

Dr Kristin Roth-Ey/ UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies

Cultural exchange and the cold war

The “cultural cold war”—the nexus of culture and superpower politics—has been prime territory for historians for well over two decades, and this for good reason. ‘Between 1945 and 1989-1991, cultural productions became the most powerful tools for the promotion of ideological goals and strategies...’ writes J.C.E. Gienow-Hecht. ‘Never before or afterward did governments, hegemonic powers, NGOs, or private individuals invest as much money, energy, and thought in the promotion of the arts, academic exchange, or cultural self-presentation.’¹ To date American and, to a lesser extent, Soviet stories have dominated cold war historiography. Yet this was, of course, a contest that played out not only bilaterally, but multilaterally, on a global scale, and in an era of dizzying social and technological change. Much to the frustration of the two superpower rivals, waging cold war involved actors and dynamics often well beyond their control. Culture was no exception.

In the *Cold War Eastern Europe* collection, historians have an invitation to explore the variety and complexity of the cultural cold war. The explosion in cultural traffic across the Iron Curtain was anything but a foregone conclusion; indeed, from the perspective of early postwar, when the collection begins, it appeared far from likely. Module I (1953-1960) covers the watershed period for changing attitudes and approaches to exchange on both sides. Clearly, the death of Iosif Stalin in 1953 was of paramount importance, East and West. But from the perspective of the West, a Soviet camp without Stalin—and within a few short years, a Soviet camp involved in something called ‘*de-Stalinization*’—was not necessarily a more intelligible foe. As J.M. Lee has shown, even after 1953, Britain remained guarded about mounting a cultural offensive against communism, preferring, and investing more in, covert operations for some time. The International Research Department [IRD],

¹ Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht and Mark C. Donfried, eds. *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy* (New York & Oxford, 2010), 15.

the major clandestine operation founded in 1948, had staffing levels several times those of the entire BBC foreign press corps in its Soviet section alone.²

The documents in module I lay bare the challenges thrown up by exchange and show historical actors as feeling their way toward solutions in this critical period. At the onset, it is well worth emphasizing contemporary Britain's financial challenges—a mundane, but critical point that comes up time and again in the records. Cultural diplomacy was an expensive business, especially in the conditions proposed by the Soviet bloc, given its inflated and non-convertible currencies. Following on the tremendous success of the *Comédie Française* in the USSR in 1955, a request went out to the ambassador in France to make discrete enquiries as to how the tour had been financed. The assumption was that the French 'were prepared to foot a large bill, given their usual confidence in the superiority of French culture over Russian [or any other] culture!'³ The British, however, were not so sure. A year earlier, the Minister in Budapest had concluded that though 'a British cultural venture would doubtless give great pleasure to the Hungarian man in the street ...we have little need to woo him: he is already converted to our cause.' He continued 'unless a cultural exchange is to be of pecuniary advantage to us, this particular game is, for the time being at least, hardly worth the candle'.⁴

At the same time, the FO was also casting a wary eye on the Soviet bloc's burgeoning cultural links with the Global South, especially southeast Asia and the middle East, and questioning whether perhaps Britain's limited funds for self-projection would best be spent there.⁵ A detailed 1954 report from Moscow commented on the huge new presence of Indian delegations in the USSR, including the historic Indian Film Festival in Moscow, and the unusual levels of publicity that attended them in the Soviet press.⁶ In the 1960s and '70s, as socialist cultural expansion in the Global South mushroomed, the dilemma would grow more acute. Limited budgets and intense ideological rivalry made for difficult choices.

² J.M. Lee, "British Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War: 1946-1961," *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 9:1, 112-134. FCO Historians, *IRD: Origins and Establishment of the Foreign Office Information Research Department 1946-48* (London, 1995).

³ TNA: FO 371/111784. Jellicoe to Meyer, 12 July 1954.

⁴ TNA: FO 371/111496. Labouchere to Eden, 13 August 1954.

⁵ For example, TNA: FO 371/111496. Hohler to Saner, 9 October 1954. ('Money spent in marginal countries like India and Yugoslavia brings in much bigger dividends.')

⁶ TNA: FO 371/ 111767. "Indian Delegations to the Soviet Union, 4 October 1954". See also TNA: FO 371/ 116115D; FO 371/ 135299; FO/371 135157; TNA: FO 371/145544; FO/371 151824.

