

VOKS, Cultural Diplomacy and the Shadow of the Lubianka: Olavi Paavolainen's 1939 Visit to the Soviet Union

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Abstract

Existing scholarship suggests that Stalin's Great Terror of 1936–8 seriously undermined Soviet cultural diplomacy and forced its main promoter, the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS), to succumb to the strict control of the party and secret police. By contrast, this article argues that by the spring and summer of 1939 VOKS was recovering from stagnation and reintroducing customs from before the Great Terror. Through a micro-historical analysis of Finnish writer Olavi Paavolainen's exceptionally long visit to the Soviet Union between May and August 1939, the article demonstrates how case studies of select VOKS operations can explain many of the dilemmas and peculiarities of Soviet cultural diplomacy during the thus far scantily researched 1939–41 period. By focusing on the interactions between Paavolainen, the VOKS vice-chairman Grigori Kheifets and Soviet writers, the article illustrates that after the purges, VOKS continued its efforts to disseminate a positive and controlled image of Soviet life by complex means that linked propaganda with network-building. Finally, the article highlights the role of individuals in cultural diplomacy and explores how an outsider perceived the Great Terror's effects on Soviet cultural intelligentsia.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy, Great Terror, Grigori Kheifets, Olavi Paavolainen, Stalinism, VOKS

Around 2 p.m. on 19 May 1939, Finnish writer Olavi Paavolainen (1903–64) arrived by train in Leningrad. While the overnight service from Helsinki was regular, the traveller was an unusual one. He came to see the Soviet Union at a time when the Great Terror of 1936–8 had alienated or denounced many of the most enthusiastic admirers of Stalin's 'great experiment'. Paavolainen, however, was neither a communist nor a fellow traveller but a politically uncommitted advocate of cultural liberalism.

His self-described task as a writer and essayist was to critically observe his ‘contemporary times’, and he was particularly fond of the expression *je ne propose rien; je n'impose rien; j'expose*, which he attributed to the French intellectual André Gide.¹ In the Soviet Union, he encountered his biggest challenge yet: to write a book that both the Finnish general public and Soviet authorities could appreciate. The pressure of reaching that objective weighed even heavier on his hosting organization, the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (*Vsesoiuznoe obshchestvo kul'turnoi svyazi s zagranitsei*, hereafter VOKS) and especially on Grigorii Markovich Kheifets, its vice-chairman.² Kheifets' Finnish contact, Hella Wuolijoki, a prominent writer and communist intellectual, had written a letter that introduced Paavolainen as the leading Finnish essayist, critic and cultural traveller. ‘His soul is glowing, and his quill is hot’, she promised, with high hopes for success: ‘May Moscow ignite a flame in his heart!’³

Kheifets' task was important from the perspective of all of those involved. Paavolainen intended to write the concluding volume to his *magnum opus* of the 1930s, a series of essayistic books that sketched a grand narrative of culture and politics in contemporary Europe. Until then, the red giant of the east had remained his unknown frontier. Although he was never able to finish the book, his correspondence, notes and a few short essays published after the war, together with reports and memos by VOKS officials, present an illuminating example of how the Soviets conducted cultural diplomacy immediately after the Great Terror. Arrangements for Paavolainen, who had been keen to come but was thus far virtually unknown to his hosts, progressed along lines reminiscent of an earlier era. In the late 1920s and again in mid-1930s – during the Popular Front period – VOKS had been a prominent, even relatively independent state-level organization. Not only was it an agent of propaganda, but it was also a promoter of dialogue with visitors who were curious to experience a developing Soviet society and potentially willing to contribute to its construction. However, as Michael David-Fox has illustrated, Stalin's purges had almost obliterated VOKS. By February 1938, a dozen senior VOKS officers were arrested, the ambitious chairman and ‘Stalinist westernizer’ Aleksandr Arosev executed and the

¹ O. Paavolainen, *Risti ja bakteristi: Uunutta maailmankuvaa kohti* (‘Cross and Swastika: Towards a New World View’, Jyväskylä and Helsinki 1938), 7. ‘*Je ne propose rien; je n'impose rien; j'expose*’ translates to ‘I don't propose anything; I don't impose anything; I present’.

² The State Archive of the Russian Federation (Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii, hereafter GARF), f. R5283, op. 5, d. 819, ll. 99, 99ob, 100–1. In this article, all GARF references are from fond R5283, opis 5, and will subsequently be referred to only with the delo (folder) and list (page) numbers, e.g. ‘GARF 819/99, 99ob, 100–1’.

³ ‘*Dusha u nego plamennaia i pero goriachee. Da sozhzhet Moskva ego serdse!*’ Wuolijoki's letter to Kheifets, 17 May 1939, in GARF 821/1, 12ob, 13.

organization taken under strict control of the party and intelligence organization of the Soviet People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (*Narodnyi komissariat vnutrennikh del*, hereafter NKVD).⁴

While the status and operations of VOKS until the turn of 1938–9 have been extensively analysed on both the general level and through case studies, the 'period of relative calm' after the Great Terror and before the storm of June 1941 has thus far received little attention.⁵ The new responsibilities of VOKS as a caretaker of the suddenly expanding although largely symbolic cultural diplomacy with Nazi Germany after the pact of 23 August 1939 have received passing mention, but even this has not been developed thoroughly.⁶ This article seeks to complement previous research, in particular by David-Fox, Jean-François Fayet, Sheila Fitzpatrick and Ludmila Stern, and to highlight the experiences of both the guest and his cultivators.⁷ It argues that by the spring and summer of 1939, VOKS had started to recover from its stagnation and reintroduce many of the customs that had existed prior to the Great Terror.

⁴ M. David-Fox, 'Stalinist Westernizer? Aleksandr Arosev's Literary and Political Depictions of Europe', *Slavic Review*, 62, 4 (Winter 2003), 737, 758–9; M. David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941* (Oxford 2012), 300–4.

⁵ This is partly a result of the fragmentation of VOKS files in GARF. In 1939, hundreds of visits still took place, but there are no general policy documents available and the folders related to individual visits are included in inventories (*opisi*) that are mostly listed as ending in 1937. The peak period for foreign tourism in the Soviet Union before the Second World War was in the mid-1930s, when VOKS was receiving about 1500 visitors annually. For amounts of yearly visits, see Fitzpatrick, 'Foreigners Observed', 218. For the 'period of relative calm', see David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 311.

⁶ In David-Fox's *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, the 1939–41 period is discussed very briefly, on pages 305–11. Studies in the German language that also briefly touch upon the period and the topic of Soviet–German cultural diplomacy include Matthias Heeke's *Reisen zu den Sowjets: Der ausländische Tourismus in Rußland 1921–1941* (Münster 2003) and Eva Oberloskamp's *Fremde Fremde neue Welten: Reisen deutscher und französischer Linksintellektueller in die Sowjetunion 1917–1939* (München 2011).

⁷ See in particular David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*; J.-F. Fayet, 'VOKS: The Third Dimension of Soviet Foreign Policy', in J. C. E. Gienow-Hecht and M. C. Donfried (eds) *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy* (New York, NY and Oxford 2010); Fitzpatrick, 'Foreigners Observed'; S. Fitzpatrick, 'Australian visitors to the Soviet Union: The view from the Soviet side', in S. Fitzpatrick and C. Rasmussen (eds) *Political Tourists: Travellers from Australia to the Soviet Union in the 1920s–1940s* (Melbourne 2008); L. Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920–1940: From Red Square to the Left Bank* (London and New York, NY 2007). In the French language, the most significant recent study of Soviet cultural diplomacy that presents a detailed analysis of VOKS operations in Switzerland during the interwar period is Fayet's *VOKS: Le laboratoire helvétique: Histoire de la diplomatie culturelle soviétique durant l'entre-deux-guerres* (Chêne-Bourg 2014).

