

TITLE VIII RESEARCH SCHOLAR PROGRAM

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Books Across Borders: Cold War Culture, Soft Power, and the Production of Soviet Books for <u>Postcolonial India, 1954-1991</u>

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Research Abstract: My dissertation traces the historical development of the USSR's post-Stalin era book translation and publication program with a particular focus on the creation of translated Soviet texts for a South Asian readership. In a challenge to the conventional view that the USSR lost the global cultural Cold War to the West, my research shows how Soviet print culture, and in particular children's literature and scientific and technical books, achieved popularity on a mass scale across South Asia. Using new archival evidence, including publisher correspondence with higher-level Soviet cultural institutions and Communist Party officials, readers' letters, sales and profit/loss figures, and transcriptions of editorial meetings, I show how and why India became the most important global market for translated Soviet books between the mid 1950s and 1991, the year marking both the disintegration of the USSR and India's economic liberalization. This project also elucidates how the Indian readers' insatiable demand for titles released in translation



by Progress, Mir, and Raduga publishing houses affected the internal workings, editorial commitments, and production processes of these Soviet foreign language presses.⁴

Research Goals: The two major objectives of my dissertation research project were to understand how the Soviet Union's global, Cold War-era book translation and publication program operated on an institutional level and to examine the social consequences of this program in post-colonial India, which formed the largest market for Soviet books in the world. In particular, my aim was to study the editorial and production processes of Progress publishing, which went from being the USSR's largest publishing house for books in foreign languages in 1954 to the largest Soviet publisher overall by 1981. By this year, the behemoth press was releasing 1,400 titles annually in 50 foreign languages and in a comprehensive print run of 25 million copies.² As a state-owned press, Progress did not independently set its own editorial policies, nor did it export, market, or distribute its own titles abroad. Moreover, to acquire the necessary human and material resources essential for book translation and production, everything from foreign translators to paper, binding material, and production time in Soviet typographies and printing houses, it had to appeal to higher-level authorities and planning agencies. My study therefore explored how Progress fit into larger cultural, economic, and diplomatic bureaucracies, which were comprised institutions such as Mezhdunarodnaya Kniga (the Soviet book export

¹ Until 1963, Progress was known as the Foreign Languages Publishing House (FLPH), but this report will refer to it by the name "Progress" throughout in order to avoid confusion. In 1963, the FLPH was broken up into two separate publishing houses: Progress and Mir. Progress became the publisher for all non-scientific texts (including literary works, children's literature as well as economic, social, and political texts). Mir was responsible for the translation of all scientific and engineering works. In 1982 Progress lost all of its literary fiction and children's literature translation departments, which joined the newly formed foreign language publishing house Raduga, or Rainbow. I studied the archival documentation of all three of these publishers while on my Title VIII grant, but I often refer to them collectively as "Progress".

² Izdatel'stvo Progress: 1931-1981 (Moscow, USSR.: Progress publishing, 1981), 7.



agency), Soviet embassies and trade missions, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Union of Soviet Friendship Societies (SSOD), the Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, the Propaganda and Agitation Division of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (CPSU), the Ministry of Industry's printing division, and the Soviet Union of Writers . Finally, given Progress's immense global reach, I designed the reception half of my study to focus on the meaning and values that Indian readers (who read Progress books in English as well as in 14 other Indian languages) derived from Soviet translated titles.

By introducing a focus on Soviet book publishing operations and their on-the-ground effects in India, my project aimed to expand both the thematic and geographical scope of scholarship on the global cultural dimensions of the Cold War. In the early 2000s, following the publication of Nigel Gould-Davies' influential article "The Logic of Soviet Cultural Diplomacy," scholars of the Cold War began to take cultural production and cultural exchange more seriously, recognizing them as essential, if under-studied components of the ideological battle that waged between capitalist and communist superpowers for a good part of the twentieth century.³ But while in recent years many notable studies have expanded our understanding of the role that cultural production played in American post-war, ideologically-driven soft power initiatives in the Third World as a key Cold War battleground, relatively fewer studies have looked at the resonance of Soviet soft power and cultural diplomacy initiatives beyond the confines of the

³ Some recent notable studies that consider the cultural dimensions of the global Cold War include Eleonory Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die : The Soviet Lives of Western Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018); Nigel Gould–Davies, "The Logic of Soviet Cultural Diplomacy," *Diplomatic History* 27, no. 2 (2003): 193–214; Rachel Applebaum, "The Friendship Project: Socialist Internationalism in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia in the 1950s and 1960s," *Slavic Review* 74, no. 3 (2015): 484–507; Charles K Armstrong, "The Cultural Cold War in Korea, 1945– 1950," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 62, no. 1 (2003): 71–99; and Mark B. Smith, "Peaceful Coexistence at All Costs: Cold War Exchanges between Britain and the Soviet Union in 1956," *Cold War History* 12, no. 3 (2012): 537–558.



