

Ludmila Stern

### ***Moscow 1937: The Interpreter's Story***

'Political pilgrimages' by Western intellectuals to the USSR in the 1920s–30s is a well documented theme. External and internal reasons for the Soviet sympathies of Barbusse and Rolland, Shaw and Wells, Dreiser and Feuchtwanger have been examined at length both as a complex cultural and historical phenomenon<sup>1</sup> and in biographies of individual writers.<sup>2</sup> However, there is a parallel narrative involving the active efforts of the Soviet side to encourage this support. Sophie Coeuré, Michael David-Fox, Sheila Fitzpatrick, Ludmila Stern and other researchers have been examining the archival documents of Soviet organisations in charge of relations with these foreigners, for example VOKS (*Vsesoiuznoe obshchestvo kul'turnykh svyazei s zagranitsei* or the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries). In her recent book, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920–40: From Red Square to the Left Bank*,<sup>3</sup> the author of

---

<sup>1</sup> D. Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961); A. F. Bance (ed.), *Weimar Germany: Writers and Politics* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1982); D. Cauté, *Le Communisme et les intellectuels français, 1914–1966* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967); D. Cauté, *The Fellow-Travelers* (London: Macmillan, 1973); V. Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); P. Hollander, *Political Pilgrims Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China and Cuba, 1928–1978* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); T. Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944–1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 18–21; J.-P. Morel, *Le roman insupportable: L'Internationale littéraire et la France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> For example, see D. Bona, *Stefan Zweig: L'ami blessé* (Paris: Plon, 1996); A. Cohen-Solal, avec la collaboration de H. Nizan, *Paul Nizan, Communiste Impossible* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1980); P. Daix, *Aragon: Une vie à changer* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994); T. Dreiser, *Dreiser Looks at Russia* (London: Constable, 1928); J. Lacouture, *André Malraux. Une vie dans le siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1973); R. Maurer, *André Gide et l'URSS* (Berne: Editions Tillier, 1983); H. Nizan, M.-J. Jaubert, *Libres mémoires* (Paris: Editions Robert Laffont, 1989); N. Racine, 'Jean-Richard Bloch (1939–1941) ou les épreuves de la fidélité', A. Angrémy, M. Trebitsch (eds.), *Jean-Richard Bloch, ou l'écriture et l'action* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2002), 253–273; T. P. Riggio, L. W. West III (eds.), *Dreiser's Russian Diary* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); A. Sheridan, *André Gide. A Life in the Present* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1998); S. Spender, *The Thirties and After: Poetry, Politics, People (1933–75)* (London: The Macmillan Press / Fontana, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> L. Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920–40: From Red Square to the Left Bank* (London, New York: Routledge, 2006).

this article uncovers the little-known ‘behind the scenes’ operations of VOKS, reconstructs its mechanisms of attraction, influence and manipulation of Western intellectuals, and documents the interactions between Soviet employees and foreign visitors – intellectuals and professionals.<sup>4</sup> It is shown that VOKS played a major part in, first, seducing visitors, and second, leading them to exercise their influence in spreading a positive image of the USSR in the West.

Interpreter/guides played a central part in these operations. The VOKS Chairman, Aleksandr Arosev, described them as ‘barrage units leading the army’ (*zagraditel'nye otriady*). However, little is known about them except their names and working languages. There is almost no record of how they were recruited, trained and instructed to act.<sup>5</sup> Official documents of VOKS and other organisations only occasionally mention the fact that they should be ‘politically prepared’ (*politicheski podgotovlenniye perevodchik*).<sup>6</sup> Visitors barely ever mention them in their travel accounts, even though their impressions of the USSR were often sifted through the interpreters’ point of view. Even Jean-Richard and Marguerite Bloch, who had fond memories of their interpreters, wrote nothing about them in their *Journal du voyage en URSS*<sup>7</sup> – not about Valentina Mil’man, or ‘Bolia’ Boleslavskaia-Wolfson, or Natalia Kamionskaia. However, André Gide leaves the reader in no doubt about how little he trusted his interpreter, ‘the charming comrade [Bolia]’:

Nothing indeed ever floors her, and she provides an answer to everything; the more ignorant she is of a subject, the more cocksure she becomes ... Our

<sup>4</sup> Other organisations examined in the book include the Comintern, MORP (*Mezhdunarodnaia Assotsiatsiia revoliutsionnykh pisatelei* or International Association of Revolutionary Writers) and the Foreign Commission of the Praesidium of the Soviet Writers’ Union (*Inostrannaiia komissiiia Prezidiuma Soiuzu Sovetskikh pisatelei*).

<sup>5</sup> Berezkhov very briefly describes his own, short-term, employment as a VOKS interpreter and a short pre-employment training course he had to attend. V. Berezkhov, *Riadom so Stalinym* (Moskva: Vagrius, 1998). See also R. Orlova, *Vospominaniia o neprosheidshem vremeni* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1983), 103–118, and, for a much less reliable account, T. Solonevich, *Zapiski sovetskoi perevodchitsy* (Sofia: Golos Rossii, 1937).

<sup>6</sup> Apletin, letter to Kol’tsov (Chairman of the Commission of Foreign Relations of the Soviet Writers’ Union), 19 April 1935, RGASPI, MORP f. 541, op. 1, d. 27, ll. 1–2.

<sup>7</sup> J.-R. et M. Bloch, *Journal du voyage en URSS*, Fonds Jean-Richard Bloch; Don 28448, Département de Manuscrits Occidentaux, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. See also L. Stern, ‘*Journal du voyage en URSS de Marguerite et Jean-Richard Bloch*’, in A. Angrémy et M. Trebitsch (eds.), *Jean-Richard Bloch, ou l’écriture et l’action*, 231–241.

charming guide is as obliging and devoted as it is possible to be. But there is this about her that is rather fatiguing – the information she gives us is never precise except when it is wrong.<sup>8</sup>

However, much is revealed about the role of the interpreters in their reports. It is unclear when writing reports became a mandatory practice. In the late 1920s VOKS interpreters wrote down brief lists of sights that they planned to visit, and occasionally – accounts of conversations with visitors and the interpreters' personal remarks. Longer and more detailed reports can be traced back to 1927; they were written by either zealous or anxious interpreters<sup>9</sup> or in relation to visits by eminent figures, for example, Barbusse and Dreiser. By the mid to late 1930s it became mandatory,<sup>10</sup> and in 1936, Arosev introduced standard forms, with new spaces for noting the visitor's statements, the interpreter's conclusions and a character assessment of the visitor. In a special meeting of 14 May 1937, calling on his staff to increase their vigilance, Arosev instructed interpreters to conduct detailed, revealing conversations with their charges and to expand reports even further. 'I propose that you go beyond the framework of the forms and write more imaginative prose (*belletristika*).'<sup>11</sup>

Interpreter/guides' reports indeed provide fascinating reading about VOKS's role in planning, conducting and monitoring foreigners' visits, in some cases providing feedback to their superiors (for example, Marquet's interpreter writes that the reception was conducted 'according to plan' [*planovo*]<sup>12</sup>), in others (as in

<sup>8</sup> A. Gide, *Afterthoughts: A Sequel to Back from the USSR*, translated by Dorothy Bussy (London: Martin Secker, 1938), 102–3, quoted in L. Maximenkov, C. Barnes 'Boris Pasternak in August 1936 – an NKVD Memorandum', *Toronto Slavic Quarterly* No. 6, Fall 2003, <http://www.utoronto.ca/tsq/06/pasternak06.shtml>.

