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NAVIGATING THE SOVIET EXPERIMENT:  
TRAVELS AND WRITINGS OF JOHN DOS PASSOS AND EDMUND WILSON IN SOVIET RUSSIA,  
1928-1935

By

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A Thesis Presented In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts  
in History

The University of Montana  
Missoula, MT

May, 2023

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## Navigating the Soviet Experiment

Chair: Dr. Michael Mayer

The travel accounts of Soviet Russia by John Dos Passos (1896-1970) and Edmund Wilson (1895-1972) vividly demonstrate how Western writer-travelers were drawn into Soviet cultural experiments. Only rarely was this process one of literary influence. This thesis focuses on published travel writings by Dos Passos (*In All Countries*, 1934) and Wilson (*Travels In Two Democracies*, 1936), as well as journals, letters, and essays, in terms of Soviet cultural developments both writers noted as historically significant in shaping Western views of the Soviet state, and of the methods involved in building socialism and Communism.

In the 1920s, Soviet culture emphasized the future through mass or collective production of spectacles involving the observer. This orientation paralleled Marxist teleology toward the post-revolutionary perfection of the fully Communist society. Individuals renounced former class identities and acquired new ones through labor for and participation in mass projects. In the 1930s, as reflected in the advent of Socialist Realism as an artistic doctrine, the emphasis in culture shifted to the exceptional individual, whose activities embodied the message of “socialism achieved” in official party discourse.

The popular appeal of using high artistic means to achieve a social end attracted Western writers such as Dos Passos and Wilson. Dos Passos wanted to promote a “revolutionary theater” that could appeal to a mass audience and encourage consciousness of social reform. Wilson sought to glimpse in the Soviet present the material result of Marxist socialism.

Official Soviet agencies sought and courted close relationships with Western writers, particularly those perceived through their publications as sympathetic to socialist ideology and its cultural manifestations. Touristic and cultural bureaus directed the curiosity of writers such as Dos Passos and Wilson toward specific Soviet achievements, and also attempted to bring them into closer collaboration with political objectives by appealing to their literary/cultural interests.



## INTRODUCTION: THE REVOLUTION'S "FAINT REVERBERATIONS"

"Navigating the Volga with considerable success," American writer John Dos Passos wrote E.E. Cummings from aboard a river steamer during his four months' sojourn in the Soviet Union in 1928. The vessel was "rapidly approaching Astrakhan" and "coming to a dock – I must go and work."<sup>1</sup> Taking up the letter again after assisting the vessel's crew unloading from the wharf a quantity of melons, Dos Passos sketched for Cummings the various people and sights he encountered in Leningrad and Moscow, emphasizing theater and filmmaking in the two cities. "The breadth and emptiness of the country is amazing," he stated. Yet he could not conceal a sense of disappointment, particularly by the silence of Leningrad. Where were the "faint reverberations" of revolution, the "tramping footsteps [and] voices yelling All Power to the Soviets"?<sup>2</sup> What had become of "October, Smolny, Lenin," he asked, before answering himself that they "were the beginning of everything."<sup>3</sup> All now were of the past, and "the October days seemed as long ago as the fall of the Bastille."<sup>4</sup>

Eight years later, the American literary critic Edmund Wilson, Dos Passos's "good friend [and] most astute critic," recorded a different impression while on the same voyage down the Volga.<sup>5</sup> "Enormous, passive, wide open," he wrote in his journal in late July 1935 en route to the newly-

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<sup>1</sup> John Dos Passos - E.E. Cummings, [August, 1928], *The Fourteenth Chronicle: Letters and Diaries of John Dos Passos*, edited by Townsend Ludington (Boston: Gambit, 1973), 386.

<sup>2</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, in *Travel Books and Other Writings, 1916-1941* (New York: Library of America, 2003), 283.

<sup>3</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 286. Smolny Institute, which Dos Passos visited in early August 1928, had been the Bolshevik headquarters at the time of the Revolution.

<sup>4</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 286.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1961), 348.

rechristened industrial city of Gorky.<sup>6</sup> At no point did he break off writing to assist the crew with cargo or navigation. “The boat seems to wander all over the river,” he observed. In a day he would land at Ulyanovsk, where he would tour Lenin’s home.<sup>7</sup> Formerly Simbirsk, Lenin’s birthplace had been renamed to honor his patronym in 1924, and was undergoing extensive reconstruction as a Sovietized city.<sup>8</sup> As he composed imagery suggestive of the passive Russian people under Stalin slowly carried along the inexorable current of historical Marxism, a young Soviet engineer-technician also traveling to Gorky asked if Wilson also “was an engineer,” and pressed him for “information about American designs.”<sup>9</sup>

Dos Passos’s accounts, “Passport Photo” and “Russian Visa,” were published initially in *New Masses* in 1929 before inclusion in his 1934 volume of travel essays, *In All Countries*. Wilson’s account forms the second half of a similar volume of travel pieces, of which the Russian is the longest, titled *Travels In Two Democracies* (1936). In addition, both writers described their impressions of Russia extensively in journals and letters. Often during his travels Dos Passos supplemented his notes with small sketches or watercolors, which concentrated on architectural form, spatial layout, and the relation of design to livable social conditions.<sup>10</sup> All

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<sup>6</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties: From Notebooks and Diaries of the Period*, edited by Leon Edel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 577.

<sup>7</sup> Wilson gave a detailed description of Lenin’s home in *To The Finland Station*, emphasizing the bourgeois environment of the leader’s youth to support his contention that Lenin represented a reversion to the ideals of revolution originating among the bourgeoisie that gained currency in historical writings on the French Revolution by Michelet and Condorcet. This contention drew on the “enlightened” aspect of revolution that he carried over into analyzing Soviet culture. Edmund Wilson, *To The Finland Station: A Study in the Writing and Acting of History* (New York: Doubleday, 1947), 355-357. Wilson described the social milieu of Simbirsk in the late 1800s as both “stratified” and a locus of “academic” and artistic creativity, home to the Russian historian Karamzin and the poet Goncharov as well as Kerensky, leader of the Menshevik coalition: *To The Finland Station*, 354.

<sup>8</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1936), 260.

<sup>9</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 577.

<sup>10</sup> See George Knox, “Dos Passos and Painting,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 6:1 (Spring 1964), 23-24, which analyzes Dos Passos’s artwork and the aesthetic influences of expressionism, cubism, and “abstract realism.”

were useful for documenting new modes of culture produced in the aftermath of the Revolution. Neither *In All Countries* nor *Travels In Two Democracies* attracted many readers. Only a few thousand copies of each were printed, and these printings satisfied current reader demand. In February 1935 Dos Passos commented on his book's poor sales: "I was rather disappointed at its not selling (and that means not being read) . . . I find to my dismay each book I publish sells less than the preceding book [and] with *In All Countries* I'm virtually down to zero."<sup>11</sup> The following year, *Travels In Two Democracies* sold even fewer copies. However, contemporary critical attention, particularly from critics on the left such as Granville Hicks and Brooks Atkinson, focused on the Russian sections. Reviewers observed that Wilson's account of Soviet Russia highlighted its utopian aspirations and its prescriptive application to a more "actively idealistic" concept of US welfare.<sup>12</sup>

The study of Dos Passos's and Wilson's travel accounts represents a convergence of two scholarly approaches. The first is that taken by Sovietologists including Sheila Fitzpatrick, Sylvia Margulies, Francois Furet, James Von Geldern, and Michael-David-Fox, who have directed their attention towards what David-Fox termed the "Soviet culture of evaluation."<sup>13</sup> A crucial similarity between Soviet tourism and cultural efforts to act upon the consciousness of individuals existed, as noted by Margulies in her examination of how cultural interactions were influenced by specific Soviet agencies and intellectual contexts (such as the literary genre of

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These influences, Knox stated, spilled over into Dos Passos's "stage design and set construction" as well as his fiction.

<sup>11</sup> John Dos Passos – Matthew Josephson [6 February 1935], Matthew Josephson Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

<sup>12</sup> William L. Bailey, review of *Travels In Two Democracies*, *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (June, 1937), 450-451.

<sup>13</sup> Michael David-Fox, "The Fellow Travelers Revisited," 322.



Socialist Realism, which became the official criterion for writing in 1934). Among these scholars exists a point of agreement concerning the faculties of Soviet agencies to inculcate a sense of participation in observing and correcting themselves and others to achieve future perfection. As Fitzpatrick observed, the need to provide models for social behavior and institutions impelled Soviet cultural institutions while providing a host of sites by which the socialist future could be gauged. The second line of scholarly interest, represented in the writings of Jochen Hellbeck, Igal Halfin, and Julie Draskoczy, centers on the composition and significance of texts such as diaries and autobiographical statements written by Soviet subjects during the interwar period. These texts themselves have provoked controversy, with some Sovietologists such as Orlando Figes denying Hellbeck's contention that diaries and journals constituted a means of tracing the interaction of individuals with Soviet educational or cultural institutions.<sup>14</sup> This line of scholarship has analyzed the personal account in terms of the acculturation and "reforging" narrative prevalent in 1920s Bolshevism and the deployment in personal writings of internalized party-state language to "forge new selves."<sup>15</sup> Literary and biographical studies of Dos Passos and Wilson (by Townsend Ludington, Virginia Spencer Carr, and Melvin Landsberg for the former, and Sherman Paul, George H. Douglas, and Jeffrey Meyers for the latter) placed their respective Soviet travels in terms of aesthetic or intellectual development, but have not discussed the nature of their cultural interactions, nor attempted to place them within a Soviet historical context. Unlike many contemporary American writer-travelers such as Theodore Dreiser or Waldo Frank, neither Dos Passos nor Wilson placed the post-revolutionary

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<sup>14</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Company, 2007), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Michael David-Fox, "The Fellow Travelers Revisited," 318.

experiment in a “backward” or pre-modern framework. As Wilson pointed out, this narrative of backwardness belonged to a picture-postcard vision, not Soviet reality.<sup>16</sup> Even when discussing the onset of the show trials, Dos Passos refused explanations of “Slavic atavism” for political violence.<sup>17</sup> Instead, both writers situated the Soviet experiment within a larger, Western fascination with artistic and industrial modernism.

In examining travel writings by foreign visitors, only a few, such as David-Fox, have approached how and why Western writers were sought and courted by Soviet Russian cultural institutions during the interwar period, though this era was, as David-Fox observed, an especially active one for literary encounters between Russia and the West. Travel writing itself is an under-analyzed genre that, in the Soviet instance, often yields great insight into the role played by cultural programs in developing “the nature of the narrator’s place” within collective or historical consciousness in a Marxist-oriented society.<sup>18</sup> This suggests a field of overlap between texts written by Bolshevik and Stalinist-era Russians and the subjective travel accounts composed by Western writers through a shared epistemological concern with an “appeal to the authority of the eye-witness.”<sup>19</sup> In effect, travel accounts supplement the texts studied by Hellbeck and Halfin by granting insight into the nature of a closed society and its efforts to refashion a population *en masse*. A good many writers, as Furet stated, came to verify or dispel the “mythical October” that informed the expectations of intellectuals.<sup>20</sup> This appeal to myth,

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<sup>16</sup> Edmund Wilson – Louise Bogan [circa late May 1935], *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 271.

<sup>17</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson, 23 December 1934, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 459.

<sup>18</sup> Casey Blanton, *Travel Writing: The Self and the World* (London: Routledge, 2000), xii.

<sup>19</sup> Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 65.

<sup>20</sup> Michael David-Fox, “The Fellow Travelers Revisited,” 304; Francois Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, translated by Deborah Furet (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 67.

addressed by both Dos Passos and Wilson in their accounts, required impressing both the Soviet population and foreign travelers with cultural and industrial development under socialism. Evaluation and observation marked Soviet culture, as Fitzpatrick and David-Fox observed, but also inhered in spoken or written discourse, as Halfin noted, and was fostered among visitors by party-state agencies desirous of generating positive views of Soviet achievements.

Pursuing a “model-based” approach that itself may be derived from interwar Soviet culture, this study uses the travel accounts of Dos Passos and Wilson to show how US intellectuals who visited Soviet Russia had to navigate a complex of cultural and economic evaluations on both the Russian and Western sides. The confluence of the Great Depression, the rise of Fascism, and the Soviet planned economy that replaced the limited New Economic Policy informed their critiques. The scholarly studies of Soviet culture inform analysis of how the two accounts mark how Soviet organizations presented the superiority of their system culturally and socially. Consequently, the accounts display how foreigners would position themselves in terms of larger ideological struggles and “show their face” as a supporter of or detractor from socialism.

While this approach does not directly contradict estimations of how Soviet agencies manipulated visitors, a more revelatory framework of Soviet cultural diplomacy helps understand the travel accounts in terms of what drew US intellectuals to post-revolutionary Russia. In studying Soviet culture, both Fitzpatrick and David-Fox proposed a more transnational scope for Soviet-US contact during what the latter called the “era of significant

Western intellectual presence inside the Soviet Union.”<sup>21</sup> This approach befits Dos Passos’s ideal of transnational aesthetic modernity, and Wilson’s conception of post-revolutionary Russia as an evolution of enlightenment-revolutionary goals.

Close reading of the travel accounts shows that the revelation of Stalin’s crimes – to which historians such as Paul Hollander have assumed foreign visitors were willfully blind – were not the sole factor in the departure of many American writers from the Left. To be sure, the events of 1937-1939 drove many sympathizers away from ideological Communism. In Dos Passos’s case, 1939 also marked a literary “break” concurrent with publication of *Adventures of a Young Man* in June, two months before the Russo-German Non-Aggression Pact. Quite contrary to contemporary socialist realist depictions of heroic figures in service to the Communist cause, the protagonist of Dos Passos’s novel was betrayed and undone by unquestioning acceptance of party ideology. Critics assailed the novel as a distortion of the Communist cause.<sup>22</sup> However, the travel accounts of Dos Passos and Wilson demonstrate that significant fissures, not all ideological, appeared in the literary left well before the show trials and purges. In particular, the apparent “freedom” granted after the 1934 All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers soon proved to be a guise for party-state oversight of literary production.

In the late 1920s, Stalin renewed the Bolshevik “class war” in response to agricultural shortages and to stabilize market supplies necessary to commencing rapid industrialization of the nation. Class conflict overlay Dos Passos’s self-presentation in his explanation to Cummings,

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<sup>21</sup> Michael David-Fox, “The Fellow Travelers Revisited,” 335.

<sup>22</sup> See John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson, 27 June 1939, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 522, and John Dos Passos – Dwight MacDonald [July 1939], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 526.

as he navigated between his “intelligentsia” identity as a writer and his “proletarian” identity as a worker. Throughout his account, Dos Passos reminded himself, in asides, he was essentially a reporter (using an alternate third-person narrative voice he referred to as “Amerikanskii Peesyatel,” the transliteration of the Russian for reporter), but the nature of the Soviet experiment defied such objectivity.<sup>23</sup> An uneasiness about suspect class backgrounds and intellectual pursuits shared space with enthusiastic comments on Soviet culture, especially theater and film, as the means by which the revolution’s ideals were transmitted to the population. Culture, in Jochen Hellbeck’s phrase, “was as much a producer as a product.”<sup>24</sup> Dos Passos’s and Wilson’s accounts display the ways in which Western writers not only recorded the new consciousness of the historical role of the masses in Russia, but how writers were instrumental in reporting its advent to Western readers.<sup>25</sup>

However, for the foreign traveler, “navigating” also meant sifting through official reports on utopian Soviet projects that were tinged with Party language directing visitors’ attention toward party-state achievements. Soviet power resided in observation and surveillance, and this power in part required observers from the West who could report on cultural show.<sup>26</sup> Wilson noted that those who sat – or more often stood in deference to Stalin’s presence – during parades and in theaters often were Westerners like himself. Many were tourists, diplomatic legates, journalists employed by Western newspapers, and even matrons from the

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<sup>23</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 273, 274, 302. Dos Passos translated the term himself as “newswriter”: *In All Countries*, 302.

<sup>24</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 7.

<sup>25</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 4-5.

<sup>26</sup> Sheila Fitzgerald, “Foreigners Observed: Moscow Visitors in the 1930s Under the Gaze Of Their Soviet Guides,” *Russian History*, Vol. 35, No. 1/2 (Spring-Summer 2008), 216; Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 221.

Midwest curious to know if Soviet Russia was “safer” than the New Deal US.<sup>27</sup> State tourist agencies assigned guides to draw writers into specific literary or educational projects that officials hoped would ensure a favorable report. These projects often displayed the importance of education and literacy within the Soviet experiment, but often also employed methods or media, such as theater, that attracted the interest of both Dos Passos and Wilson. Travel accounts of Soviet Russia were not reports unmediated by official viewpoints and language.

Lastly, publication in the US of an appreciative account of Russia signaled to Soviet cultural authorities the success of its directive to induce the visitor into self-definition as a “friend” of the party-state. Dos Passos’s comments indicate the extent to which Bolshevik definitions of class permeated post-revolutionary Russian society and shaped the impressions of travelers who wanted to record the present historical situation. Wilson noted that in traveling to Russia in 1935 he took part in an “international club of people interested in the Soviet Union.”<sup>28</sup> The Soviet experiment attracted the attention of a number of writers and “progressive intellectuals” from the US who were mutual friends of Dos Passos and Wilson and to whom the Soviets extended “cultural services” in the 1925-1935 period.<sup>29</sup>

Historians of the early Stalinist period have analyzed Soviet culture’s orientation toward future “command of nature in its entirety,” in Leon Trotsky’s phrase. The geography of

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<sup>27</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 273-274.

<sup>28</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 153.

<sup>29</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Foreigners Observed,” 217; Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 98-99. These included Theodore Dreiser, Waldo Frank, E.E. Cummings, Upton Sinclair, Sherwood Anderson, Max Eastman, and William Saroyan, as well as a number of non-literary friends and acquaintances of the writers. Wilson, for example, recorded a conversation about Russia with his neighbors, the socialist activists Charles and Adelaide Walker, who visited Russia early in 1934 and who also were friends of Dos Passos, a full year before his own journey. He encountered Saroyan in July 1935, when both were in Moscow soon after Saroyan’s attendance at the First International Congress of Writers, held in Paris on 21 June: *The Thirties*, 576.

landscape and cities informed such an orientation, and as travel writing of the modernist period privileged mimetic description, writers' accounts often tried to take in the scope of the Soviet experiment. "There is so much space everywhere," Dos Passos wrote another correspondent, "everything comes in great quantities."<sup>30</sup> Bolshevik and Stalinist acculturation programs "attuning the individual self to the general course of history" intersected with writers' efforts toward recording this history, with an intention of correction and adaptation to present US social and economic conditions.<sup>31</sup>

It is tempting to look at the Soviet travel account in the light of Robert Darnton's ideas concerning the subversive relationship of covert, "forbidden" texts to state-controlled discourse. As one British resident in Moscow reminded Dos Passos, "You can come and go when you please" without suffering the fate of the "old revolutionaries who had created the Soviet Union."<sup>32</sup> The Soviet travel account, however, was seldom a text intended to reveal the hidden reality of life under Stalinist rule. Reporting on travels in Soviet Russia necessitated a certain degree of official complicity, but was regulated to an even greater extent by what Wilson called the "typical intellectual illusion" common among those interested in Russia.<sup>33</sup> This illusion originated, Wilson told Dos Passos, in the utopian ideals intellectuals "cherished" and wished to see in Soviet society; when "political movements failed to live up to their pretensions" of social change, the idealist suffered disillusionment.<sup>34</sup> Rather, as pointed out by

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<sup>30</sup> John Dos Passos – Germaine Lucas-Championniere [mid-August 1928], John Dos Passos, *Lettres a Germaine Lucas-Championniere*, edited by Mathieu Grousse (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 248. Original in French; my translation.

<sup>31</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 161.

<sup>32</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 310.

<sup>33</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 31 January 1935, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 257.

<sup>34</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 31 January 1935, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 257.

Jochen Hellbeck in his study of Soviet-era diaries, the travel account tended to complement party-state discourse rather than provide a personal counter-narrative of resistance.<sup>35</sup> “Soviet revolutionary ideology,” Hellbeck stated, can no longer be understood simply in terms of competing narratives of “inner striving and outward compliance.”<sup>36</sup> The text written by the interested traveler often intertwined evaluation of “socialist construction” with “political-ideological” observations that drew on the writers’ understanding of Marxism and the historical events of the Revolution.<sup>37</sup> True, one can discern efforts to transcend the formulaic language dispensed by hosts and guides. As Soviet literary policy of the 1930s implicated rote, Party-directed language, Dos Passos especially expressed refusal. “Independent thinking,” he wrote a correspondent, “even if a defeatist, nihilist, or fascistical sort is more valuable in the long run than all the copying out of manifestoes already discarded in Moscow.”<sup>38</sup> The writer who chose to document travels in Soviet Russia ran a gamut of Soviet official pronouncements emanating from political and cultural leaders, factions on the US political left, editors of journals who might publish the travel account, and literary critics, all of whom acted as forces upon reception of the accuracy of the work. Communist and Socialist parties within the US challenged the accounts’ authenticity, insisted on a level of ideological fidelity to Marxist and Leninist phraseology, and faulted writers who failed to praise Soviet rational planning to overcome “natural and economic forces.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 14.

<sup>36</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 11.

<sup>37</sup> Michael David-Fox, “The Fellow Travelers Revisited: The ‘Cultured West’ Through Soviet Eyes,” *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (June 2003), 310.

<sup>38</sup> John Dos Passos – Matthew Josephson [6 February 1935], Matthew Josephson Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

<sup>39</sup> Gary Saul Monson, “The ‘Lifeworld’ That Gorbachev Ended,” *Commentary*, 154:3 (October 2022), 47.



The period in which each traveled also shaped their accounts in significant ways. The roughly four months between late July and early December, 1928 that Dos Passos's "Russian Visa" covers, saw the inception of Stalin's First Five-Year Plan (announced publicly in October just as Dos Passos reached Moscow) and the end of Lenin's New Economic Plan, which strident Bolsheviks deplored as a necessary but regressive accommodation of a free-market economy. At the same time, Soviet film and theater reached an apogee of international reputation and excited Dos Passos with Soviet avant-garde aesthetic developments. Wilson's visit also occupied roughly four months, from May 23 (his arrival in Leningrad) to mid-September, 1935. By this juncture, those "radicals" such as Dos Passos who heralded the Russian Revolution as a turning point in history now challenged Soviet presentations of Stalin as a successor to Lenin, and questioned the methods by which Stalin was consolidating his power.<sup>40</sup>

For Soviet tourist and cultural agencies that sought to influence views of Russia abroad, writers' impressions of Russia rested on "their recognition of the great socialist homeland as a superior system to be emulated."<sup>41</sup> After 1929 the possibility of representing its revolutionary goals as an alternative socio-economic model to a flawed capitalism provided an additional motive that to an extent offset Great Break nationalistic policies.<sup>42</sup> Visitors in the 1920s were drawn to "the experimental, internationally-known avant-gardists [who] were primarily on offer," including those doing "pioneering work" in "scholarly fields" and science.<sup>43</sup> Agencies of

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<sup>40</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 9 May 1935, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 262.

<sup>41</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 226, 14; Michael David-Fox, "The Fellow Travelers Revisited," 310. In the latter, David-Fox stated that the US and Britain were particular targets because the support of the French literary left was almost implicit, although many important French writers visited Russia in the 1930s.

<sup>42</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Foreigners Observed: Moscow Visitors in the 1930s Under the Gaze of Their Soviet Guides," *Russian History* 35:1-2 (Spring-Summer 2008), 222.

<sup>43</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Foreigners Observed," 225.

the Soviet government, whether touristic or literary, sought Westerners who would write convincingly of post-revolutionary achievements. The “domestic-international cross-fertilization” between Western intellectuals and Soviet intelligentsia influenced visitors’ observations concerning new facilities such as schools, factories, and worker housing that were intended to dispel lingering portrayals of Russia as backward during the interwar period.<sup>44</sup> By 1935, Soviet tourist and cultural agencies coordinated to reproduce “official” interpretations.<sup>45</sup> In her study of the Belomor White Sea Canal project’s “rehabilitation” of criminals as laborers, Julie Draskoczy noted the importance of the “mentor who guides” the “unreformed [and] uninitiated” prisoner along the path towards becoming a “New Man.”<sup>46</sup> At times the writer-traveler followed the Soviet New Person’s submersion “in the Bolshevik community without leaving any trace” of former intelligentsia identity.<sup>47</sup> The Soviet travel account often placed its narrator in a similar relationship with both actual guides quoting officially-vetted statements, and facilities that modeled the infrastructure of a fully socialist world, especially those who attached “intellectual” importance to “welfare state” institutions such as model farms, schools, and medical facilities.<sup>48</sup> Descriptions of both old and new facilities and the construction work going on in Russia filled pages of Dos Passos’s and Wilson’s accounts.

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<sup>44</sup> Michael David-Fox, “The Fellow Travelers Revisited,” 307; Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 5.

<sup>45</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Foreigners Observed,” 225; Lewis Feuer, “American Travelers to the Soviet Union, 1917-32: The Formation of a Component of New Deal Ideology,” *American Quarterly* 14:2 Part 1 (Summer 1962), 119-120.

<sup>46</sup> Julie Draskoczy, “The ‘Put’ of *Perekovka*: Transforming Lives at Stalin’s White Sea-Baltic Canal,” *The Russian Review*, Vol. 71, No. 1 (January, 2012), 38.

<sup>47</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies Initiating the Bolshevik Self* (Seattle: Herbert J. Ellison Center for Russian, East European, and Central Asian Studies, University of Washington Press, 2011), 163; Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921-1941* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 246.

<sup>48</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Foreigners Observed,” 225; Lewis Feuer, “American Travelers to the Soviet Union, 1917-32: The Formation of a Component of New Deal Ideology,” *American Quarterly* 14:2 Part 1 (Summer 1962), 119-120. Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 182.

As Soviet Russia embarked on manifold ways to acculturate the masses, its cultural authorities perceived the benefit of attracting visitors from the West, particularly the US, whose political outlooks could be considered sufficiently reliable to report on the “culturedness” [kul’turnost’] of socialist life.<sup>49</sup> Sheila Fitzgerald proposed that “foreign visitors” to Soviet Russia in the interwar period revealed “Soviet-Western cultural communication as a two-way traffic.”<sup>50</sup> The “mutual appraisal” resulting from this traffic “shaped new and consequential calculations of superiority and inferiority between Russia and the West.”<sup>51</sup> Comparison of Dos Passos’s account with Wilson’s shows an undeniable tightening of access for visitors from the West, and a corresponding control of how Soviet achievements were interpreted and explained.<sup>52</sup> Dos Passos was allowed by officials to travel far beyond urban areas, but only in the company of designated cultural efforts toward education. Yet even this relative freedom is a measure of how greatly Soviet Russia changed in the seven years between 1928 and 1935. Edmund Wilson seldom ventured beyond cities along approved travel routes, and he was accompanied by duly authorized guides supplied by Soviet tourist agencies even during his shortest journeys outside the metropolitan districts of Moscow or Leningrad.

Permeability did not always secure positive impressions to flow back to the US. American “intellectual and social leaders” interested in the “whole conception of a ‘social experiment’” who visited Russia did not consistently do so simply “to have their political prejudices

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<sup>49</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 147; Michael David-Fox, “The Fellow Travelers Revisited,” 309.

<sup>50</sup> Sheila Fitzgerald, “Foreigners Observed,” 215.

<sup>51</sup> Michael David-Fox, “The Fellow Travelers Revisited: The ‘Cultured West’ Through Soviet Eyes,” *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (June 2003), 301.

<sup>52</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick: “Foreigners Observed,” 220.

confirmed and . . . thus connived at their own ‘duping’ by the Kremlin,” as Sheila Fitzpatrick argued.<sup>53</sup> Even those who did, such as Edmund Wilson, came to Russia less in expectation of resolving the “amalgam of alienation and utopia-seeking” Paul Hollander claimed motivated intellectual travelers, than to question whether a society constructed on Marxist principles really could come to fruition.<sup>54</sup> In the instances of Dos Passos and Wilson, “explicitly cultural categories” attracted their initial interest (Dos Passos in Russian theater, Wilson in the evolution of Marxist thought), and tourist bureaus in Soviet Russia often coordinated reception of writers around specific interests.<sup>55</sup> Official pronouncements of Soviet achievement were channeled through a multitude of cultural forms such as theater, film, and the “socialist realist” novel, which often were more prescriptive than descriptive. Soviet cultural show offered dramatic examples of proletarian heroes or ways for viewers or readers to acquire better consciousness of their historical roles, exhibiting how under socialism Russia ‘s “image” altered from that of “a backward country to a guiding light.”<sup>56</sup> By penetrating into the political and ideological forces commanding Soviet acculturation of its population into New Persons, the writer often acquired insight into how the party-state manipulated language to promote national achievements vis-à-vis the West.<sup>57</sup> Comparing Communist Party directions emanating from Moscow in the 1930s to US capitalist propaganda during its entry into the First World

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<sup>53</sup> Lewis Feuer, “American Travelers to the Soviet Union, 1917-32: The Formation of a Component of New Deal Ideology,” *American Quarterly* 14:2 Part 1 (Summer 1962), 119; Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Foreigners Observed,” 216.

<sup>54</sup> Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba, 1928-1978* (New York: University Press of America, 1990 [originally published 1981]), 6.

<sup>55</sup> Michael David-Fox, “The Fellow Travelers Revisited,” 308-309.

<sup>56</sup> Francois Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, translated by Deborah Furet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 67.

<sup>57</sup> On the involvement of Soviet state tourist agencies in restricting and monitoring visitor contacts, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Foreigners Observed,” 219.

War, Dos Passos wrote that the more he was exposed to the former the more he became “immune to the whole vocabulary.”<sup>58</sup> What he termed “communist holier-than-thouishness” in US periodicals derived from the willingness of literati to imitate Soviet models of language and phraseology in order to be considered doctrinally correct.<sup>59</sup>

Soviet culture was oriented toward realizing a utopian project in the future, not in marking the revolutionary past. “All the healthy people . . . young, young, young,” Dos Passos wrote, were “building socialism,” and travelers’ queries about the past “didn’t interest them.”<sup>60</sup> Though Dos Passos himself still was young (32 at the time), his Soviet travels made him feel left behind. “For us” in the “capitalist world outside” Russia, he wrote, socialism and its emblematic sites “lay in the future; for [young Russians] they were the basis of all habits, ideas, schemes of life.”<sup>61</sup> Soviet socialism in 1928 remained oriented toward future international development. “We are working” for “workers in America” and Europe “as much as for ourselves,” young students informed Dos Passos.<sup>62</sup>

To document how the future would appear Dos Passos and Wilson proved adept at recording signs of the new Soviet Russia. To a literary critic such as Wilson, Russia was the text of an “improved edition of mankind,” in Leon Trotsky’s phrase.<sup>63</sup> With the skill of their literary backgrounds as critics and imaginative writers, both used travel essays to decode the signs

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<sup>58</sup> John Dos Passos – Robert Cantwell, 25 January 1935, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 464.

<sup>59</sup> John Dos Passos – Robert Cantwell, 25 January 1935, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 464.

<sup>60</sup> John Dos Passos – Germaine Lucas-Championniere, 8 December 1928, John Dos Passos, *Lettres a Germaine Lucas-Championniere*, 259; original in French, my translation; John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 286.

<sup>61</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 286.

<sup>62</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 285-286.