Relations among western powers and their implications for cultural diplomacy were a further cause for concern. Would British cooperation with the Soviets in theatrical exchanges jeopardize lucrative dollar contracts with the Americans in future, for example?⁷ Was the best option to pursue a series of bilateral agreements (as the states of bloc wanted), or would a collective approach help smooth over possible conflict among western partners and serve their purposes better? Did it make sense to divvy up responsibilities ('that Italy might have a go at Hungary, while we and the French tackled Poland and Czechoslovakia', as mooted in 1956), and if so, how was this to be organized?⁸

A more fundamental problem, however, was the perception that exchange agreements conferred political legitimacy on the exchanging partners. Well into 1956, some in the FO argued that it would be a mistake to conclude official agreements with the 'satellite' or 'puppet' states (their terms) of eastern Europe because to do so would signal Britain's acceptance of their legality.⁹ This was precisely the wrong message to send across the Iron Curtain, where people deserved their support. It was also an approach certain to ruffle feathers among eastern European exiles and émigrés in the UK, many of whom rejected the new states completely and had unresolved legal and financial disputes with them as well.

One possible solution to this problem was to allow cultural exchange to develop organically and unofficially, and in many ways, it was this approach that chimed mostly closely with FO sensibilities. Theatres and other private sector organizations were autonomous agents, free to engage with Soviet bloc partners as they wished, either by sending groups or inviting them to Britain. On the one hand, it was thought important to demonstrate to the Soviet bloc the nature of the West's commitment to freedom: this was the way culture (and business) worked in a free society, the argument went. On the other hand, there could well be a price to pay in domestic political terms if the government were

⁷ TNA: FO 371/ 111786. Minutes (Jellicoe), 13 April 1954.

⁸ TNA: FO 371/ 122121. "Record of a conversation with the Italian Embassy on cultural contacts with the Soviet bloc." 4 July 1956. Although the IRD collaborated closely with the US anti-communist propaganda operation, it resisted American bids to control a coordinated western effort and attempted to chart a distinctive course. See Linda Rizzo, "A Difficult Compromise: British and American Plans for a Common Anti-Communist Propaganda Response in Western Europe, 1948-1958," *Intelligence and National Security*, 26:2-3, 330-354.

⁹ 'Our attitude to the Satellite Governments was that they were not genuine governments at all but puppet regimes; and we did not wish to take any action which would give the peoples of the Satellite States the impression that we took their governments seriously.' TNA: FO/ 371 122121. "Cultural relations with the Soviet Union and the satellite states." 11 April 1956.

seen to be violating its own principles by blocking fundamental freedoms. In point of fact, after Stalin's death, a steadily increasing flow of cultural traffic *did* move across the Iron Curtain—delegations, individuals, exhibitions and so on. Some of this activity was brokered by the British Council, which gained recognition as a permanent governmental institution in 1955. (That same year, the Council formed a Soviet Relations Committee).¹⁰ But all these early activities were the fruit of individual (civic, professional) initiatives, and not a coherent, government-wide strategy or program, which remained controversial.

The impact on the 'man in the street' was an ongoing question- and here it was not so much the Hungarian (Polish, Czechoslovak etc.) public that troubled minds as the British. ('From the point of view of one's own artistic pleasure, it would no doubt be agreeable to see the Hungarian ensemble in London. But there is absolutely no advantage to us in a show which will impress the man in the street with its vitality and gaiety and leave him with the idea that the Hungarian regime is typified by happy dancers [and footballers]).'¹¹ The FO was consistently hostile to the activities of the various 'friendship' societies (e.g. British-Soviet Friendship Society, British-Polish Friendship Society) – civic organizations affiliated with the communist party, albeit not exclusively communist in membership. Any activity sponsored by one of these friendship groups was understood as crypto-communist propaganda. British cultural institutions, who sometimes consulted with the FO when approached by friendship societies with proposals for cooperation, were warned against getting involved.