United States and Western and Eastern Europe.⁴ Given this gap in our knowledge about how Soviet cultural initiatives were actually received on the ground in Third World countries such as India, is it truly possible to conclude that "there was never a moment when the USSR gained cultural ascendency" in the global "culture wars" with the United States?⁴ And if we are to focus more narrowly on the global circulation of Soviet print culture during the Cold War, it is actually possible argue, as one scholar has done, that by the late 1960s Soviet literature's brief fling with "international fame" was "aborted" without an examination of its reception history outside of the West?⁶ These are the blind-spots in the history of Cold War culture and Soviet soft power initiatives that my research on Progress aims to address.

<u>Research Activities:</u> During my time in Russia as an American Councils, Title VIII research fellow, I conducted archival research in four state archives. In the following section I will give an overview of the historical research I undertook at each of these sites over the past nine months.

State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF): This archive contained primary archival collections. In them, I studied documentation between the publisher and other Soviet cultural authorities and institutions.

⁴ Studies that concern the United States' post-war cultural diplomacy efforts and anti-Soviet propaganda initiatives include Amanda Laugesen, *Taking Books to the World: American Publishers and the Cultural Cold War* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2017); Walter L Hixson, *Parting the Curtain : Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945-1961,* 1st ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); Reinhold Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Alfread A. Reisch, *Hot Books in the Cold War: The ClA-Funded Secret Western Book Distribution Program Behind the Iron Curtain* (Central European University Press, 2013).

 ⁵ This claim can be found in David Caute, *The Dancer Defects : The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). Caute's work does focus on both American and Soviet soft power, cultural initiatives during the Cold War but he does not look at their impact in the Thrid World.
 ⁶ Polly Jones, "The Thaw Goes International: Soviet Literature in Translation and Transit in the 1960s," in *The Socialist Sixties: Crossing Borders in the Second World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 122.



Russian State Economic Archive (RGAE): I found this archive useful for my study of foreign book distribution mechanisms. Here I was able to read sales and export reports by *MezhKniga* (the Soviet book export agency) from the 1980s, which provided incredible insight into the ways the Soviet Union desired to compete with capitalist booksellers on a global marketplaces.

Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI): In mid-January, I began to work for about two days each week in RGANI, the archive that holds all of the Communist Party files from 1952 to 1991. This was not part of my original research plan because until January 2019, the archive had been closed for three years. When it unexpectedly reopened, I decided to visit to have a look at their finding aids, which are not available online. There I found a large number of files with direct relevance to my project. Progress, as both a cultural institution and a vehicle of Soviet cultural diplomacy abroad, regularly corresponded with and submitted reports to the International Division and Propaganda and Agitation Division within the Central Committee of the Communist Party (CPSU). These divisions, in turn, released numerous resolutions that the publishing house was mandated to follow. I studied the hierarchical relationship as well as the tension that occurred between Progress and these higher-level party organs in order to better understand how the publisher's operations fit into larger Soviet foreign policy goals.

Russian State Foreign Policy Archive (AVPRF): In mid-March, toward the end of my grant period, I was granted permission to work in AVPRF, the institutional archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (MID) Unlike regular state archives, researchers cannot look at AVPRF finding aids (*opisi*) and request the files they wish to study. Instead, you must submit a brief summary of your research project and the archivists themselves present you with groups of files that concerned MID departments have allowed you to see. Therefore, you never know what kind of



material you will be able see on any particular day. I was given files from the Soviet Embassy in India and the Ministry of Internal Affairs South Asian department, which contained some documentation related the USSR's larger cultural diplomacy programs in India.

Important Research Findings: The research I have conducted in the aforementioned archives permits me to make the following evidence-based arguments.

1. The rapid expansion of Progress publishing's operations in Third World languages and the attendant growth of MezhKniga's book exports and distribution activities between 1954 and 1964 depended as much on external "pull" factors related to postcolonial readers' insatiable desire for access to affordable, well-produced reading material as it did on "push" factors, that is, on the Soviet Union's competitive desire to expand its cultural influence in the decolonizing Third World in the wider context of an ongoing ideological battle with the capitalist West. The line of causality that historians have typically drawn to explain the rapid increase in the production and circulation of Soviet culture around the world between the mid 1950s and the mid 1960s is based on what historian Michael David-Fox has called the "internal and external dimensions of the Soviet system." Studies have shown, for example, how certain domestic ideological and cultural shifts that occurred following the death of Joseph Stalin such as the declaration of "peaceful coexistence" as the USSR's official foreign policy in 1956 and a relaxation of tight controls over the foreign activities of Soviet cultural institutions (e.g. VOKS) set the stage for a revival of Soviet interest in cultural exchange,

⁷ Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921-1941* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 313.