<sup>63</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 5.

around them. The new signs engendered by Soviet cultural experiments did not preclude either from attempting to fit post-revolutionary Russia into known historical trajectories.<sup>64</sup>

Even more significantly, the 1917 Revolution had altered discourse itself. Just as 1789 marked “Year One” for the Jacobins, the Bolsheviks “dated from Dialectical Materialism” the “beginning of human thought,” and sought to impose this thinking upon its culture, Wilson stated.<sup>65</sup> A new field of Marxist evaluation sprang up. As Lynn Hunt presented in her study *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*, “revolutionaries rejected all reminders of the past” by employing new “language and imagery” to form a new political class.<sup>66</sup> In order to “mobilize the people in support” of the new regime, Hunt contended that the new Republic had to “break with the national past” by bringing “the process of symbol making into sharp relief.”<sup>67</sup> In the process of “inventing . . . symbols and rituals as they went along,” revolutionary societies rejected modes of speech and conduct that reinforced or emulated cultural constructs and their “implicit assumptions [that] would undermine the revolutionary system.”<sup>68</sup> The Soviet

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<sup>64</sup> Dos Passos’s criticism of Stalinist political repression, beginning in 1934, placed particular emphasis on historical precedent, comparing incipient Stalinist terror to the French post-revolutionary “Napoleonic stage”: John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson [January 1935], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 461. See also Daniel Aaron, *Writers On The Left*, 351, which reprints a section of an interview between Dos Passos and Theodore Dreiser from December 1937, in which Dos Passos commented “the achievements of the French Revolution . . . are still going on,” but the “great achievements of the Russian Revolution have been made, and . . . absorbed into history.” This attempt to fit Soviet Russia into a historical mold has been studied by scholars such as Martin Malia, who proposed “a definition of Russia as within Europe” based on commonalities of revolt, and French historian Francois Furet, who noted the “interplay of particularity and universalism” among Western intellectuals attempting to understand the Russian Revolution. See Martin Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press/Belknap Press, 1999), 14, and Francois Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Deborah Furet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 124.

<sup>65</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 203, 214.

<sup>66</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 178.

<sup>67</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*, 208, 27.

<sup>68</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*, 54; Linda Frey and Marsha Frey, “‘More Savage than White Bears’: The Diplomatic Etiquette of Revolutionary France,” *The Court Historian*, 22:1 (2017), 55.

regime in the 1920s and 1930s fostered whole arrays of new habits, production facilities, modes of dress, personal conduct, and iconography as a result of what Wilson believed to be the “liquidation of social and racial distinctions.”<sup>69</sup> To understand their meaning involved a new discursive relationship with one’s environment and the social import of “speaking Bolshevik,” in Stephen Kotkin’s phrase, to entrench “the ways of speaking about oneself . . . through the lens of Bolshevism.”<sup>70</sup> The imagining and creation of new signs left their actual definition open to flux. Wilson commented that those highest in power in “the Stalin administration,” including the leader himself, manipulated public discourse by “formulating its policies in some such language as ‘The indignant proletariat demand’.”<sup>71</sup> Public praise of the leader was couched in similar discursive terms as “gratitude” expressed by the masses.<sup>72</sup>

Bolsheviks envisioned “their building of the Communist utopia as a constant battle against custom and habit” retained from the tsarist era.<sup>73</sup> Reformist and rehabilitative strategies applied as equally to the private individual as to the criminal element.<sup>74</sup> Yet what mattered most in the acquisition of new habits, as Julie Draskoczy argued, was not whether the subject truly considered him- or herself part of socialist progress, but the “performative aspect” of the labor to construct a new self.<sup>75</sup> “Performance,” Draskoczy stated, became the actual environment of Soviet culture, in the expectation that “the beliefs” of reform ultimately would

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<sup>69</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 153.

<sup>70</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1997), 198.

<sup>71</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 223.

<sup>72</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 223.

<sup>73</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 7.

<sup>74</sup> Julie Draskoczy, “The ‘Put’ of *Perekovka*: Transforming Lives at Stalin’s White Sea-Baltic Canal,” *The Russian Review*, Vol. 71, No. 1 (January, 2012), 33.

<sup>75</sup> Julie Draskoczy, “The ‘Put’ of *Perekovka*,” 31.

“alter their own, as well as others’, perceptions.”<sup>76</sup> To paraphrase F.A. Hayek’s definition of dictatorship, Soviet culture required that “everything be governed by a single system” of performance. By the mid-1930s, resistance to refashioning one’s language and conduct became synonymous with criminality, and uncorrected social behavior could invite suspicion of anti-Stalinist activity. How one acted in public and how one spoke therefore became part of understanding one’s historical role. Part One examines Dos Passos’s and Wilson’s travel writings in light of their personal interest in acquiring a “revolutionary” identity, and the examples of new customs and habits they encountered within Soviet society. These cultural projects also provide striking examples of the strategies by which Soviet agencies sought to influence foreign writer-travelers and bring them to the point where they could be accepted as a “friend of the U.S.S.R.,” signifying “interest in Soviet cultural life” and a willingness to marshal public opinion to produce favorable impressions of Russia abroad.<sup>77</sup> Both Dos Passos and Wilson were prodded to declare themselves as Soviet “friends,” and so integral was this question to formation of self-identity in post-revolutionary Russia that Dos Passos chose to place the query “are you with us?” and the request to “show [his] face” at the very beginning of “Russian Visa,” so as to frame the entire travel account as a response.<sup>78</sup>

Theater, as explained in Part Two, was an essential medium for demonstrating the historical necessity of the revolution, for heroizing its participants, for glorifying exceptional members of

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<sup>76</sup> Julie Draskoczy, “The ‘Put’ of *Perekovka*,” 31.

<sup>77</sup> Michael David-Fox, “The Fellow Travelers Revisited,” 307; Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 270. The question of whether Wilson was such a “friend” was posed to him several times during his travels, but the most noteworthy instance occurred after he mentioned to some Russian acquaintances a recent visit to the Lenin Museum in Ulyanovsk.

<sup>78</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 274.



the proletariat, and for serving as a “didactic” means of showing the populace new modes of conduct and habit by using actors as teachers.<sup>79</sup> Its techniques also inured audiences to be observed as much as observant, for watching was not passive in experimental theater of the 1920s any more than it would be in the trials of anti-Soviet “conspirators” in the 1930s. Groundbreaking methods of staging, lighting, and performance made Soviet audiences participants in theater, allowing them to experience the sense of engagement with an ongoing revolution in aesthetic terms.

“Stalin’s reign,” explained Orlando Figes, produced a “silent and conformist population.”<sup>80</sup> Wilson was struck by how “the word of one man could regulate the habits” of an entire people.<sup>81</sup> The techniques of stagecraft, which spilled out of the theater into everyday lives by virtue of playlets used to cultivate new behaviors, also inculcated watchfulness. Conformity required performing according to choreographed movement, a common feature of 1920s Bolshevik mass spectacle, and scripted language that gained force after the 1934 All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers consolidated the various literary factions that had received government funds since the Revolution. The experimental theater that so excited Dos Passos in effect “set the stage” for the persecutions and massacres that swiftly eliminated his and others’ support of Soviet socialism’s “humanitarian tendencies” of reforming citizens and modernizing the nation.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Boris Wolfson, “Fear on Stage: Afinogenov, Stanislavsky, and the Making of Stalinist Theater,” in *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Bringing the Revolution Home*, edited by Christine Kiaer and Eric Naiman (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 101.

<sup>80</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, xxxi.

<sup>81</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 227.

<sup>82</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson, 5 February 1935, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 465.

## Part One: The Soviet New Person In Travel Accounts

After the Revolution, the Soviet population was encouraged by the new regime to think in terms of personal reshaping and “forging” through experiences that would transform both themselves and the society around them. Writing about one’s life history, to plot it almost as a journey of “exploring questions of identity and selfhood,” became a way of documenting one’s self-transformation but also, generically, typified the interwar travel account.<sup>83</sup> The travel text shared a common goal with the “political project” iterated by the Bolsheviks, as both required redefinition of one’s life and erasing former class-based identities.<sup>84</sup> Travel texts, as Carl Thompson stated, depicted the “centrality of the narratorial self” through reflexive “interior and exterior journeys.”<sup>85</sup> As both Jochen Hellbeck and Igal Halfin pointed out, the documentation of one’s journey of consciousness – an essential feature of Bolshevism – occurred through composition of personal journals and official autobiographies.<sup>86</sup> Writings of a personal nature were encouraged in Soviet Russia in order to document how, in the words of Leon Trotsky, “Communist life . . . will be built consciously.”<sup>87</sup> Yet even journals were public in the sense that they often accompanied official acts, such as application to Party membership, for Bolshevism, as Halfin observed, admitted of no private sphere.<sup>88</sup> The “challenge” faced by

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<sup>83</sup> Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 99.

<sup>84</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies: Initiating the Bolshevik Self* (Seattle: Herbert J. Ellison Center for Russian, East European, and Central Asian Studies, University of Washington Press, 2011), 96-97.

<sup>85</sup> Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 99, 100; Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between The Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 203.

<sup>86</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 5-6; Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 34.

<sup>87</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front*, 22.

<sup>88</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 5.

the Bolsheviks in forging a mass population conscious of its historical role in creating a socialist state lay in thinking and acting as if all aspects of one's life were as open to critiques as a stage performance.<sup>89</sup> As Hellbeck noted in his extensive study of Soviet-era diaries, the personal act of writing was not intended to display private thoughts so much as to assist in conceiving of the self as part of a collective endeavor.<sup>90</sup> Diaristic entries also became checklists attesting to personal cultivation, a means of tracking one's encounters with significant figures and successful performances, while organizing one toward the unidirectional goal of attaining the perfection of Marxist teleology.<sup>91</sup> Carl Thompson discerned an identical motivation behind contemporary examples of the travel genre, predisposing the writer to "progress[ing] toward some sort of conclusive" or "epiphanic" result.<sup>92</sup> In the Soviet travel writing example, the epiphany became closely related to the political demands placed on the writer to recognize and "accept the discipline" of party affiliations.<sup>93</sup>

The Soviet New Person was therefore both a literary construct – the living exhibition of Marxist and Leninist writings – and a product of the new culture of post-Revolutionary Russia. Both journal and travel account offered to the writer the chance to compose a "narrative of history as progressing toward the light."<sup>94</sup> Nor was the former exclusively the province of the resident Russian and the latter that of the visiting Westerner. As Michael David-Fox discerned in his analysis of Maxim Gorky's travel writings, the two modes were interchangeable, and

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<sup>89</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 19.

<sup>90</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 34.

<sup>91</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 34.

<sup>92</sup> Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 115.

<sup>93</sup> John Dos Passos, "The Making of a Writer," *New Masses* 4:10 (March 1929), 23.

<sup>94</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 4.

prominent cultural figures often composed touristic accounts of Soviet progress.<sup>95</sup> Regardless of personal ideological orientation, visitors to Soviet Russia likewise sought a “link between cultural education and political enlightenment,” seeing the latter through the lens of the former.<sup>96</sup> Literacy and cultural interactions were shaping forces in Soviet lives and occasioned much commentary from travel writers. While the forms of cultural discourse changed markedly between the mid-1920s and mid-1930s in Russia, their centrality in terms of literature, drama, film, and what Sheila Fitzpatrick termed the secondary and tertiary levels of acculturation (manners, clothing, personal behavior and hygiene) remained relatively constant.<sup>97</sup> The continuity and expansion of cultural forces, and the provision of high culture to the more successful New Persons, established a means of connecting the two travel accounts.

The personal experiences and views of Dos Passos and Wilson regarding refashioning, cultivation, and becoming conscious bore directly on their perceptions of Soviet New Persons. Dos Passos perceived them in terms of his First World War experiences and the socialist language that dominated international pacifism in 1917. The repudiation of class constraints became a common theme in postwar “lost generation” disillusionment with war and political language, but also was consistent with Bolshevik narratives in which collective activity in the revolution substituted for capitalist-motivated war (themes Dos Passos would develop

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<sup>95</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 156.

<sup>96</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 155.

<sup>97</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism Ordinary Life In Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia In the 1930s* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 80. These levels Fitzpatrick codified, “The first was the culture of basic hygiene...and elemental literacy . . . The second, emphasizing such things as table manners, behavior in public places, treatment of women, and basic knowledge of Communist ideology, was the level of culture required of any town dweller. The third, part of what had been called ‘bourgeois’ or ‘petty-bourgeois’ culture, was the culture of propriety, involving good manners, correct speech, neat and appropriate dress, and some appreciation for the high culture of literature, music, and ballet. This was the level of culture implicitly expected of the managerial class, members of the new Soviet elite.”

throughout the *U.S.A.* trilogy).<sup>98</sup> He sympathized with those Russians who had participated in both the war and the Revolution. Among these were several Old Bolsheviks (i.e. those whose activism in socialist or communist causes predated Lenin's return to Russia). One Leningrad acquaintance showed Dos Passos "the streets where he had fought eleven years ago, the place where they'd held the barricades" while speaking "a little wistfully about the enthusiasms and comradeship of those [1917] days."<sup>99</sup> Others were former members of the intelligentsia or aristocracy.

Because Bolshevik consciousness involved acknowledgement of class, Dos Passos criticized any individual who clung to favored class status and was "left where he stood" in the post-revolutionary culture.<sup>100</sup> Wilson appreciatively noted those whose conduct reflected Bolshevik cultivation, such as engineers, agronomists, and even aviation students. Because these persons often arose from the proletariat, became cultured and literate, and showed an awareness of Russian nineteenth-century classical literature, Wilson accepted the Soviet system's claims that the modernization of the environment would produce a better population. The imminence of the socialist future was a prominent theme in mid-1930s Stalinism, and New Persons symbolized its accessibility.<sup>101</sup> Inversely, the success of the Soviet experiment could be achieved only by individuals willing to adopt new conduct and comprehend the new signs of power.<sup>102</sup>

An account of one's journey (real or metaphorical) used the travel format to replicate and valorize an ideology centered on "reinvention or renewal of the self" through the "shaping

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<sup>98</sup> Daniel Aaron, *Writers On the Left*, 164, 348.

<sup>99</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 287.

<sup>100</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 289-290.

<sup>101</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 97.

<sup>102</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 83.

effects of state power.”<sup>103</sup> Cultural interactions yield great insight into the ways Soviet “westernizers” approached foreign intellectuals, often through the apparatus of cultural or touristic bureaus. Indeed, Dos Passos wrote in *In All Countries* of the writer’s responsibility “to see the world and find out” about the powers transforming social life in the early twentieth century.<sup>104</sup> Travel texts became a means of authenticating political and ideological commitment, displacing the genre’s “naïve empiricism” by forging authorial identification with the construction of socialism and showing the author “winning a struggle” against former class identity.<sup>105</sup> The writings of Dos Passos and Wilson about Russia, especially the formal travelogues each composed during and soon after their respective visits, exemplify the type of writing known as “reportage.” “In reportage,” explained Donald Pizer, “a writer who is not a professional journalist reports on his journey,” composing a text that “contains both a factual account of what he has seen and heard and been told and his personal understanding of the meaning of what he has encountered.”<sup>106</sup> In Pizer’s estimation, Dos Passos’s *In All Countries* and the volume of travel essays by Wilson published prior to *Travels In Two Democracies*, 1932’s *The American Jitters*, exemplified the reportage form.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 115; Jochen Hellbeck, “Galaxy of Black Stars: The Power of Soviet Biography,” *The American Historical Review* 114: 3 (2009), 616.

<sup>104</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 284.

<sup>105</sup> Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 91; Michael Gold, “The Education of John Dos Passos,” *The English Journal* February 22, 1932, 27; Virginia Spencer Carr, *Dos Passos: A Life*, 298-299, 576. Gold’s comment, though directed at Dos Passos, specifically, typifies the responses of the literary left to the concept of self-transformation and its relationship to producing writing.

<sup>106</sup> Donald Pizer, “John Dos Passos and Harlan: Three Variations on a Theme,” *Arizona Quarterly* 71:1 (Spring 2015), 16. See also Daniel Aaron’s estimation that Dos Passos was an “artist-reporter”: *Writers On The Left*, 347.

<sup>107</sup> Donald Pizer, “John Dos Passos and Harlan: Three Variations on a Theme,” 2.

## THE NEW PERSON OF THE BOLSHEVIK 1920S

Summarizing his recent travels about Soviet Russia in the fall of 1928, Dos Passos wrote, “I’ve been down the Volga from Yaroslav to Astrakhan . . . and I’ve had two weeks hard horseback riding across Daghestan . . . and I’ve scrambled a great deal about the Caucasus and spoke with people of extremely various dialects . . . and since then I’ve been going to the theatre every night in Moscow – and I feel like a new man. Honestly this country is enormously invigorating.”<sup>108</sup>

The question of “invigorating” self-transformation through travel leading to formation of a “new man” was central to Dos Passos’s identity. He was, as Malcolm Cowley stated, “the greatest traveler in a generation of ambulant writers,” and consequently personally invested in self-education through travel and writing about travel.<sup>109</sup> However, the idea of self-education also reflected ongoing, Bolshevik-derived concepts at play in Soviet Russia’s culture. Just as the French Revolution “juxtaposed sincerity, transparency, and authenticity against [the] *ancien regime*,” the Soviet experiment posited its ideals in terms of social behaviors arising from the distinction of “industrialist modernity established by the capitalist West” from the backwardness of the recent tsarist past.<sup>110</sup> Progress toward industrial modernity spurred a “reliance on conscious planning” in terms of both material production and ways of thinking about oneself.<sup>111</sup> After the 1917 revolution, a “concern with self-transformation” inhered in

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<sup>108</sup> John Dos Passos - Dudley Poore [October 1928], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 388. Dos Passos went on in this letter to complain “It is so hard to get away from the lingo” of Harvard “wealth and clubs and that abominable coverer up of things – niceness”; language itself became both signifier and sign of class repudiation and self-transformation.

<sup>109</sup> Malcolm Cowley, *Exile’s Return*, (New York: Viking, 1951), 292.

<sup>110</sup> Linda Frey and Marsha Frey, “‘More Savage than White Bears’: The Diplomatic Etiquette of Revolutionary France,” 55; Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 9.

<sup>111</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 9.

both society and individual.<sup>112</sup> This concern was “linked . . . to the goal of remaking the life of society as well as of each individual according to revolutionary standards of rationality, transparency, and purity” through collective endeavors.”<sup>113</sup> The “power of socialist labor” informed self-transformation to make the proletariat aware of their historical roles .<sup>114</sup> New Persons were excited by forging a new “political history” as well as by eradicating a past in which they had not been full participants.<sup>115</sup> Wilson noted how “the purpose of the ‘culture’ campaign [is] to make people seek self-improvement,” explaining that “the ‘*Kultura*’ of which one hears so much is pre-eminently sanitary and technical.”<sup>116</sup> The public stage of collective activities encouraged repetition and elaboration of speech and modes of behavior, but also experimentation in the means of expression to find new modes in which New Persons could display their acculturation.<sup>117</sup> The Bolsheviks cultivated “performances designed to prove [themselves] more dedicated, conscious Communists.”<sup>118</sup> In Bolshevik terms, the New Person had to eliminate what Dos Passos called “the old inveterate Adam,” the original man, through the utopian prospect of redeeming human nature through “knowledge [and] feelings that have been trained” within a new environment.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 5, 13.

<sup>113</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 5

<sup>114</sup> Katerina Clark, “Little Heroes and Big Deeds: Literature Responds to the First Five-Year Plan,” in *The Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-1931*, edited by Sheila Fitzpatrick (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 192.

<sup>115</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 66.

<sup>116</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 255, 200.

<sup>117</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick observes that “several levels” of acculturation were addressed by public ceremony, including theater, during the 1920s, and had grown by the early 1930s to a distinct taxonomy indicative of where one belonged in the new technical echelons emerging out of the First Five-Year Plan, according to individual mastery of new cultural norms such as hygiene, literacy, appreciation of “high” culture, and knowledge of ideological texts. Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 80.

<sup>118</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 9-10.

<sup>119</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 302.



Replacement of old cultural forms by new was, of course, a part of the “prewar European current” that both broadened its reach and took on “intensified forms” within the specific milieu of the Bolshevik revolution.<sup>120</sup> The individual, Jochen Hellbeck stated, “adopt[ed] the agenda of revolutionary transformation [to] become personally transformed in the process.”<sup>121</sup> Dos Passos, through critiques of post-First World War radical literature, was well aware of both these currents and the cultural and aesthetic forms that developed out of them (as in the novels of the radical Spanish writer Pio Baroja, the paintings of German expressionist George Grosz and muralist Diego Rivera, or the verse of French poet Blaise Cendrars, all of which Dos Passos appraised).<sup>122</sup> Dos Passos situated both the historical event of the 1917 Revolution and several artistic figures prominent in its subsequent cultural experiments in close proximity, while including them in a larger, modernist, transnational trend. The “October revolution in social organization and politics, the Einstein formula in physics” had aesthetic counterparts among the group that included Picasso, Modigliani, [the Italian futurist] Marinetti, Chagall; that profoundly influenced [the Russian dramatists and film directors] Maiakovsky, Meyerhold, Eisenstein” and the works of prominent modernists such as T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and Igor Stravinsky, among many others.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 69.

<sup>121</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 347.

<sup>122</sup> See, for example, “Building Lots,” a 1924 review of Baroja’s novels *Weeds* and *Red Dawn* (the latter of which contained a dust jacket illustration by Dos Passos), *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 73-74; “Paint the Revolution,” a 1927 assessment by Dos Passos of Rivera’s murals, *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 94-96, and “Grosz Comes To America” (1936), *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 173-178.

<sup>123</sup> John Dos Passos, “Translator’s Foreword to *Panama: Or The Adventures of My Seven Uncles*,” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 134.

## “BECOMING MORE RED”: DOS PASSOS AS NEW PERSON

Fashioning a new self “enjoined [others] to break with the past, to work on himself or herself as a free agent.”<sup>124</sup> Class identity had been present in Dos Passos’s personal life almost from the moment of his birth in 1896. His father, John Randolph Dos Passos, a wealthy Wall Street lawyer, was not married to Dos Passos’s mother, Lucy Sprigge Madison, who acted as the former’s mistress. Dos Passos’s itinerant childhood prevented frequent contact with his father and half-siblings, concealed his actual social relations, and contributed to a sense of travel as formative to personal identity.<sup>125</sup> In common with Bolsheviks who used diaries and statements for Party admission to craft documents attesting to “thinking about the self as a political project,” Dos Passos used his own early writing, particularly letters written from European cultural centers or composed during his sojourns during the First World War, as combined personal manifestos and travel accounts.<sup>126</sup> In such letters – which he would expand into more formal essays in the 1920s – Dos Passos spoke of countering the subjective “Harvard aesthete” self who was gathering impressions with the revolutionary zeal to write about what he saw and silence the “lying tongues” of “the rich ease of life.”<sup>127</sup> To several classmates he commented that “Every day I become more red. My one ambition is to be able to sing the international [sic].”<sup>128</sup> He also

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<sup>124</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 3.

<sup>125</sup> Virginia Spencer Carr, *Dos Passos: A Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 68, 136, 139. and *passim*. Townsend Ludington indicates Dos Passos self-referenced his pre-Harvard years as “a hotel childhood,” underscoring its sense of impermanency and itinerancy; not until Dos Passos entered prep school at Choate in 1907 did he have a semi-fixed place of residence: Townsend Ludington, “The Hotel Childhood of John Dos Passos,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 54:2 (Spring 1978), 298. Most of these years were spent in Europe. He did not take the last name of Dos Passos until age twenty, having been known as “John (or Jack) Madison” until then: Donald Pizer, “John Dos Passos in the 1920s: The Development of a Modernist Style,” *Mosaic* 45:4 (December 2012), 52.

<sup>126</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 96-97.

<sup>127</sup> John Dos Passos, diary entry, 24 August 1917, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 94.

<sup>128</sup> Daniel Aaron, *Writers On The Left*, 353.

incorporated the bellicose language of his wartime environment to express that “the Liberals cover their heads with their robes of integrity and wail . . . I’m tired of wailing. I want to assassinate.”<sup>129</sup>

The break with one’s past, to “assume the mantle of a proletarian,” occurred simultaneously with the creative act of forming a new self, and in Bolshevik terms this project involved “learn[ing] the new public language of class.”<sup>130</sup> Implicit in Dos Passos’s letters is a class-based progression through transfer from the voluntary, bourgeois Norton-Harjes Ambulance Service of 1917, comprised of Harvard-educated elites such as himself, to compulsory service in the US Army in 1918. “I’ve always wanted to divest myself of class and the monied background . . . From the bottom – thought I, one can see clear,” he wrote his classmate Arthur McComb, adding in a subsequent letter, “Politically I’ve given up hope entirely [because] the capitalists have the world.”<sup>131</sup> He regarded his wartime experiences as class liberation, announcing to one friend, “I am thinking of becoming a revolutionist.”<sup>132</sup> Only in that way, he stated, could he “live naked and clean” and “achieve freedom from utter asininity.”<sup>133</sup> He later would describe his personal transformation in terms of the radical “IWW theory” of “build[ing] a new society in the shell of the old.”<sup>134</sup>

In addition to class identity, Dos Passos became aware of and repudiated the economic system which had formed him. “In my disillusionment I began listening seriously to the socialists,” he recalled

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<sup>129</sup> John Dos Passos - Arthur McComb, 27 August 1917, Melvin Landsberg, *John Dos Passos’s Correspondence With Arthur K. McComb, or Learn to Sing the “Carmagnole”* (Niwot CO: University Press of Colorado, 1991), 64.

<sup>130</sup> Thomas Strychacz, *Modernism, Mass Culture, and Professionalism*, 133; Sheila Fitzpatrick, “The Bolshevik Invention of Class,” in Ronald Grigor Suny, editor, *The Structure of Soviet History: Essays and Documents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 176.

<sup>131</sup> John Dos Passos - Arthur McComb [Summer 1917], Melvin Landsberg, *John Dos Passos’s Correspondence With Arthur K. McComb*, 63; John Dos Passos – Arthur McComb, 20 July 1917, Melvin Landsberg, *John Dos Passos’s Correspondence With Arthur K. McComb*, 52.

<sup>132</sup> John Dos Passos – Rumsey Marvin, 5 June 1917, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 73.

<sup>133</sup> John Dos Passos – Rumsey Marvin, 10 April 1917, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 70.

<sup>134</sup> John Dos Passos - Edmund Wilson, [14 January 1931], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 398.

later.<sup>135</sup> “My confidence and interest in Marxism and the Communist Party fluctuated widely from the time of the first excitement of the news of the Russian Revolution,” because “it was first and foremost based on the pacifist and anti-militarist side” of party ideology, and “the theory . . . that capitalism bred wars died hard” in his experience.<sup>136</sup> “After the War I felt a great sense of disappointment in the results achieved [and] I became interested in the Soviet experiment.”<sup>137</sup> He quickly learned the import of allowing his name to be attached to collective activities and socialist-sponsored organizations (e.g. the Passaic NJ textile strike of 1926, the Sacco and Vanzetti protests in 1927, and the “Dreiser Committee” composed of writers dispatched to report on and assist striking miners in Harlan County, KY, in 1931), stating “The class war must be reported.”<sup>138</sup> Consistently throughout his involvement in these activities, he resisted straightforward party affiliation, writing in 1934 “I’m not a Communist, though I have sympathy and admiration for much they do,” and relating to Wilson that he “felt all along that the Communists were valuable as agitators” politically and economically.<sup>139</sup> “To survive,” he stated in 1937, democracy must “keep on evolving” through exposure to various political methods.<sup>140</sup>

The writings of Dos Passos in the 1920s, which cover a full spectrum of novels, essays, travel writings, plays, and editorial work (such as the 1927 compendium of documents related to Sacco and Vanzetti, *Facing the Chair*) combined “manifestations of the political scene and

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<sup>135</sup> John Dos Passos, “Introduction,” *One Man’s Initiation: 1917* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 37.

<sup>136</sup> John Dos Passos – Matthew Josephson, 2 August 1953, Matthew Josephson Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. In this letter, Dos Passos went on to identify those novels containing these themes, including *Three Soldiers* (1923) and *Nineteen Nineteen* (1932).

<sup>137</sup> John Dos Passos, statement prepared for the House Un-American Activities Committee, 22 January 1953, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 600.

<sup>138</sup> John Dos Passos, *The Theme Is Freedom*, 4; Daniel Aaron, *Writers On the Left*, 178.

<sup>139</sup> John Dos Passos – Bernice Baumgarten, 14 November 1934, quoted in Townsend Ludington, *John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey*, 331, 534; John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson, 5 February 1935, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 465.

<sup>140</sup> John Dos Passos – John Howard Lawson [circa November 1937], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 514.

cultural history.”<sup>141</sup> The close approximation of Dos Passos’s activities with Bolshevik concepts of reclamation and renewal is striking, especially at a time when the “old Bolsheviks” who served as cultural overseers of Soviet Russia of the 1920s were soon to be interrogated publicly for ideological deviation. He discarded the privileged “ethercone” of his Harvard-educated origins for cognizance of “the world struggle between the capitalist class and the working class.”<sup>142</sup> His Russian travels conjoined “political interest [and] artistic” motives evident in a 1923 statement that “Explosions of fresh vitality in any art necessarily destroy the old forms.”<sup>143</sup> The “stimulating activity” of self-transformative travel, Melvin Landsberg stated, became a pattern in Dos Passos’s life in the 1920s, alternating “excitement over experimental art” with “vigorous literary work.”<sup>144</sup>

#### THE SUCCESS OF THE NEW AND “THE FAILURE OF THE OLD”: WILSON AS NEW PERSON

Edmund Wilson’s research motives for visiting Russia differed from Dos Passos’s in that he did not espouse such revolutionary or self-denying breaks with the past. Similar to Dos Passos, who was less than a year younger, Wilson enjoyed an Ivy League education (Princeton, rather than Harvard) and an upper-middle-class family background, in which he often engaged in political-economic debate with his lawyer father, Edmund Wilson Sr. Well-read in the Freudian school of literary analysis, Wilson in

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<sup>141</sup> Melvin Landsberg, *Dos Passos’ Path to U.S.A.*, 121.

<sup>142</sup> John Dos Passos - A. Lawrence Lowell, 9 August, 1927; *John Dos Passos: The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 97-98. Both the moment of “awakening” of consciousness, and the personal reactions to the Sacco and Vanzetti executions, would find inclusion in separate “Camera Eye” segments of *U.S.A.*

<sup>143</sup> John Dos Passos, “Foreword to *Roger Bloomer*,” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 71; Linda W. Wagner, *Dos Passos : Artist As American*, 66. Wagner further asserted political over cultural motives: “Had Sacco and Vanzetti not been executed, [Dos Passos] would probably never have traveled to Russia”: *Dos Passos: Artist As American*, 67.

<sup>144</sup> Melvin Landsberg, *Dos Passos’ Path to U.S.A.*, 123.

later years cast his transformation in gently Oedipal form as rebellion against his father's perceived conservatism through interest in "socialism in Europe and Russia" during the First World War after "having read [various] socialist writings."<sup>145</sup> Yet as late as 1929 he rebuked Dos Passos for the latter's "'infatuation' with social revolution" and expressed doubt concerning the use of novels and theater as "processes" by which revolutionary ideas could be communicated.<sup>146</sup>

While Dos Passos's interaction with the Russian cultural scene was inflected by his personal redefinition project, Wilson's derived more from critical views that posited revolution in similar terms to literary modernism, as synthetic and hence openly dialectical. "I began to gravitate toward the socialist left," Wilson wrote historian Arthur Schlesinger in 1964, as a result of reading and contemplating texts and historical events simultaneously, "the *Fabian Essays* and the Russian Revolution."<sup>147</sup> As a creative act, writing fundamentally altered history, and he conceived of Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky less as ideologues than "poets . . . in their political vision" who employed "the intensity of their imaginations . . . through the written and spoken word [so as] to arouse others to see human life and history as they did."<sup>148</sup> Self-transformation resulted from interacting with an environment produced by cultural leaders able to "remodel society by the power of imagination and thought."<sup>149</sup> Writers as such were not revolutionaries, Wilson wrote Dos Passos; the writings of Marx and Lenin were examples of "what artists and poets tended to do when the Revolution got frustrated."<sup>150</sup> As creative writers, Marx, Engels, and Lenin "were aiming at a point of view and a

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<sup>145</sup> Edmund Wilson, *A Piece Of My Mind: Reflections at Sixty* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1956), 224-225.

<sup>146</sup> Daniel Aaron, *Writers On The Left*, 349.

<sup>147</sup> Edmund Wilson – Arthur Schlesinger [1964], *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 197.

<sup>148</sup> Edmund Wilson, *To The Finland Station*, 221.

<sup>149</sup> Edmund Wilson, *To The Finland Station*, 315.

