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Soviet Cultural Diplomacy with Scandinavians after the Great Terror:

VOKS and Visitors from Denmark and Norway in 1939

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This article analyzes Soviet cultural diplomacy in Scandinavia shortly before the outbreak of World War II. The focus is on exchanges between the key Soviet organization for cultural diplomacy, the All-Union Society for Cultural Ties Abroad (*Vsesoiuznoe obshchestvo kul´turnoi sviazi s zagranitsei*, VOKS) and select Danish and Norwegian journalists and writers.[1] While utilizing sources from Russian and

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[1] In the case of the Soviet Union and VOKS, which was a federal-level organization established in 1925, cultural diplomacy refers to state-controlled efforts to develop networks with relevant foreign individuals and organizations. Hosting and cultivating intellectuals during their visits to the Soviet Union was perhaps the most important method used by VOKS, but it also, e.g., distributed Soviet publications abroad and facilitated art exhibitions and book translations. In 1928, the first VOKS chairperson, Ol´ga Kameneva, asserted that as the European intellectual Left was still more advanced than the young proletarian culture of the Soviet Union, VOKS should engage in reciprocal exchanges. However, this balance was soon largely abandoned, starting with the "Great Break" of 1928–31. See Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and David-Fox, *Crossing Borders: Modernity, Ideology, and Culture in Russia and the Soviet Union* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), 58–63. For wider discussions on cultural and public diplomacy – e.g., on how cultural diplomacy differs from one-sided propaganda and how its various definitions address the roles of governmental and nongovernmental actors and spheres of society – see Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht and Mark C. Donfried, eds., *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy* (New York:

Scandinavian archival collections to examine four such exchanges in detail, the article discusses continuities and changes in how VOKS worked to transnationally develop and disseminate a positive and controlled image of Soviet society by hosting foreign intellectuals after the purges of the Great Terror of 1937–38 and before June 1941. By expanding on previous research and highlighting the perspectives of the hosts and their guests, the analysis contributes to our broader understanding of the elements in Soviet cultural diplomacy that continued to function through the purges and were reciprocal even if asymmetrical. The article also focuses on the underexplored "period of relative calm" for VOKS, as characterized by Michael David-Fox in *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, the most comprehensive published study of Soviet cultural diplomacy before the World War II.[2]

Throughout the interwar period, VOKS and other important agents of Soviet cultural diplomacy, such as the Foreign Commission of the Union of Soviet Writers (*Soiuz pisatelei SSSR*, established in 1936[3]), mainly focused on West and Central European countries. Therefore, the Scandinavian dimension has received limited attention in research. Additionally, the period of 1939–41, when the Great Terror had seriously hindered VOKS operations and diminished its significance (and when most European countries were engulfed in war and occupied by German forces), barely has a place in the main

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Berghahn, 2010); and Nancy Snow and Nicholas J. Cull, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2020).

[2] See David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 311. For other key studies in English and Russian, see A.V. Golubev, *"Vzgliad na zemliu obetovannuiu": Iz istorii sovetskoi kul´turnoi diplomatii 1920–1930-kh godov* (Moscow: Institut rossiiskoi istorii Rossiiskoi akademii nauk [IRI RAN], 2004); Ludmila Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920–1940: From Red Square to the Left Bank* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007); Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Foreigners Observed: Moscow Visitors in the 1930s under the Gaze of Their Soviet Guides," *Russian History* 35, 1–2 (2008): 215–35; Fitzpatrick, "Australian Visitors to the Soviet Union: The View from the Soviet Side," in *Political Tourists: Travellers from Australia to the Soviet Union in the 1920s–1940s*, ed. Fitzpatrick and Carolyn Rasmussen (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2008); Jean-François Fayet, "VOKS: The Third Dimension of Soviet Foreign Policy," in *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy*, 33–49; A. V. Golubev and V. A. Nevezhin, *Formirovanie obraza Sovetskoi Rossii v okruzhaiushchem mire sredstvami kul´turnoi diplomatii, 1920-e – pervaia polovina 1940-kh gg* (Moscow: IRI RAN, 2016). In French, 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, *VOKS: Le laboratoire helvétique: Histoire de la diplomatie culturelle soviétique durant l'entre-deux-guerres* (Chêne-Bourg: Georg éditeur, 2014).

[3] Both David-Fox and Katerina Clark have argued that in 1936–38, the Foreign Commission, headed by Mikhail Kol´tsov, rivaled and even exceeded VOKS's influence on Soviet cultural diplomacy. Some of the best-known European visitors of the period, such as André Gide and Lion Feuchtwanger, were hosted by the Foreign Commission. Kol´tsov was arrested in the purges of December 1938 and later executed. See Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 179; and David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 306.

narrative.[4] The main reason for this neglect is archival silence: there are no general VOKS policy documents available from 1939–41, and the files related to operations that actually took place in 1939 or later are included in inventories mostly listed as ending in 1937. However, a close reading of the VOKS archival catalogue reveals that even during the first half of 1939, and before the German–Soviet pact in August 1939 and the outbreak of war the next month, VOKS operations had an unprecedentedly strong Scandinavian focus in proportion to the whole. Of the 160 files in the inventories (*opisi*) of the Anglo-American and First Western Divisions from the 1939–41 period, 60 refer to the Nordic countries.[5]

The earlier years of Scandinavian–Soviet cultural relations have been more widely researched, especially concerning specific Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish organizations that played a role in that field. However, the studies usually concentrate on only one of the countries and are mostly published only in the Scandinavian languages.[6] Perhaps the most illuminating comparative study in English, by Ole Martin Rønning, focuses on the first level of cultural diplomacy, which took place in the framework of the Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish Cultural Fronts, intellectual-driven leftist organizations of the mid-1930s popular front period. They had some success and societal visibility, especially in Denmark, where support for the Communist Party was at the highest among the Nordic countries, but they were all suppressed and dissolved with the end of the popular front era, the Great Terror, and the isolation

[4] David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 300–11.

[5] In Russian, the divisions are op. 3, Anglo-amerikanskii otdel (1925–1937), and op. 5, Pervyi zapadnyi otdel (1925–1937). See VOKS Archival Catalogue, Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF) f. R5283, Vsesoiuznoe obshchestvo kul´turnykh sviazei s zagranitsei (VOKS). In this article, “Scandinavia” refers to Denmark, Norway and Sweden, while “Nordic” includes Finland as well. According to available archival records, VOKS did not host any Icelandic visitors in 1939–41. All GARF files referred to in this article are part of op. five.