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which had reached a nadir under Stalin.⁴ At the same time, most historians of the cultural Cold War would concur that the expansion of U.S. and European cultural diplomacy and development aid initiatives in the Third World in the early 1950s, which marked both a global and a cultural turn in the pre-existing ideological rivalries between the capitalist West and the socialist East, compelled the Soviet Union to commit to a new kind of competitive cultural openness and artistic dialogue with foreign publics.⁹ This commitment found its expression in the USSR's eager negotiation of countless bi-lateral cultural and scientific exchange agreements (which permitted the dispatch of artistic collectives, trade unions, fine arts exhibitions, and individual artists abroad) as well as in a general expansion of different forms of Soviet print and material culture intended for consumption by foreign audiences. What remains missing from this causality narrative, however, is any serious consideration of how foreign social forces, entirely unrelated to the Soviet Union's domestic politics and conduct of foreign policy, might have impacted Soviet designs for cultural outreach and exchange.

My archival research establishes another vector of causality for the expansion of the Soviet Union's print propaganda activities in the Third World during the Cold War. I show how as early as 1953, South Asian readers were demanding that the FLPH translate and publish particular genres and titles of Soviet books, erstwhile unavailable in English or other Indian languages. Given that post-colonial India was experiencing rapid

⁸ Two excellent recent works on this topic include Rósa Magnúsdóttir, *Enemy Number One : The United States of America in Soviet Ideology and Propaganda, 1945-1959* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019) and Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die : The Soviet Lives of Western Culture.*

⁹ Jeremy Friedman, for example, in "Soviet Policy in the Developing World and the Chinese Challenge in the 1960s," *Cold War History* 10, no. 2 (2010) makes the claim that "the growth of Soviet influence in the developing world also called for an expansion of the propaganda apparatus," 254.



population growth as well as an increase in its literate population at the time, this demand is not so surprising in and of itself. But what *is* surprising, particularly given the ongoing academic preoccupation with questions censorship, ideological control, and state intervention in the Soviet publishing sphere, is that Progress publishing consistently took its marching orders from this diverse South Asian readership, which from the beginning of the post-Stalinist period formed one of the largest markets for Progress publications outside China, Korea, and the socialist block (and the largest market for Soviet texts in English translation).¹⁰

2. The colossal demand for translated Soviet literature on the Indian subcontinent and for Progress titles in particular, which persisted through the disintegration of the USSR in 1991, subsidized a significant portion of Progress publishing's loss-making publication activities in other global marketplaces. The extent of Third World influence on Soviet publishing operations comes to the fore in Progress's annual accounting reports, which show the profit and loss sustained by the publisher for each published title in every language and genre category (e.g. literary fiction, popular science, economics etc.). To scan the columns of titles released under the publisher's most important thematic categories of "social and political literature" (*obshchetvenno-politicheskaya literatura*) and "Marxist-Leninist Classics," is to get lost in a sea of negative numbers. In 1957, for instance, these two categories alone, which represented over two thirds of the publisher's catalogue, accounted for the majority of its losses. This,

¹⁰ By the late 1960s India would become the largest consumer of Progress publications outside the socialist block and would remain so until 1991. Scholars have misidentified Britain and North America as the "principal markets" for English-language translations of Soviet titles. See Jones, "the Thaw Goes International," 121.

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in itself, comes as no surprise. For decades scholars have called attention to the ways in which Soviet organs, whether the Central Committee's Department of Agitation and Propaganda or the State Committee for Publishing, Printing and the Book Trade (*Glavizdat*) generously subsidized the translation and production of unprofitable titles for both domestic or foreign consumption. But overall, in 1957, as in subsequent years, Progress *was* in fact profitable; the sales of the remaining 36 percent of its catalogue that or, or 207 books, offset all other losses. And the vast majority of this profit came from the sales of Soviet children's books and Russian classics and translated into Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, Korean, and English.¹¹ Thus, even as nearly all of Progress's Spanish, French, German, Swedish, Arabic, Japanese, and Chinese titles remained *unprofitable*, the immense magnitude of the publisher's sales of literary and children's works translated into Third World languages helped Progress remain profitable overall.¹²

Such profit-loss data raise important questions about the nature of the Soviet propaganda "machine" during the early Cold War period. What does it mean to know that 150,000 copies of a Bengali translation of Leo Tolstoy's children's story book *Three Bears* were sold in 1957 for a profit of 177,000 rubles while 11,000 copies of Lenin's "On National Liberation Movements of Peoples of the East" carried a loss of 24,500

¹¹ My sources reveal that that South and South East Asian book markets accounted for three quarters of Progress's English book sales during the 1950s and 60s.