<sup>150</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 9 May 1935, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 206; Edmund Wilson, - Christian Gauss, 31 August 1934, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 248.

culture beyond those of their bourgeois education . . . a point of view above classes.”<sup>151</sup> In researching Marxism’s origins and precepts, he identified its analysis of “political phenomena in socio-economic terms.”<sup>152</sup> “It is hard to apply to the United States any of the forms of European socialist or Communist theory,” he stated at the outset of the Depression in 1930, because, despite a literate population, “a generally prosperous and contented, all-bourgeois half-continent [was] not at all susceptible to ideas” of the kind.<sup>153</sup> As the social consequences of the economic slump became more visible (and took a personal turn for both him and Dos Passos, reducing income from writing), Wilson recognized that he could not “attempt to write literary history in a vacuum” separate from “the social and economic background” of his subjects.<sup>154</sup> “Politically,” he stated in 1930, “I am going further and further to the left all the time and have moments of trying to be converted to American Communism.”<sup>155</sup>

A chief attraction of the Soviet experiment for Western intellectuals and critics, David Caute stated, was its presentation as a “postscript to the Enlightenment.”<sup>156</sup> The term experiment itself became “emblematic of the intellectuals’ championing of the rationality of science,” and the acculturation of the population to the demands of rapid industrialization offered an example of “rational” application of methods as an alternative to capitalism’s apparent irrational production crisis during the Depression.<sup>157</sup> Wilson noted that in the 1930s “Russian proletarians and peasants are educating themselves with avidity [and thereby] taking most seriously their new duties of citizenship.”<sup>158</sup> He recorded one Muscovite informing him that “since the Revolution, we have science and technique for

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<sup>151</sup> Edmund Wilson, *To The Finland Station*, 319.

<sup>152</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 7; Edmund Wilson, “Marxism at the End of the Thirties,” 600.

<sup>153</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Peale Bishop, 15 January 1930, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 193.

<sup>154</sup> Edmund Wilson – Upton Sinclair, 25 March 1930, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 195.

<sup>155</sup> Edmund Wilson – Allen Tate, 28 May 1930, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 196.

<sup>156</sup> David Caute, *The Fellow-Travelers*, 264.

<sup>157</sup> Michael David-Fox, “Opiate of the Intellectuals? Pilgrims, Partisans, and Intellectual Tourists,” 728.

<sup>158</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 223.

the first time.”<sup>159</sup> His descriptions also showed that, inasmuch as he viewed Soviet society as an exhibit of Marxist “scientific” and rational economics, the suspicions exhibited during the Stalinist Thirties were logical developments of the supervision borne by the Bolshevik Twenties to “apply a scientific criticism to the mysteries of the Church” that previously had been the sole arbiters of social life in Russia.<sup>160</sup> Moreover, he approved Marxism’s “hostility to organized Christianity.”<sup>161</sup> As Igal Halfin noted, Communist ideology contained a strong “conversion” element, drawn from religious doctrine.<sup>162</sup> Many foreign visitors came to see how the social “experiment merged with religious fulfillment” through a population “transfigured by Lenin’s experimentalism.”<sup>163</sup> Wilson saw in Marxist discourse a conflation of Judaic prophetic “zeal” and nineteenth-century utopianism. “Abolish the church with its spiritual direction, and substitute for a government based on divine right, a government based on a scientific view of history, and you shift to the strictly human sources of order and inspiration,” he wrote.<sup>164</sup> Marxist political organizations “believ[ed] in the dialectic as a supernatural power that would bring them to salvation,” which Wilson believed induced people to accept their discourse “without the necessity of thought or virtue on their part.”<sup>165</sup>

Personally adopting Marxism’s rational evolution of historical progress disposed Wilson to read Soviet Russia under Stalin in terms favoring the “enlightenment” mode proposed by Cauter and David-Fox, and quite differently from the “revolutionary” and aesthetic mode of Dos Passos. To Wilson, the Bolshevik Revolution sought to establish in New Persons a sense of “human dignity” and self-worth,

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<sup>159</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 304.

<sup>160</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 165

<sup>161</sup> Edmund Wilson, “Marxism at the End of the Thirties,” 600.

<sup>162</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 4.

<sup>163</sup> Lewis S. Feuer, “American Travelers to the Soviet Union, 1917-32: The Formation of a Component of New Deal Ideology,” *American Quarterly* 14:2 Part 1 (Summer 1962), 123-124.

<sup>164</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 212.

<sup>165</sup> Edmund Wilson – A.J. Muste, 31 December 1937, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 296.



and eradicate “the memory of the time when their great-grandfathers and their grandfathers were exchanged for pigs and dogs.”<sup>166</sup>

The onset of the Great Depression coincided with the initial phases of agricultural collectivism and the implementation of the First Five-Year Plan. Soviet cultural agencies capitalized on these as “opportunities” for attracting positive impressions from visiting foreigners.<sup>167</sup> A large proportion of the latter were “foreign communists and sympathizers,” including not only writers and journalists assigned to Moscow, but the voluntary or “spontaneous” fellow-travelers who had gone to Russia to lend technical assistance to burgeoning Soviet industrialization.<sup>168</sup> Wilson shared with Dos Passos a view that capitalist market economics had “run its course,” particularly in relation to the needs of writers and artists.<sup>169</sup> Unemployment and distrust of banks and investments marked “a period which has just now come to a close,” he stated, though capitalists had yet to “believe in the Marxist” alternative.<sup>170</sup> In his 1931 essay “An Appeal To Progressives” Wilson wrote the time had come to dismiss the “progressive” concept of liberalism that had been founded on the principles of laissez-faire capitalism. In its place Wilson called for a progressive Left to “dynamite the old conceptions” and formulate “a clearly articulated program of social change.”<sup>171</sup> The “desirability of a planned economy” such as existed in Soviet Russia would fit American interests through integration of the nation’s existing “organizational” skills, already a subject of Soviet imitation, toward “a radical social experiment.”<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 223.

<sup>167</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 189.

<sup>168</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 187-188.

<sup>169</sup> Edmund Wilson, “Brokers and Pioneers,” *The New Republic*, LXX (March 23, 1932), 145. See also Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams*, 111.

<sup>170</sup> Edmund Wilson, “An Appeal To Progressives,” *The Shores Of Light*, in *Literary Essays of the 1920s and 30s*, edited by Lewis M. Dabney (New York: Library of America, 2007), 425.

<sup>171</sup> Edmund Wilson, “An Appeal To Progressives,” *The Shores Of Light*, in *Literary Essays of the 1920s and 30s*, 433.

<sup>172</sup> Edmund Wilson, “An Appeal To Progressives,” *The Shores Of Light*, in *Literary Essays of the 1920s and 30s*, 431.

Like many writers who traveled to Russia at this time, Wilson believed that further evolutionary improvement of Marxism could result from re-appropriating Soviet models derived from capitalist antecedents.<sup>173</sup> He recognized the Soviet experiment's transnational aspect, stating the success of the Five-Year Plan owed much to American resources: "The Russians have been studying American methods: they have imported a thousand American engineers" to accelerate industrialization.<sup>174</sup> Without the assistance of American technical experts, Wilson averred, Soviet Russia would not "accomplish anything valuable."<sup>175</sup> Though he believed during the era of the Great Break the Soviets would have nothing to do with Americans looking to learn from their experiments, he soon concluded that American radicals had to "take Communism away from the Communists."<sup>176</sup> Much like the post-revolutionary culture of the Bolsheviks, American culture needed to foster a "break with the bourgeois past" that became inherent in early 1930s radical rhetoric, and seek methods to "dramatize the failure of the old."<sup>177</sup> "I have heard it said by the Communists," he wrote in 1934, "that discipline and solidarity . . . guided by the authority of the Comintern, will be enough to liquidate capitalism."<sup>178</sup>

"An Appeal To Progressives" brought Wilson into epistolary dialogue with Dos Passos, though the two men had known each other for a decade, and Wilson had reviewed both *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) and *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel* (1930). Citing Dos Passos's 1930 *New Republic* essay "Wanted: An Ivy Lee for Liberals," Wilson supported Dos Passos's call for a "publicity expert" to "familiarize the public with the idea of Communism," rather than allowing Communist Party adherents to claim that "literature

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<sup>173</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 209.

<sup>174</sup> Edmund Wilson, "An Appeal To Progressives," *The Shores Of Light*, in *Literary Essays of the 1920s and 30s*, 432.

<sup>175</sup> Edmund Wilson, "An Appeal To Progressives," *The Shores Of Light*, in *Literary Essays of the 1920s and 30s*, 432.

<sup>176</sup> Edmund Wilson, "An Appeal To Progressives," *The Shores Of Light*, in *Literary Essays of the 1920s and 30s*, 432.

<sup>177</sup> Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams*, 111-112.

<sup>178</sup> Edmund Wilson – *New Masses*, 22 March 1934, Edmund Wilson Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, box 51, folder 1373.

produced during any period is determined by the economic position of the class for whom it is written.”<sup>179</sup> Dos Passos agreed that party language had some value as “agitation” but rejected the assumption that literary production resulted from “class warfare.”<sup>180</sup> “As a writer I belong to that class” of “technicians of one sort or another” “whether I like it or not,” he stated.<sup>181</sup> Further discussion with Wilson buttressed Dos Passos’s conviction that the importation of party language from Soviet Russia to the US offered little to the “subconscious political education” of American workers or intellectuals.<sup>182</sup> In May 1932, to assist in fulfilling his call for a “clearly articulated program of social change,” Wilson co-authored with Lewis Mumford, Waldo Frank, and Sherwood Anderson a “manifesto,” which he sent Dos Passos for approval prior to possible publication. In this piece Wilson addressed the “crisis of human culture” exacerbated by the “present economic system,” and suggested a potential US “dictatorship of class-conscious workers” “based on common material possession.”<sup>183</sup> Dos Passos took issue with the text’s “Thirteenth Street” rhetoric and suggested eliminating the phraseology.<sup>184</sup> “I think,” he wrote Wilson, “the only useful function people like us can perform anyway is introduce a more native lingo into the business . . . A manifesto is supposed to influence other people,” not the signers, though he indicated willingness to “subscribe” his name to the document.<sup>185</sup> After considering Dos Passos’s objections, Wilson admitted he had “followed too closely” Communist Party language,

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<sup>179</sup> Edmund Wilson, “An Appeal To Progressives,” *The Shores Of Light*, in *Literary Essays of the 1920s and 30s*, 433; Edmund Wilson, “The Economic Interpretation of Wilder,” *Literary Essays of the 1920s and 30s*, 406.

<sup>180</sup> John Dos Passos – Melvin Landsberg, November 1964, quoted in Melvin Landsberg, *Dos Passos’ Path To U.S.A.*, 176.

<sup>181</sup> John Dos Passos, “Whom Can We Appeal To?”, *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 132.

<sup>182</sup> Melvin Landsberg, *Dos Passos’ Path To U.S.A.*, 127; John Dos Passos, “The New Masses I’d Like To See,” *New Masses* 1 (June 1926), *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 81.

<sup>183</sup> Edmund Wilson, “Manifesto,” *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 222-223.

<sup>184</sup> Edmund Wilson – Theodore Dreiser, 2 May 1932, *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 222.

<sup>185</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson [May 1932], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 409.

which would alienate the American technical middle class.<sup>186</sup> “So far as I am concerned,” Wilson wrote, “anybody is right who wants to get rid of capitalism [and] who understands the class nature of politics [and] I regard myself as any such person’s ally.”<sup>187</sup>

In 1933 Wilson began work on the early chapters of *To The Finland Station* (1940), his study “presenting the rise of Marxism.”<sup>188</sup> During the summer of 1934 he spoke with several acquaintances, such as the leftist literary critic Matthew Josephson, who recently had traveled to Soviet Russia and who “regaled” Wilson “with such lively news” that he felt impelled to travel there.<sup>189</sup> The research for *Finland Station* led Wilson to self-identify with Marx, who “read up Russian literature and history, and had documents sent him from Russia.”<sup>190</sup> Wilson began “learning German” in order “to read Marx and Engels in their original language,” the study of which Dos Passos approved.<sup>191</sup> Wilson also commenced lessons in Russian. While in Moscow he engaged a tutor, and after his return to the US he continued to take lessons in the language “in order to read Pushkin, inspired by D.S. Mirsky’s book on the subject.”<sup>192</sup> Though he declared he was “concerned primarily with America,” not with the “strategic

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<sup>186</sup> Edmund Wilson – Waldo Frank, 17 June 1932, *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 223; Edmund Wilson – Waldo Frank, 10 August 1932, *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 224.

<sup>187</sup> Edmund Wilson – *New Masses*, 22 March 1934, Edmund Wilson Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, box 51, folder 1373.

<sup>188</sup> Edmund Wilson – Christian Gauss, 21 October 1934, *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 249; Edmund Wilson – Henry Allen Moe, Guggenheim Foundation [October 1934], *The Thirties*, 542.

<sup>189</sup> Edmund Wilson – Louise Bogan, 20 August 1934, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 251.

<sup>190</sup> Edmund Wilson, *To The Finland Station*, 327-328.

<sup>191</sup> Edmund Wilson – Christian Gauss, 13 August 1934; *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 250; Edmund Wilson – Leonard Kriegel [1971], *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 276; John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson [2 April 1935], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 471.

<sup>192</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 553, indicates he began taking Russian lessons no later than June 8, 1935. Journal entries in *The Thirties*, 621, show he continued taking Russian lessons after his return to New York in the fall of 1935, and sought assistance and advice on translating Pushkin. “He [Pushkin] seems to have permeated their whole literature and the Soviet writers idolize him,” he wrote Malcolm Cowley on 14 September 1936: *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 277.

necessities” of Soviet domestic policy, he deemed a visit to Soviet Russia necessary to consult the archives of the Marx-Lenin Institute and began planning his trip in the fall of 1934.<sup>193</sup>

## OFFICIAL NAVIGATING

The interwar travel narrative was characterized by modes of seeing.<sup>194</sup> In accounts of Soviet Russia, the freedom to observe was complicated by intervention of state touristic agencies. While their personal interpretations of historical events centered on the narrative of self-transformation and the failure of capitalism, a key factor as to why Dos Passos’s and Wilson’s encounters with the Soviet experiment differed rested with the intermediaries who guided and traveled with them. Visitors, like Soviet subjects, were “defined by their relation to the state, and touristic agencies sought to instruct Western travelers in the proper relation of observer to state power.”<sup>195</sup> Soviet cultural agencies throughout the 1920s and 1930s sought to enlist writer-travelers in “universalizing models of the

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<sup>193</sup> Sherman Paul, *Edmund Wilson*, 96. Paul observed that Wilson’s “burden” in visiting Russia was “his own expectation”: *Edmund Wilson*, 118.

<sup>194</sup> Edwin H. Cady, “‘Realism’: Toward a Definition,” in *Documents of American Realism and Naturalism*, edited by Donald Pizer (Carbondale IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998), 326, 328. Cady notes a distinct connection between realistic modes of seeing and the “evolution of the travel book” during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These modes of seeing are defined by a “common vision” in the dual sense of “everyday” and “democratic,” and “shared” or “normative.” In reference to interwar travel narratives, Carl Thompson stated in *Travel Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2011) that the “common” vision is expressed through a “narrative mode of ‘showing’ rather than ‘telling,’ electing not just to report an encounter retrospectively, but rather to reconstruct it on the page,” replicating the “disorienting kinesis” of multiple points of view through “fragmentation, unexpected juxtapositions and abrupt jumps from one image to another” (28, 57). Further applications of literary modernism to modes of seeing are found in Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel* (New York and Cleveland OH: Meridian Books, 1957), 146, and Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Viking, 1960), 92. In the instance of Dos Passos, Carol Shloss sees in Dos Passos’s “use [of] the fragment, the small structural unit that was already his preferred narrative mode” in the 1920s a means of producing a collective vision, a “recognition of the importance of each unit within the whole” that “when assembled in the viewing/reading.” *In Visible Light: Photography and the American Writer*, 158-159. These modes can be applied as adeptly to Bolshevik conceptions of revolution and Stalinist concerns with a collective mode of seeing and interpreting “common” behavior.

<sup>195</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 136; Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 207.

future to the level of doctrine” by encouraging them to write of their experiences.<sup>196</sup> Those Soviet guides who engaged directly with foreign writer-travelers provided contacts with “highly-placed people in ministries, newspapers, and other institutions.”<sup>197</sup> For their part, travelers occasionally viewed representatives assigned by these agencies as interferences who “aim[ed] to restrict and monitor their contacts.”<sup>198</sup> Though agencies did attempt to personalize visits by appealing to particular interests, these interests always were aligned with the centralization and control exerted by the party state, as in Dos Passos’s attachment to an educational delegation or Wilson’s provision of critical articles for Soviet consumption.

In the 1920s, Soviet tourist agencies competed with one another, often through highlighting particular aspects of Soviet culture that aligned with the agencies’ official functions (such as education or art history). These agencies shared a “proclivity to mold and monitor foreigners simultaneously.”<sup>199</sup> At the time of Dos Passos’s visit, touristic bureaus sought “influencing Western public opinion” through the formation of personal ties between “foreign intellectuals” and Russian cultural figures, facilitating contact with key figures of the Soviet literary and artistic scene.<sup>200</sup> These agencies also were implicated in self-transformative strategies. All sought to “alter the mental outlook” of tourists, and were not merely means of directing foreign visitors to showcases for Soviet achievements but also exposed them to “surveillance initiatives” common to “the early Soviet state” by reporting visitors’ comments

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<sup>196</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 158.

<sup>197</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Foreigners Observed,” 219.

<sup>198</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Foreigners Observed,” 219.

<sup>199</sup> Michael David-Fox, “The Fellow Travelers Revisited,” 311.

<sup>200</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Foreigners Observed,” 216-217, 219. The acronym VOKS stands for “All Union Society for Cultural Ties Abroad.” Founded in 1925, the bureau frequently hosted and “received foreign intellectuals and arranged their contacts and tours” within Soviet Russia; it also served as liaison between foreign reporters and Soviet press agencies. See Michael David-Fox, “The Fellow-Travelers Revisited,” 307.

and interests to cultural authorities.<sup>201</sup> Soviet agencies espoused the message that the Soviet population received “the benefit of everything they produced” as an aspect of modernization that soon would allow Russia to overtake Western material standards of living, and verify that “the socialist ideal [was] more natural.”<sup>202</sup>

Though he did make limited use of VOKS, which catered to “bourgeois intellectuals and the realm of culture” of the West, Dos Passos did not take away a positive impression of its tactics and later warned Wilson away from its “helpful” but “arrant” services.<sup>203</sup> Overreliance on these agencies, he told Wilson, limited foreign visitors’ ability to penetrate “inside” past the models.<sup>204</sup> In part Dos Passos’s negativity toward VOKS can be attributed to his class-based self-definition as a proletarian or technician; he did not want to be perceived as a “bourgeois intellectual” interpolated into “active” collaboration with the agency’s own writers.<sup>205</sup> He tended to disdain the privileges granted by the party-state to the latter for their work, such as the “Writer’s Rest House.” “Socialism doesn’t seem to have made [literary figures] any more entertaining as a class,” he wrote, and he believed that writers “can’t get any sustenance from [their] own kind” by forced interaction and reuse of the same figures of speech.<sup>206</sup>

The Soviet system was highly hierarchized by the 1930s, and foreign visitors’ access to important officials relied on personal contacts or intermediaries who could vouch for one’s “culturedness” and amenability to “understanding Soviet reality.”<sup>207</sup> The best way to accomplish contact was through

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<sup>201</sup> Michael David-Fox, “The Fellow Travelers Revisited,” 314.

<sup>202</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies* 252.

<sup>203</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 175; Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Foreigners Observed,” 216-17; Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 49, 113.

<sup>204</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson [2 April 1935], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 470-471.

<sup>205</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 293.

<sup>206</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 311.

<sup>207</sup> Michael David-Fox, “The Fellow Travelers Revisited,” 309-310.

introductions to those who already personified “culturedness,” such as officials within Soviet agencies of culture, or creative figures themselves. Dos Passos wrote to a number of those he met in 1928 on Wilson’s behalf, including film directors Vsevolod Pudovkin and Leonid Trauberg.<sup>208</sup> He offered to write Eisenstein but suspected “he’s getting pretty difficult.”<sup>209</sup> Despite his dislike of Gorky, Dos Passos recognized the writer’s influence in the party-state, and wrote the author a letter that praised Wilson’s faculties as a literary critic.<sup>210</sup> He advised Wilson that if he had any “trouble,” “Gorky is the man to get hold of – he is alleged to have the ear of the Kremlin.”<sup>211</sup>

Wilson most often made use of the guides and services of Intourist, founded in 1929 as an agency providing “visa and travel arrangements.”<sup>212</sup> By the mid-1930s Intourist had gained a “monopoly in foreign tourism,” augmented by “official decrees” by which its guides directed and informed foreign visitors about “model sites.”<sup>213</sup> Intourist representatives determined Wilson was “known to be sympathetic with the Soviet regime,” thus he was “not made uncomfortable,” though as a result of increased official oversight his travels were necessarily more circumscribed than had Dos Passos’s.<sup>214</sup> The elimination of competition among agencies strove to present a singular and unified narrative of Soviet achievements, and Intourist was staffed by exemplars of Soviet acculturation who directed visitors to sites best expressing the new culture of rational, planned growth. This change reflected both the relative paucity of available models outside the human at the time of Dos Passos’s visit as well as

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<sup>208</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson [2 April 1935], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 470-471.

<sup>209</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson [2 April 1935], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 471.

<sup>210</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson, 8 May 1935, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 474. Dos Passos’s letter to Gorky is unlocated and not catalogued in repositories of Gorky’s papers in Russia. Possibly it never reached the writer and was lost, or perhaps intentionally destroyed after Gorky’s death in 1936.

<sup>211</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson, 8 May 1935, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 474-475.

<sup>212</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 176; Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Foreigners Observed,” 216-217.

<sup>213</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 176.

<sup>214</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 187.



the increased vigilance exercised toward foreign tourists to prevent their receiving impressions contrary to official messages. Although Dos Passos often used literary figures as guides during his perambulations, he just as frequently ventured out unaccompanied in Leningrad and Moscow. By 1935 visitors were discouraged “from wandering round the streets on their own, partly to stop them getting lost and partly to prevent them seeing too much.”<sup>215</sup> As Wilson’s travel writings show, Intourist did not concern itself solely with cultural elites from abroad; through payment of additional fees, foreign visitors “traveled first class and hired a special guide.”<sup>216</sup> Again, such procedures limited potential contact to Soviet figures more apt to discuss successful policies, and Wilson confided in his journal that he occasionally preferred traveling “hard” with the everyday Russian population to the “soft” accommodations so as to converse with those Russians willing to speak to a foreigner.<sup>217</sup> Instead of the official delegations attached to important scientific, educational, and journalistic bureaus who accompanied Dos Passos, Wilson’s tour groups were not dispatched on state functions, and included many Western sightseers. He noted the presence of British tourists on one tour, and a lengthier sojourn with a group in Stalingrad included annoying Americans who “oppressed the other tourists with monologues.”<sup>218</sup> Intourist, as Michael David-Fox commented, also tended toward “loading visitors down with notoriously long schedules” that left them little personal time.<sup>219</sup> Wilson recorded instances of “how the Intourist people and I had misunderstood each other” about schedules, for often the supply of transportation proved inadequate to Intourist’s timetables.<sup>220</sup> Conveyed to a collective farm outside Moscow by taxi, Wilson feared the driver would not wait, until his guide assured him the driver

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<sup>215</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Foreigners Observed,” 220.

<sup>216</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 273.

<sup>217</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 179, 279.

<sup>218</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 274.

<sup>219</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 176.

<sup>220</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 543.

“would wait half an hour and that meant he would wait an hour.”<sup>221</sup> Official service degenerated the farther the traveler ventured from Moscow; in Gorky, Wilson complained in his journal about the “incompetent and lackadaisical Intourist” functionaries.<sup>222</sup> In *Travels* he noted how the agency booked him “with two other people to a room with only two beds, or charged for a room with a shower when the shower had been removed.”<sup>223</sup> Nor was Wilson interested in all the sites to which he was conducted, and professed little interest in visiting cultural heritage sites such as former Orthodox monasteries and cathedrals. Taken somewhat unwillingly to the Troitsk-Sergeivsk Monastery on July 6, 1935 Wilson found the interior reminded him of Coney Island, an “uncomfortable combination of the cruel and the ugly with the pretty and sentimental.”<sup>224</sup> Charged a full day’s rental for a hotel room in which to eat his lunch while there, he was hurried away from the repast by his guide because “the museum closed at four.”<sup>225</sup> On yet another occasion, a stranger asked whether Wilson thought Intourist “overcharged” him and if the places shown were “up to [his] expectations.”<sup>226</sup> After the stranger left, Wilson expressed uncertainty whether the man was a “disloyal character” or a “GPU agent trying to provoke . . . unfavorable criticism.”<sup>227</sup>

Intourist openly sought to present a narrative of Soviet achievement in comparison with Western decline. An internal party-state document urged its representatives to highlight for foreign visitors the “economic crisis” of capitalism in the West and the imminent collapse of “bourgeois culture and

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<sup>221</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 556.

<sup>222</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 577. See also Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Foreigners Observed,” 220-221. Wilson’s complaints, Fitzpatrick indicates, accord with other “aggrieved” responses to “service problems” with Intourist.

<sup>223</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 279.

<sup>224</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 230.

<sup>225</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 230-231.

<sup>226</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 238.

<sup>227</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 239.

civilization.”<sup>228</sup> The agency publicized “evidence of the ‘crisis of capitalism’ and the drive to construct socialism” that echoed the language Wilson had employed concerning “the breakdown of capitalism” in 1931.<sup>229</sup> By the mid-Thirties, other cultural agencies, such as the Writers’ Union (in which Sergei Tretyakov, an acquaintance of both Dos Passos and Wilson, played a significant role) also promoted a narrative in which Soviet “catching up and overtaking” the capitalist West drew together former “avant-gardists [with] Party intellectuals” to receive foreign writers.<sup>230</sup> These guides’ interweaving of the avant-garde with Party discourse abetted Wilson’s conclusion that “the case for socialism” was commensurate with “the case for a high general standard of living.”<sup>231</sup>

Seeing Soviet Russia through Intourist’s lens led to a distorted view of the success or failure of Soviet ideology. In the limitation of Wilson to Moscow and urban areas can be discerned contemporary party-state policy showcasing the city an emblem of international Communism and its future-oriented telos. Moscow was the “symbolic and organizational cultural center on an international scale” for writers who sought to influence outside opinions of the revolution’s successful aftermath.<sup>232</sup> In geopolitical terms, Moscow-centrism reflected redirection of “international communism around Soviet state interests” during the mid-1930s.<sup>233</sup> The US depression further assisted in this redirection, noticeable in Wilson’s comparisons of Moscow’s New Person crowds as “certainly much pleasanter with each other,

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<sup>228</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 191.

<sup>229</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 191; Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 242.

<sup>230</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 195, 220. David-Fox characterized Tretyakov as one of “many cultural officials” who retained “his identity as a revolutionary artist”: *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 220-221.

<sup>231</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 251.

<sup>232</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 194; Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931-1941* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 115.

<sup>233</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 191, 194.

for all their jostling and jamming than New Yorkers,” who restrained their “particular anxieties.”<sup>234</sup> The city had become a showcase of Soviet intentions for the future along a “model” plan, according to James H. Bater, and Wilson noted that though he “expected Moscow to be old and musty,” it was “modern and energetic.”<sup>235</sup> He was particularly impressed with the newest showpiece of Soviet modernity, the Moscow Metro. The “moral” message contained in such models, he decided, was socialism produced areas of “public utility” superior to and more “dignified” than capitalist equivalents.<sup>236</sup> Yet this “moral” orientation also displayed the ways in which Soviet policy remained engaged with what Dos Passos called “the deep currents of historical change under . . . orthodoxies” in the West.<sup>237</sup> Wilson described the “general disposition” of foreign visitors to summarize Soviet achievements in ideological terms, which was what Intourist precisely sought to impress on travelers.<sup>238</sup> Western visitors, Wilson related, “put down everything good or bad . . . to the workings of socialism,” and took touristic sights as models of real life.<sup>239</sup>

#### CULTURAL ICONS: ENCOUNTERING NEW PERSONS: JOHN DOS PASSOS

Interactions with those who shared their life histories and the impact of the Revolution helped Dos Passos understand the Soviet experiment in terms of how to “adopt the agenda of revolutionary transformation and become personally transformed in the process.”<sup>240</sup> Through both official and

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<sup>234</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 182.

<sup>235</sup> James H. Bater, *The Soviet City: Ideal and Reality* (Beverly Hills CA: Sage, 1980), 93; Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 181.

<sup>236</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 182.

<sup>237</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 191; John Dos Passos, “The Writer As Technician,” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 171.

<sup>238</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 208.

<sup>239</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 208.

<sup>240</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 347.

unofficial guides, Dos Passos sought to broaden the scope of his travel narrative by incorporating the life histories of those he encountered. In each presentation Dos Passos also appropriated and generalized from his own transformational experience of the revolutionary period to those now navigating an unfamiliar social landscape where deviation was “counterrevolutionary.”<sup>241</sup>

The life histories of Soviet cultural figures also related common motifs of Bolshevik conversion and growth of consciousness.<sup>242</sup> In relating these biographies, Dos Passos seized on the World War as a starting point for the historical impetus for both the Bolshevik revolution and his generation’s emphasis on self-transformation. The Revolution had provided the historical impetus for conceiving one’s life in terms of a rupture or break, a mode that would find counterpart in Dos Passos’s own narrative style, which deployed “an unsettling sense of disconnect” or “fragmented” viewpoints through elimination of “any coherent connection” between locale and personal history.<sup>243</sup> He toured Leningrad with the Russian translator of his works, Valentin Stenich, a lifelong resident of the city who, like Dos Passos, exemplified revolutionary rewriting of one’s class identity. A writer of “first rate poetry,” Stenich, though “the son of a rich man,” “had joined the red guards and fought . . . all through the October days.”<sup>244</sup> Eventually “expelled from the communist party” for his bourgeois class background, Stenich remained valuable to the Soviet experiment through cultural activities.<sup>245</sup> (Eight years later Wilson also met Stenich and related the same biography; in his journal he described

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<sup>241</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 287.

<sup>242</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 12.

<sup>243</sup> Barry Maine, “U.S.A.: Dos Passos and the Rhetoric of History,” *South Atlantic Review* 50:1 (January 1985), 77; Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London UK: Verso, 1996), 182.

<sup>244</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 287.

<sup>245</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 287.

Stenich's self-identification with Dos Passos's characters "up against industrialism" and his complaint that Leningrad "would be nothing left but factories and museums" in coming years).<sup>246</sup>

The Bolshevik ideal of renunciation also figured in the biographies Dos Passos related. The New Person was urged to look for social structures useful to an international workers' class, and "family and village had to be rejected so that the international proletariat could be embraced."<sup>247</sup> Class identification with the proletariat substituted for familial connections to bring forward "collective identity in self-formation."<sup>248</sup> Many of the figures Dos Passos depicted in "Russian Visa" were voluntarily displaced from family, birthplace, and community, and the author recorded their "transition between the antediluvian world they were brought up in" prior to 1917, "and the new world" where "they could live, breathe, [and] think without strain."<sup>249</sup> This same collective repositioning would soon motivate Stalinist repudiation of "formalism" in the arts (as when Wilson was warned that "consideration of the 'aesthetic factors'" in Soviet literature of the 1930s constituted signs of the "disintegrating bourgeois world") in favor of celebrating efforts to propel society toward the future.<sup>250</sup>

Of the many cultural and scientific figures whom Dos Passos noted as models, the most significant (other than dramatists and film directors) was the behavioral scientist Ivan Pavlov, whose Leningrad laboratories Dos Passos visited in the first half of August 1928. The party-state promoted Pavlov as one of its eminent "homegrown scientific and cultural icons" who attained international recognition

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<sup>246</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 540. By the time Wilson met Stenich, the latter displayed to Wilson significant signs of "Westernized" acculturation, such as punctuality, "lucid" speech, and being "dressed *a l'americaine*," that distinguished him from other cultural apparatchiks Wilson encountered: *The Thirties*, 539.

<sup>247</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 6.

<sup>248</sup> Julie Draskoczy, "The 'Put' of *Perekovka*." 31-32.

<sup>249</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 291-292.