[6] On Denmark, see Kim Frederichsen, “Fra nødhjælp til samvirke: De dansk-sovjetiske venskabsforeninger i mellemkrigstiden,” *Arbejderhistorie*, no. 3 (2014): 44–62; on Norway, Ole Martin Rønning, “Norsk-russiske forbindelser i mellomkrigstiden: Noen trekk ved den norske virksomheten i Russland,” *Arbeiderhistorie* (2002): 33–51; and on Sweden, Lars Björlin, “Kultur och politik: Kommunistiska frontorganisationer i Sverige”, in *Kommunismen – hot och löfte: Arbetarrörelsen i skuggan av Sovjetunionen 1917–1991*, ed. Håkan Blomqvist and Lars Ekdahl (Stockholm: Carlsson, 2003), 39–71. The post-1945 history of Soviet–Scandinavian and Soviet–Finnish cultural diplomacy has also been studied in the respective countries. On Denmark, see Frederichsen, *Soviet Cultural Diplomacy towards Denmark during the Cold War, 1945–1991* (Copenhagen: Københavns Universitet, 2017); on Norway, Ingunn Rotihaug, *“For fred og vennskap mellom folkene”: Sambandet Norge–Sovjetunionen 1945–70* (Oslo: Institutt for forsvarsstudier, 2000); on Sweden, Olov Wenell, *Sovjetunionen och svenska vänsällskap 1945–1958: Sällskapen Sverige-Sovjetunionen som medel i sovjetisk strategi* (Umeå: Umeå universitet, 2015); and on Finland, Ville Pernaa, *Tehtävänä Neuvostoliitto: Opetusministeriön Neuvostoliittoinstituutin roolit suomalaisessa politiikassa 1944–1992* (Helsinki: Venäjän ja Itä-Euroopan instituutti, 2002).

of Communists from other elements of the workers' movement and liberal sympathizers.[7] The second level of the framework for cultural diplomacy was the organizations linked to the Communist International (Comintern), VOKS, or both. These organizations included two kinds of entities: the essentially communist "friendship" organizations were technically nation-specific branches of the Comintern-affiliated International Association of Friends of the Soviet Union, established in Moscow in November 1927. In all three Scandinavian countries, there were also organizations for the advancement of cultural and economic relations. As these organizations were not affiliated with the Comintern or the Communist Party, they were more inclusive at least in principle.[8] The friendship and cultural/economic organizations are discussed in this article, because they effectively served as the foreign nodes and contact points of the international VOKS framework. The third, deepest but mostly invisible, level of Soviet influence and contacts was organized directly through the Comintern. Its clandestine and illegal elements – which were committed to the international revolutionary project and focused on money transfers, document forgeries, espionage, and later sabotage – largely moved from Germany to Copenhagen after the events of 1933. The illegal apparatus – also widely studied by Scandinavian historians in particular – lies outside the scope of this analysis, which is limited to interactions visible in the public sphere.[9]

In this article, the focus is on the Scandinavian intellectuals who not only corresponded with VOKS but were also hosted or supported by VOKS during an actual visit to the Soviet Union after the Great

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[7] Ole Martin Rønning, "Intellectuals Ready to Fight: Anti-Fascist Cultural Fronts in Scandinavia, 1935–1939," in *Anti-Fascism in the Nordic Countries: New Perspectives, Comparisons and Transnational Connections*, ed. Kasper Brasken, Nigel Copsey, and Johan A. Lundin (New York: Routledge, 2019), 173–86.

[8] In Sweden, the more independent "cultural" organization Sällskapet Sverige–Ryssland (Society Sweden–Russia) was established in 1924. It was replaced in 1935 by the Comintern-supported "friendship" organization, originally named Sällskapet för främjande av kulturella och ekonomiska förbindelser mellan Sverige och Sovjetunionen (Society for the Advancement of Cultural and Economic Relations between Sweden and the Soviet Union) but known as simply Sällskapet Sverige–Sovjetunionen, later Sällskapet Sovjetunionens Vänner (Society of Friends of the Soviet Union). See Björlin, "Kultur och politik," 39–71; and Wenell, *Sovjetunionen och svenska vänsällskap 1945–1958*, 83–84. The Danish and Norwegian organizations are discussed below. In Finland, similar organizations did not exist before the year 1940 due to the illegal status of the Communist Party and other radical socialist organizations, as well as generally limited relations with the Soviet Union.

[9] On the Comintern's illegal apparatus in Scandinavia, see e.g. Wilhelm Agrell, *Stora sabotageligan: Kominterns och Sovjetunionens underjordiska nätverk i Sverige* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2016); Morten Møller, Jesper Jørgensen and Niels Erik Rosenfeldt, *Den røde underverden: Hemmelig kommunistisk virksomhed i Skandinavien mellem to verdenskrige* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2019). The most extensive study in English is Rosenfeldt, *The "Special" World: Stalin's Power Apparatus and the Soviet System's Secret Structures of Communication*, 2 vols., trans. Sally Laird and John Kendal (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2009).

Terror. Although the number of foreign visitors had fallen drastically, at least five individuals classified by VOKS as either writers (*pisateli*) or journalists (*zhurnalisty*) arrived, all between June 1939 and March 1940. They were a varied lot by background and political orientation: three Danes (the communist writer Martin Andersen Nexø, the communist journalist Alfred Poulsen, and the centrist liberal journalist and civil servant Erling Stensgård); one Norwegian (the conservative journalist and politician Erling Bühring-Dehli); and one Swede (the journalist and former Comintern cadre Ingvar Larsson). Additionally, the Finnish liberal writer Olavi Paavolainen made an exceptionally long 11-week tour in the summer of 1939.[10] Altogether, these visits took place during a relatively short but dramatic period that included the negotiations of the German–Soviet nonaggression pact, the occupation of Poland, increased pressure toward the Baltic states, and the Soviet–Finnish Winter War. As the visits of Paavolainen and Larsson have been examined in previous research, this article focuses on Nexø, Poulsen, Stensgård, and Bühring-Dehli.[11]

Because VOKS-organized or supported visits had become rare when compared with the period before the purges, a comprehensive microhistorical analysis of the background, events, and consequences of these particular visits offers unique insight into transnational networks and nascent developments that were interrupted when World War II extended throughout Scandinavia and the wider Baltic Sea region.[12] The primary sources used are memos and correspondence from the VOKS collection in the State Archive of the Russian Federation in Moscow (*Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, GARF) as

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[10] While researching this article, the author was able to access these six archival files. The majority of the ca. 60 files are about correspondence at the organizational level, about journalists and writers who were in correspondence with VOKS but whose file title does not mention a stay (*prebyvanie*) in the Soviet Union, and about other categories of Scandinavian visitors or contacts such as translators, teachers, medical professionals and theater professionals. However, as the archival file titles do not always accurately describe the contents, a comprehensive study of VOKS and Scandinavia in 1939–41 would need to include all these materials.

[11] On Paavolainen, see Ville Laamanen, "VOKS, Cultural Diplomacy and the Shadow of the Lubianka: Olavi Paavolainen's 1939 Visit to the Soviet Union," *Journal of Contemporary History* 52, 4 (2017): 1022–41; on Larsson, who actually was a veteran of the Comintern's illegal apparatus, see Ville Laamanen, "From Communist Cadre to Outsider: Ideals, Opportunism, and Coping with Change in Moscow and Stockholm, 1929–1948," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 45, 3 (2020): 334–59.