¹² It is important to note that Progress, as a state-owned publishing house operating in a communist planned economy, was never intending on making (nor did ever make) a capitalist-style profit from its book production. But showing some profit on its book sales was important as it indicated that Soviet ideas, culture and values were being successfully propagandized across the world where readers were willing to spend money on Soviet titles. This quantifiable success also translated into privileged access to state resources that thousands of other Soviet publishing houses were competing for. These resources included access to the best kind of printing paper and binding material, man-hours in Soviet typographies, an increased employee head count, access to foreign currency for the import of special printing materials and equipment, permission to print in the most technologically sophisticated printing houses among others.



rubles? Through what lens do we interpret the fact that after 36,000 copies of the Ukrainian folk tale, "The Mitten" sold out within one hour at a Calcutta bookstore Progress agreed to the Indian seller's request to print another 100,000 copies in Bengali for them the following year? That the press also agreed to the same bookseller's request to stop sending them unprofitable Bengali translations of Plekhanov's works (a staple Soviet political work)? My scrutiny of such profit-loss statements over a twenty-year period of Progress's history raises questions about how Soviet Union funded its expansive publishing industry.

3. Children's publications were the lynchpin of the USSR's foreign book program.

Historians often assume that USSR's massive translation and publication program revolved around the production of Marxist-Leninist classics and other political or socioeconomic works intended for consumption by an adult reading audience. My research definitively shows, however, that this was not the case. For the entire twenty-year period between 1953 and 1973 (the years for which archival evidence is available) Progress publishing sold significantly more copies of children's titles than of books in any other genre category (not only for region of the world my research focuses on, South Asia, but for all regions around the world). By the late 1960s, in fact, the ratio of children's books exported to Marxist-Leninist classics was 8:1. As mentioned earlier, this intense focus on the translation and production of children's books for foreign audiences was *not* the result of a party resolution or any other kind of order handed down to Progress management from higher-level organs. Rather, it was had emerged from bottom-up reader and



bookseller requests that the publisher took seriously (further elaboration on this point can be found below).

4. Soviet books achieved mass popularity in South Asia thanks to their publishers' straightforward solicitation of audience feedback, unfailing attention to all forms of reader criticism, and willingness to adapt and improve its production and editorial process in accordance with audience expectations. From the very beginning of its post-Stalin era publishing history, Progress (and later the publishing houses Mir and Raduga) printed a "request to readers" on the final page of every published title. It read (in its English translation): "The publisher would be glad to have your opinion of this book, its translation and design and any suggestions you may have for future publication. Please write to 21, Zubovsky Boulevard, Moscow, USSR." This solicitation provided a clear framework for reader feedback, which the publishers would then use to argue for or against any proposed changes to their editorial or production process. By providing their foreign readers with a clear communication outlet while simultaneously encouraging them to give the publisher the kind of knowledge and feedback it most desired (e.g. comments on translation quality, book design and title choice), Soviet presses were able to collect an extraordinary amount of information on their readership that they would otherwise not have access to. In turn, this information allowed the publisher to propose and institute informed changes to its editorial and book production processes. These changes helped the USSR achieve its goal of producing books that promoted communist ideas, values, and ideals in a way that was culturally and linguistically accessible and enjoyable for its target reading publics.



Policy Implications and Recommendations: Building on the aforementioned research findings, my research puts forward several concrete recommendations that could inform the United States' conduct of public and cultural diplomacy abroad.