Paavolainen's itinerary was originally planned for two months but ultimately lengthened to an eleven-week tour that extended from Leningrad to Moscow, the river Volga, Stalingrad, Rostov-on-Don and the Donbass region, Georgia and the Black Sea coast and finally Kiev and Odessa.⁸ With a case study of this unusually long and geographically broad visit, the article demonstrates how micro-historical analyses can be used as a prism to explain many of the dilemmas and peculiarities of Soviet cultural diplomacy, especially in mid-1939 but also during the whole 1939–41 period. After the purges of 1936–8, organizing an extensive visit with no guarantees of success was a calculated risk for VOKS. However, the visit still had much in common with the programmes arranged for valued guests of previous years, such as Gide (1936) and Lion Feuchtwanger (turn of 1936–7). All of Paavolainen's destinations, from the palaces of culture in Leningrad to the national-in-form socialism of the Caucasus, were significant in the context of the Soviet social project.

Additionally, the article highlights the role of individuals in cultural diplomacy at a distinctive period in Soviet and European history, namely during the months immediately following the Great Terror and before the Soviet–German nonaggression treaty of 23 August and the subsequent 22-month 'devils' alliance⁹ of Stalin and Hitler. Analysis of VOKS memos, especially those by the vice-chairman Kheifets, demonstrate that a *chekist*, that is a seasoned veteran of OGPU and (from 1934) NKVD intelligence and special operations, was ready to employ the whole repertoire of cultivation methods that had been used extensively before the purges. By focusing on descriptions of selected key events and interactions during Paavolainen's visit, the article argues that 'the dissemination of a positive and controlled image of Soviet life' by complex means that linked propaganda with network-building, as Jean-François Fayet has noted¹⁰, remained a priority for VOKS even after the Great Terror. In comparison with VOKS documents, Paavolainen's own limited but surviving notes reveal that he

⁸ Paavolainen's original itinerary from March 1939 in the Literary Archives of the Finnish Literature Society (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, SKS, hereafter SKS LA), the Olavi Paavolainen Archive (hereafter OPA), Ad. In her analysis of VOKS-hosted visits from the 1930s, Sheila Fitzpatrick has determined that the duration of a stay was typically between ten days to a month. See S. Fitzpatrick, 'Foreigners Observed: Moscow Visitors in the 1930s under the Gaze of their Soviet Guides', *Russian History*, 35, 1–2 (Spring–Summer 2008), 220.

⁹ The phrase refers to Roger Moorhouse's *The Devils' Alliance: Hitler's Pact with Stalin, 1939–1941* (New York, NY 2014).

¹⁰ Fayet, 'VOKS: The Third Dimension of Soviet Foreign Policy', 33.

encountered a society portrayed as rational, technological and scientific, but also seriously wounded by the purges and troubled by its shadows.¹¹

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Although Paavolainen was unknown to VOKS, they had little doubt of his enthusiasm to come. He had actually tried to obtain a Soviet visa already in late 1936 and possibly again in early 1937, but both applications were turned down. At the time he did not yet have the support of Wuolijoki, and his credentials were otherwise uncertain as well:¹² In August–September 1936, he had visited Nazi Germany as part of a German cultural diplomacy programme with the Nordic countries¹³, coordinated by the *Nordische Gesellschaft* ('Nordic Society'). While witnessing the Nuremberg party rally, Paavolainen experienced the full force of totalitarian propaganda that promised to create not only a 'new society' but also a 'New Man'.¹⁴ The first and most visible result of the visit was the book *Kolmannen Valtakunnan vierana* ('As a Guest of the Third Reich'), an ambiguous and often sarcastic work that seriously disappointed the Germans but was debated widely in Finland when it was published in December 1936. For Paavolainen, the logical continuation would have been to follow with another volume about the 'other side', one that Hitler had declared to be the arch-enemy of both Germany and Europe more generally.¹⁵

Not surprisingly, Moscow was looking at other Finnish candidates at that time. In the summer and autumn of 1937, finding a suitable 'left-leaning young writer' was a concern of Finland-emigrated communists. The most prominent figure involved was Otto Wille Kuusinen, a high-ranking Comintern

¹¹ The two GARF folders related to Paavolainen contain altogether 41 pages of documents, out of which ca. 90% are memos and correspondence that involve Kheifets and other VOKS officials dealing with the visit.

¹² M. Kurjensaari, *Loistava Olavi Paavolainen* (Helsinki 1975), 198–9; J. Paavolainen, *Olavi Paavolainen – keulakuva* (Helsinki 1991), 143.

¹³ In this article, the concept of the 'Nordic countries' refers to the four North European countries of Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden (all of which were independent states in 1939).

¹⁴ V. Laamanen, 'Olavi Paavolainen, a Finnish writer with a vision of the reformatory force of fascism', in T. Sandu (ed.) *Vers un profil convergent des fascismes? 'Nouveau consensus' et religion politique en Europe centrale* (Paris 2010), 197–204.

¹⁵ After failing to obtain a Soviet visa, Paavolainen quickly devised an alternative plan together with his publishing house Gummerus. He chose to seek perspective to European affairs from a distance, travelling in South America between March and August 1937. This resulted in two new essayistic books titled *Lähti ja loitsu* ('Departure and Spell') and *Risti ja bakaristi*.

official and future head of the eventually failed puppet government set up to support the Soviet invasion of Finland in November 1939.¹⁶ The refusal of writer Pentti Haanpää, with whom the most progress was made, serves as an example of how news and rumours of the Great Terror had already discouraged sympathisers abroad: 'I find this whole generosity suspicious. Like the hearty soup in the gypsy legend, I wonder if this is proper meat', Haanpää wrote to his countryman, poet Arvo Turtiainen.¹⁷ By early 1939, the setting had changed significantly: In the available sources, there are no references to any involvement by Kuusinen nor the few other surviving Soviet officials of Finnish origin in planning Paavolainen's visit. In the aftermath of the 'national operations'¹⁸ of the Great Terror, they had good reason to keep their distance. Having anything to do with the visit of a 'son of a large farm owner' was risky business, no matter how enthusiastically Wuolijoki had spoken of Paavolainen's enthusiasm and 'anti-fascist opinions'. Even VOKS Chairman V. Smirnov had weighed in on the guest's character in a letter to Intourist chief Korshunov, describing Paavolainen as 'bourgeois' and 'somewhat prejudiced'.¹⁹ The few available examples of correspondence between VOKS and Intourist officials indicate that with the exception of part of the programme in Leningrad, the responsibilities of the state tourism company were limited to practical arrangements such as visa and accommodation issues. Paavolainen's visit was clearly a VOKS cultural diplomacy operation.

¹⁶ Correspondence between Kuusinen and Arvo Tuominen, September–December 1937, in Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), f. 516, op. 2, d. 1522, ll. 29–32, 36, 42.

¹⁷ Haanpää's letters to Turtiainen, 2 and 4 November 1937, published in P. Haanpää, *Kirjeet* (Helsinki 2005), 189–90. On the Kuusinen government, see D. Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination, and Terror under Stalin, 1927–1941* (New Haven, CT and London 2011), 241–3; K. Rentola, 'Intelligence and Stalin's Two Crucial Decisions in the Winter War, 1939–40', *The International History Review*, 35, 5 (2013), 1089–90, 1101–2.