<sup>9</sup> L. Stern, 'The All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and French Intellectuals, 1925–1929,' *Australian Journal of Politics and History* Volume 45, 1 (1999), 99–109.

<sup>10</sup> Information on tourists from France, Italy and Spain who visited the USSR in 1935–1936, and the record of conversation with them, 5 October 1935 – 8 October 1936, GARF, VOKS f. 5283, op. 2, d. 260.

<sup>11</sup> Arosev's speech at the meeting of the VOKS active nucleus, 14 May 1937, f. 5283, op. 1, d. 357, l. 67, in A. Golubev and V. Nevezhin, 'VOKS v 1930–1940-e gody', *Minuvshee: Istoricheskii al'manakh* 14 (Moscow, St. Petersburg: Atheneum-Fenix, 1993), 349–350.

<sup>12</sup> Programme of service provided to Marquet, GARF, VOKS f. 5283, op. 7, d. 313 and Report by com. Kravchenko on the reception of the French artist Albert Marquet, ll. 35–36.

the case of Gollancz<sup>13</sup>), implicitly responding to specific instructions. Naturally, the reports have to be read with critical distance because of the known tendency of the VOKS interpreters to either gloss over and exaggerate to suit the expectations of their management<sup>14</sup> or, on the contrary, project fears that proved unfounded.<sup>15</sup> With the heading ‘not to be disclosed’ (*ne podlezhit oglasheniu*), and bearing pencil marks and hand-written comments in the margin, these typed-up reports were clearly passed on to senior members of staff and to Arosev for screening.

These reports suggest that while in the 1930s the number and choice of places to be visited increased, compared to the 1920s, the principal idea of the visits remained the same. Visitors were taken to the same socio-cultural (*kul'turno-bytovye*) institutions promoting Soviet achievements, rather than to places of traditional Russian cultural and historical heritage. Along with collective farms and the Bolshevo commune for underage criminals, visitors were shown the Central Park of Culture and Rest (the future Gorky Park) and the obligatory Moscow Metro, opened in 1934. Visits to art exhibitions of European and Russian masterpieces alternated with the Lenin Museum, the Anti-Religious Museum and the display of drawings by Soviet children. Other institutions routinely visited included the Mother and Child Rooms (*Komnata materi i rebenka*) at the Kazansky or the Northern railway stations, and the Institute of Child and Adolescent Health (*Institut okhrany zdorov'ia detei i podrostkov*). The most visited high school was the Decembrists' school.

The main change in VOKS's 1930s program was that it became strictly controlled. No more deviations from the official list of sites would be tolerated, and, unlike in the 1920s, visitors could no longer be allowed to wander off unsupervised, as did Theodore Dreiser and Walter Benjamin in 1927–28. However, this controlled hospitality with its opulent banquets, holidays on the Black Sea and displays of cultural excellence, which Mikhail Apletin, an official of both VOKS and MORP, cynically called ‘stage managements’,<sup>16</sup> did not always produce the desired outcome. In 1936, André Gide, singled out for a particularly lavish re-

<sup>13</sup> Conversation with Gollancz, Leningrad Section, Orlov to Arosev, 14 May 1937, GARF, VOKS f. 5283, op. 3, d. 1070, l. 37.

<sup>14</sup> Orlova, 103–118.

<sup>15</sup> See Stern, ‘The All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and French Intellectuals, 1925–1929’, 99–109.

<sup>16</sup> Apletin, ll. 1–2.

ception, caused a scandal by publishing his critical *Return from the USSR*. Gide's *volte face*, following his enthusiastic response during his visit, demonstrated how unreliable the Western fellow-travellers' support was. At the time when the first Moscow trials began to cause consternation amongst the previously solid ranks of Western supporters, Soviet organisations began to regard their visitors with suspicion.<sup>17</sup> The 'direct party instructions relating to increased vigilance' (*primnye partiinye direktivy, sviazannye s usileniem bditel'nosti*)<sup>18</sup> issued by Yezhov in 1936 hit VOKS hard, leading members of its staff to spy on each other and even send letters of denunciation to the NKVD. Arosev sent his letters directly to Yezhov and Stalin, implicating rival organisations and some Soviet writers. These events are given detailed attention in *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union*.<sup>19</sup>

It was in this atmosphere that in December 1936, shortly after the publication of Gide's book, another 'famous foreigner' arrived in Moscow. This was Lion Feuchtwanger, an exiled German Jewish writer living in the South of France. Feuchtwanger was internationally known for his historical and anti-Nazi novels, which included *Jew Süß*, *Success* and *The Oppermanns*. Feuchtwanger had been invited by Mikhail Kol'tsov, Chair of the Foreign Commission of the Soviet Writers' Union and a journalist well-known both in the USSR and in the West. He sought special approval for this invitation from the Central Committee and the Politburo. The same attention needed to be accorded to Feuchtwanger as to André Gide, he argued,<sup>20</sup> for Feuchtwanger's visit might well prompt him to write a rebuttal of Gide's *Return from the USSR*. Possibly too he might reverse the critical views of the Moscow trials held by intellectuals in his circle. As it was known to Soviet organisations that Feuchtwanger had been critical of the 1936 trials of Zinov'ev and Kamenev, his visit was timed to coincide with the second trial, that of Pyatakov, Radek and others, held in January 1937.

<sup>17</sup> In fact, already in the late 1920s the Head of the VOKS Romance sector, Tsetsiliia Rabinovich, had instructed its interpreters to mistrust non-Communist visitors; this led to a close scrutiny of the visitors' reactions and possible future accounts in the west, and an almost open hostility on the part of the interpreter. See Stern, 'The All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and French Intellectuals,' 108.

<sup>18</sup> Arosev to Yezhov, 15 May 1936, GARF, VOKS *f.* 5283, *op.* 1a, *d.* 308, *l.* 47.

<sup>19</sup> Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920–40*, 273–278.

<sup>20</sup> Maximenkov, Barnes, 'Boris Pasternak in August 1936...'

A left-bourgeois writer (*levoburzhuaznyi pisatel'*), to use VOKS's term, Feuchtwanger went to Moscow, by his own account, as a sympathiser, hoping to confirm that the Great Experiment was a success. Sharing Jean-Richard Bloch's misgivings about the restrictions on personal freedom in the Soviet Union, he found in *Return from the USSR* a warning and a source of reflection.<sup>21</sup> Whatever his exact expectations of the USSR on the eve of his visit, Feuchtwanger was looked after jointly by the Foreign Commission of the Soviet Writers' Union and VOKS and received with the highest honours, including the rare privilege of a meeting with Stalin, and sat in on the 1937 trial. Shortly after his return to France in February 1937, he published the notorious *Moscow 1937*, in which he praised Stalin's Soviet Union and justified the trials.