<sup>250</sup> Edmund Wilson, "Letter to the Russians About Hemingway," in *Literary Essays of the 1920s and 30s*, 10; see also Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 296, and Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*, 184.

despite what Dos Passos termed his “skepticism about the Soviet worldview.”<sup>251</sup> Though he did not meet Pavlov in person (despite an American assistant/translator, W. Horsley Gantt, who befriended and offered to introduce the writer), the scientist became for Dos Passos a model of the relationship of the socialist state to the scientific or literary “technician” operating independently within its system.<sup>252</sup> His interpretation of Pavlov’s relationship to the Leninist-Stalinist state hinted at the ideals of “secur[ing] enough freedom from interference from the managers of society” that underlay his utopian view of the Soviet experiment’s efforts at “social harmony.”<sup>253</sup> “[O]nly because Lenin considered Pavlov’s scientific work of great importance and because of his unique reputation as an early winner of the Nobel Prize . . . was [he] given freedom to continue his researches [and was] subsidized by the government.”<sup>254</sup> Although Pavlov received “every facility for work” through sponsorship by Lenin, “he never admitted that Lenin was right,” Dos Passos noted.<sup>255</sup> “Saw Pavlov’s dogs,” he wrote Cummings not long after his visit: “All his work . . . is coming out in an English translation [by Gantt] this year [through] International Publishers.”<sup>256</sup> Continuing his analysis, Dos Passos highlighted themes of sacrifice and labor consistent with Bolshevik ideals, indicating why the party-state after Lenin continued to value Pavlov’s work. “He hates the Soviet Government and roars against them in his lectures, and they give his laboratory more money every year,” Dos Passos wrote.<sup>257</sup> “[He] never missed a day in his laboratory all through the war and the revolution.”<sup>258</sup> Gantt informed Dos Passos of

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<sup>251</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 243; Boris Wolfson, “Fear on Stage: Afinogenov, Stanislavsky, and the Making of Stalinist Theater,” 102.

<sup>252</sup> John Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 177. See also John Dos Passos, “The Writer as Technician,” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 170.

<sup>253</sup> John Dos Passos, “The Writer as Technician,” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 170.

<sup>254</sup> John Dos Passos, statement prepared for the House Un-American Activity Activities Committee, 22 January 1953, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 602.

<sup>255</sup> John Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 191.

<sup>256</sup> John Dos Passos – E.E. Cummings [circa August 1928], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 386.

<sup>257</sup> John Dos Passos – E.E. Cummings [circa August 1928], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 386-387.

<sup>258</sup> John Dos Passos – E.E. Cummings [circa August 1928], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 386-387.

how, during his seven-year “apprenticeship” with Pavlov, he often had gone without food, and that “there was no heat in the poorly insulated buildings” so everyone, including Pavlov himself, “worked in overcoats” during the winter.<sup>259</sup>

Dos Passos’s depiction of Pavlov indicated the proclivity of foreign visitors to gain insight into the Soviet system through representative individuals and models. Cultural officials seeking to influence Western views seized on the significance of the model-based interaction.<sup>260</sup> For Dos Passos, Pavlov became the exemplary figure of devotion to craft within an economic system that “allowed [him] to say and write things” inimical to the regime as long as such “statements were not allowed to go further than the walls of his laboratory.”<sup>261</sup> Yet the fact Dos Passos gained access through Gantt to Pavlov’s sanctum suggested Soviet agencies did not regard contact as contaminating at this juncture, which softened the impression the scientist was a kind of prisoner. Instead, privation was regarded as part of the privilege of bringing socialism into the future for historical actors. The Soviet regime upheld Pavlov as a “showcase” individual, but only because it controlled access to his utterances.

Enduring hardship, coupled with the renunciation of bourgeois identity and comforts, were part of the Bolshevik program for reforming the intelligentsia. Ascetic habits imitated those of the “revolutionary underground” prior to 1917.<sup>262</sup> Wilson related the impressions of a Russian acquaintance who told him of her visit to the apartment of Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin’s widow and an important figure in the Commissariat of Education. “There were no comforts in the apartment . . . no ornaments, except pictures of Lenin . . . she seems never to have noticed her furniture [or] looked at

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<sup>259</sup> Virginia Spencer Carr, *Dos Passos: A Life*, 242.

<sup>260</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 136.

<sup>261</sup> John Dos Passos, statement prepared for the House Un-American Activities Committee, 22 January 1953, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 602.

<sup>262</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 14.



her walls.”<sup>263</sup> This retention of asceticism even after the “victory” of the Revolution Wilson deduced as the application of Marx’s “materialist conception of history” to the personal sphere. Comfort was “reckoned in terms of money,” and though Soviet Russia had not yet reached the future state where individuals did not need to work for money, the “bare walls” demonstrated “their state is not dedicated, as the capitalist governments are, to the mere preservation of the status quo.”<sup>264</sup>

#### THE “AMBIGUOUS BORDERLAND” OF CULTURAL TRAVEL<sup>265</sup>

Dos Passos’s travels outside of population centers constituted a sign of privilege based on acquisition of a class identity sympathetic with Soviet cultural efforts. Yet the freedom accorded him through this privilege was the result of a specific historical moment that took Dos Passos outside the normal paths granted to tourists. Bolshevik acculturation proceeded through autonomous groups placed under official oversight and subject to central approval. Dos Passos later praised to Wilson the “democratic” composition and procedures of the Soviet “workers’ committees” he saw operating within this center-periphery relationship, insisting such relations exemplified the socialist experiment.<sup>266</sup> Stenich introduced Dos Passos to a group of teachers who “had finished their two years in the Red Army” and now sought official placement.<sup>267</sup> They immediately suggested to the writer an option to officially guided travel. Around the middle of August 1928, Dos Passos met with Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Soviet Minister of Education and

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<sup>263</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 255-256.

<sup>264</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 256.

<sup>265</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 201.

<sup>266</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson, 5 February 1935, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 465; John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson [January 1935], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 461-462.

<sup>267</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 286.

Commissar of Enlightenment.<sup>268</sup> He dined with Lunacharsky and his wife inside the Kremlin, and Lunacharsky arranged for Dos Passos to tour for several weeks through the Georgia and Transcaucasus regions during the remainder of August and into September.<sup>269</sup> Through the auspices of Narkompros, the Peoples' Commissariat for Education, Lunacharsky permitted Dos Passos to accompany an inspection of school facilities.<sup>270</sup>

Only the year before, Narkompros had devised with Politburo guidance a resolution "to make literary labor equivalent to the labor of workers."<sup>271</sup> This resolution to an extent consolidated literary faction in Soviet Russia, especially those between the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP) and organizations of a more avant-garde orientation. Such bureaucratic streamlining also helped identify and "draw out" Trotskyist sympathizers.<sup>272</sup> Lunacharsky regarded both literature and education as essential to supplying Soviet industry of the future with technical "specialists."<sup>273</sup> As Dos Passos understood party-state aims, the Bolsheviks intended "all education [to be] by work . . . merit will be [decided] according to work, not by theories or examinations."<sup>274</sup> As an agency of the "revolutionary proletariat"

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<sup>268</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*, 22, 30; John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson [2 April 1935], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 471.

<sup>269</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson [2 April 1935], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 471; John Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 181; Townsend Ludington, *John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey*, 271.

<sup>270</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 299; John Dos Passos, journal entry, 28 August 1928, quoted in Townsend Ludington, *John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey*, 271.

<sup>271</sup> "Resolution of the Politburo of the TsK VKP(b), 5 May 1927," in *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents, 1917-1953*, ed. by Katerina Clark, Evgeny Dobrenko, Andrei Artizov, and Oleg Naumov (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 51.

<sup>272</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*, 50.

<sup>273</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*, 62.

<sup>274</sup> John Dos Passos, "In a New Republic," *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 60-61.

Narkompros supervised a school system that would educate “intelligent workers [to] carry out the changing policies of the center.”<sup>275</sup>

Narkompros was not touristic in the sense of providing expert guides or arranging accommodations, and the journey exemplified the growing role of the “revolutionary state in officiating over the experimental world” inhabiting the cultural realm.<sup>276</sup> Dos Passos and his co-travelers often slept or stayed in schools or private homes.<sup>277</sup> Inspection of schools and school sites during the summer of 1928 served the purpose of “establish[ing] state-run schools in every village throughout the country.”<sup>278</sup> This program concealed what David L. Hoffmann termed Bolshevism’s “militant approach to enlightenment” by bringing schools into centrally coordinated supervision and eliminating potential political opponents under a cultural guise.<sup>279</sup> “For Soviet mass culture,” James Von Geldern wrote, the “nation and the periphery stood as metaphors for society” by virtue of the process of “discovery,” mapping, and “classification” for utility.<sup>280</sup> The Soviets were as eager to promote to visitors their achievements in cultivating these regions as to include such areas within mandated acculturation programs, in order to dramatize the rapidity with which socialism could reform and enlighten society.<sup>281</sup> This effort to dispel impressions that “backward” areas were uncultured or lacked “work habits” communicated the population’s enthusiasm to the outside. The willing cooperation of the

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<sup>275</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 313.

<sup>276</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 88.

<sup>277</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 299.

<sup>278</sup> David L. Hoffmann, *Cultivating the Masses: Modern State Practices and Soviet Socialism, 1914-1939* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 222.

<sup>279</sup> David L. Hoffmann, *Cultivating the Masses*, 222; John Dos Passos, “In a New Republic,” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 60.

<sup>280</sup> James Von Geldern, “The Centre and the Periphery,” 190.

<sup>281</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 153.

intelligentsia in acculturating proletarians and peasants also repaired some of the earlier divisions “between the Bolshevik party and the working class” ruptured since the end of the Civil War in 1921.<sup>282</sup> The inclusion of Dos Passos indicated the coordination of the intelligentsia, avant-garde artists, and educators with “industrial specialists” to “cooperate with the Soviet government.”<sup>283</sup> The educated New Person would be “emerging not from among intelligentsia circles but among the proletariat.”<sup>284</sup>

Dos Passos’s inclusion in this inspection tour was neither singular nor unique even to this particular trip. Lunacharsky sought a “‘conscious’ element” within society, such as “professionals and artists who provided organization and guidance from outside,” for acculturation purposes – the same element Dos Passos would describe as “energetic and fanatically curious about peoples, languages, architecture, history.”<sup>285</sup> However much he may have been unaware of the political ends, Dos Passos regarded the work and travel involved as affirming the “humanitarian tendencies” of the proletarian-writer connection.<sup>286</sup> During a significant part of the journey Gantt accompanied him. An American journalist, Anna Louise Strong, was also attached in a semi-reportorial capacity to the company.<sup>287</sup> (Though Dos Passos’s remarks in his contemporary notes and letters suggested he disliked Strong’s assiduous “enthusiasm” for Communism, he advised Wilson in 1935 that the journalist, then

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<sup>282</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*, 30.

<sup>283</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*, 102.

<sup>284</sup> David L. Hoffmann, *Cultivating the Masses*, 225.

<sup>285</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 98; John Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 187.

<sup>286</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson, 5 February 1935, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 465.

<sup>287</sup> Ray Lewis White, “John Dos Passos and the Federal Bureau of Investigation,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 14:1 (Summer 1987), 104. Dos Passos knew Strong primarily through her frequent contributions to *The Liberator*, a radical periodical that flourished between 1918 and 1924 and to which Dos Passos contributed a few articles. See Virginia Spencer Carr, *Dos Passos: A Life*, 239, though Carr erred when she stated *The Liberator* carried Strong’s reports on the trip she shared with Dos Passos.

attached to the Moscow *Daily News*, “can arrange many things if she wants to”).<sup>288</sup> The composition of this group – with which Dos Passos had to “catch up” – displayed the eagerness with which foreign visitors joined with the Soviet experiment and documented their impressions.<sup>289</sup> Dos Passos described the Narkompros delegates as a “schoolteacher woman, several middleaged men, and a ruddycheeked young fellow . . . They were friendly, but nobody put himself out to help a foreigner.”<sup>290</sup>

The Narkompros tour, like many Soviet cultural projects, utilized the knowledge of local inhabitants while aligning them with the political and cultural center. Throughout his journey in this region Dos Passos noted the frequency with which his group had to change guides, because few possessed knowledge capable of “seeing” beyond a certain distance. “The guides would never take their horses farther than the next valley because it would be inhabited by a different people and they didn’t know the language,” he observed while in Chechnya.<sup>291</sup> Re-education, therefore, contained an implicit Marxist telos to see beyond the immediate, personal, and material. Moreover, no single language prevailed; instead, a “variety of races and languages.” rendered direct communication between even neighboring districts all but impossible.<sup>292</sup> At the most a guide would accompany them two or three days before having “to find an interpreter to

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<sup>288</sup> John Dos Passos, diary entry, 28 August 1928, quoted in Townsend Ludington, *John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey*, 271; John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson [2 April 1935], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 471; John Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 184. See also David C. Duke, “Anna Louise Strong and the Search For a Good Cause,” *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 66:3 (July, 1975), 123, 130-131.

<sup>289</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 295.

<sup>290</sup> John Dos Passos, journal entry, August 1928, quoted in Townsend Ludington, *John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey*, 271; John Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 184.

<sup>291</sup> John Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 185.

<sup>292</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 295; Virginia Spencer Carr, *Dos Passos: A Life*, 247, 240. In recounting the trip in *The Best Times*, for which he used the journal he had kept in 1928, Dos Passos commented that proper names of locations were “all spelled wrong. I never could find them on any map”: John Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 184.

ask the way.”<sup>293</sup> “Nobody spoke any language I’d ever heard of; nobody belonged to any nation I’d ever heard of,” Dos Passos concluded.<sup>294</sup>

The areas in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and the Transcaucasus were not conventionally shown to visiting Western intellectuals, but commissars such as Lunacharsky considered the acculturation campaign important enough to grant access to foreign reporters who might write favorably of Soviet Russia. For example, while staying in Botlikh Dos Passos noted the opening of a new “Workers’ and Peasants’ Club” offering such cultural activities as “a stage and a movie screen” and speeches amplified through loudspeakers.<sup>295</sup> In contrast, several areas Dos Passos visited were distinctly modernized and already displayed standards of living and production comparable with those in the West. In Baku, development of the oil fields brought to the city European-style accommodations, accomplished through local initiative rather than top-down direction from Moscow.<sup>296</sup> (Dos Passos would later recall “being surprised by the high style of culture” in certain areas such as Dagestan, with its architecture of “what seemed Persian designs”).<sup>297</sup> These developed areas contrasted with the “little stone age villages” in the hinterlands, which he described as existing outside of time (and, implicitly, the telos of Marxism).<sup>298</sup> The improvisational transportation further decreased Dos Passos’s sense of “forms

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<sup>293</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 295.

<sup>294</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 294.

<sup>295</sup> John Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 185.

<sup>296</sup> Dos Passos wrote Arthur McComb that in Baku, his accommodations were “run by the Hotel Trust of the Republic of Ajerbeidjan [*sic*],” emphasizing localized rather than centralized socialism: John Dos Passos – Arthur McComb [circa August-September 1928], Melvin Landsberg, *John Dos Passos’s Correspondence With Arthur K. McComb*, 223.

<sup>297</sup> John Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 186.

<sup>298</sup> John Dos Passos – Ernest Hemingway [circa August 1928], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 387.

of organization” imposed from the political center; pausing in Botlikh, he noted “people haggle[d] over the price of horses to take us on to the next place.”<sup>299</sup>

The utopian characteristics of Bolshevism required recasting the historical antipathy of the peasantry of outlying areas toward “central authorities,” which led to experimental development of urban centers, markets, and culture.<sup>300</sup> The “freedom” Dos Passos observed represented the ideals of this period, an “escape from the repressive state” signified by the rural population’s old social relationship to tsarist “lord and policeman.”<sup>301</sup> More broadly still, this reaction was elicited by popular perception of foreigners and officials as conveyors of enlightenment and modernity. In one region the local population repeatedly petitioned Dos Passos and his party to attract “mining engineers” by “writ[ing] about them in the foreign press” and promoting the area’s “great future as a mining district.”<sup>302</sup>

## ENCOUNTERING NEW PERSONS: EDMUND WILSON

In his travel account and journals, Wilson tried to retain the internationalist orientation of socialist culture from the 1920s. To do so presented him with a dilemma: whether to present those aspects of Stalinism that supported an internationalism and remained consonant with the political aims of the Popular Front that were gaining ground in 1935, or whether to portray Soviet culture as distinctly nationalist. Wilson did not resolve this dilemma, and the difficulty he experienced in deciding which of

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<sup>299</sup> John Dos Passos – Ernest Hemingway [circa August 1928], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 387.

<sup>300</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 15.

<sup>301</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 15.

<sup>302</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 300.

these traits to highlight in his travels contributed to his authorial decision that “ideas of . . . stronger personality” emanating from Lenin and Stalin ultimately shaped Soviet policy.<sup>303</sup> Wilson, like many Western intellectuals who visited early 1930s Russia such as George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells, saw in the Soviet experiment an “administratively advanced order of disciplined organizers” who would free creative figures from dealing with the vagaries of the capitalist market’s valuation of their work only in terms of the money their writing earned.<sup>304</sup> These writers sought in Russia the signs of a “radiant, communal future of freedom” that Soviet authorities wished to promote as a Marxist-inflected utopia of technological perfection.<sup>305</sup> The “individual is the only thing that matters, and only the gifted individual – in fact only the poet and the artist,” Wilson wrote in 1929.<sup>306</sup> Writers, he averred, were integral to historical change as the key intermediaries between ideology and the masses: “the great writing of the Russian Revolution was done by Lenin and Trotsky.”<sup>307</sup>

As revealed in *To The Finland Station*, Wilson viewed the writer-historian as one who could re-enact the revolutionary process of “fighting [one’s] way through . . . long degradations [and] triumphing in joyful rebirths” via a personal connection to research.<sup>308</sup> Michelet, for example, experienced symptoms of oppression coinciding with writing about French absolutism, and was redeemed by revelation of “a new *me*” when he came to the events of 1789.<sup>309</sup> Personal identification with revolution was even more fundamental to understanding Bolshevism, Wilson stated, citing Trotsky’s statement that the

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<sup>303</sup> Edmund Wilson - John Peale Bishop, 4 October 1929; *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 174.

<sup>304</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 236.

<sup>305</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 172; Alexander Bogdanov, *Red Star: The First Bolshevik Utopia* (Bloomington IN: Indiana State University Press, 1984), 33.

<sup>306</sup> Edmund Wilson - Allen Tate, 13 August 1929; *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 168.

<sup>307</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 215; Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 9 May 1935, *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 266-267.

<sup>308</sup> Edmund Wilson, *To The Finland Station*, 25.

<sup>309</sup> Edmund Wilson, *To The Finland Station*, 25.



“revolutionary movement” transcended mere personal identity by “lead[ing] humanity from out the dark night of the circumscribed I” into historical awareness.<sup>310</sup> In effect, the public realm was the only place where refashioning could be truly significant for the self.

What Wilson termed, not without irony, “proletarian discipline” was the defining quality of New Person social behavior. As its qualifier indicated, this kind of discipline marked conduct that advanced Party objectives, and was not necessarily limited to those of proletarian background or employment.<sup>311</sup> Proletarian discipline did not require deep study of Marxist ideology. Rather, participation in party-state mandated public activities sufficed.<sup>312</sup> Dos Passos recalled the “songs of the Red Army soldiers marching” as one example, and Wilson too witnessed groups of children or soldiers singing “marching songs.”<sup>313</sup> The nationalist orientation of culture under Stalin led to revival of regional melodies such as Caucasian ballads.<sup>314</sup> Implicated in its definition for Wilson was the contrast with the external mode of policing in the US, where “if the police don’t stop us, nothing will.”<sup>315</sup> As presented in *Travels*, this discipline took three forms. Helpfulness, or at the very least the performance of assistance, exemplified the first. He found pedestrians only too happy to act as guides. Dos Passos noted throughout his travels the “hospitable” people he met everywhere who shared their food with him, even when they themselves could not “find anything to eat.”<sup>316</sup> Aboard a train, Wilson and a

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<sup>310</sup> Edmund Wilson, *To The Finland Station*, 434.

<sup>311</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 33; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 80.

<sup>312</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 33.

<sup>313</sup> John Dos Passos – Germaine Lucas-Championniere, 8 December 1928, *Lettres a Germaine Lucas-Championniere*, 259, original in French; my translation.

<sup>314</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 228.

<sup>315</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 172.

<sup>316</sup> John Dos Passos – Germaine Lucas-Championniere, 8 December 1928, John Dos Passos, *Lettres a Germaine Lucas-Championniere*, 259. Original in French; my translation.

companion acquired a “little shut-off compartment” they thought themselves “lucky” to have to themselves, only to find it “belong[ed] to the conductor” who had relinquished it to them due to overcrowding.<sup>317</sup> When he locked himself out of his Moscow hotel room, half a dozen of the staff assisted.<sup>318</sup> Wilson was unsure whether this number indicated incompetence at a specialized task, a social need for mutual supervision, or that ultimately no one wanted to accept responsibility for failure.<sup>319</sup>

The second aspect of discipline was self-restraint, which took the form of “a new kind of public conscience.”<sup>320</sup> Wilson noted that “if anyone behaves hoggishly, there is general remonstrance and protest,” and the mass pressure often produced an apology or a retreat by the offender.<sup>321</sup> “Nobody is disagreeable or rude,” he wrote, and “if one throws anything away, one immediately picks it up again” to spare the “old women” assigned to cleaning up in public spaces the trouble.<sup>322</sup> On public conveyances, “People push and dispute” but “show each other more consideration than in N[ew] Y[ork].”<sup>323</sup> Breaking off a conversation for any reason was uncultured, as was leaving any public gathering until “the matter at hand [was dealt with] thoroughly.”<sup>324</sup> The result, Wilson stated, was that “a dinner, a play, a ballet, a meeting, a Russian lesson, a dinner conversation [was] likely to go on for hours” because no one wanted to commit the gaffe of excusing him- or herself.<sup>325</sup> Failure in cultural performance resulted in public “instructing or rebuking,” an example of which occurred to him early on

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<sup>317</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 234.

<sup>318</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 187.

<sup>319</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 188.

<sup>320</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 217.

<sup>321</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 183.

<sup>322</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 204.

<sup>323</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 547.

<sup>324</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 192.

<sup>325</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 192.

in Leningrad, where, “walking home from the theater,” he crossed [the street] at the wrong time and place, and heard voices behind” accusing him of being ““badly educated.”<sup>326</sup> Only when he spoke was his visitor status was disclosed and his pursuers mollified.

A third measure of discipline, and perhaps the most prominent in mid-Thirties Stalinism, was the reception of privilege. “Culturedness” demanded that Party members not exploit their connections to the regime. They and their families were “obliged to demonstrate that [their] private conduct and convictions conformed to the Party’s interests.”<sup>327</sup> The son of a Party member Wilson encountered in an Odessa hospital received more attention from staff than other patients, but tried to downplay his status, having learned “that it was very ill bred of him to accept distinction for his father’s office.”<sup>328</sup> The “President of the collective farm” Wilson visited interrupted a meal to guide visitors around the facility and insisted with “dignified and simple good manners” that the company “sit down in his office” to relax.<sup>329</sup>

Proper conduct was inculcated in children from a young age. “It is in the little children that all our hope lies,” a Bolshevik educational official told Dos Passos.<sup>330</sup> Wilson described the attractiveness of the uniform given to members of the Pioneers, a children’s organization “dedicated to sweeping away the backward customs of the past.”<sup>331</sup> The Pioneers operated under official oversight of the Commissariat of Education, which promoted social inclusion in organization as “a higher form of family.”<sup>332</sup> Wilson watched them parade attired in “white

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<sup>326</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels in Two Democracies*, 171-172; Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 537.

<sup>327</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 33.

<sup>328</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 295.

<sup>329</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 198-199.

<sup>330</sup> John Dos Passos, “In A New Republic,” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 61.

<sup>331</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 46.

<sup>332</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 25-26.

shorts and white athletic shoes” that contrasted with “dark red shirts” and scarves, and “made it almost impossible” to differentiate between sexes.<sup>333</sup>

From the Pioneers, youths could continue with substitutions for the family by joining the Komsomol, open to those aged between 15 and 20. Wilson interacted with several Komsomolka, who were assigned by Intourist to guide and translate for visitors. Some, Wilson noted, liked to display openly their political commitment by reading Marxist texts such as “Engels’ pamphlet on *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*, in order to improve her English and her knowledge of dialectical materialism both at the same time.”<sup>334</sup> Others, such as one who conducted him around the Winter Palace (and got him momentarily lost in the “labyrinth”), were more interested in querying Wilson about the US in order to assert Soviet superiority.<sup>335</sup> “Was life in America better or not?” several asked him.<sup>336</sup> In Moscow he “went up to a traffic cop, and [was] astonished” to find a “red-cheeked” Komsomolka.<sup>337</sup> The Komsomol “made regular reports” to both the security authorities at the NKVD and the tourist bureaus to which they were attached, and indeed Wilson suspected these questions were meant to elicit responses that would reveal his movements in the city.<sup>338</sup>

Denunciation also factored into discipline. If social inclusion became a criterion of the New Person, retention of a private self indicated lack of “culturedness” and a potential threat to order. Wilson

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<sup>333</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 568.

<sup>334</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 555-6. Wilson would note the impact of the subjects of Engels’ critique, the utopian socialists Robert Owen and Charles Fourier, upon Soviet industrialism’s confluence of social and industrial engineering: *The Thirties*, 538-539.

<sup>335</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 166.

<sup>336</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 579.

<sup>337</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 184.

<sup>338</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Foreigners Observed,” 218; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 169.

heard of one individual who, he was told, “never fitted in in Moscow” because “he always goes around by himself.”<sup>339</sup> Potentially, such a person could be suspected as a “Trotskyite,” Wilson’s acquaintance informed him, and “had to be taught a lesson.”<sup>340</sup> “If anyone expresses notions which seem . . . out of step,” Wilson concluded, suggestions of “ruthless policies,” sometimes involving physical violence, often followed.<sup>341</sup>

“In no country I have ever been in,” Wilson wrote, “even France, has literature such prestige as in Russia.”<sup>342</sup> Cultural representatives acted as guides to Soviet achievements and “were expected to act on the consciousness of outsiders,” using the same methods in their roles as “writers [who] would engineer human souls or Soviet subjects would forge new selves.”<sup>343</sup> These figures were “public men” instrumental in propagating narratives concerning the New Person.<sup>344</sup> During his four month stay in Russia, Wilson met a number of writers and literary figures, many of whom were representatives of Soviet writers’ or cultural agencies. He noted the main difference between himself and the “sightseeing proletariat” devolved upon his identity as a writer, which permitted him to be assigned a personal guide instead of participating in group tours.<sup>345</sup>

Wilson’s first impressions of these writers and official figures reflected ongoing debate in Soviet Russia concerning the role of literature in social restructuring and individual transformation. This literary “class,” though running the risk of becoming an elite, impressed Wilson with their “personal

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<sup>339</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 229.

<sup>340</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 229.

<sup>341</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 229.

<sup>342</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 211.

<sup>343</sup> Michael David-Fox, “The Fellow-Travelers Revisited: The ‘Cultured West’ Through Soviet Eyes,” *The Journal of Modern History* 75:2 (June 2003), 313.

<sup>344</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 212.

<sup>345</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 165.

independence [and] critical intelligence.”<sup>346</sup> Chief among these was Maxim Gorky, whom Wilson described in *Travels* as “a kind of Commissar of Literature” in discussing Gorky’s past friendship with Lenin and present proximity to “sharing the glory with Stalin.”<sup>347</sup> Though Dos Passos had not met Gorky in 1928, he had written Gorky on Wilson’s behalf, though Gorky’s absence from Moscow during the time of Wilson’s visit precluded any meeting between the two.<sup>348</sup> Among the writers Wilson did meet, the most prominent was the critic D.S. Mirsky, who was not part of the official literary culture and who then existed on the fringes of Moscow’s literary scene despite prior “revolutionary” associations.<sup>349</sup>

Several of the literary figures Wilson encountered exemplified the cultural use the regime made of showcasing New Persons to Western writer-travelers. A number of these were former avant-garde who, like Sergei Tretyakov, now served the party-state’s cultural agencies. During June Wilson spent many evenings with Sergei Alymov, a poet and novelist, a prominent member of the LEF, the acronym for the Soviet “left front of art” in the 1920s who by 1930 had risen to a place of prominence within the Soviet agencies dedicated to receiving literary visitors. Alymov and his wife Maria held regular weekly *soirees* where cultured New Persons gathered, though few attendees were literary. Rather, the company included representatives from the tourist agency Open Road, lawyers, and party officials.<sup>350</sup> Wilson was disappointed that neither of the Alymovs, though “interested in America,” knew its literature despite working as translators; neither “had never heard of [Herman] Melville [and] did not

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<sup>346</sup> Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams*, 42; Edmund Wilson, “John Jay Chapman”, *The New Republic* LIX (May 22, 1929), 30-31.

<sup>347</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 212.

<sup>348</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson, 4 May 1935, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 462-463. In the letter, Dos Passos confessed “I’ve never met [Gorky, but] I told him you were the A 1 literary critic” and hoped Gorky would accord Wilson an official reception.

<sup>349</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 563, 564. Wilson’s initial meeting with Mirsky took place on 14 June 1935 in Moscow.

<sup>350</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 567.

know . . . about either Cummings or Dos [Passos].”<sup>351</sup> Instead, Alymov affirmed the nationalist cultural approach of Stalinism, informing Wilson he “judge[d]” literary standards through comparison with “the Russian classics.”<sup>352</sup> Twice within weeks of his arrival in Moscow, Wilson wrote his editor at Scribners, Maxwell Perkins, to send Alymov copies not only of two of his books, *Axel’s Castle* and *The American Jitters*, but also “some of your new American books” by such modernists as Thomas Wolfe, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Erskine Caldwell.<sup>353</sup> Alymov claimed to be “very much excited over” what Wilson had told him of recent American literature, and Wilson saw an opportunity to promote “our contemporary writing, since I’ve seen how the Russians are influenced by it.”<sup>354</sup>

In addition to New Persons, the Alymovs frequently entertained visiting American cultural figures, such as the neorealist American photographer Paul Strand, whom Wilson met on June 21, and brought them into personalized contact with examples of the new Soviet elite (Wilson noted that the gathering that included Strand also contained a “girl from Mrs. A[lymov]’s home town of Michurinsk, who managed artists’ models” for photographic work).<sup>355</sup> These cultural encounters were multidirectional and transnational, and indicated the ways by which privilege was dispensed via what Michael David-Fox termed the “patron-client relations” typical of mid-1930s Stalinism.<sup>356</sup> Through Maria Alymov, Wilson gained access to a *dacha* reserved for writers and elites outside Moscow; like other structures “redeemed” under the Soviet aegis, the *dacha* was both cultural sign and site of refashioning, having been the former residence of “a rich

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<sup>351</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 553.

<sup>352</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 553.

<sup>353</sup> Edmund Wilson – Maxwell Perkins, 10 June 1935, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 272; Edmund Wilson – Maxwell Perkins, 11 June 1935, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 272.

<sup>354</sup> Edmund Wilson – Maxwell Perkins, 11 June 1935, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 272-273.

<sup>355</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 565.

<sup>356</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 208.

business man . . . one of the patrons of the [Moscow] Art Theater.”<sup>357</sup> As socialism had dispensed with the necessity of private sponsorship for theater, the house had been turned over to one of the cultural agencies, which used it as a rest house for “technical and professional people.”<sup>358</sup> The frequency of Wilson’s visits, however, eventually led to general complaints that these elites “were seeing too much of a foreigner,” resulting in Wilson’s sequestration “where the other boarders would not see” him.<sup>359</sup>

Wilson described his frustration in trying to locate some of these official literary figures – observations that highlight the discrepancy between the official “openness” of Soviet society and its use of surveillance. Attempts to contact German playwright Bertolt Brecht led Wilson into a comedy of errors of mistimed communications and “confused” identities and telephone numbers; he never did meet Brecht, who was then self-exiled in Russia.<sup>360</sup> He did become acquainted with another exiled German, Herman Habicht of the Open Road travel agency, who met Wilson upon the latter’s arrival in Moscow.<sup>361</sup> Habicht introduced Wilson to several Soviet press officials, informing him of their usefulness in procuring a visa to travel outside Moscow.<sup>362</sup> In his journal, Wilson recorded his dislike of patronizing such officials who “deriv[ed] force . . . from Soviet power behind” them.<sup>363</sup>

The non-encounter with Brecht highlighted the means employed by Soviet agencies and tourism bureaus eager to mobilize cultural figures in approaching visiting intellectuals, even if

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<sup>357</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 217.