¹⁸ Even though estimates of the total number of Finns executed in the actions against diaspora nationalities during the latter half of 1937 and throughout 1938 vary between ca. 10,000 and 20,000, it is agreed that the 'Finnish operation' had a high execution rate. For estimates and commentary, see K. Rentola, *Kenen joukoissa seisot? Suomalainen kommunismi ja sota 1937–1945* (Helsinki 1994), 23–4, 72; B. McLoughlin, 'Mass Operations of the NKVD, 1937–8: A Survey', in B. McLoughlin and K. McDermott (eds) *Stalin's Terror: High Politics and Mass Repression in the Soviet Union* (Basingstoke 2003), 120–3; R. Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment. 40th Anniversary Edition* (Oxford 2008), 404; T. Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (London 2011), 104; D. Hoffmann, *Cultivating the Masses: Modern State Practices and Soviet Socialism, 1914–1939* (Ithaca, NY and London 2011), 299–300; D.R. Shearer and V. Khaustov, *Stalin and the Lubianka: A Documentary History of the Political Police and Security Organs in the Soviet Union, 1922–1953* (New Haven, CT and London 2015), 193–4.

¹⁹ Smirnov's letter to Korshunov, GARF 819/100; see also GARF 819/97.

Although Paavolainen himself preferred to describe his literary vocation as ‘exploration of contemporary times’, he never explicitly defined what the concept of ‘contemporary’ included. This ambiguity has a noteworthy link to Soviet ideology. As David-Fox has noted, the Soviets did not really have a concept of ‘modernity’ as such. They referred instead to ‘contemporaneity’ (*sovremennost*), which can be interpreted as an alternate form of modernity.²⁰ For Paavolainen, ‘contemporary’ was essentially the same as ‘modern’, but that position had evolved before his German and Soviet experiences. Already in the late 1920s, Paavolainen had come to prominence within his country’s Finnish-language cultural elite as a poet, journalist and essayist, and become a figurehead for the *Tulenkantajat* (‘Flame-bearers’) movement of young Finnish literary modernism.²¹ For those who identified themselves as belonging to the movement, both ‘modern’ and ‘contemporary’ referred to novel – and liberal – trends and styles in literature and arts in general. While many among the *Tulenkantajat* had moved to the left when the crisis of ‘modern’ became apparent by the National Socialist takeover of Germany, Paavolainen insisted on remaining uncommitted and focused instead on ‘presenting’ the change that had engulfed society. This choice also largely defines his overall tone in *Kolmannen Valtakunnan vieraina*.

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The main venue of Paavolainen’s introduction to the ‘great experiment’ was Moscow, where he arrived on 29 May. He spent the next four weeks in the capital, experiencing much that it had to offer but also suffering from illness and the hot weather. ‘The heat gets on my nerves and I already feel stressed’, he wrote to countryman and fellow writer Lauri Viljanen on 24 June. By then, however, his condition had improved enough for him to undertake a five-day cruise down the Volga, from Gorki to Stalingrad.²² He spent the first two weeks of July in the south, first in the Donbass area and then in Georgia and the Black Sea coast. He returned to Moscow just in time to see the annual *fizkul’tura* (‘physical culture’) parade in Red Square on 18 July, with tickets provided by VOKS.²³ Attended by some 40,000 athletes,

²⁰ M. David-Fox, *Crossing Borders: Modernity, Ideology, and Culture in Russia and the Soviet Union* (Pittsburgh, PA 2015), 6.

²¹ J. Kanerva, ‘An Eye Looking at the Masses: On Olavi Paavolainen’s Method of Examining the Process of Politics’, in J. Kanerva and K. Palonen (eds) *Transformation of Ideas on a Periphery: Political Studies in Finnish History* (Helsinki 1987), 133–5.

²² Paavolainen’s postcard to Viljanen, 24 June 1939, SKS LA, OPA, Bb, 150:13; O. Paavolainen, ‘Volga’, in M. Kurjensaari (ed.) *Naapurimme Neuvostoliitto: Kuvitettu tieto- ja lukukirja* (‘The Soviet Union, Our Neighbour: Illustrated Volume’, Helsinki 1946), 422.

²³ GARF 819/90; GARF 821/11.

the parade served to underline the fundamental differences between Soviet and bourgeois physical culture.²⁴

The day after the *fiż'kultura* spectacle, Paavolainen was escorted to a different kind of stage that showcased Soviet culture. As had been the general practice with VOKS-hosted visits since the 1920s, the Soviets hoped to promote cultural progress as well as social and technological advancement.²⁵ In Paavolainen's case, VOKS also tried to set up meetings with Soviet writers in order to explore opportunities to increase cross-border exchange of literature and theatre plays. However, the only documented event of this kind during Paavolainen's stay in Moscow took place with author Vera Inber at the writers' retreat of Peredelkino, situated some 30 kilometres from the city, where Kheifets took Paavolainen by car on 19 July.²⁶

That afternoon and evening, first at Inber's residence and later back in Moscow with Kheifets, marked the culmination of Paavolainen's visit. The only known sources of the events of 19 July are unpublished archival records, most notably a memo where Kheifets describes the Peredelkino visit in just a few short paragraphs.²⁷ As for Paavolainen, only a page of scattered remarks in his surviving notes show any mention of the afternoon with Inber.²⁸ Still, those few hours were significant for him, as the meeting was actually an encounter between old acquaintances. In 1934, the same year when Peredelkino was inaugurated as the premium residence of the most privileged and favoured Soviet writers, Inber had travelled to Helsinki. Paavolainen had first met her on 24 September at a reception hosted by the Soviet envoy Boris Stein, and the socializing continued the following evening at a party in the Hotel Tornio along with some thirty other guests from the literary and cultural circles, Wuolijoki included.²⁹ Some three months earlier, on 29 June 1934, Paavolainen had also attended another event at

²⁴ B. Keys, 'Soviet Sport and Transnational Mass Culture in the 1930s', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 38, 3 (July 2003), 433; S. Grant, *Physical Culture and Sport in Soviet Society: Propaganda, Acculturation, and Transformation in the 1920s and 1930s* (New York, NY and London 2012), 141, 180; K. Schlögel, trans. R. Livingstone, *Moscow, 1937* (Cambridge and Malden 2012), 248–55.

²⁵ David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 106–22.

²⁶ GARF 819/90.

²⁷ GARF 819/90.

²⁸ Paavolainen's brief and undated notes, titled 'Peredelkino', are in the possession of the Paavolainen family in Helsinki.

²⁹ Paavolainen, *Olavi Paavolainen – keulakuva*, 131.

the Soviet mission, then held on the occasion of author Boris Pil'niak's visit.³⁰ At that time, Pil'niak's star was on the rise, and Stalin ordered his appointment to the Union of Soviet Writers' executive board just two months later.³¹

By the time of the Peredelkino visit, however, Inber was Paavolainen's only remaining acquaintance among the ranks of Stalin's 'engineers of the human soul' tasked with forging man anew.³² At the height of the Great Terror, on 28 October 1937, NKVD officers escorted Pil'niak from his home in the midst of his son's birthday. The death sentence was passed after months of imprisonment, on 20 April 1938. Pil'niak was shot the next morning at Kommunarka, some twenty kilometres from his former residence. The sins he was saddled with included fraternising with bourgeois parties, providing information for the friend-turned-traitor André Gide and spying for Japan, the country that in Stalin's view was the linchpin of an espionage alliance with Germany and Poland.³³ The charges are a telling reflection of the times when Soviet practitioners of cultural diplomacy were hit the hardest. The widely travelled, independent-minded Pil'niak, born Boris Vogau with Volga German ancestry, was an archetype of the purges' cosmopolitan victim.

It is no surprise then that in Kheifets' memo there is no mention of Pil'niak. Still, the VOKS vice-chairman had reason to expect a lively discussion on more permissible aspects of Soviet literature. The Inber appointment in July 1939 had been in the making for the past few weeks, and the initiative had come from Paavolainen.³⁴ Consequently, Kheifets' brief notes reflect disappointment about the guest

³⁰ The Finnish National Archives (hereafter FNA), the Security Police Archive (hereafter EK-VALPO), hm 4219, report 1877, 29 June 1934.