[12] Here, the microhistorical approach corresponds to Jill Lepore's definiton: however singular a person-specific case may be, the value of examining it lies in how it serves as an allegory that illuminates the culture as a whole. ("Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography," *The Journal of American History* 88, 1 [2001]: 129–44).

well as writings by the visitors themselves, interviews with them, and newspaper articles about them.[13] Thus, the primary sources related to these writers and journalists form a versatile and underexplored body of data. While the analysis builds on previous research on Soviet cultural diplomacy, intellectuals, and earlier Soviet–Scandinavian exchanges, it also links to ongoing discussions on how Soviet history offers distinctive and revealing contributions to transnational history.[14] The organizations, networks, and private connections that enabled these visits both supported the individual objectives of those involved and, in the words of Pierre-Yves Saunier, facilitated relations that functioned as processes of dedication to transnationally shared common goals.[15]

Another applicable methodological vein in the study of these exchanges, and one discussed by Giles Scott-Smith in particular, would be to analyze them within the framework of international relations theory (IR) and with a constructivist approach that focuses on how the exchanges function and what kind of effects they produce. Scott-Smith has noted that while the participating visitors are usually open to the nurturing of their curiosity or cultural affinity with the host country, the hosts may also be subject to long-term political influence.[16] Although the IR framework is not applied in this article, the Soviet–Scandinavian exchanges discussed here both fit into and challenge the model of reinforcement and nurture and could well provide interesting premises for a wider study with a constructivist approach.

Concerning the role of VOKS in the wider Soviet strategy and Soviet operations throughout Scandinavia and the whole Baltic Sea region, the article offers an approach for managing the lack of accessibility to the archives of the Soviet state and military intelligence services. As Kaarel Piirimäe has noted, it is generally difficult to assess Soviet objectives in this area, particularly due to the relative neglect of the topic in current historiography, when compared with East-Central or Southeastern

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[13] Relevant newspaper articles have been collected from the extensive digitized databases of Danish and Norwegian newspapers, hosted by the Royal Library of Denmark (http://www2.statsbiblioteket.dk/mediestream/avis) and the National Library of Norway (https://www.nb.no/search?mediatype=tidsskrift).

[14] On transnationalism and Soviet history, see Michael David-Fox, "The Implications of Transnationalism," *Kritika* 12, 4 (2011): 885–904; and on established trends in the wider field, see e.g. Bernhard Struck, Kate Ferris and Jacques Revel, "Introduction: Space and Scale in Transnational History," *International History Review* 33, 4 (2011): 573–84.

[15] Pierre-Yves Saunier, *Transnational History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). 82–86.

[16] Giles Scott Smith, "Mapping the Undefinable: Some Thoughts on the Relevance of Exchange Programs within International Relations Theory," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, March (2008): 173–95; Scott-Smith, "Exchange Programs and Public Diplomacy," in *Routledge Handbook of Public* Diplomacy, 38–49.

Europe.[17] Because access to primary sources that directly discuss Soviet security policy in the 1930s is limited, a qualitative approach that utilizes select Russian documents and Scandinavian primary sources and scrutinizes cultural diplomacy operations during the period when the links between VOKS and the Soviet intelligence apparatus were at their strongest can be illuminating.

While serious comparisons with other periods fall outside the scope of this study, a notable parallel is apparent in the prominence of Scandinavian contacts in 1939–41 and during the early postrevolutionary years of the 1920s. During both periods, the options for active Soviet diplomacy were limited. From the October Revolution in 1917 until the nonaggression pact with Germany in August 1939, Soviet Russia (later, the Soviet Union) was on the defensive in its security policy concerning the Baltic Sea region. Based on geography alone, Germany, France, and Britain all had the upper hand as policy influencers for Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. Meanwhile, Stalin and his Commissariat of Foreign Affairs struggled to assess the potential benefits and dangers of increased cooperation between the small North European states. Moscow nevertheless sought to limit its losses, mainly by pursuing nonaggression treaties not only with Finland, the Baltic states, and Poland but with the Scandinavian countries as well. However, negotiations with Denmark, Norway, and Sweden all ultimately stalled.[18]

In cultural diplomacy, geography is less important, and raw power is generally ineffective. For these reasons, a focus on Scandinavian visitors with different political positions illuminates the more subtle face of Soviet efforts of influence and soft power. After the Great Terror, and later, the signing of the German–Soviet pact, praise from Communists, even generally respected figures such as the Danish author Nexø, had limited appeal in Scandinavia beyond the small groups of Soviet loyalists. However, when skeptical visitors were inspired to give positive or even "objective" accounts of their experiences, and when those accounts were seen by wider circles in society, the practices of interactive cultural diplomacy could achieve something that directives from the Comintern or the Soviet authorities never could. Additionally, although Scandinavian social democrats and Communists were on separate paths by 1939, the Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish communist parties were all able to operate legally, unlike in Finland and the Baltic states. All three Scandinavian countries had social democratic prime ministers at the time, and their workers' movements were generally strong. From the perspective of VOKS, these

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[17] Kaarel Piirimäe, "'Masters of the Baltic': Soviet Objectives Towards the Baltic on the Eve of the Second World War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 47, 4 (2012): 876.

[18] Patrick Salmon, *Scandinavia and the Great Powers, 1890–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 227–34; Gunnar Åselius, "Östersjön I sovjetisk marinstrategi," in *Sovjetunionen och Norden – konflikt, kontakt, influenser*, ed. Sune Jungar and Bent Jensen (Helsinki: Finska Historiska Samfundet, 1997), 33–36.

factors may have been potentially encouraging when the organization was rearranging its priorities after the purges.

Danish Visitors and Established Channels of Cultural Diplomacy

A public channel for the cultural presence of the Soviet Union had existed in Denmark since the establishment of the Danish–Soviet Association (Dansk–Russisk Samvirke, DRS) in 1924, the same year Denmark officially recognized the Soviet state. Another, more clearly communist organization, the Union for Friends of the Soviet Union (Landsforbundet Sovjetunionens Venner, SUV), was formed around 1930.[19] In June 1939, DRS was to some extent involved with at least one VOKS-hosted visitor to the Soviet Union, Alfred Poulsen, a theater and film editor for the communist newspaper *Arbejderbladet*. The other Danes whose 1939 visits were documented by VOKS were Martin Andersen Nexø, who also was the chair of SUV at the time, and Erling Stensgård, the deputy director of the State Library in Aarhus. Although these visits had their distinctive motives and objectives, they were all linked to the framework of Soviet cultural diplomacy via its technically separate but transnationally connected branches.

Few details are available about Poulsen's visit to Moscow on 22–26 June. His handwritten note from 25 June, addressed to VOKS in English, reveals his disappointment about the lack of an interesting program or special access, which would have enabled him to write articles that countered the capitalist press and thus, provide "real" information about Soviet theater.[20] No articles by Poulsen actually appeared in *Arbejderbladet* after his visit, and it seems that VOKS did not put much effort into hosting him. However, later correspondence indicates that after Poulsen had returned home, VOKS sent him a large number of photos of and literature about theater, opera, ballet, and other forms of performative art.[21] Poulsen's group also included Erling Stensgård, who was on a self-initiated mission to negotiate the recovery of 18th-century artifacts, naval cannons recently discovered on Bering Island off the Kamchatka Peninsula, left behind by the Danish-born Vitus Bering's ill-fated arctic expedition in 1740–42. Stensgård's visit and his efforts to get the cannons to Bering's native city of Horsens, where a

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[19] Morten Thing, *Kommunismens kultur: DKP og de intellektuelle 1918–1960* (Copenhagen: Tiderne Skifter, 1993), 925; Frederichsen, "Fra nødhjælp til samvirke," 51–58. By 1938, SUV had grown into a relatively big organization, with some 4,000 members in several local branches. In comparison, DRS was a much more exclusive club with only 100–200 members.

