endorsed by Churchill from 22 June 1941 well before its endorsement by Stalin in his 7 November 1941 speech, became so influential in Soviet thinking (Brandenberger 2002: 118). Perhaps, rather than Britain becoming infected with the feared Communist contagion, paradoxically it was the British who helped spread the Russian nationalist bacillus in the Soviet Union.

Conversely, if we attempt to consider more closely whether any of the distinctly Communist ideas present in Soviet propaganda were echoed in changes to British society, we might draw on the debate as to what dimensions of the wartime experience influenced the societal shift that occurred during the war which brought the 1945 Labour government, Britain's most left wing and socially reforming ever, to power. One response to this question has found, in the re-examination of women's roles, a partial explanation for the rising demands for social rights and social security articulated in Labour's vision for a welfare state (Rose 2003: 149). It seems no coincidence that Manvell's asserts, in her discussion of *100 Million Women*, that "victory will bring an opportunity for righting the social and economic evils of the past". It may be that these films played a part in the dynamic of regime competition that, it has been argued, was crucial in the formation and development of post-war welfare states (Obinger and Schmitt 2011).

The Soviet depictions of women in film were strikingly different to those in the British media, as we have seen. British women referenced the images of Soviet female combatants, consumed in part through film, to justify their desire to take an active part in all dimensions of life, even in battle (Rose 2003: 109). Anna Krylova, in an important study of Soviet female combatants in World War Two, has argued that the fact that the Soviets put more than half a million women into combat, a far greater number than any other country, was a consequence of the reassessment of gender brought about by the 1917 revolution, leading to the perception that identities as women and as fighters were not necessarily in conflict (Krylova 2010: 16). In turn, it has been argued that their greater effectiveness than the Axis powers in mobilising women was one reason why the Allies, including the Soviets, won (Black 2015: 99). If this is so, then it may be that the apparently irrelevant, innocuous Soviet propaganda short films exerted a tiny, but palpable effect not only on the peace, but also on the very outcome of the war. So maybe the Left's thunder was stolen, but for results and ends of wartime victory and social reform that it aspired to, and endorsed.

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