However, at the time of his stay, not everyone shared Kol'tsov's optimism regarding the usefulness of the important guest. VOKS archival documents reveal a high degree of suspicion on the part of the VOKS staff involved in the hosting of his visit. These documents recreate a fascinating picture of Feuchtwanger's responses to Soviet hospitality and, perhaps more importantly, of the way the leaders of Soviet organisations and interpreters interacted with eminent Western visitors (and each other) in 1936–37. The very first account of Feuchtwanger is found in Arosev's letters to Stalin, Molotov and Yezhov. Following the latter's directives about the need for heightened vigilance, Arosev was quick to delegate responsibility to the rival Writers' Union and warned the Soviet leadership that Feuchtwanger might prove to be another Gide.

At the moment, Feuchtwanger is in Moscow. He is an important figure in terms of his influence on European minds. His name is known across every continent, plus he speaks the main languages of all the continents. In addition, regardless of his literary talent, this man has great appeal. He has numerous friends and a large crowd of fans.

As to his character, he is a petty man. *His attitude towards us is very uncertain.* He is also the responsibility of the Soviet Writers' Union. On the basis of initial reports about conversations with him, his actions on his return from the Soviet Union *cannot but inspire our concern.*<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> L. Feuchtwanger, 'Foreword: Aim of the book' *Moscow 1937*, published 1937, <http://www.kuzbass.ru/moshkow/koi/INPROZ/FEJHTWANGER/moscow1937.txt>.

<sup>22</sup> Arosev to Stalin, Molotov, Yezhov, Andreyev, 13 December 1936, GARF, VOKS, *f.* 5283, *op. la, d.* 308, *l.* 135.

Arosev's information about Feuchtwanger was clearly based on reports by D. Karavkina, an employee of the VOKS Second Western Department. A future translator of Hoffmann and Hesse into Russian, she was appointed as Feuchtwanger's interpreter and secretary and wrote daily reports about him.<sup>23</sup> Photographs capture them both smiling and looking content; however, Karavkina's reports convey a different picture, in which Feuchtwanger appears as an ironic, sceptical and essentially critical figure. Karavkina's accounts are very different from those written by other interpreter/guides ten years earlier; however, they are reminiscent of most of those by Ludmila Rastiger-Ronskaia, an interpreter who accompanied the French writer Andrée Viollis to Central Asia in 1929. Ronskaia was the first Soviet interpreter to write a report about her negative experience of dealing with a foreign visitor. In it she clearly stated that her role was that of a propagandist responsible for the visitor's impressions of the USSR.<sup>24</sup>

Just as Ronskaia's report, in the form of a letter, had been sent to her superior, Tsetsiliia Rabinovich, Karavkina's reports, re-typed and bearing handwritten comments, were clearly passed on to her superiors. By the time Arosev wrote to Stalin, Molotov and Yezhov, he had received at least four of her reports. Karavkina's caution was understandable. As a VOKS interpreter, she would have been warned many times to be on her guard, and would have borne the brunt of the responsibility for Feuchtwanger. Her negative assessment of Feuchtwanger is understandable, given the frequency with which his critical comments appear in her reports. Even accepting that these are biased, they nonetheless reflect Feuchtwanger's reactions, his sources of information about the USSR, and Karavkina's role as an official propagandist. Looking through his interpreter's eyes, much can be learned about the fluctuations in his views during his stay, as well as about the complex role of a VOKS interpreter as professional propagandist and her expectations of the charge from whom she wished to elicit an uncritically positive response.

---

<sup>23</sup> Some of these have already been published, while others, kept in separate files, are discussed here for the first time. I. A. Altman 'L. Feuchtwanger in Moscow (from the reports of a VOKS employee)' *Sovetskie arkhivy*, 4, 1989, 55–63. Other VOKS reports on Feuchtwanger are contained in *op.* 8 *d.* 290, *op.* 5 *d.* 745, *op.* 1 *d.* 334, and *op.* 8 *d.* 292.

<sup>24</sup> Stern, 'The All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and French Intellectuals, 1925–1929', 106–8.

Feuchtwanger's reactions to his custom-made program were unpredictable. Though a sympathiser, he often responded as a political adversary and refused to play the game. 'He has shown no interest in Soviet life, our construction and art,' wrote Karavkina. When asked about his impressions of the Metro – the Muscovites' pride and joy – he replied that he could make no comparisons, as he never took the underground and always travelled by car. From Karavkina's point of view, his motivation for being in Moscow seemed purely selfish. 'As the basis of his schedule, Feuchtwanger uses his "writer's business", such as negotiations with publishers, editors, authors and directors for stage and screen adaptation of his writings.'<sup>25</sup> (During the visit of Victor Gollancz in April 1937, his interpreter/guide made similarly negative comments regarding the publisher's lack of interest in Soviet achievements and the priority he assigned to his business negotiations with Aleksei Tolstoy, conducted without the supervision of VOKS.<sup>26</sup>)

Luxury and comfort – Soviet style, at least – failed to impress Feuchtwanger. The Metropol Hotel, which had so enchanted Jean-Richard and Marguerite Bloch in 1934 with its old-world glamour,<sup>27</sup> was an endless source of grievance to Feuchtwanger. Karavkina disparagingly described his complaints as petty and concerned with minor problems. He 'complained about small things going wrong (*nepoladki*): the light, the furniture, etc.' and was worried that his possessions might be stolen from his room. Worse still, he believed that minor failings reflected bad general management. 'He immediately added that such petty details probably had had a significant impact on the mood of Andre Gide, a highly strung person and an artist.'<sup>28</sup> Such was the source of Arosev's opinion of Feuchtwanger as conveyed in his letter to Stalin and Yezhov.

Small things also led the German visitor to generalise about living conditions in the USSR. 'In the morning, Feuchtwanger spoke endlessly about how life in the USSR is full of inconveniences. He complained about service in the hotel, unreliable mail deliveries and a whole range of other faults.'<sup>29</sup> If Karavkina's

<sup>25</sup> Karavkina, 13 December 1936, GARF, VOKS f. 5283, op. 5, d. 745, l. 22.

<sup>26</sup> 'He did not display any of the qualities of a man who is interested in our life', Orlov to Arosev, 14 May 1937, l. 37.

<sup>27</sup> Stern, 'Journal du voyage en URSS de Marguerite et Jean-Richard Bloch', 232.

<sup>28</sup> Karavkina, 11 December 1936, GARF, VOKS f. 5283, op. 5, d. 745, l. 21.

<sup>29</sup> Karavkina, 29 December 1936, GARF, VOKS f. 5283, op. 1, d. 334, l. 34 (verso).

report can be trusted, his observations again extended to Soviet life in general. 'He declared that so far, the living standard in the USSR is infinitely lower than in other European countries; when our worker begins to live like a French one, then the Soviets will conquer the entire world.'<sup>30</sup> His criticism of the low living standard was concrete and based on his own observations. 'He was then thinking aloud about the living conditions of the employees at the resort where he had stayed. They earn 70 roubles [per month] while a pair of shoes costs 180 roubles. And so forth, along those lines.'