[20] Poulsen to VOKS, 25 June 1939, GARF f. R5283, op. 5, d. 792, ll. 14, 14 ob.

[21] List of publications and photos sent to Poulsen by VOKS, 17 July 1939, ibid., ll. 12, 13.

memorial was being planned, were visible in the Danish press, and some progress was also made before the outbreak of the war put the project on hold.[22] Unlike Poulsen, Stensgård personally wrote about his visit. His account is particularly interesting because he was not a Communist or socialist. At the beginning of the century, he had been involved in the founding of the social-liberal centrist party *Det radikale Venstre*, and he wrote for the party newspaper *Jydsk Morgenblad*.

In July 1939, a two-part narrative of Stensgård's experiences in Moscow was published in *Randers Dagblad og Folketidende*, which was affiliated with *Venstre*, the center-right liberal parent party of *Det radikale Venstre*. Stensgård chose the perspective of an observer who was conscious of his position as an outsider and stressed the experience of moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar when he crossed the border from Finland to the Soviet Union.[23] In his characterization of Moscow, Stensgård highlighted signs of social progress and urban development. He acknowledged general Western skepticism and expectations of Potemkin's façade but stated that he was free to go wherever he pleased, just as in Copenhagen. He was, however, probably followed and watched, like the Finnish writer Paavolainen, whom VOKS hosted in Moscow at the same time.[24] Although Stensgård's account is brief, it has a notably personal tone that avoids the pitfalls of describing all kinds of statistics and listings, which often burdened reports based on Soviet publications that VOKS generously distributed. Stensgård's narrative focuses on Gor´kii Park, the Moscow Metro, and children's playgrounds, all of which impressed him as distinctive features of a vivid, highly habitable metropolis. "Everything for the children," Stensgård noted, seemed to be the "motto for cultural work in this great, strange country."[25]

The internationally known writer Martin Andersen Nexø was one of the most valued foreign friends of the Soviet Union and the most important public intellectual of the Danish workers' movement. He had joined the Communist Party (*Danmarks Kommunistiske Parti*, DKP) in 1937, after his final break with

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[22] The effort to get the cannons delivered was also supported by the Norwegian-born American biologist Leonhard Stejneger. See "Et Vitus Bering-Mindesmærke med kanoner fra Bering-Øen," *Berlingske Aftenavis*, 28 April 1939; and "En Nordmands Ord om Vitus Bering," *Berlingske Aftenavis*, 11 July 1939. Eventually, the cannons were delivered to Horsens in 1957.

[23] For more on the experience of crossing the border from Finland, a common method of traveling to the Soviet Union at the time, see Charlotte Tornbjer, "Symbolizing Borders: Swedish Travels into the Soviet Union during the 1930s," in *Borders as Experience*, ed. Karl Gunnar Hammarlund (Halmstad: Högskolan i Halmstad, 2009), 188–98.

[24] The surveillance of Paavolainen during his "independent" walks in Leningrad a few weeks earlier was documented by VOKS. See L. Kislova to G. M. Kheifets, 21 May 1939, GARF f. R5283, op. 5, d. 819, l. 99. There is no evidence in the VOKS archives that the two would have crossed paths.

[25] Erling Stensgård, "Min Genbo er Kreml," *Randers Dagblad og Folketidende*, 12 July 1939; Stensgård, "Moskva – en Ungdommens By!," *Randers Dagblad og Folketidende*, 17 July 1939.

social democracy following Hitler's takeover in Germany.[26] He was also a frequent visitor to the Soviet Union. His first trip took place in 1922, followed by the book *Mod Dagningen: Skildringer fra Rusland* (Toward Daybreak: Depictions from Russia).[27] Before his 1939 trip, which began soon after his 70th birthday, he had returned at least three times, including in 1937 during the show trial of Georgii Piatakov, Karl Radek, and others.[28] Although Nexø's 1939 visit was actually hosted by the Foreign Commission of the Union of Soviet Writers, he was an established insider and in regular contact with VOKS before, during, and after the trip. From the period of his stay in the Soviet Union, the most illuminating document dates from 16 July. On that day, Nexø visited VOKS headquarters in Moscow and met with Chairman Viktor Smirnov, as well as the leading *chekist* in the cultural diplomacy organization, Vice Chairman Grigorii Kheifets, who was a veteran of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs' (*Narodnyi komissariat vnutrennikh del*, NKVD) and the Comintern's intelligence apparatus and had wide experience in various international assignments.[29] The men discussed the prospective return of the Bering cannons, which Nexø supported and about which he was also later approached by Stensgård.[30] More importantly, however, Nexø and the VOKS leadership talked about the *Dansk–Russisk Samvirke* and its chair, the schoolteacher N. K. Johansen, who in Nexø's opinion was completely unsuitable for the job, a "saboteur" and a constant hindrance to VOKS efforts in Denmark.[31] Later in September, Nexø wrote to VOKS to suggest the historian Albert Olsen as the next chair and to ask whether VOKS had reached a decision about bringing DRS and SUV closer together. Olsen was formally a social democrat, but Nexø emphasized Olsen's sympathy with the Soviet Union and the

[26] Aldo Keel, *Der trotzige Däne: Martin Andersen Nexø* (Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuch, 2004), 233; Morten Thing, "Den politiske Nexø," *Arbejderhistorie*, no. 2 (2019): 90–91.

[27] Thing, "Politiske Nexø,", 90–91; Kim Frederichsen, "Kammerat Nexø – et kritisk debatessay om Martin Andersen Nexøs forhold til Sovjetunionen," *Arbejderhistorie*, no. 2 (2019): 99.

[28] Personal information form for Nexø, 1939, GARF f. R5283, op. 5, d. 791, l. 1; interview of Nexø in Moscow, *Arbejderbladet*, 23 July 1939; see also Keel, *Der trotzige Däne*, 146–66, 192–233.

[29] On Kheifets, see K. Degtiarev and A. Kolpakidi, *Vneshniaia razvedka SSSR* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2009), 602–3; V. N. Usov, *Sovetskaia razvedka v Kitae v 20-e gody XX veka* (Moscow: Dom Konfutsiia, 2011), 354.

[30] See Stensgård's postcard to Nexø via VOKS in Moscow, 17 July 1939, GARF f. R5283, op. 5, d. 791, ll. 49, 49 ob; Nexø's reference to Stensgård and the Bering cannons (Nexø to VOKS, September 1939), is on l. 46.