<sup>358</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 217, 236.

<sup>359</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 241.

<sup>360</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 534, 539. Stenich initially “allowed [Wilson] to think he was [Brecht]” so as not to “say anything disappointing”: Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 170.

<sup>361</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 546.

<sup>362</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 561.

<sup>363</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 562.



this meant “promising things they cannot perform,” Wilson stated.<sup>364</sup> Karl Radek and Nikolai Bukharin, prominent “westernizers” within the Soviet cultural apparatus, held the responsibility of “formulating strategies for influencing public opinion abroad,” often through “analytical briefings” given to foreign press representatives, including those of Wilson’s acquaintance.<sup>365</sup> These reports, Michael David-Fox stated, often coordinated with Communist efforts to “lure” workers “away from Social Democrat” factions in the West.<sup>366</sup> Radek’s reception of Brecht allowed the playwright and other German intellectuals whose work had been proscribed by the National Socialists in their home country to support Soviet cultural diplomacy that connected them with other Western literary figures.<sup>367</sup> Although he missed meeting Brecht, a few weeks later on June 8, Wilson attended a lecture on work “conditions and the theater” given on behalf of the International Association of Revolutionary Theaters by Friedrich Wolf, another prominent German Socialist playwright.<sup>368</sup>

Wilson’s encounters with Soviet literary figures proved as disappointing as what passed for writing itself. He noted the omnipresence of “bookstores – old and new” everywhere in Moscow, and found “an edition of thousands of books [was] like a drop in the sand.”<sup>369</sup> Official agencies “regard[ed] literature and the other arts as branches of party politics.”<sup>370</sup> Many of the older shops sold the remnants of personal collections belonging to the old intelligentsia (“what libraries they invoked,” Wilson remarked).<sup>371</sup> The texts disseminated through the newer stores iterated the revolutionary

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<sup>364</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 22; Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 170.

<sup>365</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 252-253.

<sup>366</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 252.

<sup>367</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 258.

<sup>368</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 553.

<sup>369</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 548-549.

<sup>370</sup> Edmund Wilson, “American Critics, Left and Right,” *Literary Essays of the 1920s and 30s*, 525.

<sup>371</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 542, 548.

“myth” of Soviet history, as the books in stock were “all Marx, Lenin, [and] Stalin” under the official imprimatur of government-directed publishers, or “technical stuff” that made culture subservient to the essential role of industry.<sup>372</sup> For purposes of research on “the early years of Lenin” he consulted a number of “Russian memoirs that had never been translated” covering his self-transformative work to “break . . . out of the mold” of his class origins.<sup>373</sup> (In later decades, he would recall “I tended to accept the memoirs published in the Soviet Union [and] hadn’t realized how early the deliberate mythmaking had begun” concerning Lenin).<sup>374</sup> Even in regard to Marx’s own writings the Soviet party-state sought cultural authorities able to “provide a commentary which supplied the ‘correct’ interpretation” of the texts.<sup>375</sup> This kind of rewriting according to imagined future needs was enacted everywhere within Soviet culture. “One is shocked to find writers,” Wilson wrote, “quoting passages [in literary reviews] out of their context in such a way as to give them a different meaning, inventing passages which do not exist, [or] trumping up counter-revolutionary charges.”<sup>376</sup> As a result, Wilson often recorded in his journal the sensation of “waking up” and “adjusting myself to a fourth dimension,” or inhabiting a “dream world” in which reportage and utopian perfection coexisted in the same text.<sup>377</sup> He even found, during a stay in hospital, that medical staff wrote patients’ charts in relation to future events: his own temperature was “given a rise for the next day” to conform to expectations.<sup>378</sup>

Soviet agencies emphasized the cultural turn toward nationalism through continuity with the literature of Russia’s past, as indicated by Alymov’s comment he concerned himself only with “Russian

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<sup>372</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 548.

<sup>373</sup> Edmund Wilson – Allen Tate, 6 February 1940, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 358; Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 260.

<sup>374</sup> Edmund Wilson – Arthur Mizener, 4 April 1950, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 479.

<sup>375</sup> Edmund Wilson, “Marxism at the End of the Thirties,” *Literary Essays of the 1920s and 30s*, 594-595.

<sup>376</sup> Edmund Wilson, “American Critics, Left and Right,” *Literary Essays of the 1920s and 30s*, 523.

<sup>377</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 552.

<sup>378</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 292.

classics.” Wilson discerned in Soviet nationalism a re-established “continuity of the Russian literary tradition” interrupted by the aesthetic experimentalism of the Twenties.<sup>379</sup> “[T]hey have turned back,” he noted, and “are exercising the utmost diligence to add to and preserve” their earlier literature.<sup>380</sup> By the early 1930s the cultural forms of Stalinism “reject[ed] the ideology of the bourgeois masters” of literary tradition, Russian and Western, though writers were required “to study them and learn from them technically.”<sup>381</sup> Soviet writers “might learn from the bourgeois writers” of the West, and judge these works “irrespective of political zeal.”<sup>382</sup> “The last Writers’ Congress in Moscow,” Wilson wrote Dos Passos, attempted to “relieve [the] impoverishment” caused by Bolshevik proscription of pre-Revolutionary writers “by bringing back the culture of their tradition.”<sup>383</sup> Writers “not essentially revolutionary,” such as Boris Pasternak now served as literary “influence” to the “new generation.”<sup>384</sup> Literary nationalism, Wilson observed, resulted in “a new edition of Tolstoy” and “Lermontov,” some of whose works had been “formerly considered unprintable.”<sup>385</sup> Soviet publishing houses “were bringing out the note-books of Dostoevsky and various documents on his life” as well as “new material by Turgenev” and revived interest in Pushkin, “the object of such a cult,” Wilson amusingly noted, as to have his “picture” on every box of a mass-produced “sweet cracker.”<sup>386</sup>

In re-establishing the primacy of a specifically Russian literary heritage, Soviet policy sought to influence the West by considering literature from the perspective of national achievement.

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<sup>379</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 214.

<sup>380</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 215, 207.

<sup>381</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 214.

<sup>382</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 9 May 1935, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 266; Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 213.

<sup>383</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 558; Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 214; Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 9 May 1935, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 266.

<sup>384</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 216.

<sup>385</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 214.

<sup>386</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 215.

Consequently, the avant-gardists and modernists whom Dos Passos encountered in 1928 were either displaced in prominence, or submitted to the new cultural emphasis on the heroization of exceptional figures, either historical or contemporary, who “built” Russia. Soviet texts “celebrated the achievements of the masses” by pointing out to others the “rapid advancement” of socialist society.”<sup>387</sup> The “outstanding representative” of the heroic worker leading collective efforts exhibited how his transformed nature served the rational Soviet plan and received rewards doled out by supervisors who quantified labor.<sup>388</sup> The composition of autobiographical narratives similarly changed from depicting the author as proletarian to celebrating interpersonal relationships with Soviet heroes. Impressions of rational planning were further manifested in statements in which Wilson supported an elitist form of social engineering that produced “positive heroes.”<sup>389</sup> The positive hero, Thomas Lahusen stated, was “evolutionary” rather than revolutionary.<sup>390</sup> As defined by Katerina Clark, these heroes were literary constructs, “equivalents” for economic or political “official policy” intended to dramatize the “plot” of socialism for observers by using their own experiences of striving towards perfection “to transform not only the masses of society, but individual deviants.”<sup>391</sup> They therefore were highly observed figures whose openly presented lives denoted the importance of visibility to Soviet socialism. Many of Wilson’s “positive heroes” were the engineers and technicians who carried signs of their acculturation – books and journals – that Wilson observed them reading and studying. He discussed Russian writing more fervently with engineers and technicians than he did with most literary

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<sup>387</sup> Katerina Clark, “Little Heroes and Big Deed: Literature Responds to the First Five-Year Plan,” 191.

<sup>388</sup> James Von Geldern, “The Centre and the Periphery,” 189.

<sup>389</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 210; James Von Geldern, “The Centre and the Periphery,” 188.

<sup>390</sup> Thomas Lahusen, *How Life Writes The Book: Real Socialism and Socialist Realism in Stalin’s Russia* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 26.

<sup>391</sup> Katerina Clark, “Little Heroes and Big Deed: Literature Responds to the First Five-Year Plan,” 192-193.

personages and noted how eager these were to share their acculturation with others.<sup>392</sup> It fell to one group of these “positive heroes,” “three young men [who] had been sent by the Soviet government to study American coke processes,” to inculcate in Wilson a lifelong interest in Russian literature.<sup>393</sup> The most important of the group, “Chief Engineer at the coke by-products plant in Magnitogorsk,” the new center of Russian steel production, read aloud “extracts from Pushkin” to Wilson during the latter’s journey to Leningrad.<sup>394</sup> Such a person combined for Wilson the technical and literary cultural emphasis of the Soviet experiment, and he accepted such an individual as a representative figure of the “new” Russia in the same manner as Soviet citizens themselves, even going so far as to develop a lifelong interest in reading and translating Pushkin.<sup>395</sup>

#### CAUGHT IN QUICKSAND: CLASS ORIGINS

Embracing Bolshevik ideology in the 1920s required both cautious performance and distance from suspect backgrounds. Through a “combined strategy of concealment and transformation,” cultural participation also could serve the purpose of “unmasking” potential political deviation through exposition of “private” discussion.<sup>396</sup> As seen with Dos Passos’s self-identification with revolution, the strategy could involve rejection of class origins, particularly among former intelligentsia. While the Bolsheviks accommodated the intelligentsia as necessary to short-term

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<sup>392</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels in Two Democracies*, 275.

<sup>393</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels in Two Democracies*, 150.

<sup>394</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels in Two Democracies*, 160.

<sup>395</sup> Edmund Wilson – Malcolm Cowley, 14 September 1936, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 277. Wilson undertook his own translation of Pushkin’s “Bronze Horseman” after his return to the US, and famously quarreled with Vladimir Nabokov over the latter’s critique of further Pushkin translations Wilson attempted in the 1950s.

<sup>396</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 174; John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson [1 December 1934], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 455. Dos Passos noted the political ramifications of “publishing [a] confidential letter”: John Dos Passos – Malcolm Cowley, 25 November 1934, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 453.

objectives as the “class destined to bring light to the worker” and as essential formulators of “utopian blueprints” for society, they also sought to divest the party of “politically unreliable” elements connected to the bourgeoisie.<sup>397</sup> The fluidity of “official discourse” regarding the significance of class backgrounds “left enough room for an elaborate identity maneuver” on the part of many intellectuals, often by incorporating proletarian traits such as physical endurance.<sup>398</sup> By 1928 Dos Passos himself had experimented with refashioning himself by rejecting the class-bound associations of his Harvard education (as in a 1927 letter to Harvard president A. Lawrence Lowell defending Sacco and Vanzetti) and substituting as more relevant and important his plebian experiences of the First World War as the transformative events of his life.<sup>399</sup>

The fact Dos Passos had the leisure and means to travel classified him, in Bolshevik terms, as part of the bourgeois intelligentsia “suspected as a class traitor.”<sup>400</sup> Bolshevism’s essentialization of origins led many to performing as a proletarian, enduring hardship for collective purpose. As “the discourse of class permeated all spheres” of public and private life under Bolshevism, the intelligentsia had to demonstrate new identities intended to close the “distinction between mental and manual labor (the intelligentsia and the workers).”<sup>401</sup> To resolve a potentially anathematizing identity, Dos Passos related in the first paragraphs of his travel account how he was seen off from Moscow by a theater director

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<sup>397</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 98, 112; Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 28; J. Arch Getty, *The Origins of the Great Purges* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 46; Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 7. In the 1930s political unreliability or “vacillation” would become a common accusation leveled against Dos Passos and especially Wilson by US literary critics who were Communist Party members or supporters

<sup>398</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 7.

<sup>399</sup> John Dos Passos – A. Lawrence Lowell, 9 August 1927, *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 67-68.

<sup>400</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 98.

<sup>401</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 46, 99.

and her “company,” all drawn from proletarian origins, indicating his own equality with this group.<sup>402</sup> A few pages later he related his own work in the New Playwrights’ Theater, not as a writer but as one of the backstage workers amid the “dusty painted flats” he designed as backdrops for dramas intended “to make a number of things understood.”<sup>403</sup> Dos Passos took pains in his writings during his Russian travels to present proletarian associations and bridge the “gap between the people and the intelligentsia” without distancing himself from either aesthetic or intellectual interests.<sup>404</sup>

Dos Passos found two particular examples during his travels of the ways in which “former” intelligentsia dealt with the question of class identity. One, already mentioned, was Valentin Stenich, who provided to the writer an ideal example of how “revolutionary activism” could dispel identification as a “member of the old intelligentsia.”<sup>405</sup> He encountered another among those in the Narkompros delegation, an individual he referred to in his notes as a “young fellow with nose-glasses” (i.e., not unlike the nearsighted Dos Passos himself) called Nikolai Semyonovich.<sup>406</sup> Dos Passos’s notes interpolate mention of “long conversations in bad French and worse German” with Semyonovich amid descriptions of the terrain, though he did not record the subject of these conversations and neither “Russian Visa” nor Dos Passos’s memoirs give more than slight indication of what the two conversed about.<sup>407</sup> Semyonovich’s multilingualism, however, indicated a cultured, educated background. As Dos Passos pointed out, those such as Semyonovich who were too young to have had firsthand experience of the

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<sup>402</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 274.

<sup>403</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 276.

<sup>404</sup> James Von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals*, 9, 119

<sup>405</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 116.

<sup>406</sup> John Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 184.

<sup>407</sup> John Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 187.

revolution found it difficult to “imagine” either “a time when Marxism had not been a rule of conduct” or “the capitalist world outside.”<sup>408</sup> Unlike Stenich, whose identity had been forged through participation in revolutionary events in Leningrad, these younger people sought full integration into socialism as a New Person, even when doing so required rigorous inspection of class origins. As an emissary of acculturation through education Semyonovich could anticipate his own background, including his family history, would be vetted thoroughly.

A few days into the delegation’s travels on horseback in Dagestan Semyonovich “nearly lost his horse in quicksand” near a “mountain lake.”<sup>409</sup> (“I had never seen a proper quicksand before,” Dos Passos recalled in his memoirs, and no one else in the party had thought to warn Semyonovich).<sup>410</sup> Dos Passos cited this occurrence as typical of how “it never occurred to the Russians to put themselves out” to help others.<sup>411</sup> Yet, given the degree to which Dos Passos’s description of Semyonovich implied self-identification, it is very possible that both recognized and sympathized with the roles each was playing, at the same time they used the cultural-educational mission’s hardships as part of their “forging” process.

In his notes, Dos Passos gave a brief sketch of Semyonovich’s personal history: he “had done well at the University” (which one, Dos Passos did not indicate), and “attained something equivalent to a PhD.” and his family “were Moscow merchants.”<sup>412</sup> The openness of Semyonovich’s admission of a possible bourgeois class origin is an example of the fluidity of anathematized backgrounds of the era and the way cultural activism could provide both a

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<sup>408</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 286.

<sup>409</sup> John Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 186.

<sup>410</sup> John Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 186.

<sup>411</sup> John Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 184.

<sup>412</sup> John Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 187.



screen and a means of transformation. At several points Dos Passos differentiated Semyonovich's labor – as inspector who was unfamiliar with hardship – with his own “accustomed feeling of the past.”<sup>413</sup> In letters of 1918 Dos Passos linked his “proletarian self” with repetitive plebian activity as a distinct stage of his class consciousness, writing friends of washing windows and sweeping floors in terms of “philosophic” self-transformation.<sup>414</sup> “There's comradeship in it though, and one learns,” he confided in his journal.<sup>415</sup> To some degree, the openness of Semyonovich's collective work in education served as his means of escaping scrutiny of his origins. At the end of the trip, he admitted to Dos Passos he “had the wrong class origins.”<sup>416</sup> “A committee was at work on the class origins of all the students. When they came to him he'd be out.”<sup>417</sup> In Moscow a few months later, Dos Passos was informed Semyonovich “had killed himself rather than face the committee” and submit to interrogation.<sup>418</sup>

As Igal Halfin determined, and as official pronouncements made clear in 1927, an intelligentsia background was not a singular cause for interrogation or exclusion from party membership.<sup>419</sup> Rather, Semyonovich's life story highlighted the nexus of concealment and class conflict that so much a part of Dos Passos's definition of the revolutionized New Person. In March 1928, general instructions issued from the Central Committee urged local party leaders to “review the class affiliations of their membership.”<sup>420</sup> Although six months had passed, and Semyonovich did not profess party membership to Dos Passos, his promotion in the ranks of

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<sup>413</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 298.

<sup>414</sup> John Dos Passos – Rumsey Marvin, 4 October 1918, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 217.

<sup>415</sup> John Dos Passos, diary entries, 2 October 1918 and 5 October 1918, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 216, 218.

<sup>416</sup> John Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 187.

<sup>417</sup> John Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 187.

<sup>418</sup> John Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 187.

<sup>419</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 98.

<sup>420</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 119.

cultural agencies such as Narkompros rested on a favorable review. Without that, the young man appeared to be caught, and he chose to present personal identity to Dos Passos as an inflexible remnant of the past, as in fact class conflict had been to the Bolsheviks immediately after the revolution.<sup>421</sup> Halfin determined that in by the late 1920s the question of origins was superseded by that of the “milieu” in which one was educated and labored as far more central to self-transformation.<sup>422</sup> (Hence, for example, Wilson’s lengthy description in *To The Finland Station* of Lenin’s boyhood home and its “middle class” appointments and library).<sup>423</sup> This flexibility assisted Dos Passos in defining his own self-presentation to questioners; he could point to more recent experiences and environments (such as those of 1917-1918) as of greater significance to his development than his class by birth. Dos Passos implied the confluence of Bolshevik identification of intellectuals as passive non-actors with the need for self-concealment hindered Semyonovich’s transformation. The moment of consciousness integral to the reforging narrative led instead to self-destruction. The possibility of exposure of one’s efforts at concealment, rather than ideological swerving, determined one’s future in late Bolshevism.<sup>424</sup>

Those with personal connections to the revolutionary milieu, such as the “old Bolsheviks” who supported Trotsky, faced even more consequential exposure. Dos Passos recorded one discussion with a British resident of Moscow and his Russian-born wife, “a member of the old intelligentsia.”<sup>425</sup> In 1927, the same year as Trotsky’s expulsion from the Party, Stalin promoted

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<sup>421</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 120; Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 311.

<sup>422</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 120.

<sup>423</sup> Edmund Wilson, *To The Finland Station*, 355-357.

<sup>424</sup> Julie Draskoczy, “The ‘Put’ of *Perekovka*,” 38.

<sup>425</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 310.

a “war scare” that implied the USSR was infiltrated by British spies, and “used this fear to call for mass arrests of potential enemies.”<sup>426</sup> The couple told Dos Passos they were “doomed unless they could get out.”<sup>427</sup> The Britisher was under suspicion for his nationality, his wife for her affiliation with the “revolutionary” milieu of Trotskyites, those who “created the Soviet Union [and were] friends and coworkers with Lenin.”<sup>428</sup> “I came here to work full of idealism,” the Britisher stated, “I used to believe in them as you do [and] sometimes I still do, [but] we don’t dare make enquiries about leaving for fear they’ll arrest us.”<sup>429</sup>

The process of remaking oneself through hardships intended to overcome one’s intelligentsia status deferred but did not eliminate exposure. The instances of Pavlov and Stenich showed how prior class identifications could stand in the way of reinventing the self in Bolshevik fashion, but did not necessarily preclude the individual from being utilized in the collective life of socialism. Repudiation of class background could provide a public demonstration of how New Persons “abjured their past” in order to demonstrate the forward-looking nature of socialist teleology.<sup>430</sup> As the Five-Year Plan loomed in 1928, the regime recognized it “could not survive without ‘bourgeois specialists’” and trained technicians.<sup>431</sup> Those of intelligentsia backgrounds were no longer regarded with suspicion, but could propel themselves upward in the bureaucratic hierarchy through formation of just such personal “confidences” as Dos Passos had denigrated in 1918.<sup>432</sup> The remaining “old intelligentsia” and

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<sup>426</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 73.

<sup>427</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 310.

<sup>428</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 310.

<sup>429</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 309.

<sup>430</sup> Julie Draskoczy, “The ‘Put’ of *Perekovka*: Transforming Lives at Stalin’s White Sea-Baltic Canal,” 38.

<sup>431</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*, 6.

<sup>432</sup> John Dos Passos, diary entry, 2 October 1918, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 217.

the new technical experts, along with party administrators, comprised a new intelligentsia class.<sup>433</sup> Indeed, as Sheila Fitzpatrick noted, this new taxonomy automatically assigned intelligentsia status to Stalin and the Politburo.<sup>434</sup> This redefinition opened “high” or “bourgeois” culture to a greater range of society, and conveyed this culture’s function as a socialist objective.<sup>435</sup> In essentially aesthetic matters, a parallel antipathy toward artistic “formalism” emerged in the early 1930s.<sup>436</sup> According to Katerina Clark, Boris Pasternak was among the most prominent Russian writers of the era to organize his literary output, like industrial work, according to a plan.<sup>437</sup>

While class origins still could figure in identity under Stalinism, the de-emphasis of class conflict as an arbiter in the early 1930s rendered questions of personal identity more flexible. Wilson at times seemed quite unsure – as likely did many Russians – over what constituted signs of class background. This was especially true in the contradictory statements he made regarding “Old Bolsheviks.” In February 1934 the Communist Party Congress presented a policy of “conciliation,” readmitting to the party the Old Bolsheviks anathematized by Stalin during the Great Retreat.<sup>438</sup> Wilson accepted these official statements as indicators of the onset of “a period of unusual relaxation and tolerance,” and even described Stalin as “a confirmed Marxist and old Bolshevik [who] whatever his limitations, is still working for socialism.”<sup>439</sup> During his

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<sup>433</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*, 15.

<sup>434</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*, 15.

<sup>435</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*, 1.

<sup>436</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 296; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*, 184.

<sup>437</sup> Katerina Clark, “Little Heroes and Big Deed: Literature Responds to the First Five-Year Plan,” 197.

<sup>438</sup> Alexander Barmine, *One Who Survived: The Life Story of a Russian Under the Soviets* (New York: Putnam, 1945), 247.

<sup>439</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 9 May 1935, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 266; Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 11 January 1935, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 255.

travels, however, Wilson encountered several who declared the line of succession in the government (a particularly sensitive topic in the mid-1930s) closed even to these “rehabilitated” figures. Informed that “the Society of Old Bolsheviks has lately been liquidated by Stalin,” Wilson asked “who would be Stalin’s successor” and suggested to a party member Kliment Voroshilov, “the popular Commissar of War.”<sup>440</sup> “‘Voroshilov?’ replied the Communist. ‘Oh no, Voroshilov is a Bolshevik.’”<sup>441</sup>

Wilson regarded the cases of two women he met in Moscow as models of the new relationship between the regime and those of bourgeois origins, indicating the diminution of class backgrounds (principally as a “private space” that no longer existed under Stalin). As with literature, Stalinist culture identified the intelligentsia of the 1930s with traditionalism, not with interest in the avant-garde and experimental.<sup>442</sup> Artists, writers, and members of the “old” intelligentsia now were less likely to experiment either with self-identity or aesthetics, and more apt to repeat existing formulas and affiliate themselves with party-state agencies.<sup>443</sup> Wilson described the class background of Lily Herzog, the daughter of a scientist of “the old society” who refashioned herself as an official with the tourist bureau Open Road.<sup>444</sup> Herzog had been completing her education at the time of the Civil War and recalled for Wilson the hardship of attending “classes [that] would be interrupted by the dropping of British bombs” and “the strain of trying to do homework when [she] had so little light.”<sup>445</sup> Though her

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<sup>440</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 203.

<sup>441</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 203.

<sup>442</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*, 4.

<sup>443</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*, 7.

<sup>444</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 552. In *Travels* Wilson refers to Herzog simply as “S.”

<sup>445</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 193.

bourgeois family eventually left Russia for Egypt, Herzog remained and, according to Wilson, “made a place for herself in the new society,” having “mastered English early.”<sup>446</sup> This skill not only reflected the pro-Western orientation of Leninism, but brought her to the attention of “the big economic conference [in 1928] that worked up the Five-Year Plan,” where she was employed as “technical translator.”<sup>447</sup>

From Wilson’s sketch of Herzog’s life several key themes emerge as to why she succeeded in Stalinist social terms as a representative New Person for a visitor. Hardship and familial renunciation figured early in her formative experiences. She endured years of “meager materials and the austerity of the post-revolutionary period.”<sup>448</sup> Her intelligentsia background could be utilized through application of specialized technical knowledge to the singular achievement of early Stalinism. She exemplified Lenin’s “militant atheism” by expressing to Wilson her belief that people “fall back on religion” when no other avenues of self-improvement lay open to them.<sup>449</sup> She espoused models of acculturation: Soviet women, especially those in professions such as hers, “have to be educated in taste as in so many things.”<sup>450</sup> Wilson described her youth as “burned up” in service to official programs.<sup>451</sup> She told him of letters she wrote her family in which the West’s culture of “night-clubs and dances” was

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<sup>446</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 193.

<sup>447</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 193.

<sup>448</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 194.

<sup>449</sup> Edmund Wilson – Lily Herzog, 5 June 1955, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 476.

<sup>450</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 194.

<sup>451</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 193.

“not to be compared” with Soviet achievements.<sup>452</sup> “She is always impatient with people who are nostalgic about the old [tsarist] regime,” Wilson concluded.<sup>453</sup>

On several occasions Herzog accompanied Wilson to the theater and ballet, serving as translator “with astonishing intelligence and fluency.”<sup>454</sup> While this activity could be regarded as part of her touristic responsibility, Wilson took pains to present her and her husband as individuals who acted independently of party-state oversight; her “translations” therefore could be freed of propagandistic taint. Her marriage itself represented the affiliation of Soviet and American interests. Frank Herzog, Lily’s husband, was an American, “the son of one of the engineers who had been brought over as advisors on the planning of Soviet industry,” which connected his life story with those technical experts Wilson identified in “An Appeal to Progressives.”<sup>455</sup> The Herzogs invited Wilson to their apartment at least once, where the company discussed “political notabilities and events,” and Wilson described the comfortable appointments of the apartment at length in his journal.<sup>456</sup>

Lily Herzog’s successful effort to forge a new, unconcealed selfhood within the Stalinist organization left her able to portray her independence and non-coercion capably to Wilson. Her motivation fit the rationality Wilson associated with those of an intelligentsia background.<sup>457</sup> A second woman, from whom Wilson took Russian lessons, had a similar class background to

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<sup>452</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 193.

<sup>453</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 193-194.

<sup>454</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 194. In his journal, Wilson recorded one such visit to the ballet on June 6, 1935 as “very brilliant”: Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 553.

<sup>455</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Red, Black, Blond and Olive*, 46; Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 566.

<sup>456</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 554, 564.

<sup>457</sup> Wilson stayed in contact with Herzog long after his visit, for example asking Herzog for her reaction to Khrushchev’s “secret speech” to the Politburo “repudiating Stalin” in a letter of 26 March 1956: *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 579.

Herzog's but an entirely different life trajectory. "Madame Mitrova," as he referred to her, echoed Bolshevik class views, pointing out to Wilson her intelligentsia status left her unprepared for a metaphoric "life outside" its secure confines.<sup>458</sup> Prior to the revolution she had been "the wife of an old Social Democrat" who had been part of the second Duma in 1917; with her husband she had spent "many years in exile" from 1918 on when the SD Party, through its most vocal contingent the Mensheviks, was expelled by the Bolsheviks.<sup>459</sup> The Mirtovas passed most of their exile in Cambridge, England where, she informed Wilson, observing the English social classes left her regretting she "was not Chekhov – because if I had been Chekhov, I should have had some excellent subjects."<sup>460</sup> British authorities at the time of the Civil War (1919-1921) denied entry to a number of Russian exiles suspected of infiltrating the UK under guise of diplomatic or scholarly interests, so even in Cambridge she had been forced to conceal her identity.<sup>461</sup> Incriminating self-exposure nearly resulted when she mistook a conversation about Maxim Litvinov, the Russian ambassador to England appointed by Lenin without full accreditation and arrested by the British, for one analyzing the character of Litvinov in Ivan Turgenev's novel *Smoke*.<sup>462</sup> Wilson visited Mme. Mitrova almost weekly during the two months he spent in Moscow, recording after one tutorial that when she first had read Dostoyevsky's novels, "they seemed to her to have nothing to do with life."<sup>463</sup> When "the

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<sup>458</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 201.

<sup>459</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 201; Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 558. See also Richard Pipes, *Russia Under The Bolshevik Regime, 1919-1924*, 44.

<sup>460</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 201.

<sup>461</sup> See Donald James Evans, "The Ludwig Martens–Maxim Litvinov Connection, 1919–1921," *Intelligence and National Security*, 30:4, (2015), 435.

<sup>462</sup> Donald James Evans, "The Ludwig Martens–Maxim Litvinov Connection, 1919–1921," *Intelligence and National Security*, 30:4, (2015), 435-436; Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 558-559.

<sup>463</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 229.



Revolution opened everything up, she saw all the types he had described,” and she repeatedly told “her daughter that she is a character” out of Dostoyevsky’s works.<sup>464</sup> Her story in effect was the inverse of Lily Herzog’s, one in which the future-oriented narrative of Soviet culture caused only displacement and uncertainty about one’s identity. She became the center of party-state suspicions regarding her class origins as well as suspicions by Western powers because of her political affiliation with her husband.

While Mme. Mitrova did not inform Wilson which particular “insulted and injured” Dostoyevsky character she resembled, her frequent references to Russian literature indicated her intelligentsia background. Lacking a suitable private space of her own, she utilized a friend’s apartment for lessons, Wilson wrote in his journal on June 8.<sup>465</sup> The chief difference lay not in her “old bourgeoisie” background but a “tainted” political affiliation, though nowhere did she (or Wilson) indicate her actual membership in the SD party.<sup>466</sup> It was sufficient, under Stalinism, for such affiliations to become potential “pollutants” capable of deviation, in the same mold as the intelligentsia had appeared to Lenin a decade earlier.<sup>467</sup>

The stress on the life history in both travel accounts parallels the “reforging” of Russia through rational planning after the Revolution. The prevalence of the outcast who could not adapt or refashion the self successfully demonstrated the isolation techniques practiced by the party-state towards those deemed contaminants to the perfection of society. Moreover, in Mme. Mitrova’s case, such individuals were also rejected by the West on similar contamination

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<sup>464</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 229.

<sup>465</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 554.

<sup>466</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 229.

<sup>467</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 98.

grounds due to their past activities in attempting to overcome a class-defined origin. The question therefore entered Wilson's mind as to what extent Soviet citizens, particularly those highly placed and with whom he interacted, were "communoids," a neologism he defined as "a person who is not a Communist, but who tries to talk and act like one."<sup>468</sup> As Igal Halfin pointed out, the "dominant linguistic forms and the values they encode" in Soviet discourse tended toward tacit approval through repetition, leading to a historical view that those persons who confined their utterances to party slogans and speech forms did so only through the coercive "unequal power" wielded by the party-state itself.<sup>469</sup> Halfin and Hellbeck, however, both posited that, regardless of the "filter of official language" reproduced in speech and texts such as letters or journals, Soviet subjects adopted this language as a means of revealing an "interior truth" necessary to transformation and/or redemption.<sup>470</sup> Successful individuals became, in Halfin's words, "managers of impressions" much like actors, and by extension much like contemporaneous travel writers who composed "dramatizing interactions" with new cultural forms in their accounts.<sup>471</sup> This "managed" impression required ritualization and repetition in order to achieve correct performance, and as Julie Draskoczy observed, the necessity of ensuring survival under Stalinism required one to "perform selfhood" until individuality was "dissolved" and, in dramatic terms, the New Person became "one-dimensional" and "undiscernible" within the mass.<sup>472</sup>

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<sup>468</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 239.

<sup>469</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 9; Katerina Clark, "Little Heroes and Big Deed: Literature Responds to the First Five-Year Plan," 194; Sheila Fitzpatrick, "The Cultural Revolution as Class War," in *The Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-1931*, edited by Sheila Fitzpatrick (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 28-29.

<sup>470</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 9; Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 311.

<sup>471</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 9; Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 97; Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between The Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 203.