Criticising Feuchtwanger's small-mindedness ('his character seems very petty', a recurring criticism in these reports), and observing that 'petty things obscure his view of major ones',<sup>31</sup> Karavkina admitted that he expressed approval too, however grudgingly. 'You do not have to defend the Soviet Union to me; I do understand perfectly well how grand (*grandiozno*) everything here is and what gigantic work (*gigantskaia rabota*) is being done here,'<sup>32</sup> she quoted him. Towards the end of December and in early January, Karavkina noted that Feuchtwanger was becoming more receptive. He showed an interest in the daily life of the workers, wishing to visit their homes and shops and asking Karavkina about her own living conditions. He even praised the reconstruction of Moscow.

Despite his scepticism, Feuchtwanger was struck by the grandeur of the Moscow reconstruction plan and spoke about it with admiration, enquiring about every detail of its development and approval, as well as its implementation.

Having noted that Feuchtwanger was very interested in the theatre, Karavkina now reported that

he liked the performance of [Gozzi's play] *Turandot* a lot, with an excellent cast. During one of the interludes, Goriunov publicly announced that Feuchtwanger was in the audience. He received an ovation and was dragged onto the stage. He was very embarrassed but obviously pleased.<sup>33</sup>

As for Rolland, Bloch, Malraux and many other visiting writers, meeting Soviet intellectuals was a particular source of pleasure for Feuchtwanger. Having

<sup>30</sup> Karavkina, 13 December 1936, GARF, VOKS, *f.* 5283, *op.* 5, *d.* 745, *l.* 22.

<sup>31</sup> Karavkina, 7 December 1936, GARF, VOKS, *f.* 5283, *op.* 8, *d.* 290, *l.* 16.

<sup>32</sup> Karavkina, 11 December 1936, GARF, VOKS, *f.* 5283, *op.* 5, *d.* 745, *l.* 21.

<sup>33</sup> Karavkina, 24 December 1936, GARF, VOKS, *f.* 5283, *op.* 1, *d.* 334, *l.* 5.

initially asked to meet Aleksei Tolstoy, Babel', Pasternak, Il'f and Petrov, and Eisenstein,<sup>34</sup> he greatly enjoyed the VOKS reception on 21 December, at which he met the artists Konchalovsky and the Kukryniksy, the writers Afinogenov, Leonov, Serafimovich, Roshal' and Simonov, the actors Giatsintova and Il'insky and others:

He liked the fact that there were representatives of different layers of the Soviet intelligentsia and that he had the opportunity to talk to them. He found that everything was very much 'in the European style'.

He was very pleased to have attended a private dinner hosted by Il'f and Petrov in the company of Babel' and Kataev, to which he was invited on 3 January 1937.

Karavkina noted that meeting Soviet readers also was a highly stimulating experience – not just because Feuchtwanger was known to the audience, but because of the chance it gave him for a meaningful exchange with a thinking readership that had an excellent and detailed knowledge of his books. This was also the experience of Marquet, Rolland, Gide and others who met in the USSR an appreciative and responsive audience.

At first he wasn't pleased that he had been dragged out of the house, but the young people's speeches visibly got to him, and when his turn came to speak, he did it with some animation (as much as his temperament allowed him to) and defended his heroes, whom the young people had criticised, quite firmly. In conclusion, he declared that the last part of his trilogy about contemporary Germany, the first part of which was *Success*, would have a positive ending, which he owes to his visit to the USSR and what he saw here. This is what he considers to be the most valuable experience he acquired here. On the way back, Feuchtwanger spoke of the pleasant impression the TsAGI young people had made on him, their intellect, the thoughtful attitude to the books they read and the high level of their knowledge.<sup>35</sup>

This meeting of the literate and the thoughtful took place at the Central Aero-hydrodynamic Institute, or TsAGI. Other meetings had the opposite effect. Being in constant demand, assailed by visitors, overwhelmed with invitations and importuned by requests for articles, Feuchtwanger grew tired and irritated. During

<sup>34</sup> Karavkina, 13 December 1936, GARF, VOKS f. 5283, op. 5, d. 745.

<sup>35</sup> This meeting took place on 28 December 1936.

a 'friendly meeting' at the *Kino* newspaper, about a dozen staff members 'surrounded him and despite his obvious displeasure made him answer their questions. He was most indignant and cross (*on byl ochen' vozmushchen i zol*) for it was meant to be a 'friendly' meeting'. Another meeting, at the Masters' Club (*Klub masterov*), made 'an oppressive impression on him. In fact, apart from Mikhoels and Vishnevsky, there were no major actors or artists. The concert was worse than mediocre. It wasn't worth dragging him out at midnight to a concert like this. He was very displeased and very tired.'

Karavkina's reports of her efforts to stop Feuchtwanger from meeting those who were not on the approved list suggest that Arosev's characterisation of VOKS interpreters as 'barrage units' was no mere turn of phrase. They also reveal that even in 1937, Soviet organisations did not manage entirely to control their visitors' stay, and that the protective wall erected around Feuchtwanger was not foolproof. 'Although com[rade]. Apletin and I are trying to control visits to Feuchtwanger as much as possible, from time to time some people manage to get through and have a very harmful influence on him,' wrote Karavkina on 3 January 1937. The effect on Feuchtwanger of such meetings with 'unapproved' individuals was to subvert the impression of conditions in the Soviet Union which he was intended to take away with him. On 15 December Karavkina wrote,

At this time some woman literally burst into his room. She turned out to be Erich Mühsam's widow. Feuchtwanger was beside himself, as he does not like it when people burst in so unexpectedly. The next day he told me that he was very unhappy that she was dragging him into her 'ugly stories' (*nekrasivye dela*), that she had 'done silly things' (*nadelala glupostei*) here, had been involved in a Trotskyite matter and arrested, and that he had no intentions of getting mixed up – in other words, he was very displeased with her. All the same, he told her to come on 22.12 at 4 pm.<sup>36</sup>

Such incidents were clearly a jolt to Feuchtwanger, and it was feared they would disillusion him. On 3 January Karavkina reported that the previous day, Feuchtwanger had received the actress Yanukova, wife of the German theatre director Erwin Piscator, who had lived in the USSR for several years from 1929 and by the time of Feuchtwanger's visit had returned to the West.

<sup>36</sup> Karavkina, 15 December 1936, GARF, VOKS, *f.* 5283, *op.* 8, *d.* 290, *l.* 11.

She told him plenty of horror stories (*ona emu narasskazala vsiakikh uzhasov*) about our accommodation difficulties. In addition, apparently Piscator had paid 200,000 roubles for an apartment which he never got because he had been cheated.

She made the worst impression on him by telling him that in summer she had to sleep in a park for two weeks as she had no roof over her head. ‘What? An actress from a Moscow theatre could find nowhere to sleep?’ He became so agitated (*vzvolnovan*) that he could barely wait for my return to tell me about it.