³¹ Stalin's letter to Lazar' Kaganovich and Andrei Zhdanov, 30 August 1934, in O.V. Khlevniuk et al. (eds) *Stalin i Kaganovich: Peregovorki. 1931–1936 gg* (Moskva 2005), 465–6.

³² On writers as 'engineers of the human soul' and redefining the Soviet New Man, see P. Fritzsche and J. Hellbeck, 'The New Man in Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany', in M. Geyer and S. Fitzpatrick (eds) *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (Cambridge 2008), 319; R. Service, *Stalin: A Biography* (Cambridge, MA 2005), 299; David-Fox, *Crossing Borders*, 122.

³³ V.T. Reck, *Boris Pil'niak: A Soviet Writer in Conflict with the State* (Montreal and London 1975), 1–9; V. Shentalinsky, *The KGB's Literary Archive* (London 1995), 145–57; Conquest, *The Great Terror*, 298–300; Westerman, *Engineers of the Soul*, 181–4; David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 266–8; Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 104–5; H. Kuromiya and A. Peplowski, 'Stalin, Espionage, and Counterespionage', in T. Snyder and R. Brandon (eds) *Stalin and Europe: Imitation and Domination, 1928–1953* (Oxford 2014), 75.

³⁴ GARF 821/21.

who was constantly reluctant to share his thoughts and impressions, limiting himself to a few reserved remarks about a language barrier that hampered European awareness of recent Soviet literature and about his growing uncertainty over his own book in the making.³⁵

The meeting with Inber demonstrates that despite the upheavals that culminated in the Great Terror, several VOKS customs had survived practically unchanged. When VOKS was established in 1925, customs of evaluating the ‘cultural level’ of visitors had already emerged. They were quickly developed into conventions that provided an outline for interactions with all guests received in the framework of cultural diplomacy. One of VOKS’ first priorities was to produce a *kharakteristika*, or characterization, of the guest.³⁶ As Paavolainen’s first point of contact with Soviet society was Leningrad, the task had consequently fallen upon Lidiia Kislova, a seasoned VOKS official with wide experience in working with foreigners as the head of the Anglo-American department.³⁷ Her initial assessment from 21 May was generally positive and she saw good prospects for impressing Paavolainen with Soviet development, especially when it concerned issues like child welfare and the status of women in society.³⁸ There was every reason to believe that this visitor was receptive to *kultur’nost*, or ‘culturedness’, something that had both become an essential prerequisite of Soviet progress and, as David-Fox has noted, that attempted to create and build while the terror campaign was destroying many members of the elite.³⁹

In interpreting the reality of Paavolainen’s first encounters with Soviet intelligentsia after the Great Terror, perhaps the most telling detail is found in Kislova’s memo to Kheifets from 28 May, the day the guest had left Leningrad. In her closing summary, she updates the *kharakteristika* with critical remarks. In his initial engagement with Soviet writers in the House of Writers (*Dom tvorchestva pisatelei*) in Pushkin, near Leningrad on 20 May, arranged and hosted by the Union of Soviet Writers (*Soiuz pisatelei SSSR*), Paavolainen had been disappointingly taciturn. Although Kislova noted a brief mention of his 1929 book *Nykyaikaa etsimässä* (‘In Search of Modern Times’), Paavolainen had avoided discussing

³⁵ GARF 819/90; GARF 821/11, 21.

³⁶ David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 47–9.

³⁷ Fitzpatrick, ‘Foreigners Observed’, 217; Fitzpatrick, ‘Australian visitors to the Soviet Union’, 5–15.

³⁸ GARF 819/99, 99ob.

³⁹ For a discussion on *kultur’nost* as a concept of social and political activism and awareness, see David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 36–7; David-Fox, *Crossing Borders*, 64–5.

Russian literature and apparently had not disclosed that the book included an extensive essay on Soviet modernist writers Aleksandr Blok, Sergei Esenin and, most prominently, Vladimir Maiakovskii, whom Paavolainen had characterized as an ‘idolized, almighty standard-bearer’ of revolutionary futurism.⁴⁰ Paavolainen had likely reasoned that since many of the writers who had been in the revolution’s vanguard were now either dead or in disfavour, avoiding the topic altogether was the best approach.

Since Kislova had doubts about whether Paavolainen ‘truly was a writer after all’, she was either not informed about Wuolijoki’s letter to Kheifets, or was questioning the former’s credibility. In either case, it seems Wuolijoki herself was not enthusiastic about promoting the visitor as an authority on 1920s Soviet literature in Finland, although that would have been no exaggeration. Regardless of Kislova’s doubts and observations of Paavolainen’s snobbery when discussing his other self-declared literary achievements and reputation around Scandinavia, she maintained that the guest certainly was a person of interest. Noting that Paavolainen’s characteristics ‘did not meet the expectations of a typical Finn’, she also explicitly mentioned that he was ‘not one to turn down a few glasses of vodka over lunch’. Paavolainen had also overburdened his Intourist-provided translator ‘by demanding her to translate every document in the Museum of the Revolution’. In conclusion, she expressed hopes that Kheifets, with his knowledge of German and Swedish, would be more successful in ‘cultivating’ the guest.⁴¹

Some three weeks later in Peredelkino, Paavolainen found himself sipping tea with Inber and Kheifets. The ever-observant vice-chairman’s memo includes a paragraph on a conversation about events in Helsinki back in 1934, when one of the events with Inber was ruined by the drunken roar and insults of fellow guest F.E. Sillanpää, a writer and future Nobel Prize winner.⁴² As unimportant as the small talk was in comparison to the hoped-for discussions about future literary and cultural exchange, its prominence in Kheifets’ memo underlines the scarcity of the kind of dialogue that VOKS was most interested in. On that summer’s day, the reality in Peredelkino was at odds with the ideal that had inspired its incoming inhabitants five years earlier: in the inaugural meeting of the Union of Soviet Writers, the audience that witnessed Maksim Gorky’s announcement of the retreat’s establishment

⁴⁰ GARF 819/98, 98ob.

⁴¹ GARF 819/98, 98ob, 99, 99ob.

⁴² Kheifets’ remarks in GARF 819/90; Paavolainen’s description of the 1934 events in his letter to Liisa Tanner, 27 September 1934, letter in the private collection of Professor Timo Soikkanen in Turku, Finland.

reportedly made Chekhovian references to ‘Stalin’s cherry orchard’.⁴³ During the next few years, the shadows in that orchard fell longer and darker, and Inber herself was under constant pressure to inculcate any counterrevolutionary ‘terrorists’ or ‘assassins’ among her acquaintances.⁴⁴ As late as in January 1939, Ol’ga Voitinskaia, acting editor in chief of *Literaturnaia gazeta* and NKVD observer who in David Brandenberger’s characterization was ‘a fanatic in regard to political vigilance and adherence to the official line’, reported directly to Stalin that Inber was organizing anti-Soviet literary activities.⁴⁵

Paavolainen was not familiar with Inber’s troubles, but it is safe to assume that the atmosphere in Peredelkino was different from their previous meeting in Helsinki. Throughout his discussions with VOKS representatives and Kheifets in particular, Paavolainen had been keen to assure them that he was open-minded in his view of the Soviet Union. Although there is only a single, unremarkable and passing reference to the Great Terror in his own writings, he was generally aware about the political terror’s impact on the intelligentsia.⁴⁶ Paavolainen edited and organized the vast majority of his surviving notes in 1945–6, and the results imply that he easily adopted the sympathetic tone that was expected after the final cessation of hostilities between Finland and the Soviet Union in September 1944. On the other hand, not mentioning the purges is also consistent with his choice in *Kolmannen Valtakunnan vierana* in 1936: He had stated in the book that since the Germans had not shown him their concentration camps or the persecution of Jews, he would not pass judgment on either.⁴⁷ Despite this, the book has no shortage of critical and sarcastic observations about other aspects of National

⁴³ F. Westerman, *Engineers of the Soul: In the Footsteps of Stalin’s Writers* (London 2010), 169–70.