<sup>472</sup> Julie Draskoczy, "The 'Put' of *Perekovka*: Transforming Lives at Stalin's White Sea-Baltic Canal," 39.

Wilson applied his “communoid” epithet specifically and equally to “writers at home [in the US] preoccupied with what they imagine to be the Soviet point of view about literature” as to Soviet subjects who employed such language so as to “indulg[e] in [the] comradeship which relieves most friction.”<sup>473</sup> “I don’t think, however, that it is right for the politically non-active to do very much public railing at the political errors of the Communists,” he wrote Dos Passos.<sup>474</sup> For his part, Dos Passos excoriated those American writers who lacked “any tendency . . . to try to treat the realities of the situation (in literature or in politics) either in this country or the world” without resorting to explanations derived from “obsolete labels out of Daily Worker editorials.”<sup>475</sup> “It’s just as silly for a professional writer to allow himself the luxury of the attitude of a factory hand as it is for him to pretend to be a bank president,” he wrote the novelist Robert Cantwell in 1935. A “writer,” he continued, “as such is just that, if writing is his full time work, and pretending to be something else produces all kinds of hypocrisy . . . [the writer] lead[s] what is essentially a middleclass life.”<sup>476</sup> The assumption of a proletarian guise involved a degree of self-deception, Dos Passos now stated, perhaps recalling his own assumption of a proletarian role in 1928. “In some mysterious way American Communist agitation [by writers] seems to have dropped the industrial workers and farm workers and become the revolt of the white collar class.”<sup>477</sup>

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<sup>473</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 184; Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 555.

<sup>474</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 9 May 1935, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 266.

<sup>475</sup> John Dos Passos – Matthew Josephson [6 February 1935], Matthew Josephson Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library; John Dos Passos – Robert Cantwell, 25 January 1935, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 463.

<sup>476</sup> John Dos Passos – Robert Cantwell, 25 January 1935, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 464.

<sup>477</sup> John Dos Passos – Matthew Josephson [6 February 1935], Matthew Josephson Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

The fact both Dos Passos and Wilson were privy to and able to relate class origins shows the immense significance of self-presentation to the New Person. What differs in their accounts is not the format, successfully charted by the Bolsheviks, but the external circumstances that shaped such presentation. The Bolsheviks assigned untrustworthiness to certain class origins; as class origins held less significance under Stalin, untrustworthiness was re-inscribed as concealment itself became an object of suspicion. In the Stalinist social milieu little private space existed, while an individual's role during the revolution was no indicator of one's role in a future-oriented society. Stalinism's corollary assumption proposed that concealment of one's past, tolerated and even encouraged by the educative culture fostered under Lenin, opposed a social vision of openness and visibility.

What remained consistent from Bolshevism through Stalinism was a hostility towards what Dos Passos termed "originality of thought," which the Bolsheviks early on regarded as a danger associated with the intelligentsia.<sup>478</sup> Although those such as Stenich who had "old Bolshevik" affiliations might be suspect because of their nostalgia for "things still as they had been" during the revolution, they were not beyond redemption.<sup>479</sup> Such persons "could not blame environment or family" but needed to acknowledge their personal "estrangement from past political affiliations" with non-party factions.<sup>480</sup> An inquisitorial aspect informed the party's efforts to discover and excise those persons who failed to achieve progress toward the collective goal of socialism, and who signified either an unregenerate, possibly bourgeois class identity or an ignorant and backsliding human nature that failed to fulfill its rational role. As a

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<sup>478</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 128.

<sup>479</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 287.

<sup>480</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 137.

literary figure, Wilson had to negotiate both the excising and re-educational uses of culture as he sought to familiarize Soviet litterateurs with American writers.

## WILSON AND JOURNALISTS

Although Wilson portrayed his journey in *Travels* as one of cultural interaction, he did not fully heed Dos Passos's admonition about the "danger" of meeting only "the official greeters or else the American colony."<sup>481</sup> "It's damned hard to break out of that ring," Dos Passos admitted.<sup>482</sup> The interaction with the Magnitogorsk engineers reading Pushkin represented an effort to get "inside" the relationship of acculturation to the planned economy's industrialism, and to judge a known site of Soviet achievement through a cultural lens. In effect, by encountering the engineers Wilson encountered the cultural effects of industry, seeing both as equivalent realizations. Conversely, while the "official greeters" facilitated Wilson's reception as an interested and sympathetic Western intellectual, they circumscribed his view. Wilson's journals make clear he spent a great deal of time amid "the American colony" resident in Leningrad and Moscow, whether with New York acquaintances such as Muriel Draper or correspondents such as Walter Duranty of *The New York Times*, John Gunther of the *Chicago Daily News*, and Louis Fischer of the liberal weekly *The Nation*.

Several factors may underlie Wilson's reluctance to explore and listen on his own, as Dos Passos had. He was still learning the Russian language and was not fluent, though Russians often expressed surprise he spoke the language at all (one journal entry records the astonishment of a chambermaid

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<sup>481</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson [2 April 1935], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 470-471.

<sup>482</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson [2 April 1935], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 471.

who, “coming to life” when Wilson used the Russian word for “heart,” exclaimed “He understands!”).<sup>483</sup> Secondly, by limiting himself to American acquaintances, he attempted to conduct research through listening and questioning what they knew, free of “communoid” language. Thirdly, these social occasions were frequent and open to Russians of mutual acquaintance, preserving an impression of Soviet discourse between citizen and foreigner that dispelled Wilson’s fears that most Russians moved away from him when they overheard him conversing in English.<sup>484</sup> These mixed social gatherings included Soviet cultural attaches, Europeans, and Americans.<sup>485</sup>

A chief contention among Sovietologists such as Richard Pipes is that the work of Western journalists such as those Wilson knew consisted of reiterating party-state “propaganda.”<sup>486</sup> This contention rests not on their reproduction of information disseminated through official channels, but on whether investigative reporting in Soviet Russia could remain at all independent from the oversight of authority and the consequences of publishing unauthorized statements. Pipes suggested that a closer connection between reportage, cultural showcasing, and the dispensation of privilege existed in terms of the material self-interest undergirding the Soviet New Person of the Stalinist era. Foreign correspondents and fellow-travelers alike enjoyed privilege in Russia to a greater extent than they would elsewhere, even in their home countries, complicating the objectivity of their reports.<sup>487</sup> Such an assertion rested on the Soviet expectation that Westerners’ material status determined their political consciousness (which, as seen in Dos Passos’s case, was clearly not universally true and displayed the

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<sup>483</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 581.

<sup>484</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 542.

<sup>485</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 565.

<sup>486</sup> Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime, 1919-1924* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 232.

<sup>487</sup> Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*, 209.

lengths to which some visitors went in approximating Bolshevik self-forging).<sup>488</sup> Correspondents would “write only what the Soviet authorities approved” so as not to risk the loss of material privileges, which included access to official news sources and party representatives.<sup>489</sup>

Both Igal Halfin and Jochen Hellbeck drew upon Pipes’ contention that journalists functioned as “prime supplier[s] of arguments to American fellow-travelers” to debate the ways in which official Soviet pronouncements were “filtered” and interpreted in the everyday lives of Russians.<sup>490</sup> Julie Draskoczy emphasized the importance of the role of the authorized guide to the self-transformative project through the repetition of “speech-acts” connecting official pronouncements to “reviewing” and transforming one’s life.<sup>491</sup> Wilson, however, attempted to dispel this impression by using American journalists and acquaintances as points of contact with Russians in non-official circumstances, such as social gatherings and informal parties, though he also attended in their company more formal cultural activities (for example, accompanying Muriel Draper to the theater numerous times in Leningrad, or meeting them at lectures).

In mid-June 1935, Wilson moved into Walter Duranty’s apartment at 53 Bolshaya Ordynka while the correspondent was away from Russia for the summer, and stayed until the end of July.<sup>492</sup> Living conditions in Moscow were crowded, partly due to the razing of older districts, an advent that to Wilson signaled the egalitarian intentions of the socialist experiment. There were

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<sup>488</sup> Michael David-Fox, “The Fellow-Travelers Revisited,” 318.

<sup>489</sup> Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*, 209.

<sup>490</sup> Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*, 209; Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 9; Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 34.

<sup>491</sup> Julie Draskoczy, “The ‘Put’ of *Perekovka*: Transforming Lives at Stalin’s White Sea-Baltic Canal,” 40.

<sup>492</sup> Edmund Wilson – Maxwell Perkins, 10 June 1935. *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 272; Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 565. The building, which still stands, is a two-story Greek Revival structure opposite the Khram Svyatoy Velikomuchenitsy Yekateriny Na Vspol'ye Orthodox cathedral, which Wilson mentioned several times in *Travels*.

“no swell parts of the city, [but] no degraded parts either,” and “little, if any, destitution” among residents.<sup>493</sup> The city’s population grew from 2 million to 3.4 million between 1928 and 1933.<sup>494</sup> Earlier in 1935 Stalin imposed a “master plan” of redevelopment in order to showcase Moscow as both political and cultural center.<sup>495</sup> Signs of what the future city would resemble abounded as architects and planners “set out to rearrange the whole place, [so that] already there are only little patches of the old Moscow of the Muscovite Tsars” remaining, Wilson observed.<sup>496</sup> Bolshaya Ordynka was one of these “patches,” an “old section of merchant residences” that now housed Soviet officials and a few Westerners.<sup>497</sup> A measure of the privilege Wilson enjoyed was the fact he lived alone, with only a part-time maid, Ekaterina Nicolaevna, who herself was a vestige of “the old bourgeois society under the Tsar.”<sup>498</sup> (On several occasions she scolded Wilson for attempting an egalitarian conversation).<sup>499</sup> The “closed and dead” Orthodox cathedral facing Wilson’s quarters was undergoing revitalization as “some kind of archive” for state documents.<sup>500</sup> For one who, only a few months earlier, had resided in a decrepit townhouse in New York’s East Village, the congested housing along Bolshaya Ordynka seemed quite reminiscent of US conditions. When he visited other Russians, “hospitality” was confined to one “crowded room.”<sup>501</sup> “Little naked children play[ed] in the courtyard” in the summer heat, and “radios make an overtone of old waltzes.”<sup>502</sup> One

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<sup>493</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 207.

<sup>494</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 149.

<sup>495</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 149.

<sup>496</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 181.

<sup>497</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 207.

<sup>498</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 574.

<sup>499</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 574, 566. In a journal entry on June 26, 1935, Wilson recorded a “crisis with old woman (the Durantys’ maid)” that evening because of her criticism of his manners: *The Thirties*, 566.

<sup>500</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 207.

<sup>501</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 218.

<sup>502</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 211.



apartment contained “eight families, which include thirty people” who “all use the same toilet and kitchen.”<sup>503</sup> Though the outward material appearance of peoples’ lives struck Wilson as “dreary,” he acknowledged the population had “deep resources” that transcended material conditions of housing and attire.<sup>504</sup> The psychological effect of contemplating Soviet standards of living turned his thoughts inward to self-examination. “What is there beneath the murmur of this immense and amorphous life which lies all around me here?” he asked himself.<sup>505</sup>

Duranty had been the first American journalist to announce Stalin as Lenin’s likely successor in 1924, and his closeness to the Stalin regime led some, such as Richard Pipes, to accuse Duranty of “playing down . . . the sordid aspects of Soviet reality” and receiving superior housing and travel arrangements as rewards.<sup>506</sup> Wilson’s journal entries written at Duranty’s preserved a sense of detachment from the local scene mimetic of its emptying-out by the revolution. From the flat’s windows (which he left open, contrary to Russian custom) he could see vacant “courtyards, with some careless Russian greenery” and “churches closed and dead.”<sup>507</sup> On several occasions Wilson was invited to the apartment of Louis Fischer and his Latvian-born wife Markoosha.<sup>508</sup> In *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*, Richard Pipes categorized Fischer’s reporting as “disinformation” done “under the influence of his wife, an employee of the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs.”<sup>509</sup> On June first, Wilson recorded in his

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<sup>503</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 218.

<sup>504</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 211.

<sup>505</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 211.

<sup>506</sup> Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*, 233-234.

<sup>507</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 565.

<sup>508</sup> Louis Fischer, *Men and Politics: An Autobiography* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pierce, 1941), 5-6.

<sup>509</sup> Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*, 236. Wilson later described Fischer as an “amazing example” of the “snobbery” shown to the proletariat by the privileged in Russia: Edmund Wilson – Malcolm Cowley, 15 April 1937, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 287.

journal “Dinner with Tretyakov and [the] Fischers,” and two weeks later another gathering at their apartment that included John Gunther, the daughter of a prominent Russian chemist, and Konstantin Umansky, the chief of the press section of the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs.<sup>510</sup> During the party, Umansky, in Wilson’s presence, criticized Gunther’s editor for allowing anti-Soviet sentiments to appear in his newspaper.<sup>511</sup> Umansky then asked if it was true Gunther and other journalists were restricted by word counts from full reporting on such matters as the death of German president Hindenburg the previous year, which Wilson confided signified where the official’s “high politics degenerated into apocryphal anecdote.”<sup>512</sup> That same month Wilson met a young English journalist, Pat Sloan, at two different social occasions.<sup>513</sup> Sloan was a British Fabian, a close friend of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, who visited Russia in 1932.<sup>514</sup>

Wilson did encounter some dissenting viewpoints among the journalistic colony. In his journal he recorded at least one “talk” with Eugene Gordon, the African-American Moscow correspondent of the *Negro Liberator*, who had joined the *Moscow News* in the spring of 1935.<sup>515</sup> Gordon notably opposed

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<sup>510</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 551; US State Department, Office of the Historian, Foreign Relations of the United States and Soviet Union, 1932-1933, online at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1933-39/toc-papers>. Umansky later became Soviet Ambassador to the US, 1939-1941. His presence at the party would seem to substantiate Pipes’ claim that the Fischers acted as conduits for pro-Soviet propaganda. In the mid-1930s, Umansky frequently translated for Stalin’s consumption interviews he conducted with literary figures such as H.G. Wells (Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 237).

<sup>511</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 552. Gunther worked in Russia through 1937; he later returned during the period of the Khrushchev “thaw” in 1956 to write *Inside Russia Today* (1958).

<sup>512</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 551.

<sup>513</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 552, 561.

<sup>514</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 210. Sloan would write an account, *Soviet Democracy* (London: Gollancz, 1937), that argued democracy and dictatorship were non-mutually exclusive: R.D. Charques, review of *Soviet Democracy*, *International Affairs* 16:6 (November 1937), 977. In 1945 he would compose a pamphlet on the Yalta conference, *Where Russia Stands Now*, published under the auspices of the “Russia Today Society,” a British coalition of left-wing intellectuals that promoted Soviet culture and of which Sloan was a member.

<sup>515</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 532. Identification based on context; Wilson did not record Gordon’s first name, but stated he was a “Negro Communist.” Both Wilson and Gordon reported on the Scottsboro case: see Edmund Wilson, *The American Earthquake*, 339, and Walter Lear Gordon III, “A Tale of Three Cities: Loren Miller in Moscow, Los Angeles, and New York in 1935,” *Black Renaissance* 14:1 (Summer 2014), 51.

prevailing party-state thought, comparing Soviet Russia's forcible treatment of the Ukraine to segregationist policy in the "black belt" of the US South.<sup>516</sup> Wilson, who had taken great interest in covering the Scottsboro Case while traveling in the South during the spring of 1931, recorded Gordon's contention "that 'self-determination' . . . was totally unrealistic" according to Communist principles.<sup>517</sup> Gordon referred Wilson in late July to Samuel Adams Darcy, a Ukrainian-born socialist and leading official of the Communist Party of the USA.<sup>518</sup> Darcy's "Marxist jargon" precipitated what Wilson called in his journal an "argument" over Soviet policy.<sup>519</sup> He noted Darcy's tactic of refuting "an argument by an assumption that someone else would be able to refute it" if they were present as "the furthest point" of "communoid" authoritarianism.<sup>520</sup> As Gordon had warned Wilson of Darcy's ideological zeal, Wilson had been prepared for Darcy's uncritical repetition of Communist phraseology.

The interactions with journalists who were "Russian experts" by virtue of long residence and relationships with Soviet political bureaus support a view that Wilson believed Soviet Russia retained the international outreach begun after the Revolution. Correspondents received official language in press releases, bureaucratic notifications, speeches, and articles translated from Russian news sources such as *Pravda*. These "materials [were] sent to influence the press and public opinion" overseas, so that Wilson transmitted at least some of these official views.<sup>521</sup> In the cases of Fischer and Duranty, each had a spouse or intimate friend who served as

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<sup>516</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 532.

<sup>517</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 247-248.

<sup>518</sup> Social Networks and Archival Context biography, Samuel Adams Darcy, online at <https://snaccooperative.org/ark:/99166/w60p1mz3>.

<sup>519</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 576. Darcy was known to both Wilson and Dos Passos from his involvement in novelist Upton Sinclair's campaign in the 1934 California gubernatorial race, which they discussed in letters during 1934 when Dos Passos was working in California. See John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson, 24 August 1934, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 440, and John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson, 2 November 1934, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 449.

<sup>520</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 248.

<sup>521</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 196.

translator and intermediary; others, such as Darcy, had close links with the Comintern. The close alliance of cultural tourists, international reporters, and representatives of Stalin's Bureau of International Information that is so noticeable in Wilson's journals testifies to the "centralization" of "privileged information" and how it was conveyed through apparently informal social contacts.<sup>522</sup>

Western journalists in Russia, Richard Pipes stated, advanced views that "democracy could not be learned in a day," or that Russia under Bolshevism was just emerging from the darkness of its past – ideas Wilson repeated and incorporated into *Travels*.<sup>523</sup> Wilson advised Dos Passos that Russia could not "be expected to undergo a complete cultural transformation from the Russia of the Tsars in the short time since the Revolution."<sup>524</sup> In so advising Dos Passos he recapitulated a theme current among journalists. Duranty, for example, equated Soviet policing with its American counterpart.<sup>525</sup> Wilson recorded this opinion in his journal before enlarging upon it in *Travels*, verifying his belief by comparing his own experiences in February 1932, when as part of a committee reporting on the relief of striking coal miners in Kentucky, he witnessed the aftermath of the beating of several co-members by local police and hired security.<sup>526</sup> Another instance of Wilson repeating in *Travels* a reporter's reiteration of an official Soviet view occurred when his friend Muriel

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<sup>522</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 201.

<sup>523</sup> Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*, 209.

<sup>524</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 11 January 1935, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 255.

<sup>525</sup> Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*, 235.

<sup>526</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 161. Dos Passos was also a member of the organization, assembled by Malcolm Cowley and drawn largely from contributors to *The New Republic*, though he did not travel on this occasion to Kentucky; he did, however, compose open letters asking for aid. See Daniel Aaron, *Writers On the Left*, 178-179, and John Dos Passos, open letter on behalf of the National Committee to Aid Striking Miners Facing Starvation, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 401. This letter, composed in January 1932, is one of many that essentializes Dos Passos's travel as part of societal transformation, beginning "Having just come back from a trip with the Dreiser Committee . . . ."

Draper introduced him to another British-American writer then in Russia, Lewis Browne, who in 1937 would publish a hybrid travel-novel that contrasted US and Russian culture from the viewpoint of a young Russian émigré.<sup>527</sup> Browne informed Wilson “the people were so much better off than they had been when he had been there last” in 1926.<sup>528</sup> “Everybody says . . . they have really got going,” he continued, because previously official discourse consisted of “nothing but dialectical materialism.”<sup>529</sup> In his journal a few days later, Wilson enlarged on Browne’s observation, writing about the party-state’s “curious effect of trying to cut off [the] past and starting over with dialectical materialism,” and how current cultural efforts attempted to redress “this impoverishment” by supporting a national and “respectable” common culture.<sup>530</sup> In *Travels* he accommodated Browne’s contention that “dialectical materialism” no longer applied culturally or economically to Stalinism though it remained “the basis of the Soviet state” in open discourse, indicating how certain observations later in his travels were influenced by statements received early in his visit.<sup>531</sup> In repeating this assertion to Dos Passos, Wilson poked fun at Soviet cultivation, annotating a postcard of a young girl holding a monkey: “A little Komsomol giving her monkey his dialectical materialism. There is less of this, though, abroad than formerly.”<sup>532</sup> Browne’s statement also

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<sup>527</sup> See Lewis Browne, *Oh Say Can You See: A Novel* (New York: Macmillan, 1937). In 1941-42 Sinclair Lewis “arranged with his old acquaintance Rabbi Lewis Browne to make an extended tour in which the two would debate informally”: Mark Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 682.

<sup>528</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 546; Browne’s earlier trip is mentioned in <https://www.macdowell.org/artists/lewis-browne>.

<sup>529</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 546.

<sup>530</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 558, 570.

<sup>531</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 203. Significantly, Wilson did not credit the statement to Browne, instead incorporating it into the authorial voice narrating his journey.

<sup>532</sup> Edmund Wilson – John and Katy Dos Passos, July 1935, *Edmund Wilson, The Man In Letters*, edited and introduced by David Castronovo and Janet Groth (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2000), 51.

displayed how the Stalinist apologist could report Soviet superiority with sincere admiration through contrast with previous conditions or emphasis on cultural gains.

Taken in the aggregate, the informal evening gatherings between Wilson, journalists, and the New Persons comprising Soviet press or touristic agencies illuminate how foreign intellectuals were received by the Stalin regime during the remaining period of open contact with the West in the mid-1930s. The close alliance of tourism with the function of journalism at this time is further indicated by the overlapping invitations that brought representatives from both Soviet agencies into personal engagement with Wilson. By placing himself in the milieu of other reporters, Wilson conveyed the impression in *Travels* that he had access to privileged information. Such access was a common motivator among Western intellectuals visiting Russia. The inclusion of Umansky, whose official role combined diplomatic responsibilities with translating foreign press reports for briefing Stalin, suggests the ways in which officials tried to implicate Western reporters in the distribution of party-state policies.<sup>533</sup> To the Soviet apparatus, writer-travelers served as “mediators” between party discourse and Western readers that dispelled harsh criticisms of Stalin’s methods and helped form positive impressions of Soviet culture in “foreign publications.”<sup>534</sup> Many of the Soviet figures were what Michael David-Fox termed “Stalinist Westernizers” who “courted” both Soviet high officials and visiting foreign intellectuals such as Wilson, seeing both groups as means to spreading socialist influence and enhancing their own prestige.<sup>535</sup>

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<sup>533</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 239-240.

<sup>534</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 219.

<sup>535</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 209.

Correspondents could not respond directly to provocation by Soviet officials, yet their open circulation with officials perpetuated an illusion of unimpeded access. Wilson noticed that in the confrontation cited above between Gunther and Umansky, Gunther walked away rather than “hear anything against his boss,” presumably because to dispute Umansky would have restricted Gunther’s access to interviews with other officials.<sup>536</sup> Umansky, in turn, summoned Wilson to a meeting to inquire into Wilson’s reasons for visiting Moscow (though undoubtedly these were made explicit at the time of Wilson’s application for a travel visa) within days of Wilson’s arrival in the city.<sup>537</sup> Support for Wilson’s research project through official channels further obliged him to social meetings with appointed cultural diplomats, indicating their importance in serving the party-state’s discursive relationship with the West. Access to desired locales (in Wilson’s case, the Marx-Lenin Institute) often devolved in mid-Thirties Stalinism upon interactions outside official bureaucracy.<sup>538</sup> By cultivating personal relationships with cultural leaders, Wilson attempted to allay suspicions of his potential “ideological perversions,” such as “being attainted with Trotskyism . . . a sin of which I am as likely as not guilty,” that barred other scholars from the Marx-Lenin Institute.<sup>539</sup> While the ubiquity and apparent helpfulness of cultural diplomats seemed to acknowledge Wilson’s importance on a quasi-official level, he found Umansky and others like him intolerable for exerting their power to extract reports favorable to the Soviet image. At the same time Wilson’s acquaintance with journalists shaped his travel account by repeating hopes that foreign leftists still looked for in the Soviet system.

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<sup>536</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 562.

<sup>537</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 552.

<sup>538</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 208; Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*, 232-233.

<sup>539</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 11 January 1935, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 256.

NETWORKS OF PRIVILEGE: “BRIGHTENING LIFE UP AND LETTING UP ON THE PRESSURE OF INDUSTRIALIZATION”<sup>540</sup>

A new culture of privilege arose from the ranks of technicians, bureaucrats, industrial functionaries, and professionals that oversaw implementation of the Five-Year Plans of 1928 and 1932.<sup>541</sup> This culture differed greatly from the ascetic style of the Old Bolsheviks, who equated luxury with bourgeois capitalism.<sup>542</sup> Luxury as reward and incentive for serving party-state interests removed the class-associated taint appended to its semiotic function. Moreover, Western visitors regarded the proliferation of new consumer goods in 1930s Russia as a sign of Soviet progress, because so few had been available earlier.<sup>543</sup> Dispensing signs of luxury had two functions. First, their limited availability encouraged competition and overachieving within the workplace. In *Travels* Wilson attempted to reconcile Stalinist competition with Marxist socialism. In both economic systems, Wilson argued, “different degrees of ability would be able to command different incomes” even though “everyone ranks as a worker” (as in the 1927 Party declaration that writers were workers).<sup>544</sup> Competition in the workplace occurred on both individual and group levels, as “brigades” of shock workers vied for “special privileges” such as “theater tickets [or] longer vacations.”<sup>545</sup> Soviet competition’s ultimate objective was “to make the people in general desire a higher standard of living,” which would be available in fulfillment of the planned economy in the future.<sup>546</sup>

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<sup>540</sup> Edmund Wilson – Muriel Draper, 14 November 1938, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 311.

<sup>541</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 157.

<sup>542</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 157, 159.

<sup>543</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 138; Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 158.

<sup>544</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 255.

<sup>545</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 171.

<sup>546</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 255.



Wilson's observation denoted the second purpose for signs of privilege. The "inequalitarian" society required the existence of signs of a perfected future, when these signs would be attainable by all.<sup>547</sup> During the early years of Stalinism, the population, as James Von Geldern stated, was encouraged toward "identification with the Soviet system" through provision of rewards.<sup>548</sup> Cultural show therefore contained a domestic aspect, in order to motivate all "to exert themselves."<sup>549</sup> In the 1930s, the closer one came to achieving the heroic ideal of Socialist Realism, the more apt one was to receive rewards. Aviators and explorers were especial objects of heroization, and received rewards evident even to casual visitors.<sup>550</sup> Because travel itself was a sign of privilege, Wilson often was asked by young civil engineers whether he too was an engineer.<sup>551</sup> On the boat down the Volga, Wilson met "two prize aviation students" for whom the voyage was part of a "two months' vacation" they received as "among the special socialist benefits conferred" by Stalin.<sup>552</sup>

Where formerly audiences attending high cultural events, such as theater or the ballet, were not "much dressed up," higher rank officials now donned formal dress.<sup>553</sup> Proper dress conveyed the "moral stature" of the wearer.<sup>554</sup> His first night in Leningrad, Wilson noted "the people in the theater were better dressed than the people one saw in the streets," though he differentiated them from the "privileged and rich" consumers of culture in capitalist societies.<sup>555</sup> Exposure to the gaze of these new cultured elites occasioned concern for one's own appearance. A Komsomolka assigned to accompany

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<sup>547</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 255.

<sup>548</sup> James Von Geldern, "The Centre and the Periphery," 187.

<sup>549</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 255.

<sup>550</sup> James Von Geldern, "The Centre and the Periphery," 187.

<sup>551</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 257.

<sup>552</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 269-270.

<sup>553</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 306.

<sup>554</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 201.

<sup>555</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 165.

Wilson to the ballet a few nights later fretted lest she be seen as lacking “culturedness” “because she didn’t have the clothes” appropriate to the occasion.<sup>556</sup> When Wilson managed to borrow correct attire for her from an American acquaintance, the guide “wouldn’t go out and walk around in the intermission because she said she wasn’t fit to be seen.”<sup>557</sup>

The utopian aspect of the cultural showcase extended to Wilson’s acceptance and enjoyment of the modern amenities offered him as a foreign intellectual. He had access, insofar as his limited comprehension of the Russian language allowed, to publications such as *The Red Army Star* and bulletins disseminated by the GPU, which circulated only among elites in the military or high government offices (and therefore made misleading the public through “official” reports possible by limiting news unflattering to the party-state).<sup>558</sup> He was permitted use of libraries reserved for “privileged groups.”<sup>559</sup> Though not on the scale of receptions accorded figures such as Wells, Shaw, Romain Rolland, and other literary figures hailed as “friends of Soviet Russia,” these amenities were significant for the way in which Wilson chose to record them as signs of the Soviet future.<sup>560</sup> In Thirties Stalinism, privilege distinguished the cultured from the revolutionary, and were not granted visitors merely because of perceived ideological sympathy. To a great extent, signs of privilege – food, clothing, even travel itself – marked Stalinism’s efforts to “map a bipolar field in which everything and everyone stood on one side or the other” and helped identify potential “wreckers” and dissenters “resisting

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<sup>556</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 175.

<sup>557</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 175.

<sup>558</sup> Edmund Wilson – Malcolm Cowley, 15 April 1937, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 287.

<sup>559</sup> Edmund Wilson – Malcolm Cowley, 15 April 1937, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 287.

<sup>560</sup> See Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 212-214, 235, and 238-239 for examples of official receptions and audiences with political figures granted these literary figures, also David-Fox, “The Fellow-Travelers Revisited The ‘Cultured West’ Through Soviet Eyes,” 306, and David Caute, *The Fellow-Travellers*, 154.

transformation” into New Persons and who now “had to be removed from Soviet society.”<sup>561</sup> Access to “cosmopolitan style” was granted only to high officials and visitors.<sup>562</sup> The “professional and cultural elites had access to networks of privilege,” wrote Sheila Fitzpatrick, even when they were not party members.<sup>563</sup> The young Komsomol guides who assisted Wilson during his travels were themselves recipients of privilege due to their important roles in showcasing achievements; Wilson observed that “badly off by American standards as they are, [they] have had all the best of it as far as housing is concerned.”<sup>564</sup> Alexander Barmine, a state official and Soviet attache to Greece in this era, recalled that “dinner for one at the Hotel Metropole [which Wilson frequented] cost as much as a minor clerk could earn in two months.”<sup>565</sup> Privilege meant access to places such as Moscow’s “National Café” or the “Amerikansky Bar” decorated with “blue bulbs painted with golden stars.”<sup>566</sup> Although imitative of Western style, these locales’ newness showed how, in James Von Geldern’s words, “a lightened mood swept” Russia as a product of increased centralized oversight.<sup>567</sup> On Moscow’s “crowded trams,” “privileged persons [were] allowed to get on at front of cars,” while the less fortunate “hang on to [the] outside” and risked personal injury.<sup>568</sup>

Access to and consumption of material privileges not uniformly shared across Russia defined the new generation of cultural elites. The slogan of the Second Five-Year Plan (1932-1936) that Wilson saw

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<sup>561</sup> Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters Under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1999), 212; Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 34-35.

<sup>562</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 78, discusses the manifold material indicators of cultural privilege, ranging from those noted by Wilson to access to high officials and accommodation of a semblance of private space.

<sup>563</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*, 14.

<sup>564</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 546.

<sup>565</sup> Alexander Barmine, *One Who Survived: The Life Story of a Russian Under the Soviets*, 201; Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 553, 563.

<sup>566</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 229; Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 572.

<sup>567</sup> James Von Geldern, “The Centre and the Periphery,” 187.

<sup>568</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 547.

in every urban area, “Cadres decide everything,” encapsulated official promotion of this access.<sup>569</sup> Material consumption and access to information became notable signs of patronage by the regime, and played into Wilson’s vision of what Americanizing Marx might mean in practice. Broadly, Wilson’s Soviet reception accorded with his earlier statements regarding the “gifted individual” directing “revolution from above.”<sup>570</sup> This hierarchical “scaffolding” of society differed substantially from Dos Passos’s self-transformation, in which the writer “wrestled” with reconciling identities of intelligentsia and proletarian.<sup>571</sup> Writers no longer needed to assume a proletarian identity. “Soviet writers, if there is any considerable demand for their work, achieve not only distinction, but a higher standard of living than most of their fellows,” Wilson observed, an inequity he grounded in “the Marxist point of view [that] a writer is not guilty of exploiting anybody.”<sup>572</sup> He had access to hard-currency Torgsin stores in which he could make purchases by exchanging his grant money for rubles.<sup>573</sup> (He was generous enough to use this access to buy occasional treats for Russians whom he viewed favorably, such as Lily Herzog; Wilson often brought her a popular chocolate confection called “Baby Bears”).<sup>574</sup> Additionally, Dos Passos had given him access to his accumulated Russian royalties, which Wilson promised to pay back “in dollars,” allowing him purchases such as the vodka “with oak leaves on the bottle” that Dos Passos recommended.<sup>575</sup> In these examples of the new Russia, “a bowl of soup cost 5 to 7 rubles, a plate of meat 22 rubles, a glass of tea 1 ruble.”<sup>576</sup> State officials then earned 500 rubles a month and average

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<sup>569</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 568.