Undesirable information came even from authorised sources – Soviet writers, as Karavkina dutifully noted in her report. One of them told Feuchtwanger that ‘Russia never had its own [school of] painting, nor does it have one now.’ An asterisk in ink on Karavkina’s typed report directs the reader to a handwritten footnote: ‘Tret’iakov said this.’<sup>37</sup> On another occasion, Feuchtwanger asked Karavkina if it was true ‘that Pasternak is in disgrace (*v opale*) as his work does not coincide with the Party’s general line’. He had learned this at Il’f and Petrov’s dinner with Babel’ and Katayev. ‘Then he told me an anti-Soviet joke. When I asked him in amazement who had been supplying him with such information, he did not say.’<sup>38</sup> It is surprising that in 1937 Soviet intellectuals still spoke to a foreigner and in each other’s presence with relative freedom and openness. However, it is equally surprising to note that, unlike Gide, Feuchtwanger trusted his interpreter and naïvely shared his impressions with her. In fact, by quoting his Soviet colleagues he was endangering them, since Karavkina wrote down every word he said, and her denunciatory reports were passed on to the very top of the Soviet hierarchy.

Feuchtwanger’s trust went further: he engaged in frank polemics with Karavkina. He repeatedly questioned the lack of political freedom in the USSR.

In his opinion, there is no freedom of speech in the USSR. He then added that he is not against dictatorship as ‘he understands the need for it’ in the current conditions, however he considers ‘a bit more tolerance’ essential.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Karavkina, 25 December 1936, GARF, VOKS, *f.* 5283, *op.* 1, *d.* 334, *l.* 4.

<sup>38</sup> Karavkina, 3 January 1937, GARF, VOKS, *f.* 5283, *op.* 5, *d.* 745, *l.* 19.

<sup>39</sup> Karavkina, 14 December 1936, GARF, VOKS, *f.* 5283, *op.* 8, *d.* 290, *l.* 9.

This awareness, confirmed by his knowledge of Gide's experience, made him cautious in expressing his opinion, he told Karavkina. 'He was saying, among other things, that it is "dangerous" to express one's opinions here, and that this is what happened to André Gide, and that he had been told that they don't like criticism here, particularly by foreigners, and so forth.'<sup>40</sup>

Soon enough Feuchtwanger experienced this lack of freedom at first hand. Maria Osten-Gressgener, a German political migrant to the USSR, the author of *Hubert in Wonderland. Days and Deeds of a German Pioneer* (1935) and Kol'tsov's common-law wife, asked Feuchtwanger to write an article for *Pravda*. It was an article about Gide, and Osten had supplied him with materials. To Feuchtwanger's surprise, the article was not published when he expected it. 'I reassured him that they had simply run out of time,' Karavkina explained.<sup>41</sup> But then *Pravda* contacted him, asking for corrections before they would publish his article. Feuchtwanger was indignant.

It has been a difficult day today, as Feuchtwanger could not wait to pour onto me all his indignation because *Pravda*, he says, demands that he make corrections in his article on Gide. This, he said, proves that Gide was right about the lack of freedom of opinion and that one cannot express one's opinions, etc.

Mekhlis [the editor] suggested that he change certain parts, namely those relating to Stalin's 'personality cult'. I explained the essence of the Soviet nations' attitude to com. Stalin, where it came from, and that it was totally wrong to call it a 'cult'.

He was fuming for a long time, saying that he was not going to change anything. However, by the time Maria Osten arrived he had cooled down, sat with her in the study meekly and corrected everything she asked except a sentence on 'tolerance' which he would not get rid of under any circumstances.<sup>42</sup>

The trials were another matter of great concern to Feuchtwanger, who had come to Moscow deeply disturbed by the 1936 trials of Kamenev and Zinov'ev. The idea that the old Bolsheviks could be accused of treason and, worse still,

<sup>40</sup> Karavkina, 16 December 1936, GARF, VOKS, f. 5283, op. 1, d. 334, l. 9.

<sup>41</sup> Karavkina, 25 December 1936, GARF, VOKS, f. 5283, op. 1, d. 334, l. 4.

<sup>42</sup> Karavkina, 27 December 1936, GARF, VOKS, f. 5283, op. 1, d. 334, l. 3.

would confess to monstrous crimes, made no sense to him. Karavkina was quite unable to justify it to him, and he impatiently awaited a meeting with Georgy Dimitrov, the internationally revered Bulgarian Comintern leader, who had bravely defended himself from trumped-up charges at the Reichstag Fire trial.

He said he was looking forward to a meeting with com. Dimitrov. He needed to talk to him about the Trotskyite trial, because it had had a shattering effect in Europe and had cost the Soviet Union two-thirds of its supporters. Because of this it was now important to undertake some explanatory work to correct the situation.<sup>43</sup>

However, Dimitrov also failed to supply Feuchtwanger with convincing arguments.

He told me about his visit to Dimitrov, who received him at home for dinner. He went there especially in order to discuss the Trotskyite trial. He said that Dimitrov was very nervous (*volnovalsia*) in talking about it and took one and a half hours to explain it to him, but ‘did not persuade him’. Feuchtwanger then declared to me that abroad this trial is being considered in a very hostile light and that it is seen in the same category as the Reichstag Fire trial. ‘Nobody’ can understand that it is possible that 15 ‘committed revolutionaries’, who had risked their lives so many times, plotting against the lives of the leaders, would suddenly all confess and repent. I explained to him that his entire mistake consisted precisely of considering these Trotskyite counter-revolutionaries as ‘committed revolutionaries’, when they were in fact totally unscrupulous people who strove to gain power by all means, stopping at nothing.<sup>44</sup>

It seems that his hosts’ goal at every turn was to try to persuade Feuchtwanger to accept the USSR as it was shown to him, in accordance with Apletin’s earlier suggestion that visitors at all times be surrounded by ‘politically prepared interpreters’, Soviet writers speaking the visitor’s language and ‘comrades in charge’ (*otvetstvennyie tovarishchi*).<sup>45</sup> Karavkina, as a permanent presence in his entourage, fulfilled her function either by removing the cause of his criticisms (for example by having repairs arranged at the hotel), or by marshalling endless

<sup>43</sup> Karavkina, 17 December 1936, GARF, VOKS, *f.* 5283, *op.* 1, *d.* 334, *l.* 8.

<sup>44</sup> Karavkina, 19 December 1936, GARF, VOKS, *f.* 5283, *op.* 1, *d.* 334, *l.* 7.