⁴⁴ Memorandum of the TsK VKP(b) Department of Cultural-Educational Work, 29 August 1936, in K. Clark and E. Dobrenko (eds) *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents, 1917–1953* (New Haven, CT and London 2007), 316–7. In addition to her cosmopolitan history of living in France and Switzerland, Inber had the worst kind of family burden as a daughter of one of Lev Trotsky’s cousins.

⁴⁵ Ol’ga Voitinskaia’s letter to Stalin, 30 January 1939, in A. Iakovlev and L. Maksimenkov (eds) *Bol’shaia tsenzura. Pisateli i zhurnalisty v Strane Sovetov. 1917-1956 gg* (Moskva 2005), 502–6; see also D. Brandenberger, ‘“Simplistic, Pseudosocialist Racism”: Debates over the Direction of Soviet Ideology within Stalin’s Creative Intelligentsia, 1936–39’, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 13, 2 (Spring 2012), 381–8.

⁴⁶ Notes of Paavolainen’s talk ‘Kolme kuukautta Neuvostoliitossa’ (‘Three months in the Soviet Union’), 29 October 1939, SKS LA, OPA, Cc.

⁴⁷ O. Paavolainen, *Kolmannen Valtakunnan vierana: Rapsodia* (‘As a Guest of the Third Reich: A Rhapsody’, Jyväskylä and Helsinki 1936), 8, 119. The page numbers refer to the book’s 1993 edition.

Socialist culture and society. In 1939, both his publisher and the public had reason to expect something similar about the Soviet Union.⁴⁸

While eyewitness testimonies from across the border were limited during the purges and visas were seldom issued, small-scale visits within the realm of cultural diplomacy did continue, and a Finnish theatre delegation was welcomed to Leningrad and Moscow in June 1938. The delegation included a member of the Finnish Parliament, the Social Democrat Sylvi-Kyllikki Kilpi, whose article in her party's daily newspaper *Suomen Sosialidemokraatti* is one of the most vivid contemporary Finnish accounts that address the reality of the Great Terror. The overall theme of the article is silence, an inevitable consequence of Stalin's purges and the national operations in particular. Kilpi observes that in Intourist hotel lobbies, one could no longer meet emigrated compatriots keen on hearing news from their former homeland. 'Of the men of 1918, none seem to remain', the rumours whispered with a reference to those who had crossed the border after the socialists had lost the Finnish Civil War. 'A strangely dreary fate has befallen this lot of Finns', she concludes.⁴⁹

On 19 July 1939, the encounter between Paavolainen and Vera Inber ended at nine in the evening. After driving back to the city, Kheifets took the next step in cultivating his guest, taking him to the summer garden of the House of Artists (*Dom rabotnikov iskusstv*) in central Moscow. Following a short discussion on cross-border exchange of music, literature and theatre, Kheifets started asking Paavolainen about his own book in the making. After initial reluctance, Paavolainen started to speak more candidly than on any other occasion about what he described as 'painful issues'. According to Kheifets' memo, Paavolainen claimed to be 'no ordinary tourist, but a writer, with sharp vision'. He was constantly struggling with how to write without 'committing literary suicide', a topic the two had first discussed over six weeks earlier. On a cruise along the Moscow–Volga Canal on 4 June, Paavolainen had tried to explain that people in Finland were not prepared to 'learn the truth' about the

⁴⁸ In neighbouring Sweden where Paavolainen's books were also published, the most significant first-hand description of a visit to the Soviet Union during the Great Terror was Gustaf Hellström's ironically-titled *Vägen till paradiset* ('Road to Paradise', 1937). Written after his four-week visit in the summer of 1937, the book is a carefully balanced account that reflects the author's encounters with Soviet society with both criticisms of its shortcomings and acknowledgment of its achievements. Like Paavolainen, Hellström had also visited and written about Nazi Germany, and both men thus stand out as atypical guests in the wider context of visitors to the Soviet Union.

⁴⁹ S.–K. Kilpi, 'Suomalaiskohtaloita Neuvostoliitossa. Pieniä haastatteluja matkan varrelta', in *Suomen Sosialidemokraatti*, 17 June 1938.

Soviet Union.⁵⁰ The remark contained at least a subtle warning to Kheifets that if he were to retain his credibility, the book would have to include a degree of criticism.

At the House of Artists, Paavolainen finally gave in to Kheifets' insistence and made some remarkably censorious remarks about Soviet propaganda. While he tried to maintain that vodka was not to blame for his outspokenness, Kheifets notes that his guest was enjoying it 'quite a bit' (*dovol'no mnogo*). Nevertheless, Paavolainen argued that the Soviets were failing to employ propaganda efficiently, singling out a museum exhibition about the arctic Nenets people. The yurt on display was furnished with electric lighting, a portrait of Stalin and a samovar, which Paavolainen considered an artificial composition.⁵¹ Pointing out Stalin's presence also relates to André Gide, a long-time literary inspirer of Paavolainen, who had observed three years earlier in *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.* how the portraits occupied spaces previously reserved for icons: 'Is it adoration, love, or fear? I do not know; always and everywhere he is present', the Frenchman wrote.⁵² Kheifets challenged Paavolainen's criticism, arguing like a good Stalinist that what Paavolainen perceived as propaganda was the reality of a rapidly modernizing country. The memo contains a detailed description of the exchange, likely to underline Kheifets' persistence. He emphasized as much, arguing how Paavolainen himself had admired unequivocal signs of Soviet progress, such as the transformation of 'big village Moscow' (*bol'shaia derevnia Moskva*) as a result of huge construction projects along the Mozhaik highway, as well as in Donbass, where Paavolainen had visited some two weeks earlier. However, Kheifets also asked Paavolainen's opinion on what the Soviet Union should do differently, effectively acknowledging the value of the guest's arguments while defending his own.⁵³

Even with the constraints in interpreting the nature of exchanges between Kheifets and Paavolainen on the basis of VOKS memos, the overall conclusion is that the vice-chairman advocated dialogue rather than orthodox propaganda. There was good reason to act carefully, as Paavolainen was unknown to VOKS and thus also unpredictable, as opposed to someone like the French writer Romain Rolland

⁵⁰ GARF 819/90–1, 93–6.

⁵¹ GARF 819/91.

⁵² A. Gide, trans. D. Bussy, *Back from the U.S.S.R.* (London 1937), 66.

⁵³ GARF 819/91–2. Moscow's characterization as 'big village' was a popular conception of Muscovite urban space and mentality, noted by various visitors to the city from the seventeenth century onwards. See S. Boyum, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, NY 2001), 95–100.

whose first visit was preceded by continuing contacts and developments that led toward formal affiliations and friendship with the Soviet cause.⁵⁴ Paavolainen's status as an outsider is underlined by the simple reality that one of his two acquaintances among Soviet writers was executed less than a year before he had himself travelled to Moscow. On top of that, Kheifets, Kislova or any other VOKS official was definitely aware that by early 1939, all who came to see the 'great experiment' inevitably arrived with more prejudice than just a few years earlier. Although Paavolainen's character was positively assessed in Helsinki by envoy Vladimir Derevianskii, NKVD intelligence officer Zoia Voskresenskaia and their contact Hella Wuolijoki, a flawlessly positive or propagandist account was not even anticipated.⁵⁵ André Gide's visit had been a disaster because Stalinism had failed the expectations of an ideologically committed individual.

With Paavolainen, VOKS had reason to hope for an 'objective' book that would help win sympathy to a state and a political system that had suffered serious blows to its global reputation and appeal during the Great Terror.