In March 1954, the IRD prepared a secret report concluding that, far from beneficial, cultural exchanges 'will in general redound to the disadvantage of Her Majesty's Government.' This was because while Soviet bloc cultural activities abroad had the capacity to sway western opinion, western cultural activities could 'only have an exiguous effect on public opinion (since the Communist Governments control all forms of publicity)'. In effect, there was no way for the British government to control the impact of communist propaganda on the British public, nor the impact of British culture behind the Iron Curtain. A positive response to 'the Communist cultural offensive' would thus only serve to amplify their message and risk 'creating the impression that our relations with the Communist world

¹⁰ For a discussion of the Soviet case, see Mark Smith, "Peaceful Coexistence at All Costs: Cold War Exchanges between Britain and the Soviet Union in 1956," *Cold War History* 12:3, 537-558.

¹¹ TNA: FO 371/ 111496. Minute by Brown on Labouchere to Hohler. November 1954.

are normal...[and] reduce public vigilance to the aims of international communism.’ The IRD suggested that the British government share this analysis with its allies ‘in the hope that that this will open the eyes of other Governments to the problem’.¹²

Within a few short years, this kind of defensive approach would seem outmoded at best. Already at the four power summit in Geneva in July 1955, Soviet and western representatives attempted to hammer out cultural exchange principles for the first time. The theme was very much on the agenda during Nikita Khrushchev’s and Nikolai Bulganin’s visit to the UK in April 1956. Two years later, an analysis of the recent French and American cultural agreements with the USSR concluded that the UK could and should do better, while also continuing to underscore that *ad hoc* arrangements were always preferable to formal ones and that they must not allow themselves to be boxed in by formal obligations that might prove difficult, or undesirable, to meet.¹³ Formal negotiations got underway that year all the same, and a UK-USSR agreement was signed in London in December 1959.¹⁴ The momentum for East-West exchange was, it seems, irresistible.

No single factor can account for the remarkable shift in attitudes and approach to cultural diplomacy over the crucial years covered in module 1, 1953-1961. Mark Smith emphasizes the importance of the nuclear threat in focusing people’s minds; contemporaries on both sides of the Iron Curtain understood cultural exchange as a means to ratchet down tensions and decrease the risk of nuclear war.¹⁵ We can also point, with Sarah Davies and others, to Britain’s desire to use cultural diplomacy to make its mark on the world stage, and particularly to distinguish itself from the US.¹⁶ It is also important to recognize just how hard the Soviets and eastern Europeans pressed on the UK (and indeed all the western powers) to open up. In the increasingly dynamic media environment of the postwar era, the ‘culture story’ was not one easy to ignore. One of the main talking points of the Paris Working Group (France, US, UK) in the run up to the Geneva Summit was that the West must *not* allow the Soviets to ‘take the initiative’ and ‘take credit’ for cultural

¹² TNA: FO 371/ 111362. “British policy toward cultural relations with the communist bloc”, March 1954.

¹³ TNA: FO 371/ 135392, “Summary of French and American Cultural Agreements with the USSR”. 1958

¹⁴ See [http://treaties.fco.gov.uk/docs/fullnames/pdf/1959/TS0082%20\(1959\)%20CMND-917%201959%201%20DECEMBER,%20LONDON%3BAGR%20BETWEEN%20GOVT%20OF%20UK&NI&GOVT%20OF%20USSR%20ON%20RELATIONS%20IN%20SCIENTIFIC,%20TECHNOLOGICAL,%20EDUCATIONAL&CULTURAL%20FIELDS%201960-61.PDF](http://treaties.fco.gov.uk/docs/fullnames/pdf/1959/TS0082%20(1959)%20CMND-917%201959%201%20DECEMBER,%20LONDON%3BAGR%20BETWEEN%20GOVT%20OF%20UK&NI&GOVT%20OF%20USSR%20ON%20RELATIONS%20IN%20SCIENTIFIC,%20TECHNOLOGICAL,%20EDUCATIONAL&CULTURAL%20FIELDS%201960-61.PDF)

¹⁵ See Smith, “Peaceful Coexistence at all Costs”.

¹⁶ Sarah Davies, “The Soft Power of Anglia: British Cold War Cultural Diplomacy in the USSR,” *Contemporary British History*, 27:3, 297-323.

exchange agreements.¹⁷ In this period of great change, then, the British foreign policy establishment found itself under great pressure not only from Soviet bloc ideological bravura, but also from popular initiatives at home and abroad, and from the demands of a globalizing media.

¹⁷ "Report of the Paris Working Group. Appendix VI (Iron Curtain)", TNA: FO 371/111650.