<sup>45</sup> Apletin to Kol'tsov 19 April 1935, RGASPI, MORP *f.* 541, *op.* 1, *d.* 27, *ll.* 1–2.

counter-arguments. She found Feuchtwanger receptive to persuasion. 'I have been trying to prove to him that this kind of reasoning is false, by using a whole range of examples, with which he agrees.'<sup>46</sup> 'As for Gide, I explained to him *why* we were indignant. It was because of his hypocrisy and because he was playing into the hands of the Fascists. He quite agreed with the latter.'<sup>47</sup> She corrected minor points that touched upon her national pride:

Apparently, Ionov told him that books are illustrated badly here because we are short of artists. I assured him that he misunderstood Ionov and that we do have wonderful graphic artists and beautifully published books.<sup>48</sup>

'I listed a number of Soviet artists and suggested he visit the Tretyakov gallery. He said he would definitely go,' she recorded a week later.<sup>49</sup>

Others influenced Feuchtwanger too, for example Maria Osten. 'Feuchtwanger is very good friends with her and trusts her,'<sup>50</sup> noted Karavkina approvingly. During his negotiations with publishers about the screen adaptation of his novel *The Oppermanns* (referred to in Karavkina's report under its other title, *The Oppenheim Family*), Karavkina admitted that Feuchtwanger was reasonable in his demands and showed no signs of pettiness.

When they got on to the contract, although Feuchtwanger defended his author's rights, he did not show, from my point of view, either greed or stubbornness, and easily gave in when com. Usievich pointed to the impossibility of this or that requirement he had made. In addition he said that although in America he had been offered much better financial conditions, nonetheless he preferred to have the film made in the USSR.<sup>51</sup>

However, it was hard to persuade Feuchtwanger in political matters, as Dimitrov had discovered. Boris Tal', an editor of the central daily *Izvestia*, to whom Maria Osten took Feuchtwanger, also failed to influence his views about democracy and freedom of speech. 'Today he told me about this conversation, saying

<sup>46</sup> Karavkina, 14 December 1936, GARF, VOKS, f. 5283, op. 8, d. 290, l. 9.

<sup>47</sup> Karavkina, 16 December 1936, GARF, VOKS, f. 5283, op. 1, d. 334, l. 9.

<sup>48</sup> Karavkina, 17 December 1936, GARF, VOKS, f. 5283, op. 1, d. 334, l. 8.

<sup>49</sup> Karavkina, 25 December 1936, GARF, VOKS, f. 5283, op. 1, d. 334, l. 4.

<sup>50</sup> Karavkina, 22 December 1936, GARF, VOKS, f. 5283, op. 1, d. 334, l. 6.

<sup>51</sup> Karavkina, 11 December 1936, GARF, VOKS, f. 5283, op. 5, d. 745, l. 21.

that Tal' had not persuaded him.<sup>52</sup> Only four days later Tal' would act as an interpreter during Feuchtwanger's meeting with Stalin. It was Stalin who would influence Feuchtwanger in the most significant way. Like Ronskaia almost 10 years earlier, Karavkina in her final report believed her charge would return home with a negative attitude.

He said to me ironically that he would like to see whether they would publish, in the USSR, his work in which he would describe life here as 'uncosy', as it seems to him. That no matter how wonderful it is in the Soviet Union, he still prefers to live in Europe.<sup>53</sup>

Even though she continued to stress her efforts as a propagandist, Karavkina was honest in admitting that her persuasive powers were limited. 'I don't know whether my evidence to the contrary had any effect on him.' Unlike other, two-faced, Soviet interpreters who flattered visitors while writing about them disrespectfully, she also recognised Feuchtwanger's positive side ('His comments are always subtle and interesting'<sup>54</sup>) and was direct with him: 'He declared that I was "a local patriot", to which I retorted that I simply understood these matters better than he did and considered it my duty to set him straight.'<sup>55</sup> Unlike Ronskaia, she comes across as a genuine and zealous propagandist rather than a meek and fearful pawn of the system.

Karavkina's reports about Feuchtwanger stop abruptly on 4 January, before his meeting with Stalin on 8 January. The only other account of his stay in Moscow is the recently published record of his three-hour conversation with Stalin, based on Tal's notes and containing the gist of their exchange.<sup>56</sup> Feuchtwanger's subsequently published *Moscow 1937* is so different in content from Karavkina's reports that it is difficult to understand what his true opinions were at the time of his stay. The book's very opening challenges Karavkina's assessment of Feuchtwanger as a sceptical and disapproving visitor. In it he

<sup>52</sup> Karavkina, 4 January 1937, GARF, VOKS, *f.* 5283, *op.* 5, *d.* 745, *l.* 20.

<sup>53</sup> Karavkina, 4 January 1937, GARF, VOKS, *f.* 5283, *op.* 5, *d.* 745, *l.* 20.

<sup>54</sup> Karavkina, 22 December 1936, GARF, VOKS, *f.* 5283, *op.* 1, *d.* 334, *l.* 6.

<sup>55</sup> Karavkina, 29 December 1936, GARF, VOKS, *f.* 5283, *op.* 1, *d.* 334, *l.* 1.

<sup>56</sup> The full text is available in 'Beseda s Lionom Feikhtvangerom (1937)', *Al'manakh Vostok*, 6 (18), June 2004, [http://www.situation.ru/app/j\\_arp\\_447.htm](http://www.situation.ru/app/j_arp_447.htm).

forcefully states his obligation to bear witness to the Soviet Union's achievements and defend it.

The Soviet Union is fighting many enemies, and its allies provide it with only weak support. Stupidity, ill-will and stagnation try to discredit, defame and deny everything that is productive in the East. But a writer who has seen its greatness dares not evade bearing witness, even if this greatness is unpopular and many will find his words unpleasant. This is why I am testifying.<sup>57</sup>

Almost nothing in Karavkina's reports prepares the reader for the opinions and tone of the book. The Feuchtwanger in Karavkina's accounts relies on Gide's assessment of the USSR and quotes him to back up his own negative observations. In *Moscow 1937*, Feuchtwanger becomes Gide's opponent. He accuses Gide of what Karavkina had accused Feuchtwanger in her reports: pettiness, short-sightedness and the inability to see the big picture behind 'the multitude of small inconveniences that complicate daily life in Moscow and prevent one from seeing the important things'. Feuchtwanger, as the author of *Moscow 1937*, claims to rise above the inconvenience of petty problems. 'While in Moscow, I tried hard constantly to control my views and readjust them either way, so that momentary impressions, pleasant or unpleasant, would not affect my ultimate judgement.'<sup>58</sup> If we recall Karavkina's reports, there seems to be an inconsistency, at least with the man as she perceived him.

Unlike the Feuchtwanger in Karavkina's reports, who had no interest in socialist construction, the Feuchtwanger in his book presents a glowing picture of a developing society, including the reconstruction of Moscow and the Metro. 'The reconstruction of Moscow is the most grandiose among this kind of works.' 'Thanks to electrification, Moscow shines like no other city in the world.'<sup>59</sup> 'Their metro (...) is indeed the most beautiful and comfortable in the world.'<sup>60</sup> Enthused by the plans for the city's development, Feuchtwanger's writer's imagination allows him to predict: 'Moscow will be beautiful.' In similar vein, Jean-Richard

<sup>57</sup> Lion Feuchtwanger's *Moscow 1937* was first published in Amsterdam in 1937 in German and immediately translated into Russian and published in the Soviet Union. The English quotations are my own translation from the Russian version of the 1937 Soviet edition, <http://www.kuzbass.ru/moshkow/koi/INPROZ/FEJHTWANGER/moscow1937.txt>

<sup>58</sup> Feuchtwanger, *Moscow 1937* ('Accusations caused by lack of comfort').