* * *

Cultivating Paavolainen was a challenge for Kheifets, but his patience, as well as capability for extended and intellectually rewarding conversations were starting to produce results – something which in 1939 VOKS desperately needed. After all, the Great Terror had seriously undermined VOKS' capacity in terms of its resources, operators and the foundation from which outsiders constructed their image of the Soviet Union. Convincing the critical, careful and at times stubborn Finn would have been a challenge for anyone, but in that situation Kheifets' cosmopolitan–chekist background was more than equal to the task. His international career had started in 1922 in the service of the Communist International. Within a few years, he had advanced to covert intelligence operations in Germany, Austria, France and China under the pseudonym 'Grimeril'. After returning to Moscow, he worked as

⁵⁴ Rolland, who visited in 1935, had intimate relations with two influential Russian mediators: he was friends with VOKS chairman Arosev (who also served as translator for Rolland's audience with Stalin) and had married the poet Mariia Kudasheva the previous year. See David-Fox, 'Stalinist Westernizer?', 750, 756; Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920–1940*, 182; David-Fox, *Crossing Borders*, 163–6.

⁵⁵ Voskresenskaia is mentioned as one of Paavolainen's assessors by the spy and *diversantka* Kerttu Nuorteva, who parachuted to Finland in 1942 but was soon captured by the Finnish security police. See FNA, EK-VALPO, hm 4219, Nuorteva's examination record (*kuulustelupöytäkirja*) 56/43, p. 101; see also Rentola, 'Intelligence and Stalin's Two Crucial Decisions in the Winter War, 1939–40', 1093.

an editor for two years, first for Mikhail Koltsov's *Ogoniok* and then for *Izobretatel'*. In 1931, he was recruited by the OGPU and sent to spy in France, the United States and Italy. In 1938, however, Kheifets himself was almost swept up in the purges. As a Jew born in 1899 in Daugavpils, Latvia, he was in a dually dangerous position both as a member of a minority and as an official in the NKVD that was itself being purged. In 1938, Kheifets was nearly assigned to prison camp administration in Vorkuta, the largest division of the Gulag in the north-eastern European corner of Russia.⁵⁶ He managed to avoid it, officially on the ground of health reasons but more probably because of allies such as his superior Pavel Sudoplatov. While allowed to stay in Moscow, Kheifets' transfer to VOKS in September 1938 was still a demotion as he was stripped of his NKVD credentials until October 1939.⁵⁷ In short, his career history illustrates the transformation of VOKS during the Great Terror, when people from the secret police replaced those who had been purged.

Kheifets' reports illustrate that his efforts were focused on making sure Paavolainen would have all the advice possible for writing an 'objective' book. In order to achieve the desired results, he had chosen a strategy subtle enough to gain considerable respect and trust from his guest. Paavolainen had actually boasted to Kheifets about the success of his previous work, claiming it had been 'translated in every Scandinavian country.'⁵⁸ In reality, his three previous volumes from the 1930s were translated only to Swedish. Still, Paavolainen was rather well-known in Sweden, and especially *Som gäst i Tredje Riket* (1937), the Swedish edition of *Kolmannen Valtakunnan vieraana*, was well received.⁵⁹ Therefore, VOKS had reason to anticipate that the book would get wide attention first in Finland, and thereafter around Scandinavia.

Predictably, perhaps, developments both in great power politics and in Soviet-Finnish relations meant that the book never materialized by the time the Winter War broke out in late November 1939. But that said, VOKS memos suggest that during the autumn, the Soviets were preparing to utilize his

⁵⁶ On Vorkuta, see O. Khlevniuk, trans. R. Dowling, 'No Total Totality: Forced Labor, Stalinism, and De-Stalinization,' *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 16, 4 (Fall 2015), 961–73.

⁵⁷ For Kheifets' career details, see K. Degtiarev and A. Kolpakidi, *Vnesniaia razvedka SSSR* (Moskva 2009), 602–3; V.N. Usov, *Sovetskaia razvedka v Kitae v 20-e gody XX veka: Izdanie vtoroe, ispravlennoe i dopolnennoe* (Moskva 2011), 354. Sudoplatov's controversial autobiography *Special Tasks: The Memoirs of an Unwanted Witness – A Soviet Spymaster* (Boston, MA 1994) contains numerous positive references to Kheifets' character and abilities.

⁵⁸ GARF 819/99.

⁵⁹ Paavolainen, *Olavi Paavolainen – keulakuva*, 142.

writings to the greatest possible extent. Sources are limited, but correspondence between Kheifets and the Soviet mission in Helsinki reveals that in late September – roughly a month into the Soviet–German pact and a week into the Soviet invasion of Poland – a report of Paavolainen’s statements to the Finnish press about his experience was forwarded to the Soviet foreign ministry’s department of the Baltic countries.⁶⁰ Had Paavolainen’s anticipated book eventually turned out as generally positive, it is not unlikely that Moscow would have wished to see it achieve substantial publicity to coincide with its wider strategic interest in north-eastern Europe.

The most informative source that hints at Paavolainen’s tentative plans about the content of the book is his only prepared talk about his first-hand impressions of the Soviet Union, given to Finnish journalists and military officials in Helsinki on 29 October 1939. He told his audience that he was systematically presented with a society on its way to unmatched rationalism and technological advancement. However, he was not convinced that socialism’s ‘development from utopia into science’ was producing positive results. Paavolainen had encountered an ‘exemplarily obedient, nervous people’ with no passion for self-indulgence. Before meeting Inber, he had spent a week in Sochi and found ‘no relief’ even in the seaside resort. The Soviet Union was challenged by its own ‘hysterical rationality.’⁶¹ An intellectual had found a society of over-intellectualism.

* * *

Paavolainen left the Soviet Union on 8 August 1939, crossing the Black Sea from Odessa to Istanbul. It took him another 45 days and a self-described ‘European Odyssey’ through Athens, Marseille, Paris and

⁶⁰ GARF 821/6.

⁶¹ Notes of Paavolainen’s talk ‘Kolme kuukautta Neuvostoliitossa’ (‘Three months in the Soviet Union’), 29 October 1939, SKS LA, OPA, Cc. In 1939, technological advancement was also at the forefront of Soviet cultural diplomacy on the international stage. At the New York World’s fair of 1939–40, the Soviet pavilion (on display between April and October 1939) highlighted technological progress with displays of recent achievements in urban development, industrial construction and aviation in particular. Instead of producing a dramatic vision of the future, the pavilion attempted to demonstrate that the future already existed. In its entirety, the pavilion was very much a condensed version of the experience VOKS had prepared for Paavolainen. See A. Swift, ‘The Soviet World of Tomorrow at the New York World’s Fair, 1939’, *The Russian Review*, 57, 3 (July 1998), 364–79.

Dieppe before he was back in Finland.⁶² By then, Stalin and Hitler were allies and the war in Europe had started. Less than a fortnight after Paavolainen's arrival in Turku on 22 September, Moscow would summon a Finnish delegation to negotiate 'concrete political issues', ultimately leading to the Soviet invasion of Finland on 30 November.⁶³ During October and November, Paavolainen started to prepare his book but aimed to complete it only after several months' work. VOKS, however, was keen to see the results sooner: the interest that Kheifets was showing in his correspondence with the mission in Helsinki indicates that the vice-chairman had a tighter schedule to worry about. After Paavolainen had met with *chargé d'affaires* M.G. Iudanov in early October and revealed that he was trying to finish the book by the next summer, the Soviets turned their attention to Paavolainen's promise to write articles for the weekly magazine *Suomen Kuvalehti*.⁶⁴ On 10 November, Iudanov again wrote to Kheifets, regretting that during his recent phone call with Paavolainen, he was not able to gain reliable information on either the book or the promised articles.⁶⁵ This was the last documented Soviet exchange about the project. In Moscow the day before, state-level talks had finally broken down between the Soviets, represented by Stalin and Molotov, and the Finnish delegation led by former Prime Minister J.K. Paasikivi, with Finland refusing to give in to the demands of adjusting the Soviet–Finnish border.⁶⁶ On 26 November, the Soviets staged an incident at the border and started their invasion on the last day of the month. The end of peace was also the end of what had probably been VOKS' most extended individual cultural diplomacy operation after the Great Terror.