[31] Memo by Kheifets, 16 July 1939, ibid., l. 47. The details about Johansen's tenure as DRS chairperson remain somewhat unclear, but Nexø's comments support Frederichsen's reasoning that Johansen held the post after Ejnar Thomassen and before Albert Olsen ("Fra nødhjælp til samvirke," 55). Thing does not mention Johansen at all when he discusses DRS (*Kommunismens kultur*, 925).

independence that allowed him to "resist pressure" from his party or academia.[32] Olsen was chosen for the post in 1940, and he continued in the role after 1945 until his death in 1949. This illustrates that SUV Chair Nexø had considerable influence in DRS affairs when plans to merge the two organizations were on the table.[33]

The public dimension of Nexø's July 1939 visit, including his interview in *Arbejderbladet*, illustrates that displays of recent progress in urban and industrial development had made a deep impression on the writer who had returned to an otherwise already familiar city that symbolized an ideological and spiritual home. As an outspoken foreign ally of the Stalinist regime, he was an example of how the "metanarrative" of Soviet exceptionality was absorbed and repeated transnationally.[34] Nexø highlighted the modern housing projects, the spectacular Metro, and the improved quality of people's clothing, similarly to first-time visitors such as Stensgård and Paavolainen.[35] *Arbejderbladet* also published Nexø's article about an agricultural exhibition, which he characterized as a demonstration of the cultural diversity of the Soviet Union, a land of "A Thousand and One Nights" that stretched from the Far North to the Black Sea. "And Bolshevism succeeded," Nexø claims at the end of his narrative where the famine of 1932–33 was a nonissue and the Soviet peoples had preserved their distinctive cultures and shone as advanced, industrial farmers.[36]

The VOKS archival file on Nexø also contains clippings from the Soviet press about the backlash he received in Denmark after he publicly stood with the Soviet Union before and during the Winter War.[37] On 16 October 1939, after Soviet–Finnish negotiations had started before war broke out, *Arbejderbladet* in Copenhagen had published Nexø's article, which was extremely critical of Finland's "reactionary" government. When the Soviet Union attacked its neighbor less than six weeks later, the Danish noncommunist press showed overwhelming sympathy for Finland and its government, and lashed out

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[32] Nexø to VOKS, September 1939, GARF f. R5283, op. 5, d. 791, l. 46. Olsen had been effectively estranged from the Social Democratic Party since the mid-1930s, when he joined the antifascist front Frisindet Kulturkamp despite protests from the party leadership.

[33] The plans to merge DRS and SUV, which came to a halt with the German occupation of April 1940, have been mentioned in previous scholarship. See Frederichsen, "Fra nødhjælp til samvirke," 59. Nexø's discussions with VOKS and his role in replacing Johansen with Olsen have not been previously discussed in the literature.

[34] On the metanarrative of Soviet exceptionality, see Graeme Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[35] "Martin Andersen Nexø fortæller om Sovjet i Dag," *Arbejderbladet*, 23 July 1939.

[36] Martin Andersen Nexø, "Landbrugsudstillingen i Moskva," *Arbejderbladet*, 2 August 1939.

[37] Newspaper clippings, undated, GARF f. R5283, op. 5, d. 791, ll. 36–37.

at Nexø with unprecedented wrath.[38] The rest of the archival file illuminates another concrete aspect of VOKS's operations, as it worked to advance the translation of Nexø's work into Russian and beginning in July 1940 with the Sovietization of the Baltic states, into Latvian as well. The correspondence among VOKS, Nexø's Russian translator Anna Hansen, the Latvian publisher Biografiskais archīvs, and various other Soviet officials continues until the summer of 1941, when Nexø was arrested after all communist activities and organizations were banned in occupied Denmark. The correspondence demonstrates that Kheifets and VOKS Departmental Chief B. Volkov were handling the process personally.[39]

According to retrospectively published biographical information, the Latvian–Jewish Kheifets, born in 1899 in Daugavpils, was affiliated with VOKS from September 1938 until October 1939, after which he returned to NKVD duties.[40] In reality, his involvement with VOKS and Scandinavian issues continued at least until early 1941, and it can be assumed that he had a continuous dual role as a *chekist* and cultural diplomat.[41] During the 1939–41 period, Kheifets was probably one of the most important individuals in this capacity. Since he had also been closely involved in Olavi Paavolainen's exceptionally long visit in mid-1939, VOKS was visibly investing time and resources in cultural diplomacy in the Nordic context. Translating Nexø's work into Latvian enhanced the availability of prominent socialist literature within the newly expanded Soviet Union, and in the case of Paavolainen, VOKS had supported an extensive tour by an unpredictable liberal writer.[42] All this suggests that although VOKS was linked to the wider Soviet intelligence apparatus, the organization was also willing to take risks and seize opportunities in a way that resembled the heyday of cultural diplomacy before the Great Terror.

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[38] Børge Houmann, *Martin Andersen Nexø og hans samtid 1933–1954* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1988), 225–37; Keel, *Der trotzige Däne*, 247–50.

[39] Continuing correspondence among Nexø, Hansen, VOKS, Biografiskais archīvs et al., December 1939–June 1941, GARF f. R5283, op. 5, d. 791, ll. 3–35; 39–41. Hansen, who was Russian but married to a Dane, was also engaged in translating the Icelandic writer Halldór Laxness. Hansen died during the siege of Leningrad in 1942. See Halldór Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness: En biografi*, trans. Inge Knutsson (Stockholm: Leopard, 2008), 372–74.

[40] Degtiarev and Kolpakidi, *Vneshniaia razvedka SSSR*, 602–3; Usov, *Sovetskaia razvedka v Kitae v 20-e gody XX veka*, 354.

[41] For an example of how Soviet state and military intelligence services and the Comintern's intelligence apparatus communicated during the Swede Ingvar Larsson's visit hosted by VOKS and Kheifets in February–March 1940, see Laamanen, "From Communist Cadre to Outsider," 340–42. In 1941, the NKVD transferred Kheifets to the Soviet consulate in San Francisco to spy on the US Manhattan Project. See John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr and Alexander Vassiliev, *Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 43–50.

[42] Laamanen, "VOKS, Cultural Diplomacy and the Shadow of the Lubianka," 1036.

Bühring-Dehli, the Enthusiastic Conservative from Norway

While VOKS was managing the aftermath of Nexø's visits, the other Danes, and Paavolainen after the German–Soviet pact, another Scandinavian opening for a focused cultural diplomacy operation presented itself. The Norwegian journalist and Conservative Party (*Høyre*) politician Erling Bühring-Dehli was anything but an easily predictable guest when he visited Moscow in late September 1939. At the time, he was the chief editor of the widely read illustrated magazine *Allers Familie-Journal*, and his book about the Norwegian Prime Minister (1935–45) Johan Nygaardsvold had just been published. Having served two terms in the Norwegian parliament (1928–33), Bühring-Dehli was a well-connected and respected figure across party lines, and a keen observer of regional politics.[43] In early 1939, he had given speeches on the strategic importance of the Finnish-owned Åland Islands in the context of recent developments in the Baltic Sea region. From there, he had argued for the fortification of the islands, and anticipated that Germany and the Soviet Union would agree, to remove a vulnerable military vacuum, and thus, increase stability in the region.[44] However, negotiations on the status of Åland stalled in May, as Moscow voiced its strong opposition to the plan, which then caused Sweden to withdraw its support as well.[45]

The general framework of Norwegian–Soviet cultural relations and related organizations had similarities with those in Denmark, but there were also notable differences. In Norway, the effectively communist friendship society SUV was established first, in 1928. Because its ties to the party (Norges Kommunistiske Parti, NKP) and the Comintern were driving a wedge in the Norwegian workers' movement, VOKS supported the formation of a formally independent organization Norsk-russisk kultursamband (NRKS) in 1932. However, the project was hindered by Soviet internal disagreements on how "independent" or inclusive the new society should actually be. Neither organization ultimately had much public appeal, and SUV was disbanded in 1938 and replaced with a new entity called New Country (Nytt Land).[46] The Norwegian communist movement also lacked a widely recognized and

[43] See e.g. newspaper articles on Bühring-Dehli on his 70th birthday. "Herre med humør," *Aftenposten*, 10 September 1957; and "En livskunstner fyller år," *Morgenbladet*, 11 September 1957.