<sup>570</sup> Edmund Wilson - Allen Tate, 13 August 1929: *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 168.

<sup>571</sup> John Dos Passos – Robert Cantwell, 25 January 1935, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 463; Melvin Landsberg, *John Dos Passos’ Path to U.S.A.*, 84.

<sup>572</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 212.

<sup>573</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 552.

<sup>574</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 552.

<sup>575</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 27 April 1935, *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 263; John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson, 29 July 1935: “So glad you were able to tap the roubles,” *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 481; Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 559.

<sup>576</sup> Alexander Barmine, *One Who Survived: The Life Story of a Russian Under the Soviets*, 201.

office workers 100; therefore a single meal on such a scale could consume a fourth of one's wages.<sup>577</sup> However, Soviet officials who interacted with Western counterparts enjoyed state subsidization of living and entertaining expenses, so as to impress visitors with the Soviet standard of living. Barmine, for example, recorded that he received a stipend of 30 rubles a day, paid by the Commissariat of Foreign Trade.<sup>578</sup> This kind of subsidization would have applied to touristic employees such as Lily Herzog, obviating her need to receive additional gifts as *pourboires* from Wilson.<sup>579</sup>

At numerous points in his journals Wilson commented on the liberality of consumption afforded him in Moscow and Leningrad in a way that seemed calculated to dispel reports of Russian material and food shortages.<sup>580</sup> "Caviar and vodka in the Metropole," he wrote in his journal on June 14.<sup>581</sup> Intermissions at the theater allowed him to consume sweets, or "beer and [a] cheese sandwich," and he dined in similar fashion while traveling by train or ship.<sup>582</sup> High-ranking Soviet cultural elites such as the Alymovs could entertain Wilson at a dinner of "vodka, herring, cucumbers and radishes, kidneys, [and] meatballs."<sup>583</sup> On another occasion he dined on "sturgeon, omelette, and cheese" at the Alymovs' apartment before traveling out to the writers' *dacha* that evening, where his host "insisted on my eating a second dinner."<sup>584</sup> On board the train to Kiev, a company of privileged "aviation students" invited Wilson to share their meal of "cakes . . . candy, apples, and boiled milk."<sup>585</sup> These model New Persons also received extended vacations – the aviators were "off on [a] two-month

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<sup>577</sup> Alexander Barmine, *One Who Survived: The Life Story of a Russian Under the Soviets*, 201.

<sup>578</sup> Alexander Barmine, *One Who Survived: The Life Story of a Russian Under the Soviets*, 201.

<sup>579</sup> Alexander Barmine, *One Who Survived: The Life Story of a Russian Under the Soviets*, 201.

<sup>580</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 559.

<sup>581</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 552.

<sup>582</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 537, 545.

<sup>583</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 559.

<sup>584</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 568-569.

<sup>585</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 582-583.

holiday” after completing their training courses, Wilson noted – and preference in housing.<sup>586</sup> Habicht, the Open Road tourism supervisor, occupied a “fine new apartment” with “kitchen, bathroom, and [a] tree grown stretch” of yard.<sup>587</sup> Some even received what Wilson recognized as American suits of clothing.<sup>588</sup> He compared culinary impressions with another traveler he met on several occasions, a British man from London. Wilson asked if he had difficulty getting food; the man replied no, except “he didn’t get enough fresh fruit and green vegetables,” though “he’d had an orange and a bottle of beer the other day, so he was all right.”<sup>589</sup> (Oranges, Wilson wrote in his journal, were available, but “expensive”).<sup>590</sup> In Leningrad, Wilson “priced” some china purportedly from “the collection in the Winter Palace,” but agonized over the historical provenance of objects expropriated by a regime for the dual purpose of eliminating signs of its past and converting these signs into badly-needed cash.<sup>591</sup>

The voluntarism of Dos Passos’s assumption of a proletarian role was consistent with the late 1920s vision of “gradual self-collectivization.”<sup>592</sup> As the Narkompros delegation demonstrated, however, this vision conflicted with the pressing demands to produce a new class of technical workers to fulfill industrialization needs. Similar demands were placed on agriculture, initiating the “de-kulakization” process that began in 1930. The conflict views of whether egalitarianism was to be regarded as a future result, or needed to exist as a prerequisite for full socialism, animated debate immediately prior to the Five-Year Plan.<sup>593</sup> Stalinism did not regard hardship as a permissible model for the future. The scarcity of food distribution during Dos Passos’s visit

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<sup>586</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 582.

<sup>587</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 554.

<sup>588</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 539.

<sup>589</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 550.

<sup>590</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 550.

<sup>591</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 544.

<sup>592</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 147.

<sup>593</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 143.

pointed to the necessity of party-state led reform and the imposition of the *kolkhoz* movement starting in 1930.

Wilson chose to present the results of this process as a cultural effort, and made no mention of either the conflict of methodologies or the violence of implementing reform. Indeed, he accepted the official version advanced by his guides, using their “culturedness” as a rationale. Collective facilities such as farms and hospitals that were presented to tourists became showplaces of health and ample provisioning.<sup>594</sup> He chose to describe the “ripe red tomatoes” presented as evidence of superior cultivation, and several other foreigners in the group speculated on how pleasant it would be “to live there” in the future.<sup>595</sup> The sole mention in Wilson’s journal of the violence of collectivization occurred during a visit to a collective farm on June 9, 1935, when another tourist asked whether “all the people want to be collectivized” and received the guide’s answer “No: they had had some trouble a few years ago, but none now.”<sup>596</sup> The famine conditions were not generally known outside Russia, and within the country access to statistics was controlled.<sup>597</sup> The flow of food and goods trended from outlying areas into Moscow, giving the city an appearance “more like an American city.”<sup>598</sup> Its “people [were] better dressed and more prosperous” than elsewhere in Russia, Wilson noticed.<sup>599</sup> Yet the rural population obtained ancillary privileges unavailable to urban dwellers, particularly noticeable in Wilson’s contrast of the proletariat with the peasant class.<sup>600</sup> Muscovites, he

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<sup>594</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 95-96.

<sup>595</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 277.

<sup>596</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 556.

<sup>597</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 217.

<sup>598</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 547.

<sup>599</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 547.

<sup>600</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 555, 584

noted, were a “stunted race” in comparison with the workers at a Stalingrad tractor factory, who resembled the “strapping exuberant” images on propaganda posters.<sup>601</sup> At another farm, he observed the “red farmer’s complexion” and healthy outdoor life of even the highest ranking officials, who stood “cool [and] straight” and “explained facts concisely” with “good, easy, and sensitive manners.”<sup>602</sup> Wilson emphasized the healthy appearance particularly of females, whether engaged in agriculture or newly arrived in industrial cities. “The farther south we went,” Wilson recorded en route to Rostov-on-Don, “the freer, the better-looking the people seemed.”<sup>603</sup> “Fine-looking women,” he noted in a Stalingrad factory, “the handsomest lot I have ever seen inside a factory.”<sup>604</sup>

Wilson’s fascination with material plenty extended to apparel, though he conceded its general poor quality. In both measures, however, he followed official pronouncements, particularly a 1934 “campaign [that] promoted personal cleanliness and attractive clothing” as a further indication of how “cultural and utopian” aims in 1930s Stalinism reinforced a need for self-vigilance and performative correctness.<sup>605</sup> “The best that could be said” of most apparel, Wilson stated, “was that they were new” and meant to indicate the future cultural level of the general population.<sup>606</sup> In contrast, he described the “deliberately ugly and disagreeable” impression he formed from “jeweled miters” and “vestments”

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<sup>601</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 271; Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 117. Bonnell points out the image of the heroic worker replaced earlier Bolshevik images of worker groups struggling with chains or allegorical figures representing capitalism; posters of the mid-1930s often depicted the worker juxtaposed with an open countryside and looking off to right of frame, symbolizing the future-oriented gaze.

<sup>602</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 556.

<sup>603</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 584.

<sup>604</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 583-584; Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 271.

<sup>605</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 34; Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 117.

<sup>606</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 560.



worked with “pearls and amethysts” reserved for the Orthodox priestly class and displayed untouched in cathedrals repurposed as museums.<sup>607</sup>

Shoes in particular drew Wilson’s sharpest critique of quality. Sheila Fitzpatrick determined that shoe production, largely in the hands of small-scale private producers before 1931, was an entirely state-run industry by the mid-Thirties, and had not yet caught up to demand.<sup>608</sup> Shortages played into an official narrative holding “wreckers” responsible for low production and theft of raw materials, rather than directing attention to the formal edict that forbade all artisanal manufacture of shoes.<sup>609</sup> One of Wilson’s first sights on arrival in Leningrad was not touristic in nature but “people going along in slippers” because “they seem to be particularly short on shoes.”<sup>610</sup> Women wore “flat shoes”; only the privileged had access to “high-heeled ones, which don’t look very smart.”<sup>611</sup> The most common sort, “a kind of flimsy sneaker, all alike, [were] all made at the same place.”<sup>612</sup> When a sudden rain fell on Moscow in July, he noted many people – women especially – went barefoot rather than expose these shoes to moisture.<sup>613</sup>

This reticence at exposure to elements underscored how material shortages were used “to express an opinion about a matter of public policy,” fostering the impression among travelers that Soviet Russia was directed by Marxist imperatives relating to material distribution.<sup>614</sup> Wilson suggested hotels indulged in cultural show to attract “capitalist” visitors by “plant[ing]” older, “irreclaimable” members

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<sup>607</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 571.

<sup>608</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 45.

<sup>609</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 45.

<sup>610</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 535.

<sup>611</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 538.

<sup>612</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 560.

<sup>613</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 576.

<sup>614</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 165.

of the former bourgeois to give a false impression of “the picturesqueness of old Russia”; likewise, “chambermaids who speak German and French” were employed in tourist hotels as “concessions” to maintaining an appearance of Western standards.<sup>615</sup> Aboard the steamship *Siberia*, a recent addition to the state-owned Sovtorgflot, he recorded in his journal a sequence of mishaps that, early in his journey, caused him to doubt official claims to modernization. “Toilet paper roll came off its holder and fell to the floor as soon as touched . . . There was no plug [for the bathtub, and] only one for both the men’s and the ladies’ baths . . . roller towel that came off roll when pulled.”<sup>616</sup> Other Westerners among the passengers were upset because “none of the catches on the doors worked properly,” so every space became public.<sup>617</sup> At another tourist accommodation “the bathroom . . . had no ventilation and was suffocatingly heated,” and the door lock was broken so Wilson’s privacy was invaded: “while I was reclining in the tub, two people, finding the door unlocked, tried to walk in.”<sup>618</sup> “The big towel they give you” in hotels, he noted sarcastically, “is of the thickness, texture, and non-absorptive properties of a napkin.”<sup>619</sup> The off-limits “showcase” extended to displays of consumer goods. Moscow residents pointed out to Wilson how “things that you hadn’t been able to get anywhere turned up in the store windows,” though few had the money to purchase these goods.<sup>620</sup> Public presentation of goods was the counterpart of the secret police: the latter was unseen but known, while material goods were seen but unavailable to most.<sup>621</sup> In Gorky Park, a refreshment stand displayed “pale yellow wine and [a] spiral-piled stock of chocolate bars” which no one was purchasing.<sup>622</sup> At most accommodations open to

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<sup>615</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 541.

<sup>616</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 528-529.

<sup>617</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 528.

<sup>618</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 529.

<sup>619</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 529.

<sup>620</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 554.

<sup>621</sup> See Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 164.

<sup>622</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 559.

Western visitors “none of the [appliances] did what was said they would do,” leaving guests with only the apologies of the “very amiable and accommodating staff.”<sup>623</sup>

Though Wilson’s accounts of Soviet materialism verged on the comedic, his misfortunes preceded his discovery that these displays of unused or unusable goods were luxuries not intended for present consumption, but rather signs of what the future would contain for all. For the majority of the Soviet population in 1935, the issue was not whether baths and towels imitated or approached Western tourist standards, but that they existed at all. They became living props, or in Sheila Fitzpatrick’s famous term, “window dressing” that Wilson exposed, but only in relation to displaying the inclusivity and democratization resulting from the reduction of class conflict. For the Soviets the new materialism constituted a sign of the perfection of the socialist future. For travelers from the West, the same signs were expected conveniences whose inferiority signified Russian backwardness. The same objects therefore embodied wholly differing semiotic relationships. They could measure the distance before Russia caught up to the West, or they could measure progress since the Revolution.

#### “IN WRONG WITH THE LITERARY COMMUNISTS”: WILSON AND LITERARY CONTRIBUTIONS

Wilson also accepted a literary assignment to supplement his funds, which embroiled him in both a minor literary controversy and the “unofficial” dispensation of privilege. In mid-Thirties Russia, “success” was defined by access to supervision that “bypassed an intermediate hierarchy,” and Wilson’s personal relations with his Soviet literary acquaintances led the latter to believe the writer might be amenable to undertaking work that would signal his entry into the company of pro-Soviet

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<sup>623</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 529; Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 157.

Western writers.<sup>624</sup> While accepting the “flattering and sobering . . . honor” of inclusion among Soviet cultural-literary ranks, Wilson also reminded himself of the “responsibilities” writers bore in following party-state discourse.<sup>625</sup> That June, Wilson was “invited to contribute an article” to the Moscow *Daily News*, an English-language paper published within Russia.<sup>626</sup> Upon learning of Wilson’s affiliation with the American leftist poet-essayist Max Eastman, an avowed Trotskyist with whom Wilson disagreed on “views of Marxism,” the editorial staff of the *Daily News* prompted Wilson to write “a formal repudiation” of Eastman.<sup>627</sup> Refusing the request, Wilson instead composed a brief article on his impressions of “current productions of classical plays,” explaining he did not feel up to discussing “the new Soviet plays.”<sup>628</sup> In doing so, he could acknowledge and approve current orientation toward both Russian and Western classic literature, noting that Shakespeare, for example, was undergoing a revival in Russia. After Wilson’s essay was published on July 2, 1935, Tretyakov suggested Wilson “contribute an article” to *International Literature*, edited by Sergei Dinamov.<sup>629</sup> Wilson offered a critique of Ernest Hemingway – appropriate in that Wilson had been one of the first serious appraisers of Hemingway’s work in 1924, and Hemingway’s novels and stories in 1934-35 were undergoing translation into Russian by Ivan Kashkin.<sup>630</sup> (Wilson noted Hemingway was “attracting a great deal of attention” and

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<sup>624</sup> James Von Geldern, “The Centre and the Periphery,” 193.

<sup>625</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels in Two Democracies*, 212.

<sup>626</sup> Edmund Wilson, “The Classics on the Soviet Stage,” *The Shores Of Light*, in *Literary Essays and Reviews of the 1920s & 30s*, 496. He visited the *Moscow Daily News* offices on 10 June 1935 and was introduced to its editor, though his journal makes no note of the request for a contribution: *The Thirties*, 559.

<sup>627</sup> Edmund Wilson – *New Masses*, 22 March 1934, Edmund Wilson Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, box 51, folder 1373; Edmund Wilson, “The Classics on the Soviet Stage,” 496; Haim Genizi, “Edmund Wilson and ‘The Modern Monthly,’” 317.

<sup>628</sup> Edmund Wilson, “The Classics on the Soviet Stage,” 496. Much of the material in this article derived from journal entries, and found its way with little alteration into *Travels*.

<sup>629</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 292; Haim Genizi, “Edmund Wilson and ‘The Modern Monthly,’” 317.

<sup>630</sup> Edmund Wilson, “Letter to the Russians About Hemingway,” *The Shores Of Light*, in *Literary Essays and Reviews of the 1920s & 30s*, 507.

represented the kind of writing the Russians “would like to do themselves”).<sup>631</sup> “I came to realize that the young people in Russia are interested in the American writers,” he wrote in *Travels*, because “they are dissatisfied . . . with their own post-revolutionary literature” and sought as models those Americans “most popular in the Soviet Union – Upton Sinclair, Dos Passos, [Theodore] Dreiser” and Hemingway.<sup>632</sup> (These models, Wilson added, were nearly “all people who have recently been in wrong with the literary Communists” in the US).<sup>633</sup> Payment for the article was made not in *valiuta* but material goods, suggesting the possible clandestine nature of imbursement open to those of literary prestige. Recalling the bookshops filled with remnants of bourgeois libraries, Wilson explained he “wanted to buy books,” and Tretyakov conducted Wilson to a shop that “dealt in pre-Soviet books.”<sup>634</sup> Wilson selected an expensive set of the collected works of Ivan Turgenev, and arranged with the bookseller to ship back to the US both the set and some books he had acquired outside Russia during his travels earlier that spring. “Tretyakov,” Wilson wrote, “with his slightly complacent official air, promised to arrange all this,” rather than compelling Wilson to “show a certificate” testifying to proper purchase at a hard-currency shop when he exited the country.<sup>635</sup>

Retrospectively, at least, Wilson viewed this assignment as emblematic of his Soviet experience, implying he was cheated and consequently disillusioned. The nature of the undertaking, however, fit Wilson’s conception of his visit as transnational and cross-cultural. Instead of receiving the items he selected, he found (after arriving back in the US) a package containing only “one very badly battered

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<sup>631</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 184.

<sup>632</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 184.

<sup>633</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 184.

<sup>634</sup> Edmund Wilson, “Letter to the Russians About Hemingway,” 501-502.

<sup>635</sup> Edmund Wilson, “Letter to the Russians About Hemingway,” 502.

volume of a Soviet edition” of Turgenev; his other purchases had “disappeared.”<sup>636</sup> “So not only have I never been paid for the article,” he wrote in 1950, “but I was robbed.”<sup>637</sup> The disappearance of other texts (most of which Wilson had acquired for research on *To The Finland Station*) became a convenient symbol of Stalinist narrative control of its own revolutionary history.

Wilson’s article on Hemingway, which appeared in the second number of *International Literature* early in 1936, was preceded by a headnote, unsigned but likely composed by Ivan Kashkin, that indicated the two ways Soviet authorities approached Western writer-travelers.<sup>638</sup> First, Kashkin detailed Wilson’s leftist orientation. Since Wilson was unfamiliar to the majority of Russian readers, the note explained that though Wilson had not yet entered “the camp of revolutionary literature,” he had “taken an active part in the Left movement of the intelligentsia” through editorial-contributor affiliation with leftist periodicals such as *The Modern Monthly* and *The New Republic*, and his article “constitute[d] a new link in the development of Soviet-American literary relations.”<sup>639</sup> Second, Wilson could be shown the correct path through re-evaluation of his critique by Kashkin. Wilson’s piece offered little over others “on the same subject” of Hemingway’s career and literary themes, but Wilson “had the advantage of Marxist criticism over” what Kashkin termed the “vulgarly commercial” type meant to encourage book sales, because Wilson’s interest in the history of socialist writing and the

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<sup>636</sup> Edmund Wilson, “Letter to the Russians About Hemingway,” 502.

<sup>637</sup> Edmund Wilson, “Letter to the Russians About Hemingway,” 502.

<sup>638</sup> Edmund Wilson, “Letter to the Russians About Hemingway,” 508; Ernest Hemingway – Ivan Kashkin, 12 January 1936, *Selected Letters of Ernest Hemingway*, edited by Carlos Baker (New York: Scribners, 1981), 430-432. Wilson’s essay had appeared simultaneously in *The New Republic* 85 (11 December 1935), and Dos Passos had sent Hemingway a copy; Hemingway then complained to both Dos Passos and Kashkin about the nature of Wilson’s critique: Ernest Hemingway – John Dos Passos, 17 December 1935 and 13 January 1936, *Selected Letters*, 426, 433.

<sup>639</sup> Edmund Wilson, “Letter to the Russians About Hemingway,” 508-509.

privileges he had received thanks to Soviet recognition of his interest conferred on him the potential status of fellow-traveler.<sup>640</sup>

As in the informal social gatherings with Soviet and American press, Wilson participated in the “internal commentary on cultural and political life” in a fashion that seemed to grant him an “insider” status.<sup>641</sup> Yet for the Soviets, Wilson proved less pliable than his guides anticipated. The cultural intent of ideological correction imbued Soviet culture. Just as Lenin was “corrected” by the accession of Stalin to power, the future perfection of Wilson’s prose, Kashkin implied, rested on allowing prefaces to tell readers what to think of his work until such time as he was able to follow accepted formulas for writing.<sup>642</sup> Wilson despised this tendency in writers such as George Bernard Shaw, whose Fabian socialist themes gained emphasis in “preface[s] by which Shaw has protected himself against your possible perception of his weakness. If you submit to his spell, you will allow him to manipulate the lights in such a way that, by the time the curtain goes up, you find Shaw looking noble in the center of the stage with everything else left in semi-obscurity, and yourself with your discriminatory powers in a temporary state of suspension, under the illusion that you must either accept or reject him.”<sup>643</sup>

By soliciting Wilson’s denunciation of Eastman, Soviet literary officials appeared to welcome him as a “friend” of Soviet Russia by enfolded him within the practice of identifying contaminants who obstructed the perfection of the socialist state. Though Eastman visited Russia in the early 1920s and

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<sup>640</sup> Edmund Wilson, “Letter to the Russians About Hemingway,” 509-510.

<sup>641</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 196.

<sup>642</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 9 May 1935, *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 266. Wilson’s remark predated publication of Stalin’s *The Short Course* (1938), which became the accepted version of Communist Party history for the next fifteen years.

<sup>643</sup> Wilson, “Bernard Shaw at Eighty,” *The Triple Thinkers, in Literary Essays and Reviews of the 1930s and 40s* (New York: Library of America, 2007), 178.

had written books analyzing Marxist and Leninist ideologies, by 1935 he had been accused of anti-Stalinism. Since the environment had been rendered a neutral force, as Jochen Hellbeck pointed out, by the mid-Thirties “instances of impurity could only emanate from the individual.”<sup>644</sup> The initial request framed Wilson’s willing compliance in ideological terms, but faced with Wilson’s demurral, Dinamov and Tretyakov accommodated writer’s personal perceptions of Soviet culture rather than risk losing his potential praise. The new topic still suited party-state cultural aims by promoting Soviet theater’s superiority to Western counterparts. In making this concession to Wilson’s interests, Soviet literary figures showed him the “great lengths” to which they were willing to go “to speak the language of pure internationalism” and appeal to Western visitors.<sup>645</sup> Given Wilson’s meeting with Umansky just prior to the request, Soviet cultural officials possibly were already apprised of Wilson’s views on Eastman, and posed their request in order to identify for their own benefit his willingness to appropriate “communoid” language and tactics. Wilson chose two forms of cultural diplomacy that associated him with current literary-political discourse in Russia: assessing cultural enthusiasm for “classics” of the Russian stage, and providing an overview of the literary career of a prominent American modernist. However, in prefacing Wilson’s essays, Soviet literary figures controlled Wilson’s statements to the extent of reminding readers of how essential the vigilant “spectator-citizen” was to the functioning of the party-state.<sup>646</sup>

Wilson’s contretemps with cultural agencies fell into a normative Soviet pattern for the era. In a later essay written in 1938, Wilson addressed cultural decadence and isolation as the opposites of the socially-engaged writer’s objective: writers and critics “would much rather cherish their myths than

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<sup>644</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 34; Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 137

<sup>645</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 187.

<sup>646</sup> James Von Geldern, “The Centre and the Periphery,” 194.



give attention” to actual events.<sup>647</sup> Soviet writers, Wilson maintained, were dominated by Marxist ideology and political constraints that American writers tended to replicate in “factional politics.”<sup>648</sup> The “falsification of history” that was a prominent feature of Soviet self-transformation was “hardly a beneficent influence for the production of literature.”<sup>649</sup> Yet Kashkin also presented Wilson as a potentially redeemable foreign influence. “Liberated socialist humanity inherits all that is beautiful,” Kashkin wrote, when following “the laws of historical development.”<sup>650</sup> From the Soviet perspective, Wilson’s literary contributions showed that while he had not yet become sufficiently transformed, he either could be redeemed by future production or dismissed as a contaminating and decadent threat. To Wilson, however, the encounters left him with an example of how even literary critiques were subject to party doctrine. “As soon as you begin discussing [literary] matters in print, you find that you are being pushed into some political group” in both the US and Soviet Russia.<sup>651</sup>

## SUMMARY

The implications of cross-cultural encounters reached beyond the immediate act of writing about the experience. As Wilson recalled in 1944, writers of the post-WWI era conceived of themselves as intellectuals, and when faced with the “wreckage” of the capitalist system endeavored to form a “coherent picture of history.”<sup>652</sup> This literary project at once forced

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<sup>647</sup> Edmund Wilson, “Shut Up That Russian Novel,” 585.

<sup>648</sup> Edmund Wilson, “American Critics, Left and Right,” 522.

<sup>649</sup> Edmund Wilson, “American Critics, Left and Right,” 523.

<sup>650</sup> Edmund Wilson, “Letter to the Russians About Hemingway,” 510.

<sup>651</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 9 May 1935, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 266.

<sup>652</sup> Edmund Wilson, “Thoughts On Being Bibliographed,” in *Literary Essays of the 1930s & 40s*, edited by Lewis M. Dabney (New York: Library of America, 2007), 559.

writers into self-redefinition in the post-revolutionary conception of the role of the intelligentsia within the Soviet system, and encouraged them to think of themselves within new roles in relation to social welfare in the US by employing the Soviet example as model. The accounts provide insight into the ethical dilemmas posed to literary figures who chose to encounter post-revolutionary Russia firsthand as committed members of a transnational intelligentsia. Jochen Hellbeck framed this dilemma in terms of “an integrated ‘universalist’ worldview” that prompted intellectuals to labor “on behalf of history’s progression.”<sup>653</sup> The acquisition of a historical consciousness fit well with Marxist-Leninist concepts of the historical actor. Viewing the participants in the Soviet experiment, and the ways in which Soviet culture fostered ingrained cultural habits, became a significant attraction of Soviet culture. Given the opportunity, both Dos Passos and Wilson accepted limited involvement in Soviet cultural projects without quite formulating the long-term results of these projects.

This acceptance is at variance with a formulation of Western writers blindly accepting cultural rewards afforded them within the Soviet system. Unlike the traditional travel mode of recording impressions, the Soviet travel essay often foregrounded its writer as participant. While cultural admiration reached an apogee between the mid-1920s and mid-1930s, the politicized nature of Soviet culture presented a dilemma, in that one form of admiration often could be taken as its ideological “other.” Relatively few analyses of Dos Passos’s or Wilson’s works have focused on the cultural aspect of the travel accounts, and instead substituted the political when not utterly dismissing the works entirely as either naïve or misinformed. The

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<sup>653</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 162.

model-oriented basis of Soviet tourism further enhanced possible exportation of Soviet examples to the US through travel essays. This mitigated against a conception that in examining Soviet Russia, the party-state lacked a “clear and well-defined” vision that prevented future co-option into US.<sup>654</sup> Dos Passos would find within Russian theater a viable alternative to the capitalist model.

The revolutions in both the US and Russia, Wilson concluded, had forced persons to leave “the old system behind.”<sup>655</sup> He viewed the “inequality of privilege” in the Soviet system as a historical consequence of the revolution, during which “Lenin [tried] to skip” some “of the stages of Marxist development, and go straight from Russian village communism to socialist collectivism.”<sup>656</sup> In this respect, the Soviet system did impress some as superior. The “operation of capitalism” as a function of “American democracy,” he wrote, produced “class differences” the Soviets avoided by “skipping” the capitalist phase.<sup>657</sup> The “present period in Russia” focused on “constructing new industrial plants and developing natural resources” by which to modernize its population, differentiating its historical trajectory from that of Europe.<sup>658</sup>

In 1930 Dos Passos wrote that the possibility of translating Marxist utopian ideals into American terms required a new class much like that taking shape in Russia, composed of “engineers, scientists, individual manual craftsmen, writers, artists, actors, technicians” who comprised “a necessary part of industrial society.”<sup>659</sup> This class in Russia had no “political

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<sup>654</sup> George H. Douglas, *Edmund Wilson's America* (University of Kentucky Press, 1983), 94.

<sup>655</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 161.

<sup>656</sup> Edmund Wilson, “Shut Up That Russian Novel,” *The Shores Of Light*, in *Literary Essays and Reviews of the 1920s & 30s*, 589.

<sup>657</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 161.

<sup>658</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 161.

<sup>659</sup> John Dos Passos, “Whom Can We Appeal To?” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 132.

education" prior to the Revolution, he argued, and would have been helpful to its goals if they had; therefore, the political education of "technicians and white collar workers" in the US was necessary so they could realize "they can at least afford to be neutral" and not on the side of the "owners" of production."<sup>660</sup> The fluidity of the term "technician" helped sustain the "utopian, life-creating aspirations" of the avant-garde during the Soviet experiment.<sup>661</sup> Stalin's suppression of the Soviet avant-garde, Dos Passos stated in 1935, produced the same effect as that of monopoly capitalism upon writers, eliminating "everybody who's got any ability and originality . . . who would be of real value" to cultural and political change.<sup>662</sup> In order to follow the "allurements of doctrine," he told Wilson, the new intelligentsia in Russia and the literary left in the US had to compose "increasingly vicious rubbish" against opponents of Stalinism.<sup>663</sup>

Soviet use of American technical experts facilitated "taking Communism away from the Communists" because, unlike Russia, the US already possessed a sizeable industrial worker class and did not need to prepare one for future needs. These experts set the archetype for the "positive hero" celebrated by Stalinism. "Marx and Engels," Wilson reminded Dos Passos, believed "the transfer from capitalism to socialism might be accomplished in England and the United States by ordinary parliamentary methods," a project which, given the Depression, still appeared feasible despite the opposition of conservatives in England and "large corporations" in the US desirous of protecting investors.<sup>664</sup> Rather than revolution, Wilson saw the

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<sup>660</sup> John Dos Passos, "Whom Can We Appeal To?" *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 132-133.

<sup>661</sup> Marina Kanevskaya, "The Crisis of the Russian Avant-Garde in Iurii Olesha's 'Envy,'" *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes* 43:4 (December 2001), 476.

<sup>662</sup> John Dos Passos – Matthew Josephson [6 February 1935], Matthew Josephson Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

<sup>663</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson [January 1935], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 460-462.

<sup>664</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 9 May 1935, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 266.

evolutionary process undergirding Marxist teleology inscribed in the rational, scientific basis of the Soviet experiment and manifested in the “culturedness” of New Persons.

Dos Passos’s encounters with New Persons affirmed that “utopian schemes” could result from guidance and construction of Soviet projects, even by those of suspect class backgrounds. However, experimentalism and utopianism remained fraught with lingering class associations. By the early 1930s the cultural forms of Stalinism “reject[ed] as ‘bourgeois’ the old concept of literature as aesthetic” or as a product of “individual genius.”<sup>665</sup> This took literature out of the hands of specialists and dismissed them as irregular in political thought and potentially counterrevolutionary. For the individual, incorporation into a “Soviet public” displaced notions of a private self and became requisite “for a society building socialism.”<sup>666</sup> Reflecting this dominant cultural trend, the proximity of tourist, writer, journalist, and New Person models became more intimate and monitory. As Soviet agencies frequently were staffed by representative figures of the new culture, foreign visitors who wrote of their experiences often reiterated “official” language and points of view particular to the historic events that shaped this culture, as in Dos Passos’s encounters with those who participated in or lived through the 1917 Revolution, or the “new intelligentsia” that guided Wilson.

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<sup>665</sup> Katerina Clark, “Little Heroes and Big Deed: Literature Responds to the First Five-Year Plan,” 196.

<sup>666</sup> Evgenii Bershtein, “The Withering of Private Life,” in *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution Inside*, edited by Christina Kiaer and Eric Naumann (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 222.