In May 1939, Paavolainen had started his long-awaited eastern journey with the hope of uncovering the 'other side' in the great clash of European dictatorships. By May 1945, comparisons between a National Socialist and Soviet New Man were out of the question. With the guns silent and Paavolainen's 'contemporary' world transformed, he tried to continue with the book, but all that was finally published were three separate essays. One of them, 'Tanssitaide' ('The Art of Dance'), turned out to be a rather didactic piece on the Soviet art of dance, focusing on Igor' Moiseev's folk dance ensemble. Paavolainen

⁶² O. Paavolainen, *Synkkä yksinpuhelu: Päiväkirjan lehtiä vuosilta 1941–1944* ('Sombre Monologue: Excerpts from a Diary', Porvoo 1946), 44–7; see also Paavolainen, *Olavi Paavolainen – kenelakuva*, 161.

⁶³ H. Meinander, 'Finland and the Great Powers in World War II: Ideologies, Geopolitics, Diplomacy', in T. Kinnunen and V. Kivimäki (eds) *Finland in World War II: History, Memory, Interpretations* (Leiden and Boston, MA 2012), 57–9; Rentola, 'Intelligence and Stalin's Two Crucial Decisions in the Winter War, 1939–40', 1092–3.

⁶⁴ M.G. Iudanov's letter to Kheifets, 6 October 1939, in GARF 819/64.

⁶⁵ GARF 819/52–3.

⁶⁶ O. Vehviläinen, trans. G. McAlester, *Finland in the Second World War: Between Germany and Russia* (Basingstoke 2002), 34–43.

opened the essay with a reference to the Soviet policies as being ‘socialist in form, national in content’ – an awkward but accidental reversal of the concepts in a text that in every other regard remains a shining example of post-war political correctness.⁶⁷ In ‘Volga’, Paavolainen traced his five-day voyage downstream, expanding the theme to Soviet progress and the sacredness of the river, with references to Konstantin Simonov and the defence of Stalingrad.⁶⁸ In ‘Pietari–Leningrad’, Paavolainen described the city that had transitioned to a new, post-revolutionary era but still sustained its connections to the past.⁶⁹ Of the three, the latter essay’s theme was the most personal; after all, he was a native of the Karelian Isthmus region and had thus spent much of his life in the sphere of Petersburgian influence that extended beyond the border.

In Moscow, Paavolainen’s transition from familiar to foreign took another step. With Kheifets, he was fully exposed to the ‘great experiment’ that VOKS wanted to showcase. Still, the epicentre of communism in 1939 also contained much that a visitor to other modern capitals in Europe and beyond could relate with. Two years earlier, the painter Iurii Pimenov had captured on canvas a view of Teatral’nyi proezd, with a young woman driving an open-top car towards the House of the Unions and the recently completed Gosplan building. The painting *Novaia Moskva*, completed to celebrate Stalin’s first five-year plan, bursts with the life of a modern metropolis. A scarlet flower, echoing the colour of a metro sign, decorates the windshield. The driver is an explicitly modern woman with fashionable attire and hair.⁷⁰ In 1939, Paavolainen encountered a similar vista, visible from the Metropol hotel that just barely escapes the painting’s frame. On 11 June, he wrote to a friend in Finland, praising Moscow as a ‘pulsating, extraordinary city’ where the past, present and future blended with ‘furious dynamism’.⁷¹

In his book *Moscow, 1937*, Karl Schlögel powerfully illuminates the cognitive dissonance that originated from the sinister Stalinist blend of terror and civilization. Pimenov’s scene, reprinted in the book, is an example of that blend where progress links with the symbols of party and state. The House of the Unions had seen more than the Communist Party Congresses and state funerals, for it was also the

⁶⁷ O. Paavolainen, ‘Tanssitaide’ (‘The Art of Dance’), in M. Kurjensaari (ed.) *Naapurimme Neuvostoliitto: Kwitettu tieto- ja lukukirja* (Helsinki 1946), 336.

⁶⁸ Paavolainen, ‘Volga’, 413, 441.

⁶⁹ O. Paavolainen, *Pietari–Leningrad* (‘St. Petersburg–Leningrad’, Helsinki 1946), 32–6.

⁷⁰ On Pimenov and his work, see B. McCloskey, *Artists of World War II* (Westport, CT and London 2005), 135–8; Schlögel, *Moscow, 1937*, 42–3.

⁷¹ Paavolainen’s letter to Matti Kurjensaari, 11 June 1939, in Kurjensaari, *Loistava Olavi Paavolainen*, 201.

venue for the Moscow Trials. At the Bolshoi theatre, barely out of the frame on the right, NKVD's executioners celebrated the Cheka's twentieth anniversary.⁷² The most prominent of the symbols, however, stands behind the woman and her car: the Lubianka, momentarily invisible but nevertheless omnipresent – and only a stone's throw away from the House of Artists on Pushechnaia ulitsa. In July 1939, Paavolainen was in a privileged position: during the previous two decades, many of his compatriots had crossed the border to the Soviet Union not as guests, but to stay and build a society of New Men. When they were escorted by chekists, it was through the gates of the Lubianka. Instead of summer gardens, they saw cells and interrogation rooms – and ultimately the garage where rooms were equipped for shooting chambers, morgues and a crematory.⁷³

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When general paranoia of alien influence reached its climax during the Great Terror and VOKS Chairman Aleksandr Arosev (appointed 1934) was arrested in July 1937, many of the responsibilities of VOKS were transferred to the more prestigious Foreign Commission of the Soviet Writers' Union.⁷⁴ The Paavolainen operation, however, would have fitted perfectly into the VOKS remit during the organization's heyday under Arosev or even founder Ol'ga Kameneva (chair 1925–9), when the Soviet Union acknowledged it needed to learn from the more advanced West.⁷⁵ The expectations that VOKS had of Paavolainen were also underlined by two visa extensions that prolonged his trip.⁷⁶ In the summer of 1939, the civilized and internationally experienced Kheifets and Kislova were engaged in a cultural diplomacy operation that was both unpredictable and exceptionally lengthy, but unlike for many of their former colleagues, this did not lead to their downfall.

Before embarking on the Istanbul-bound motor ship *Svanetiia* at the port of Odessa, Paavolainen wrote two more postcards, one to his publisher in Finland and another to Kheifets, thanking Grigorii

⁷² W. Hedeler, 'Ezhov's Scenario for the Great Terror and the Falsified Record of the Third Moscow Show Trial', in B. McLoughlin and K. McDermott (eds) *Stalin's Terror: High Politics and Mass Repression in the Soviet Union* (Basingstoke 2003), 45; Schlögel, *Moscow, 1937*, 510–2; see also S. Lovell, 'The Dzhaz Age', *London Review of Books* (17 July 2014).

⁷³ On the Lubianka, see Conquest, *The Great Terror*, 268–9, 287; Schlögel, *Moscow, 1937*, 478.

⁷⁴ David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 300–6.

⁷⁵ Fitzpatrick, 'Foreigners Observed', 232; Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920–1940*, 113–4; David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 53–7, 293–6; David-Fox, *Crossing Borders*, 62–3.

⁷⁶ GARF 819/87, 89, 92; GARF 821/14.