[44] "Aalandsøyenes befestning angår også i høieste grad Norge," *Nationen*, 28 February 1939; *Tidens tegn*, 28 February 1939.

[45] For details on the fortification plans that would have included an agreement for shared Finnish–Swedish responsibility for their defense, see Salmon, *Scandinavia and the Great Powers 1890–1940*, 203–5; and Olli Vehviläinen, *Finland in the Second World War: Between Germany and Russia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 24–27.

[46] Rotihaug, *"For fred og vennskap mellom folkene,"* 21–26; Geir Bentzen, "En tid for begeistring – nordmenn og Sovjetunionen i 1945," *Arbeiderhistorie* (2002): 123. At its peak, however, the Norwegian SUV had been a comparably large organization, with some 3,000 individual members and another 3,000 people involved through collective membership.

respected public figurehead comparable to Nexø in Denmark.[47] Contrary to the Danish visitors of 1939, Bühring-Dehli's trip was not directly linked to or organized with VOKS-supported Norwegian organizations. In a retrospective article published a decade after the visit, Bühring-Dehli mentions being encouraged by "one of his communist friends" to seize the moment and contact the Soviet legation in Oslo in June 1939.[48]

Norwegian foreign policy was more immediately influenced by relations with Britain and Germany, but Bühring-Dehli wanted to gain insight into the "Eastern perspective" on ongoing international political developments.[49] In an article from 1949, he recalls the positive response he received from the Soviet minister in Norway, V. A. Nikonov. Although the two men did not know each other beforehand and had no common language, Nikonov encouraged Bühring-Dehli to write to VOKS and Intourist. Bühring-Dehli also notes that the Soviet authorities issued his visa very quickly, even as requests by some Norwegian social democrats were being denied.[50] However, he delayed confirming his travel plans. While his visa expired, the German–Soviet nonaggression pact was signed, Nikonov was removed from his position as Soviet minister in Norway, and the war began. Finally, at the end of September, and with the help of a Norwegian contact at the Soviet legation (an interpreter and wife of the chief editor of the Communist Party newspaper *Arbeideren*), Bühring-Dehli was able to take advantage of a very direct form of cultural diplomacy, riding on the same train from Oslo to Stockholm as Alexandra Kollontai, the Soviet minister in Sweden. Although Kollontai had undoubtedly been briefed on the issue beforehand, Bühring-Dehli was quite impressed with her "amiable promise" to take care of the expired visa. On the next day, 27 September, he was on his way to Moscow by airplane via Riga.[51]

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[47] Sven G. Holtsmark, ed., *Naboer i frykt og forventning: Norge og Russland 1917–2014* (Oslo: Pax, 2015), 158–59.

[48] Bühring-Dehli, "I Sovjetsamveldet – for ti år siden," *Verdens Gang*, 30 September 1949.

[49] Ibid.; Bühring-Dehli to VOKS, 8 June 1939, GARF f. R5283, op. 5, d. 806, ll. 27, 27 ob, 28. Between 1920 and 1944, Norway did not share a border with the Soviet Union, because the northern Petsamo region was then part of Finland. Thus the wider geography placed Norway on the outskirts of Soviet strategic interests when compared with the Baltic Sea littoral states Finland, Sweden and Denmark.

[50] Bühring-Dehli speculated that the denial of Soviet visas for social democrats was belated Soviet retribution for the Nygaardsvold government having allowed Lev Trotskii to stay in Norway in 1935–36. See Bühring-Dehli, "I Sovjetsamveldet – for ti år siden.". For more on Trotskii's Norwegian exile, see Oddvar K. Høidal, *Trotsky in Norway: Exile, 1935–1937* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2013); and Rønning, "Intellectuals Ready to Fight," 181.

[51] Bühring-Dehli, "I Sovjetsamveldet – for ti år siden."

Bühring-Dehli's narrative of his four-day visit to Moscow focuses on memorable encounters. On the flight from Riga to Moscow, he was accompanied by Estonian Foreign Minister Karl Selter, and during a stopover in Velikie Luki, Bühring-Dehli saw the plane of Selter's German counterpart Joachim von Ribbentrop departing before them. While in Moscow, Bühring-Dehli recalls being chauffeured by a Scandinavian woman whom he recognized by voice; she was undoubtedly Maj Ingrid Wagner, also known as "Vackra Maj," a Swedish emigrant and Swedish-language radio programming announcer sent from Moscow.[52] On his last evening in the city, Bühring-Dehli had dinner with Chargé d'Affaires Martin Bolstad from the Norwegian legation.[53] However, the encounters that failed to happen during the visit stand out as the most noteworthy.

Of all the Scandinavian visitors who walked through the doors of the VOKS office on Bol´shaia Gruzinskaia Street, Bühring-Dehli may have left the most memorable impression: He arrived unannounced on 28 September, and presented a written request for audiences with not only Foreign Affairs Commissar V. M . Molotov but also Stalin.[54] Retrospectively, Bühring-Dehli acknowledged that his wish to meet Stalin was unrealistic, and he mentions the "horrified looks" of the VOKS officials when they learned about his ambitions. Concerning Molotov, Bühring-Dehli at least wanted to believe that the commissar's negotiations with Ribbentrop and Selter rather than the outlandishness of his request were to blame for the appointment being denied.[55] At VOKS, Bühring-Dehli's ambitions were met with disbelief and real concern as to whether the Norwegian was in his right mind. Departmental Chief S. I. Volk wrote to the Oslo legation, describing Bühring-Dehli's naïveté, strange behavior, and baffling persistence in asking for the meeting with Molotov, "even for two minutes." Volk asked the chargé d'affaires, Consul M. T. Frolov, to reply with more details about Bühring-Dehli's writings, speeches, and other radio work, as well as an assessment whether there was any reason to invest more resources in him. The one-page letter maintains a professional tone, but Volk's frustration and his general skepticism about Bühring-Dehli's character and motives show through. However, Volk also noted that at another meeting the next day, Bühring-Dehli was accompanied by a Swedish interpreter and behaved in a more relaxed way, showing interest in printed materials that VOKS provided him

[52] Laamanen, "From Communist Cadre to Outsider," 342.

[53] See Bühring-Dehli, "I Sovjetsamveldet – for ti år siden," *Verdens Gang*, 30 September 1949. Before her radio broadcasting work in Moscow, Maj Ingrid Wagner (née Olsson) had secret International Liaison Department (Otdel mezhdunarodnoi sviazi, OMS, part of Comintern) assignments in Copenhagen and the Baltic states and worked as translator for the Swedish Communist Party newspaper *Ny Dag* (Laamanen, "From Communist Cadre to Outsider," 353 n. 55).