- 1. Solicit, respect, and respond to audience feedback and criticism. The practice of asking for audience feedback is not new to public diplomacy. But all too often, organizers of official cultural programs and publications simply ask their audience or readership to provide feedback in the vaguest sense. Phrases akin to "Did you like our program? Tell us what you think!" or "We want to hear from you! Write to us with your comments, questions, and concerns at john.doe@xzy.gov" are ubiquitous. The Soviet presses I studied avoided making such ill-defined solicitations. Instead, they asked readers for concrete recommendations in four specific areas (e.g. book design, content, translation, and future title selection). In providing these guidelines, they made it easy for readers to decide what they would write to them about without closing off the opportunity for feedback that falls outside of these concrete areas.
- 2. Capturing children and youth audiences should remain a priority. My research shows that the youngest members of society (and their parents) are oftentimes the most avid consumers of exported cultural products. Cultural diplomatic initiatives that do not develop interesting material and programming for youth audiences are missing out on an important window of opportunity to spread particular values, ideals, and worldviews. While the Soviet presses I studied did not *intend* to cater primarily to the tastes and desires of Third World youth, once they realized (from the outpouring of feedback and requests from readers' and booksellers) that Soviet children's books



outstripped all other genres of exported Soviet texts, they adapted their title selection strategies and other editorial practices accordingly.

Co-Curricular Activities: In early November I gave two talks on my research: one at the American Cultural Center (housed in the Moscow's Library for Foreign Literature) and one the Dostoevsky Library (a very popular library for youth in downtown Moscow). Also, in November I served as a translator and event facilitator at the Indian Cultural Centre (next door to the Indian embassy) where two guest filmmakers I had invited from India screened a documentary film on the history of Soviet book reading in the Marathi language. My talk at the American library was in English while second was given in Russian. Due to the fact that the programming coordinator at the American Library had done an excellent job advertising the talk on social media and posters hung up around the library, this event was the most widely attended. Most Russians in the audience had no idea that Soviet books had achieved such mass popularity in India during the Cold War and enjoyed learning about this understudied part of their history. On January 16, I gave a talk on my research and methodologies at the Higher School of Economics. It was titled "Lenin Should be Bound, not Stapled! or how Third World Readers Derived Meaning (and occasional annoyance) from the Materiality of Soviet Texts during the early Cold War." During and after the talk I had the opportunity to meet Russian graduate students as well as professors, professional contacts that will be important for me in the future.

<u>Conclusions</u>: Throughout its post-war institutional history, the USSR's Progress publishing held two primary editorial commitments. The first was to publish works that would "strengthen the Marxist-Leninist education of the masses abroad, fight against bourgeois ideology and expose the lies and the slander of the imperialist movement." The second was to "fulfill the requests and



desires" of foreign readers. Over the course of nine-months of research in the Moscow archives, I studied how both of these goals and the conflicts that often arose between the two, generated unprecedented demand Soviet translated texts in the Third World, which became particularly pronounced in India. Paying close attention to sales and distribution data from the USSR's book export agency, *MezhKniga*, I discovered that as early as the mid 1950s, Progress (and the cultural organs that oversaw the press's activities) were confronted with the uncomfortable reality that the translation of Soviet novels, Russian classics, and children's literature not only sold faster than collected volumes of Lenin's speeches on expanding Third World book markets, but also brought the publisher the bulk of its profit. The dissertation I am developing out of this research explores the frictions and opportunities that this market dynamic generated, both for the state-owned Soviet publishers, MezhKniga, and the larger Soviet cultural bureaucracy as well as for the and readers and institutions that became passionate end consumers of Soviet literature in translation during the Cold War.

Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications: Two weeks after completing my Title VIII-funded research in Russia, I left for India to begin the second phase of my research. In India, where I am funded by a Fulbright-Hays DDRA fellowship, I will be examining more of the reception side of Soviet book program. In addition to undertaking research in the National Archives of India, I will be conducting oral history interviews with Indian individuals who read Soviet books during the Cold War period. I plan to use the information gathered from the Russian archives to locate potential interlocuters. I hope to locate and request interviews with some of those individuals who once wrote letters to Soviet publishing houses back in the 1960s and 1970s.



My immediate plans for research presentations include a talk at the annual conference of the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (SHARP) in July. I will be presenting (remotely via Skype) on a panel entitled 'Beyond Propaganda: Thinking Through Cold War Book Networks'. My individual paper, "More Tolstoy, Less Lenin: How the USSR's Foreign Languages Publishing House Captured Expanding Third World Book Markets," is based on the archival research I conducted while in Moscow. While in the Indian cities of Kolkata, Delhi, and Mumbai, I also plan to give talks at the local universities I am affiliated with and at the American cultural centers which USIEF (Fulbright's partner in India) works closely with.

Attached Photos:

- **1.** Bachman pictured with two visiting Indian documentary film makers during her talk at the American Cultural Center in Moscow
- 2. Two beaten-up entry cards to two state archives
- **3.** Photograph of the outside of the State Archive of the Russian Federation's branch in Samara.

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