<sup>59</sup> Feuchtwanger, *Moscow 1937* ('Accusations caused by lack of comfort').

<sup>60</sup> Feuchtwanger, *Moscow 1937* (Chapter 1: 'Weekdays and Holidays').

Bloch admired the ‘Babylonian foundations’ in Armenia, amidst what he himself described as the arid desert.<sup>61</sup>

Feuchtwanger’s remarks while in Moscow about low rates of pay and the high cost of living do not prepare us for his optimistic portrayal in his book of the daily life of Soviet workers. Life is said to be improving, the famine is over, food and goods are sold at prices accessible to the average citizen. Any shortcomings are set against the advantages of life in the Soviet system: crowded living conditions and poverty, for example, are compensated for, he claims, by ‘rich, beautiful and spacious’ public amenities like clubs, stadiums and libraries.<sup>62</sup> Feuchtwanger the author rewrites his own original experiences, editing out encounters with critical and unhappy Soviet citizens. As in the travel accounts of other Western writers like Dabit, Bloch and Gide, in *Moscow 1937* the Soviet people are almost uniformly happy, criticising only minor details of the world in which they live. There is no mention of the desperate individuals who came to see Feuchtwanger to tell him of their misery or to seek his assistance.

All the people whom I met in the USSR, including accidental interlocutors who in no way could have been prepared for a conversation with me, although occasionally criticising certain shortcomings, were apparently quite in agreement with the existing order as a whole. Indeed, the entire city of Moscow felt satisfied, harmonious and even happy.<sup>63</sup>

Feuchtwanger is his own censor, omitting all reference to the lack of freedom and tolerance he had complained about previously. ‘I state with satisfaction that my frankness in Moscow did not cause any offence. Newspapers published my comments in the most prominent places, although the [Soviet] leaders perhaps did not particularly like it.’<sup>64</sup> He makes no mention of the frustration he experienced when he was forced to cut and edit his article. ‘Soviet newspapers did not censor my articles, even when I complained about the intolerance in certain areas or the excessive cult of Stalin, or else demanded greater clarity in the conduct of a serious political trial.’<sup>65</sup> Feuchtwanger outdoes even J.-R. Bloch in justifying

<sup>61</sup> Stern, ‘*Journal du voyage en URSS de Marguerite et Jean-Richard Bloch*’, 234.

<sup>62</sup> Feuchtwanger, *Moscow 1937* (Chapter 1: ‘A Picture of Today’s Moscow’).

<sup>63</sup> Feuchtwanger, *Moscow 1937* (Chapter 1: ‘A Picture of Today’s Moscow’).

<sup>64</sup> Feuchtwanger, *Moscow 1937* (Introduction: ‘Frankness for Frankness’).

<sup>65</sup> Feuchtwanger, *Moscow 1937* (Chapter 2: ‘Conformism and Individualism’).

the lack of democracy. The Soviet Union could have never achieved what it had achieved, he argues, had it allowed parliamentary democracy of the Western European type. Freedom of speech in the USSR would be no more than the freedom to vilify the Soviet regime.

Never would it have been possible to build socialism with unlimited freedom of vilification. (...) Soviet leaders found themselves facing the alternative of either spending a significant amount of their force to refute senseless and evil attacks, or putting all their efforts into the completion of construction. They have decided in favour of limiting the freedom of vilification.<sup>66</sup>

It is tempting to speculate how Feuchtwanger's views could have changed so much. Numerous questions arise in the face of an about-turn as unexpected as Gide's, albeit in the opposite direction. It is outside the scope and aims of this article to offer answers, beyond suggesting that his meeting with Stalin on 8 January 1937 is the event most likely to have changed his mind.<sup>67</sup> More relevant here are Karavkina's reports as a source of information which, in spite of their author's undoubted bias, can be taken at least in part at face value.

Her reports provide further confirmation that Soviet organisations invited Western intellectuals not to strengthen cultural relations (as they claimed) but to recruit influential supporters to their cause. They reflect how VOKS and other organisations combined forces to influence Feuchtwanger through a well-rehearsed socio-cultural program built around Soviet achievements. However, it was not enough for Feuchtwanger to give expression to his pre-existing sympathies; his perceptions had to fit a particular mould, and despite his affirmations of support ('You do not have to defend the Soviet Union to me'), VOKS required him to remove from his account any hint of concern regarding the lack of freedom, censorship, the Stalinist personality cult and, above all, the trials. This was why Arosev wrote that 'his [Feuchtwanger's] actions on his return from the Soviet Union cannot but inspire our concern', and why VOKS took care to surround the visitor with individuals who might dispel his misgivings: Boris Tal', a German-speaking Soviet official, Georgy Dimitrov, a respected revolutionary, and Maria Osten, a trusted friend. Similar attempts had been made to influence earlier visitors such as Bloch by managing their contacts with Russian

---

<sup>66</sup> Feuchtwanger, *Moscow 1937* (Chapter 3: 'Democracy and Dictatorship').

<sup>67</sup> 'Beseda s Lionom Feikhtvangerom (1937).'

writers (Ehrenburg, Tret'iakov), other Western intellectuals (Aragon, Moussinac, Malraux) and Soviet officials (Arosev, Kol'tsov, Primakov), but these attempts had been less focussed and applied over different fields.<sup>68</sup> Karavkina like other VOKS interpreters implemented the instructions developed by her superiors by monitoring Feuchtwanger's conversations and reactions, but with the difference that her day-to-day, hour-by-hour record of her observations is unprecedented in its detail.

Karavkina's role went beyond escorting Feuchtwanger and submitting reports on him. She is more candid than other interpreters in referring to her task as a watchdog preventing any undesirable impressions ('com. Apletin and I are trying to control visits to Feuchtwanger as much as possible, from time to time some people manage to get through and have a very harmful influence on him'), focusing on successes and failures, and listing the sources of his displeasure and her own attempts to deal with them. Her reports on those of his interlocutors whose influence on the German seems subversive read as denunciations of Soviet intellectuals and cultural figures. Who told him that Russia had no artistic tradition in painting? Who told an anti-Soviet joke at the dinner table? Who said that Pasternak was in disgrace? She names the culprits either in the text ('Ionov told him ...') or in pencilled annotations made after the event ('Tret'iakov said this'). Yet her conduct seems all of a piece with the atmosphere of fear and denunciation prevailing in VOKS in 1936, and with the actions of other interpreters.