[54] Z. Kamenkovich's memo (undated, no earlier than 30 September 1939), GARF f. R5283, op. 5, d. 806, ll. 27, 27 ob, 22; Volk to Frolov in Oslo, 3 October 1939, ll. 27, 27 ob, 20.

[55] Bühring-Dehli, "I Sovjetsamveldet – for ti år siden."

about economic progress and Stalin.[56] Bühring-Dehli was also escorted to the Bolshoi Theater to see Ivan Glinka's opera *Ivan Susanin* (*A Life for the Tsar*), a fitting choice because it was featured as a Soviet cultural export of the pact period, with a production being planned by the Berlin Opera Theater.[57]

Immediately after Bühring-Dehli returned on 1 October, he gave public speeches about his impressions of Soviet society and politics. He also continued corresponding with VOKS, asking for more printed materials and describing the interest that his presentations received.[58] Articles on his speeches appeared in several newspapers across party lines, and the communist *Arbeideren* even published an interview.[59] In most of his public talks and statements, Bühring-Dehli was keen to offer his interpretation of the Soviet position and immediate strategic objectives. Overall, he comes across as an individual who had a fundamental belief in the balance of power as a guiding principle in great-power relations. With his underlying trust in international politics as an arena of stability, Bühring-Dehli went as far as emphasizing that Stalin had always demonstrated, "both in theory and practice," that he was a supporter of the nationality principle, that is, the right of national self-determination.[60] Bühring-Dehli clearly valued his experience as something of an insider, and this most likely played a role in his willingness to take Stalin at his word.

The autumn of 1939 was not a time when VOKS had the luxury of being picky about potential friends or even "objective" observers. However, Bühring-Dehli's behavior during his visit added an extra layer of scrutiny as VOKS attempted to stay informed about the speeches and statements he was now giving around Norway. On 16 October, Consul Frolov replied from Oslo to VOKS, citing Norwegian Communist Party officials ("local friends") as the source of an assessment of the political position of Bühring-Dehli and his magazine *Allers Familie-Journal*. The letter characterizes Bühring-Dehli as politically neutral and generally "objective" regarding his statements on foreign policy, and *Familie-Journal* is described as a "cultural-moral" educational publication that mainly covers topics outside the sphere of politics. Thus, Frolov recommended that VOKS continue sending Soviet publications to the Norwegian.[61] However, a brief summary produced in late November of Bühring-Dehli's public

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[56] Volk to Frolov in Oslo, 3 October 1939, GARF f. R5283, op. 5, d. 806, ll. 27, 27 ob, 20.

[57] David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 311.

[58] Correspondence between Bühring-Dehli and VOKS, 1 October to 20 November 1939, GARF f. R5283, op. 5, d. 806, ll. 5–9.

[59] "Tilbake fra Moskva med ferske intryk," *Arbeideren*, 11 October 1939.

[60] See, e.g., "Borgerlig redaktør tilbake fra Moskva med ferske inntrykk," *Rjukan Arbeiderblad*, 13 October 1939; "Objektivt foredrag orn Sovjet og sovjetrussisk politikk," *Opland Arbeiderblad*, 1 November 1939.

[61] Frolov to Volk, 15 October 1939, GARF f. R5283, op. 5, d. 806, ll. 16–17.

speeches and comments following his trip ultimately reflects disappointment: his analysis was "objective but superficial," and the comments that he gave during a radio program and in a talk hosted by his own party *Høyre* were not "objective from our perspective."[62] Although VOKS had succeeded rather well in representing Moscow's strategic interests and engaging in a respectful and interactive dialogue with its unpredictable guest, the fruits of this labor were ultimately modest.

Cultural Diplomacy during an Exceptional Period

The period when Soviet cultural diplomacy with Scandinavians increased was also a time when good publicity for the Soviet Union was met by several serious challenges. The disappointment caused by André Gide's books, the end of the popular front period, the Great Terror, and finally, the German–Soviet pact would have been serious hurdles even individually, but when put together, they provided a harsh antidote to the appeal of the Soviet Union and its Stalinist system as any sort of cradle of "alternative modernity."[63] Generally, all these developments (including the arrest of several key cultural diplomacy agents who served with VOKS, the Union of Soviet Writers, and other organizations) constituted a "great break" in Soviet efforts at transnational network building, soft power, and propaganda.[64] However, this also means that the few cultural diplomacy operations that took place, the continuities that were sustained, and the new roles of *chekists*, such as Kheifets, are all the more important points of focus for research that attempts to add detail to the big picture of this break and the following "relative calm" before the storm of June 1941.

In these extraordinary circumstances, the expectations of the VOKS officials and other agents of Soviet cultural diplomacy were more moderate than they had been during the popular front period, and when the likes of Nexø, the Icelandic writer Halldór Laxness, and the German Lion Feuchtwanger had attended the show trials.[65] The proportional strengthening of a Scandinavian focus from the first half of

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[62] Summary on political appearances by Bühring-Dehli, 27 November 1939, ibid., l. 3.

[63] On non-Soviet intellectuals and "alternative modernity", see, e.g., Michael David-Fox, "Communism and Intellectuals," in *The Cambridge History of Communism,* 1*: World Revolution and Socialism in One Country, 1917–1941*, ed. Silvio Pons and Stephen A. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 545.

[64] David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 300–9.

[65] During the preparations for the long visit of Olavi Paavolainen, correspondence between VOKS, Intourist and the Soviet legation in Helsinki addressed the critical nature of Paavolainen and played down expectations for an overtly positive travel account. See telegrams and memos from 3 and 15 May 1939 (one undated), GARF f. R5283, op. 5, d. 819, ll. 97, 100, 101. See also Laamanen, "VOKS, Cultural Diplomacy and the Shadow of the Lubianka," 1033–34. Both Lion Feuchtwanger and

1939, as well as the tolerance of critical or unpredictable guests, can be interpreted as an example of adaptation by VOKS. In addition to accepting Bühring-Dehli as a visitor and following up on him despite the shock caused by his expectations of meeting Stalin and Molotov, VOKS showed considerable flexibility with the Finnish writer Paavolainen. Although VOKS repeatedly assessed him as an independent-minded and unpredictable character, the Finn was granted two visa extensions. Kheifets also patiently listened to Paavolainen's criticisms of Soviet society and employed a whole array of subtle cultivation methods.[66]

The visitors during this exceptional period are also interesting in their own right. Nexø's trip was in part a family vacation in a hospitable environment (filled with meetings with friends and acquaintances)[67] and in part business, including negotiations with VOKS about the internal affairs of the Danish–Soviet cultural diplomacy organizations. The other Danish Communist, the journalist Poulsen, had a clear professional motive for seeking firsthand impressions of recent Soviet film and performative art. The unconventional visitors – that is, Stensgård and Bühring–Dehli – were looking for something out of the ordinary and an opportunity to stand out: The issue of the Bering cannons was important for Stensgård personally, and he gained public recognition in Denmark for his efforts. For Bühring-Dehli, the visit provided the chance to embrace the role of *the* Norwegian authority and public intellectual on ongoing Soviet foreign policy, although an evaluation of his trip, based on the VOKS file, shows that his personal ambition and enthusiasm went far beyond his actual credentials.[68]