Markovich for his '*grosse, grosse Hilfe und Freundlichkeit*'.⁷⁷ He had reason enough to do that as a courteous gesture and to advance his prospects of receiving further help from VOKS when writing his book, but there may be other reasons as well. David-Fox has argued that in the case of Romain Rolland, Mariia Kudasheva was a contributor rather than a controller in shaping Rolland's evolving intellectual and political stance.⁷⁸ Paavolainen was no Rolland and Kheifets no Kudasheva, but even though their roles of guest and cultivator were never in question, Kheifets chose to mediate and contribute, finding mutual understanding with his guest. His memos in particular reveal how an experienced chekist could appreciate and carefully utilize respectful, tactful and versatile dialogue that was reminiscent of an era before the purges. Even though 'the era of intensive Soviet engagement with Western visitors and the influential interactions of the Western pilgrimage to the Soviet experiment' ended with the Great Terror, as David-Fox has argued, VOKS operations did extend beyond 'mailing out albums, books, and articles abroad'.⁷⁹ Paavolainen's eleven-week visit demonstrates that the general conception of an introvert post-purges Soviet Union, which effectively relegated VOKS first to a non-actor and then, after the Soviet–German pact, to a caretaker of the vastly expanded although unenthusiastic and symbolic cultural diplomacy with Nazi Germany, is too straightforward. Further research into additional visits and other VOKS activities between 1939 and 1941, especially around Scandinavia and the strategically important wider Baltic region, is needed, but it is already clear that in the summer of 1939, Soviet cultural diplomacy had started its recovery from stagnation.

In light of the previous arguments, it may at first glance seem odd that Paavolainen never mentions Kheifets in his writings. In his book about the visit to Germany in 1936, there are references to his local hosts, but they are characters present for the purpose of narrative, not documentary value. In the Soviet Union, Kheifets was an embodiment of Paavolainen's challenge of how to write about his experience in the first place. The restrained Peredelkino meeting with Inber, followed by the outburst to Kheifets after generous amounts of vodka, speak of a place and reality that was a pain to come to terms with. Thus, it is no surprise that the events in Moscow receive the least attention in Paavolainen's notes even though the city was the hub of the visit and the centre of his exposure to the great Soviet

⁷⁷ Paavolainen's postcard to Esko Aaltonen, 8 August 1939, in the Aaltonen family's private collection in Forssa, Finland; Paavolainen's postcard to Kheifets, 8 August 1939, GARF 821/9. '*Grosse, grosse Hilfe und Freundlichkeit*' translates to 'great, great help and friendship'.

⁷⁸ David-Fox, *Crossing Borders*, 182.

⁷⁹ David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 311.

experiment. As for Kheifets, cultivating the reticent Finn ultimately failed to produce the expected results, but he soon found himself with new challenges in an environment that was even further away from Vorkuta and the Gulag administration. In 1941–4, Kheifets served as an NKVD intelligence officer in San Francisco, working to recruit agents for operation ‘Enormous’, the Soviet attempt to tap into the United States’ atomic secrets. The summer garden on Pushechnaia ulitsa had changed to Californian high society, and the main target to J. Robert Oppenheimer, the key scientist of the Manhattan Project.⁸⁰

* * *

Olavi Paavolainen’s journeys to both Germany and the Soviet Union saw a literary intellectual in search of the ‘contemporary world’. In 1936, Paavolainen had experienced the National Socialist form of cultural diplomacy. In Germany, however, he was not a hand-picked and personally cultivated guest but a last-minute addition to a group of four other writers from the Nordic countries.⁸¹ His Soviet experience in 1939 was much more intense and personal. When welcomed by VOKS to Leningrad, Moscow and beyond, he encountered and explored a particular form of alternate modernity or, as David-Fox has noted, a ‘variation of the modern theme’ where an antiliberal and dictatorial regime was forging a distinctively modern society and culture.⁸²

Although Paavolainen never completed his intended book, the surviving notes and his previous works indicate a tentative focus on two central themes. In addition to his original intention to compare the Soviet and Nazi projects of New Man and alternate modernism, his first-hand experiences inspired him to prepare a discussion on the nature of a ‘hysterically’ rational and over-intellectual society with a serious burden similar to what research, most notably by David-Fox, has recently argued. In Paavolainen’s understanding, the Soviet people were suffering from a superiority–inferiority complex. He saw them as receptive to ‘propaganda of diligence’ that appealed to their class-conscious pride and

⁸⁰ J. E. Haynes and H. Klehr, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* (New Haven, CT and London 2000), 44, 228–32, 326–8; J. E. Haynes, H. Klehr and A. Vassiliev, *Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America* (New Haven, CT and London 2009), 43–50; see also Degtiarev and A. Kolpakidi, *Vnesbniiaia razvedka SSSR*, 603; Usov, *Sovetskaia razvedka v Kitae v 20-e gody XX veka*, 354.

⁸¹ Laamanen, ‘Olavi Paavolainen, a Finnish writer with a vision of the reformatory force of fascism’, 197.

⁸² David-Fox, *Crossing Borders*, 23–5.

feeling of superiority, but simultaneously ‘longing for acknowledgement’ that derived from a sense of inferiority.⁸³ This relates both to David-Fox’s remarks on how the rise of the ‘Stalinist superiority complex’ originated from Stalin’s depression-era commitment to overtake the thus far more advanced West, and to Katerina Clark’s thesis about the ‘great appropriation’ or Sovietization of cosmopolitan cultural influence.⁸⁴ Even though Paavolainen regarded Soviet communism as a technologically and socially advanced ideology and noted its expressed appreciation for culture, he did not encounter a society as international as he had anticipated.

In 1936, the shadows that Hitler’s crimes cast were still far from their tallest, and were temporarily displaced by the Olympic flame. Three years later, Stalin’s ‘cherry orchard’ was nearly deprived of light, and it would remain desolate for years to come. When Isaiah Berlin met writers in Peredelkino in 1956, he likened the experience to ‘speaking to the victims of shipwreck on a desert island, cut off for decades from civilization’.⁸⁵ Paavolainen’s surviving notes contain just a page of neutral remarks about the retreat, and his singular reference to Boris Pil’niak does not mention his fate, noting only how courteously both he and Inber were received during their visit to Finland.⁸⁶ Still, Pil’niak’s ghost is visible in something else that Paavolainen left behind. The essay ‘Volga’, one of the three texts he did complete in 1945–6, recalls his five-day midsummer cruise from Gorki to Stalingrad aboard the *Tovarishch Mikoian*. Its last pages contain a powerful passage on how industrialization had ‘banished the ghosts of the past’. The ‘passive and lyrical’ observation of the Volga flowing to the Caspian Sea was ‘no longer sufficient for the Soviet New Man’ who had instead built the Moscow–Volga canal and thus harnessed the power of Russia’s main artery to the service of the future.⁸⁷

Paavolainen ends his essay by quoting the Soviet man’s proclamation of how the ‘Volga now flows to Moscow!’ This might refer to a slogan he had noticed in one of Leningrad’s palaces of culture, but there may be more than initially meets the eye.⁸⁸ In 1930, Pil’niak had published the novel *Volga vpadaet*

⁸³ Notes of Paavolainen’s talk ‘Kolme kuukautta Neuvostoliitossa’ (‘Three months in the Soviet Union’), 29 October 1939, SKS LA, OPA, Cc.

⁸⁴ David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 285–8; K. Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Cambridge, MA and London 2011), 7–8; see also Service, *Stalin*, 300.

⁸⁵ I. Berlin, *Personal Impressions* (London 1998), 230.

⁸⁶ Paavolainen’s notes titled ‘Peredelkino’, undated, in the private collection of the Paavolainen family in Helsinki, Finland.

⁸⁷ Paavolainen, ‘Volga’, 445.

⁸⁸ Paavolainen, ‘Volga’, 445; Paavolainen, *Pietari–Leningrad*, 33.

v Kaspiiskoe more. An unintentional coincidence is possible, but so is Paavolainen's subtle reference: the flow of the Volga was now forcibly reversed to Moscow's halls of power, where Stalin decided which of his 'engineers of the human soul' were to serve their country by writing, and who by dying.

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