Karavkina's reports reveal the double-faced nature of the Soviet hospitality. The famous kindness of the Soviet hosts is known to have led visitors to repay generosity with generosity rather than appear ungrateful. ('But everyone treated us so well! Why not turn a blind eye and say, "Oh well, it will pass!"'<sup>69</sup> recalled Victor Serge.) Karavkina's cheerful and hospitable disposition, captured on the photographs which show her with Feuchtwanger, contrasts with the very different, critical and often disparaging, tone adopted in her reports. This tone, together with other evidence in the VOKS archives, demonstrates the hypocrisy of Soviet officials and leaders in their dealings with foreigners. From 1928, the heads of VOKS departments adopted a similar tone when cautioning interpreter/guides not

<sup>68</sup> Stern, '*Journal du voyage en URSS de Marguerite et Jean-Richard Bloch*', 233–235.

<sup>69</sup> V. Serge, *Les Révolutionnaires* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), 14.

to trust their non-communist charges, while maintaining a pleasant demeanour.<sup>70</sup> 'Lefebvre works for the French newspaper *Le Journal*, which in itself sufficiently determines his true face (...),' wrote Tsetsiliia Rabinovich, Head of the VOKS Romance Department. 'This is why one has to be reserved with him, although on the surface remain very polite.'<sup>71</sup> On the other hand, while Theodore Dreiser's escorts during his visit in 1927–28 accused him of displaying the 'petit-bourgeois individualist ideology',<sup>72</sup> his interpreter Davidovskaia and the author of the final report on his visit (possibly the Anglo-American *referent* Sergei Trevis), excused him on the grounds that he was 'too old and sick'<sup>73</sup> and were optimistic about the long-term outcome of his visit.<sup>74</sup> In 1936, Arosev, who otherwise took pride in being a hospitable and smiling *maitre d'hôtel* to his 'famous foreigners' (*znatnye inostrantsy*) urged his staff to be vigilant and suspicious. The Deputy Chair (and later Chair) of the Foreign Commission of the Soviet Writers' Union, Mikhail Apletin, was even more charming and friendly than VOKS in his reception of foreign visitors, employing in his correspondence with them an obliging and respectful style strikingly different from the chatty and cynical tone of his internal memoranda. It was he who coined such expressions as 'to stage-manage' (*obstavit'*) a visit, to 'provide inspiration' and so on, and who pioneered many of the techniques used to appeal to foreigners, who were sometimes shocked when they came across the 'conventionally chauvinistic work' he produced for domestic consumption:

Apletin, like many other Soviet cultural functionaries, is a charming and gracious person. It was, therefore, disconcerting to find, in the Moscow Library of Foreign Literature, a conventionally chauvinistic work by him on *The World Role of Soviet Literature*. The contrast between what Soviet intellectuals, officials, and party leaders are likely to say in conversation

<sup>70</sup> Stern, 'The All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and French Intellectuals, 1925–1929', 101.

<sup>71</sup> Stern, 'The All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and French Intellectuals, 1925–1929', 101.

<sup>72</sup> 'About Dreiser's stay in the USSR', GARF, VOKS f. 5283, op. 7, l. 62.

<sup>73</sup> GARF, VOKS f. 5283, op. 2, d. 81, ll. 79–82.

<sup>74</sup> Davidovskaia, 'On the American writer Theodore Dreiser's trip to N. Novgorod,' 11 December 1927, GARF, VOKS f. 5283, op. 7, ll. 66–68.

with non-communist foreigners and what they say and write for domestic consumption is one of the most discouraging aspects of their behaviour...<sup>75</sup>

The ‘doublespeak’ of Apletin, Arosev and Karavkina cannot be attributed exclusively to their chameleon-like personality. The leadership and staff of organisations that dealt with foreigners were captives of the political conditions of the late 1930s and were forced to adopt different styles for different purposes for fear of accusations of lack of vigilance, treason and spying. Only a few months after Feuchtwanger’s visit, despite his letters to the higher authorities aiming to protect VOKS and himself, Arosev and his family were arrested and executed; his letters to Yezhov and Stalin shed light on the degree of anxiety in which he had lived throughout 1936.<sup>76</sup>

In this context, Karavkina’s own position deserves separate mention. On the one hand, she follows her brief, clearly displaying ‘vigilance’: she is suspicious of Feuchtwanger, mistrusts his statements of sympathy and focuses on his negative reactions. Like Ronskaia almost ten years earlier, she acts as a propagandist responsible for persuading him and copes badly with his negative reactions. However, she also displays different features. Unlike Ronskaia, Karavkina shows independence and strength. She does not shy away from polemical exchanges with the international celebrity and presents her own vigorous counter-arguments. To this extent, she is more prepared to displease the eminent foreigner than her own superior. However, she does not portray Feuchtwanger in negative colours only. Towards the end of her work with him, her reports become more nuanced and occasionally change tone; without playing up to her superiors, she acknowledges (not without admiration) Feuchtwanger’s positive sides: his intelligence, his subtle observations and his lack of greed in publishing matters.

Karavkina’s account of her rapport with Feuchtwanger is consistent and evokes no doubts as to its truthfulness. For example, there is enough evidence that, even unpersuaded by her arguments, he was not as dismissive of her as Gide was of ‘the charming comrade Bolia’. Feuchtwanger had clearly developed a rapport with Karavkina and, moreover, trusted her enough to have an open debate and to confide in her. He shares his impressions with her, clearly unaware of the consequences for those he mentions by name. In the end, even though

<sup>75</sup> F. Barghoorn, *Soviet Cultural Propaganda* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 169.

<sup>76</sup> Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920–40*, 156–157.

Karavkina's reports are jaundiced, they are more trustworthy than reports by interpreters who gloss over their experience. Feuchtwanger's portrait, as it emerges from her accounts, is not black-and-white; her portrayal has credibility and makes a contribution to Feuchtwanger's biography.

Finally, Karavkina's reports have definite documentary value as revealing certain aspects about the Soviet Union in 1936 and early 1937 that may come as a surprise to us today. Thus, we discover that, much as they tried, the Soviet organisations could not achieve full control over foreign visitors: even visitors who were as well guarded as Feuchtwanger had some degree of independence and could obtain information outside the official sources. Feuchtwanger managed to find out about the cost of living, salaries and prices. He was able to visit writers in a private home, unsupervised, where they acted and spoke in a way not anticipated by VOKS and the Foreign Commission. It is surprising that in December 1936 Soviet writers spoke with some freedom at the dinner table and told jokes in front of each other and their foreign guest. Even 'undesirable' visitors managed to break through the 'barrage detachments' in order to open Feuchtwanger's eyes to human misery.

In this connection it is hard to ignore the fact that Feuchtwanger was reluctant to involve himself in the 'ugly stories' of his uninvited visitors; he related them to Karavkina in disbelief. Furthermore, his apologetic book *Moscow 1937* contains no reflection of this information or of the criticisms he expressed during his stay. Thanks to Karavkina's reports we know that, unlike that of his predecessors Shaw and Duranty, Feuchtwanger's blindness cannot be excused by his inability to find out about the 'real' Soviet Union. The question of what he actually thought about the USSR, therefore, remains a topic for further research, which would require the close examination of other documents, such as the transcript of Feuchtwanger's conversation with Stalin, and his personal letters and diaries, considered in the context of the contemporary political situation in Europe and of his personal circumstances.