Although the specific national contexts of the Scandinavian visitors and their trips are all relevant, evaluating them from a transnational perspective is even more illuminating. Bühring-Dehli was a special visitor in the 1939 context not only as a Norwegian public intellectual but also as a rare example of a conservative politician who was willing to be impressed and potentially swayed. If an outright antisocialist visited the Soviet Union after the Great Terror and the German–Soviet pact only to judge and condemn, who would even be interested? Open-minded nonsocialists who were aware of the repressiveness of the Stalinist regime while being impartial about most of its ideological conflicts and

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Halldór Laxness wrote uncritically about the show trials in their books titled, respectively, *Moscow, 1937* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1937) and *Gerska æfintýrið* (The Russian Adventure [Copenhagen: n.p. 1939]). Nexø's articles were published in the Danish communist press and *Pravda*.

66 Laamanen, "VOKS, Cultural Diplomacy and the Shadow of the Lubianka," 1032–35.

67 Nexø to Otto and Gertrud Rung, 22 July 1939, letter published in *Breve fra Martin Andersen Nexø*, ed. Børge Houmann (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1972), 3: 99–100.

68 Searches within the contents of the digitized Norwegian newspapers do not reveal any published rebuttals or other critical responses on Bühring-Dehli's speeches about the Soviet Union.

dilemmas could be both skeptical and curious without having a strong incentive to make a clear judgment on how well or poorly the Soviet project represented the ideals of the revolutionary workers' movement. From these premises, their statements could have added potential for wider appeal both nationally and transnationally. In the exchanges introduced here, the results were limited, but mostly for external reasons: war and occupation soon extended into Scandinavia, great-power relations took a new turn, and specific developments linked to the visits, such as the transfer of the Bering cannons, were put on hold.

While visitors such as Bühring-Dehli or Paavolainen lacked the mission of someone like Nexø, Laxness, or Feuchtwanger, it would be wrong to dismiss the writings of these "fellow travelers" as naïve. It took considerable commitment, vigor, and literary skill to first cope with one's suspicions and reservations – such as those related to witnessing the show trials – and then to explain everything in a mostly positive tone, or to argue against the likes of Gide who had, from the perspective of the loyalists, broken from the principle that a deeper conviction should guide conclusions.[69] The independent-minded critics were thus condemned for being "unable to place impressions and analysis in the *right context*."[70] For the loyalists, the Stalinist state as the manifestation of their transnationally shared ideals was the answer, and in remained so despite the hardships. As for Bühring-Dehli, his great confidence in diplomacy, institutions, and structures should be understood as a comparable dedication to a guiding principle that gave him enough reason to believe that the Soviet Union was not about to embark on an aggressive foreign policy. Several months earlier, in May–August 1939, Olavi Paavolainen had come from Finland to learn about the Soviet "new man" – another transnationally intriguing concept that had also appealed to many liberal intellectuals across Europe and beyond. Although Paavolainen encountered the aftermath of the Great Terror by experiencing a void that was often an antithesis to the promises of a rejuvenating cultural revolution, VOKS was able to gain positive results even in this challenging environment. Despite Paavolainen's reservations, his tour of the western Soviet Union, including the Caucasus region and Ukraine, impressed him enough that he started to prepare an extensive book based on his experiences.

[69] On the show trials and Nexø, see Keel, *Der trotzige Däne*, 226–33; on Laxness, see Guðmundsson, *Halldór Laxness*; and Jón Ólafsson, *Appelsínur frá Abkasíu: Vera Hertzsch, Halldór Laxness og hreinsanirnar miklu* (Reykjavik: JPV, 2012), 30–42; on Feuchtwanger, see David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 269–76; and on Gide, see Andrew Sobanet, *Generation Stalin: French Writers, the Fatherland, and the Cult of Personality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018) 103–6.

[70] Thing, *Kommunismens kultur*, 928–29. Still, Gide's communist sympathies were based on very principled ideas, such as the promise of solidarity and salvation, which constituted a higher cause as in a religion.

In September–October 1939, in the reality that followed the German–Soviet pact but before the outbreak of the Soviet–Finnish war, the German occupation of Denmark, and the battle for Norway, much was still undecided. If Paavolainen's book had materialized in peacetime and been translated into Swedish like his previous works, it might have received publicity not only in Finland – where the national communist movement was all but suppressed and the vast majority of Finns regarded the Soviet Union as the only potential threat to their national sovereignty – but also around Scandinavia.[71] Meanwhile, Bühring-Dehli was convinced enough of Moscow's commitment to peace that he gave several public speeches in Norway on how the Soviet Union had no unfriendly intentions toward the Baltic and Nordic countries.[72] Although little of the potential value of these successes of VOKS actually materialized, Bühring–Dehli and Paavolainen are both examples of how skeptical, noncommunist visitors could be influenced by subtle practices of Soviet cultural diplomacy during an exceptional period, and how the mechanisms of this influence were mostly detached from any specific national context.

As previous researchers have established, the overall importance of VOKS had clearly diminished following the Great Terror, and the organization was brought under the control of the Party and the Soviet intelligence apparatus. However, the VOKS of 1939–41 was neither a mere distributor of propaganda nor just an executor of symbolic and uninspired interactions with Germans following the 23 August 1939 nonaggression pact.[73] Although an extensive analysis of its Scandinavian activities would require more archival work, as well as access to restricted records, including the personnel files of Kheifets and other *chekists* in key positions, it can be concluded that after the purges, VOKS had a modest but real dual role in the context of Scandinavia and the wider Baltic Sea region. While VOKS was clearly a guardian of Moscow's immediate security policy interests, and tried to spin aggressive Soviet policies in the Baltic states and Finland as a stabilizing influence, the organization also continued to host visitors and attempted to engage in actual dialogue and cultural exchange that could yield transnationally meaningful results. Until June 1941 changed almost everything, VOKS continued to

[71] VOKS kept sending materials to Paavolainen and was in regular contact with the legation in Helsinki about his progress almost until the outbreak of the Winter War. See Laamanen, "VOKS, Cultural Diplomacy and the Shadow of the Lubianka," 1036.

[72] See, eg., "Sovjet nærer ingen uvennlige følelser overfor de baltiske og nordiske land," *Rjukan Arbeiderblad*, 13 October 1939.

[73] Studies on Soviet–German cultural diplomacy that briefly discuss the period between August 1939 and June 1941 include Matthias Heeke, *Reisen zu den Sowjets: Der ausländische Tourismus in Rußland 1921–1941* (Münster: LIT, 2003); and Eva Oberloskamp, *Fremde Fremde neue Welten: Reisen deutscher und französischer Linksintellektueller in die Sowjetunion 1917–1939* (Munich: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2011).

develop its networks while trying to understand how the nonaggression pact and Moscow’s other controversial actions were actually viewed by communist and noncommunist visitors from the then-neutral Scandinavian countries.

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