## Part Two: The Theater and Theatricality of Soviet Russia

Theatricality pervaded contemporary Soviet acculturation processes.<sup>667</sup> In the mid-1920s, the slogan “Theatricalize Life” urged the population to employ “scenic means” to foster a collective mindset by taking dramatic performance outside the theater in order to display everyday activities as signs of a socialist future, “a goal of high cultural importance” to the regime.<sup>668</sup> “Giving performances” in Soviet Russia, Rene Fulop-Miller recorded in 1926, was not “confined to the limited capacity of a building, but . . . visible to an infinitely greater number of spectators.”<sup>669</sup> As Igal Halfin stated, to the Bolsheviks “there is simply no domain outside of theater where real interaction takes place.”<sup>670</sup> Official pronouncements regarded environment as a crucial factor in fostering a sense of proletarianized, collectivist transformation, “passing from the real to the theatrical.”<sup>671</sup> Dos Passos declared on several occasions that he came to Russia for purposes of “studying the Russian theater,” believing doing so “would be helpful in planning new productions” in the US.<sup>672</sup> Wilson brought a long career in drama criticism for periodicals and, like Dos Passos, had attempted writing his own experimental plays.<sup>673</sup>

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<sup>667</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 10.

<sup>668</sup> Rene Fulop-Miller, *The Mind and Face of Bolshevism*, 133.

<sup>669</sup> Rene Fulop-Miller, *The Mind and Face of Bolshevism*, 133.

<sup>670</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 10.

<sup>671</sup> Rene Fulop-Miller, *The Mind and Face of Bolshevism*, 134.

<sup>672</sup> John Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 173.

<sup>673</sup> Many of these reviews and critical articles of the interwar period are reprinted in *The Shores of Light* (1951) and *The American Earthquake* (1958), and display the catholic taste of Wilson’s interests, ranging from “high culture” (performances of Shakespeare, classical ballet, and the visits of the Moscow Art Theater to New York) to popular forms (silent movie comedies, the Ziegfeld Follies, Broadway musicals).

In addition to its cultural role, theater and theatricality served as the most frequently deployed tropes for understanding the nature of Soviet socialism. Theater, Boris Wolfson stated, provided a “fruitful metaphor for understanding Stalinist culture,” and Julie Cassiday argued that understanding the mechanics of theatrical presentation was crucial to the development of systems of visibility and openness within Soviet Russia.<sup>674</sup> Contemporary experimental theater offered “mass art” combined with “social force” in impelling its audience toward a “world of collectives.”<sup>675</sup> As Dos Passos stated in “Russian Visa,” theater both transformed its audience and offered an example of the vitality of Bolshevik cultural experiments by offering the Western visitor “as much as you can digest at a sitting.”<sup>676</sup> “Not knowing the language is hardly a barrier at all,” he wrote, for one could “look at the stage all the better for not following all the lines” while “look[ing] at the audience” or becoming “part of the audience.”<sup>677</sup> The dual nature of the theatrical trope therefore addressed both objective and subjective concerns. Objectively the aesthetics of Soviet theater combined “the birth of a new style” with the emergence of a new collective consciousness as potential influences on Western culture.<sup>678</sup> Subjectively, theater could be examined for what it produced within its audience, and how it exemplified the political and economic systems within socialism. Soviet theater was integral to transmitting a “universal sense of participation” in projects of “social

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<sup>674</sup> Boris Wolfson, “Fear on Stage: Afinogenov, Stanislavsky, and the Making of Stalinist Theater,” in *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Bringing the Revolution Home*, edited by Christine Kiaer and Eric Naiman (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 93; Julie A. Cassiday, *The Enemy On Trial: Early Soviet Courts On Stage and Screen* (DeKalb IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000), 3-7; Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 16.

<sup>675</sup> John Dos Passos, “The American Theater, 1930-31,” *The New Republic* LXVI (April 1, 1931), 174; Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams*, 253.

<sup>676</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 305.

<sup>677</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 305.

<sup>678</sup> Rene Fulop-Miller, *The Mind and Face of Bolshevism*, 134.

betterment,” Dos Passos noted.<sup>679</sup> Wilson theatricalized New Persons in terms of actors engaged in a “drama of history . . . imagined by Marx.”<sup>680</sup> The Communist Party, he wrote in 1934, received his “respect” for its abilities as a “dramatizer of ideas.”<sup>681</sup> The connection between the Soviet population and acting only became stronger as a result of consolidation of literary groups and doctrine around the central generic motif of Socialist Realism in the early 1930s. As a “metaphor of visibility,” theatrical presentation “imagined Soviet subjects as fully rationalized objects of surveillance by the disciplinary Soviet state,” Christina Kiaer has noted.<sup>682</sup> In like fashion, Wilson described not only the experience of attending plays, but how the “contact between audience and performer was direct” in Russia.<sup>683</sup>

Under Stalin, theater became the most notable of the “tangible showcases” for Soviet achievement.<sup>684</sup> A conventional Western view at the time, addressed by both Dos Passos and Wilson, stated that Soviet theater was “all Bolshevik propaganda” supervised by the party-state.<sup>685</sup> Wilson related that foreign visitors were predisposed to overwriting the standard plot of a play with the Marxist language of class conflict. “[H]aving heard of the proletarian interpretations which old plays were given,” particularly those adapted from Western sources such as Shakespeare, Dickens, and Dumas, he was surprised to find such productions in the

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<sup>679</sup> John Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 194.

<sup>680</sup> Edmund Wilson, “Marxism at the End of the Thirties,” *The Shores Of Light*, in *Literary Essays and Reviews of the 1920s & 30s*, edited by Lewis M. Dabney (New York: Library of America, 2007), 593.

<sup>681</sup> Edmund Wilson – *New Masses*, 22 March 1934, Edmund Wilson Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, box 51, folder 1373.

<sup>682</sup> Christina Kiaer, “Delivered from Capitalism: Nostalgia, Alienation, and the Future of Reproduction in Tretyakov’s *I Want a Child*,” in *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Bringing the Revolution Home*, edited by Christine Kiaer and Eric Naiman (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 184-185.

<sup>683</sup> James Von Geldern, “The Centre and the Periphery,” 194.

<sup>684</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 315.

<sup>685</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 306-307.



minority: “I was unable to see that [they] had been given very much of a Marxist interpretation.”<sup>686</sup> Visitors who saw Soviet plays or spectacles, Michael David-Fox asserted, tended to frame their interpretations “in direct anticipation of ideological battles to be fought back home.”<sup>687</sup> To the extent to which this interpretation was true at the time, argued Boris Wolfson, contemporary theater addressed the “relation between the [political] waverer, the false community, and the virtuous community,” which were shared “concerns” of both “the Soviet stage” and “the courtroom of the show trials.”<sup>688</sup> These shared concerns centered on acculturation, deviation, and correction, with the last often depicted as self-generated and non-coercive, a function of the moment of recognition or illumination common to both the transformative New Person and the climactic apex of a staged drama.

Dos Passos defined the visual impact of live drama as “new ways of seeing things . . . old patterns and processes have continually to be broken up in order to make it possible to perceive the new aspects and arrangements of evolving consciousness.”<sup>689</sup> The Bolshevik emphasis on consciousness indicated how collective mass spectacles represented “the unfolding of history” for the “active participants” who were simultaneously viewers and enactors.<sup>690</sup> While the 1917 Revolution was the collective event uniting individual experiences around one transformative moment that “compelled [them] to reveal their true characters in a heightened exaggerated form,” theater and mass spectacle informed the new Soviet persons

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<sup>686</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 172, 163. Michael David-Fox concurred with this assessment of “visitors’ predispositions” in *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 212.

<sup>687</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 212.

<sup>688</sup> Boris Wolfson, “Fear on Stage: Afinogenov, Stanislavsky, and the Making of Stalinist Theater,” 93.

<sup>689</sup> John Dos Passos, “Grosz Comes to America,” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 177.

<sup>690</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 321.

about the cultural environment they now inhabited.<sup>691</sup> “Theater is the most powerful instrument” by which a society “illuminates its class sense” and “forges itself,” Petr Semyenovitch Kogan, a Bolshevik cultural critic, wrote in 1919.<sup>692</sup>

## DRAWN OUT OF DETACHMENT: THEATER, VIEWING, AND SURVEILLANCE

As a trope, theater addressed the close relationship of viewing, policing, and self-transformation within the Soviet experiment. This relationship also inhered in the conventional interwar travel narrative’s emphasis on seeing and judging. “The Revolution,” Wilson wrote, “opened everything up.”<sup>693</sup> The increase of visibility granted to actions, in which every movement became a matter of public performance, greatly expanded the travel writer’s scope and the nature of surveillance itself. The “ritual performance” of the Stalinist era also informed this trope, in which Stalin’s “grand narrative” of progress “frame[d] the citizen as a passive viewer.”<sup>694</sup> “A crucial affinity between the operations of the [secret police] and the rhetoric of the realistic theater” existed, stated Boris Wolfson, so as “to invest meaning behind the text [and] sharing its investigative function” into character motivations.<sup>695</sup> The “expensive and brilliant productions” in theaters analogized Russian fascination with authoritarian institutions of religion and governance with the artifice of entertainment.<sup>696</sup> Wilson perceived the totality

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<sup>691</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Peale Bishop, 22 October 1928, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 154.

<sup>692</sup> Petr Semyenovitch Kogan, “The Theater as Tribune,” in *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution In Soviet Russia, Part 2*, edited by William C. Rosenberg (Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 134.

<sup>693</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 574.

<sup>694</sup> James Von Geldern, “The Center and the Periphery,” 194; Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 229.

<sup>695</sup> Boris Wolfson, “Fear on Stage: Afinogenov, Stanislavsky, and the Making of Stalinist Theater,” 113.

<sup>696</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 540, 571.

of this analogy, writing in *Travels* that “all this Byzantine stuff is so new to me that I am drawn out of my sightseer’s detachment.”<sup>697</sup> The audience wielded collective power through a shared “illusory authority” involved in speculating on and discovering hidden motivations and class conflict.<sup>698</sup> This increase of visibility also facilitated official presentations of Soviet life as open and expressive, inviting the writer-traveler into a more participatory role.

Cultural experimentation brought about a “focus on the artistic qualities” (known loosely as Formalism), and to an extent displaced traditional methods of staging, visual representation, and expression.<sup>699</sup> This movement, while it lasted from the mid-1920s to about 1931, stood in opposition to traditional Russian art’s focus on “social and political meanings,” and reached its apogee during Dos Passos’s visit.<sup>700</sup> Aesthetic and stylistic considerations during the 1920s, in the view of Sovietologist Gleb Struve, propelled Russian literary figures into becoming “the most consistent and active opponents of [the] officially sponsored, Marxist sociological approach to literature.”<sup>701</sup> Boldness of expression in the arts became synonymous with the boldness of social restructuring, and both employed identical “dramaturgical strategies” that forced the New Person into the spotlight.<sup>702</sup> This experimentation sought to utilize, as Leon Trotsky declared, the “chief elements” of culture, merging industry, literature, and theater as one “apparatus” for building a new society.<sup>703</sup> In many instances Dos Passos encountered theater as a pedagogical instrument for acculturating the Soviet New Person. Soviet theater,

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<sup>697</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 231.

<sup>698</sup> Boris Wolfson, “Fear on Stage: Afinogenov, Stanislavsky, and the Making of Stalinist Theater,” 114.

<sup>699</sup> David Engerman, *Know Your Enemy: The Rise and Fall of America’s Soviet Experts* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2009, 144.

<sup>700</sup> David Engerman, *Know Your Enemy*, 144.

<sup>701</sup> Gleb Struve, *Soviet Russian Literature 1917-1950* (Norman OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951), 192.

<sup>702</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 10.

<sup>703</sup> Rene Fulop-Miller, *The Mind and Face of Bolshevism*, 223.

existing in a “new society,” purposefully “modif[ie]d the lives of individuals.”<sup>704</sup> The “didactic theater” used actors as instructors.<sup>705</sup> He wrote correspondents of the “energy and imagination” in “the public theatres, in the workers’ clubs and unions, where they put on all sorts of little plays half improvised under the title of Living Newspapers. They are very amusing, even the propaganda plays about hygiene etc. are very well staged by the people themselves.”<sup>706</sup> This led Dos Passos to synthesize Soviet theater with a different kind of “theater,” in which a skilled physician deployed “glittering instruments” during an operation to ease the “desperate difficulty [with which] a baby was being born.”<sup>707</sup>

Dos Passos’s obstetric metaphor was apt, for by emphasizing the “great healthy youthful people” who served as his frequent guides, he emphasized the nurturing role theater played in informing their lives and in bringing to life the socialist future.<sup>708</sup> Metaphors of birth and renewal were central in developing a narrative around New Persons, and were employed frequently in the genre of Socialist Realism in the Thirties.<sup>709</sup> In this regard, as Donald Pizer explained, Dos Passos’s use of theater to center “Russian Visa” established a “continuity” with Soviet culture that “is not neutrally descriptive,” but “exhibit[ed] signs of his personal engagement.”<sup>710</sup>

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<sup>704</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 307.

<sup>705</sup> Boris Wolfson, “Fear on Stage: Afinogenov, Stanislavsky, and the Making of Stalinist Theater,” 101.

<sup>706</sup> John Dos Passos – Germaine Lucas-Championniere [mid-August 1928], *Lettres a Germaine Lucas-Championniere*, 246. Original in French; my translation.

<sup>707</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 273.

<sup>708</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 273.

<sup>709</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 307; Julie Draskoczy, “The ‘Put’ of *Perekovka*,” 31, 37.

<sup>710</sup> Donald Pizer, “John Dos Passos and Harlan: Three Variations on a Theme,” 14.

Soviet insistence on its “drama of history” cast into doubt the assumption that Western cultural or economic models were inherently superior, and opened a path for cultural interactions between the writer-traveler and “invigorating” forms of Soviet theater.<sup>711</sup> Theatrical appraisal, a type of critique familiar to both Dos Passos and Wilson, dominated large parts of both travel accounts, and posited a “cross-cultural encounter” between Western writer and Soviet cultural apparatus that was particularly intense in their respective cases.<sup>712</sup>

#### WATCHING “EVERY MOVE OF THE ACTORS”

Numerous analysts of Dos Passos’s work, particularly of *U.S.A.*, have studied Dos Passos’s integration of the aesthetics of cinematic montage and theatrical expressionism into his writings, and how this aesthetic interest informed many of his explications of the interrelationship of writer, language, readership, and ideology during the 1930s.<sup>713</sup> Taking their cue from Dos Passos’s own admission that his “excitement over the ‘expressionist’ theatre of the Nineteen-twenties had a good deal to do with shaping style,” these studies often have focused on Dos Passos’s encounters with the work of prominent Russian dramatists, playwrights, and film directors, especially those whom he personally met (Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Alexander Tairov) in determining “the relationship of

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<sup>711</sup> John Dos Passos – E.E. Cummings [August 1928], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 386; John Dos Passos – Ernest Hemingway [circa August 1928], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 387; John Dos Passos – Dudley Poore [October 1928], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 388.

<sup>712</sup> Michael David-Fox, “The Fellow-Travelers Revisited,” 301.

<sup>713</sup> Lisa Nanney, *John Dos Passos and Cinema* (Clemson, SC: Clemson University Press, 2019), 63-68, discusses the influence of Soviet filmmakers on Dos Passos’s fiction; John Trombold, “From The Future To The Past: The Disillusionment of John Dos Passos,” *Studies in American Fiction* 25:2 (Autumn 1998), 237, states that Dos Passos’s encounters with Soviet theater and film proved “a galvanizing influence on his art.”

the technique to what he was attempting” literarily.<sup>714</sup> In Deming Brown’s assessment, the Soviet model of theater united “the ideological content of a work and the style in which it is written” and proved essential to Dos Passos’s developing style.<sup>715</sup> Both Donald Pizer and Carol Schloss regarded Dos Passos’s Soviet travels as a formative influence on narrative form and juxtaposition, while Lisa Nanney explained Dos Passos’s Russian journey in terms of reconciling “aesthetics with political texts and subtexts to create a form capable of moving audiences . . . to actively engaging with art” so as to understand the historical forces shaping their lives.<sup>716</sup>

In his account of Dos Passos’s literary career, Melvin Landsberg noted the confluence of political and aesthetic realms when in 1926 Dos Passos became involved with the editorial board of *New Masses*, and early in 1927 New York’s experimental New Playwrights’ Theater (NPT) included him among its directors. In both forums he “discussed the Bolshevik revolution.”<sup>717</sup> Landsberg concluded that, through conversation and labor, Dos Passos formed a new style of juxtaposition and contrast that did not rely on “discursive reason.”<sup>718</sup> To Ernest Hemingway, Dos Passos wrote in 1927 he was in “deeper & deeper with the drahma [*sic*] every moment. I’m now one of 5 directors [and] I do a lot of (against union rules) carrying about and painting of scenery and switching on and off of lights [which] keeps me from writing or worrying.”<sup>719</sup> To friends he admitted his “unhealthy” theatrical experiences “mixed [him] up

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<sup>714</sup> John Dos Passos, “Looking Back on U.S.A.,” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 237, 240; Donald Pizer, “John Dos Passos in the 1920s: The Development of a Modernist Style,” *Mosaic* 45:4 (December 2012), 52.

<sup>715</sup> Deming Brown, “Dos Passos in Soviet Criticism,” *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Autumn, 1953), 337.

<sup>716</sup> Donald Pizer, “John Dos Passos in the 1920s: The Development of a Modernist Style,” 52; Carol Schloss, *In Visible Light: Photography and the American Writer*, 158; Lisa Nanney, *John Dos Passos and Cinema*, 64.

<sup>717</sup> Melvin Landsberg, *Dos Passos’ Path to U.S.A.*, 154.

<sup>718</sup> Melvin Landsberg, *Dos Passos’ Path to U.S.A.*, 113.

<sup>719</sup> John Dos Passos – Ernest Hemingway, 27 March 1927, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 368. The other directors, listed on the NPT’s official stationery, were M. Joseph Basshe, Francis Faragoh, Michael Gold, and John Howard Lawson.

with a lot of people” whom he tried to escape by painting sets and backdrops offstage.<sup>720</sup> In Daniel Aaron’s estimation, these associations “linked him with the revolutionary movement” more actively than his declarations in letters during the First World War, and Dos Passos’s correspondence at the peak of his NPT involvement shows that he clearly saw theater as a means of employing innovative aesthetics in the service of social-ideological messages.<sup>721</sup> As a member of the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee, he stated in 1927 to its secretary, Mary Donovan, that he was “working in this theater and it takes up all my time,” so could not write an article of protest for *The Nation* or *New Masses*, but could “get the New Playwrights Theatre to give a Sacco Vanzetti benefit performance. We could give you the whole house for one night.”<sup>722</sup> In April 1928 he wrote of “preparing to take a trip to Russia . . . I was in prison (a short while), director of a theater . . . designed and executed backdrops and I have written a great quantity of polemical articles on the theater and politics and I have just finished a play.”<sup>723</sup>

Dos Passos’s commitment to serving both the theater and politicized causes led him, in the words of biographer Townsend Ludington, to “defend in print experimental drama” and to seek examples in Russia to strengthen his “polemical” combination of political and dramatic

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Gold also was a contributing editor of *New Masses* after its inception in 1926, and had invited Dos Passos to contribute articles.

<sup>720</sup> John Dos Passos - Germaine Lucas Championniere, 8 April 1929, *Lettres a Germaine Lucas-Championniere*, 263., original in French; my translation.

<sup>721</sup> Daniel Aaron, *Writers On The Left*, 348.

<sup>722</sup> John Dos Passos – Mary Donovan [March 1927], Aldino Felicani Sacco-Vanzetti Collection, 1915-1977, Boston Public Library, Rare Books Department, MS 2030 Box 8, Folder 5; John Dos Passos – Mary Donovan [circa 27 March 1927], Aldino Felicani Sacco-Vanzetti Collection, 1915-1977, Boston Public Library, Rare Books Department, MS 2030 Box 8, Folder 7.

<sup>723</sup> John Dos Passos – Germaine Lucas-Championniere, 6 April 1928, John Dos Passos, *Lettres a Germaine Lucas-Championniere*, 232, original in French; my translation. Dos Passos’s “prison” remark refers to his arrest for protesting the Sacco-Vanzetti executions in Boston in August 1927.

interests.<sup>724</sup> Dos Passos expressed these mixed intentions in a letter written in September 1927 after the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti: “It’s all over and gone down in History – as far down as the public press can push it . . . I have finished my play and am busy doing sets for this so called theatre [and] want to go to Russia.”<sup>725</sup> To Wilson he stated the execution “revealed the whole anatomy of American life, with all its classes [and] raised almost every fundamental question of our political and social system” and that he wanted to depart “with Russia more or less in view.”<sup>726</sup>

#### “THE EYEMINDED PEOPLE”<sup>727</sup>

The success of Sergei Eisenstein’s 1925 film *Battleship Potemkin* drew numerous film and literary visitors to Russia. Foreigners came to appreciate the significance film played in the building of the new Bolshevik society.<sup>728</sup> Theatrical directors such as Meyerhold and Mayakovsky adhered to the avant-garde position “that revolutionary art and revolutionary politics had a natural affinity.”<sup>729</sup> Filmmakers shared with theatrical producers a desire to assist foreign visitors to understand socialism by explaining the import of their craft.<sup>730</sup> Soviet film

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<sup>724</sup> Townsend Ludington, *John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey*, 264; John Dos Passos – Mary Donovan [circa February 1927], Aldino Felicani Sacco-Vanzetti Collection, 1915-1977, Boston Public Library Rare Books Department, MS 2030 Box 8, Folder 7.

<sup>725</sup> John Dos Passos – Ernest Hemingway [circa 18 September 1927], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 372. The play in question is *Airways Inc.*, staged by the NPT in February-March 1929 upon Dos Passos’s return from Russia. Linda W. Wagner, *Dos Passos: Artist As American*, 77.

<sup>726</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Peale Bishop, 22 October 1928, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 155; John Dos Passos – Stewart Mitchell [circa late April 1928], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 375; John Dos Passos – E.E. Cummings [circa August 1928], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 386.

<sup>727</sup> John Dos Passos, “Grosz Comes To America,” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 105.

<sup>728</sup> Marie Seton, *Sergei Eisenstein: A Biography* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 117.

<sup>729</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*, 3.

<sup>730</sup> Marie Seton, *Sergei Eisenstein: A Biography*, 117. As Seton pointed out, Eisenstein’s eagerness to explain his techniques to foreign visitors, particularly Americans, was transactional. The director was fascinated by Hollywood



furnished a model for the synthesizing of avant-garde formal experimentation in the service of a socially progressive ideal. Film became a means of education and progress in which a member of the intelligentsia could achieve social significance. The incorporation of ideological goals of social progression legitimized the avant-garde by focusing their imaginations and efforts on behalf of the masses.

The implementation of theater and cinema by the Soviet state encouraged radical experimentation as a way of reaching a broad segment of the population.<sup>731</sup> Dos Passos's encounters with Soviet film influenced his art, but also showed how the intelligentsia played a part in contemporary cultivation projects. Lisa Nanney credited the "concepts and techniques" of Soviet film theory for influencing the writer's development of "narrative montage."<sup>732</sup> Personally, Dos Passos's experiences were voluntary and closely approximated Bolshevik ideals. Dos Passos's discussions with these filmmakers illustrated how the intelligentsia could transcend their class alien status and engage in cultural means that provided the ideological end of forging "new persons." Dos Passos's contrast of the late NEP and the film's setting shows how the avant-garde attempted to inscribe the success of the Bolshevik Revolution through contrast with preceding historical failures. The effort represented "revolution" itself as

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cinema and sought to make contacts with the US film industry in the 1928-1929 period. Only a year before Dos Passos's trip to Russia, Eisenstein met with Theodore Dreiser during the latter's Russian travels, and expressed great interest in directing a film version of Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy*: Marie Seton, *Sergei Eisenstein: A Biography*, 100, 119-122.

<sup>731</sup> Lisa Nanney, *John Dos Passos and Cinema*, 65-66.

<sup>732</sup> Lisa Nanney, *John Dos Passos and Cinema*, 72. See also Carol Shloss, who similarly proposed Vertov's influence on U.S.A. in *In Visible Light*, 155.

particularly Soviet. Such standardization was common in Stalinism, and assisted in its centralizing, nationalist orientation.<sup>733</sup>

Soon after arriving in Leningrad in late July, Dos Passos attended at least one production at the Meyerhold Theater and visited the Leningradkino film studio, where he was introduced to both Eisenstein and Pudovkin.<sup>734</sup> He found watching the filming of scenes for Leonid Trauberg's historical film *The New Babylon*, a drama set during the Paris Commune of 1871, "entertaining."<sup>735</sup> A significant portion of its setting contrasted the absorption by the bourgeoisie in decadent activities (the frivolities of the can-can, sumptuous attire) and their betrayal of the working class. "All of the historical films about the revolution are very fine," he wrote, and the "young film directors here are the most interesting people."<sup>736</sup> Trauberg was then twenty-six, Eisenstein thirty, and Pudovkin thirty-five, all close to Dos Passos's own age. Eisenstein had completed his study of the 1917 Revolution, *October (Ten Days That Shook The World)* the previous year and was beginning work on *Old and New* when Dos Passos arrived. Pudovkin had completed his own version of the Revolution, *The End Of St. Petersburg*, which had premiered at the tenth anniversary of the 1917 Revolution.<sup>737</sup>

Dos Passos may have read Eisenstein's "statement" on "the sound film," first published in the Leningrad periodical *Zhizn Isskustva* on 5 August and later translated into English for

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<sup>733</sup> Anne Gorsuch, "'There's No Place Like Home': Soviet Tourism in Late Stalinism," *Slavic Review* 62:4 (Winter, 2003), 777.

<sup>734</sup> John Dos Passos – E.E. Cummings [circa August 1928], quoted in Virginia Spencer Carr, *Dos Passos: A Life*, 238. "Leningrad Movy Company" is Dos Passos's transliteration of the studio's proper name at the time, Leningradkino. See *The St. Petersburg Encyclopedia*, online at <http://www.encspb.ru/object/2855721574?lc=en>.

<sup>735</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 291.

<sup>736</sup> John Dos Passos – Germaine Lucas Championniere [mid-August 1928], *Lettres a Germaine Lucas Championniere*, 152, original in French, my translation.

<sup>737</sup> Marie Seton, *Sergei Eisenstein: A Biography*, 101.

publication in both the *New York Times* and the *New York Herald Tribune* in the following months.<sup>738</sup> Although Russian film studios had yet to implement sound recording, Eisenstein set out two principles for guiding the making of sound films. Dialogue could be recorded, but music and narration also could complement visual images and establish a dialectic with the more realistic use of recording speech, forming an “orchestral counterpoint of visual and aural images.”<sup>739</sup> Unlike staged drama, this type of film employed “non-synchronization” of sound with vision. Eisenstein’s statement that “sound [could be] treated as a new montage element” suggested to Dos Passos the possibility of employing such contrapuntal methods in fiction.<sup>740</sup> Eisenstein told Dos Passos “[Vsevolod] Meyerhold had carried the theater as far as was possible to take it in every direction and that the theater was dead for the modern world.”<sup>741</sup> Dos Passos concurred, stating that because cinema had adapted certain techniques of staging and developed new methods of presenting drama through camerawork, theater “has got to find for itself a new function.”<sup>742</sup> “Naturally they say the theatre is dead and they love the camera like a god, but they are full of energy and imagination,” he commented.<sup>743</sup>

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<sup>738</sup> Marie Seton, *Sergei Eisenstein: A Biography* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 125. Dos Passos also may have had access to Louis Fischer’s interview with Eisenstein, “Mass Movies,” published in *The Nation* on 9 November 1927; Dos Passos was a reader of the journal and met Fischer while in Moscow. Additionally, Sergei Tretyakov, whom Dos Passos met, composed a biographical article on Eisenstein for a Soviet periodical: Marie Seton, *Sergei Eisenstein: A Biography*, 119.

<sup>739</sup> Marie Seton, *Sergei Eisenstein: A Biography*, 125.

<sup>740</sup> Marie Seton, *Sergei Eisenstein: A Biography*, 125.

<sup>741</sup> John Dos Passos, “Did the New Playwrights’ Theater Fail?”, *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 119.

<sup>742</sup> John Dos Passos, “Is the ‘Realistic’ Theatre Obsolete?”, *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 77. To Germaine Lucas-Championniere he noted Soviet film directors’ fascination with the mechanical made them “love the camera like a god”: John Dos Passos – Germaine Lucas-Championniere [mid-August 1928], *Lettres a Germaine Lucas-Championniere*, 247, original in French; my translation.

<sup>743</sup> John Dos Passos – Germaine Lucas Championniere [mid-August 1928], *Lettres a Germaine Lucas Championniere*, 245-247, original in French, my translation.

While the example of Semyonovich gave Dos Passos insight into the repudiation of past class allegiances, the brief time he spent with cinema and theater people and viewing their work evoked a more traditional class ethos for Dos Passos. As his own experiences showed, the intelligentsia were expected to perform voluntary labor (e.g. Dos Passos's work as an ambulance driver), particularly in a collective form, epitomized by the nature of filmmaking and Dos Passos's performance as passenger-worker aboard ship on the Volga. The "old intelligentsia" of Russia viewed themselves as a "guiding force" in educational and cultural matters.<sup>744</sup> Trauberg, Eisenstein, and Pudovkin fit Dos Passos's idealized concept of the role played by the intelligentsia in creating "historical consciousness" of the Marxist dialectic impelling the Revolution's social change. Most striking, perhaps, was Dos Passos's emphasis on the relative youngness of these cultural luminaries. Furthermore, current Soviet debate publicly acknowledged the roles these cultural figures played. The same issue that concerned Semyonovich affected these filmmakers regarding the use of their talents in supporting and promoting the party-state. Eisenstein, for example, had been forced to re-edit *October* before its general release in order to delete scenes depicting Trotsky, who was anathematized and expelled from the Party while the film was in production.<sup>745</sup> The excision of Trotsky's part in the revolution pointed to a larger issue of rewriting history according to current political exigencies. Filmmakers who became too celebrated ran the risk of identification as exemplars of the "ingrained individualism" of bourgeois specialists who failed to comprehend collective effort.<sup>746</sup> For Dos Passos too, Stalinism's persecution of the "old intelligentsia" to increasing pressure,

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<sup>744</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 130.

<sup>745</sup> Marie Seton, *Sergei Eisenstein: A Biography*, 101.

<sup>746</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 133.

culminating in charges of “formalism” leveled against Pudovkin and many others of the 1920s avant garde, led him to question and reevaluate the influence of intellectuals upon the changes wrought under socialism. In 1935 he wrote that such persecution left him where he had started in 1917 with his ideals of voluntary intellectual contributions. The violence of the Stalinist purges, only beginning that year, forced him away from the communal and collective ideals of belonging to a cultural and historical movement. The old intelligentsia could not become the socialist “new person,” but could act as its guide or educator.

Dos Passos refined his views of theater’s function in essays displaying his appreciation of mass cultivation through theatrical means written soon after his Russian journey. “The revolutionary theater will aim to justify the ways of politics (mass action) to the individual-in-a-mass” through innovative “form and content,” not by creating an illusion of reality onstage, he stated in 1929.<sup>747</sup> He called for “American writers” to transcend mere replication of traditional forms of “art and culture” and imitating “masterpieces of literary effort fraught with the culture of a by-gone age” through an admixture of popular speech, language, and “the industrial field” as chief characteristics of modern culture.<sup>748</sup> Exposure to Soviet examples of theater, film, and mass art convinced him that such experimentation held “vast possibilities of development.”<sup>749</sup>

#### “OUTSIDE THE THEATER”: SOCIALISM AND CAPITALISM ON THE PUBLIC STAGE

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<sup>747</sup> John Dos Passos, “Did the New Playwrights’ Theatre Fail?” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 119.

<sup>748</sup> John Dos Passos, “Edison and Steinmetz: Medicine Men,” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 126; John Dos Passos, “Is the ‘Realistic’ Theatre Dead?” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 76.

<sup>749</sup> John Dos Passos, “Towards a Revolutionary Theatre,” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 101.

In the autumn, after his tour through the Transcaucasus, Dos Passos settled in “the Moscow of [Alexander] Ostrovsky’s plays.”<sup>750</sup> During much of his stay he lived in the apartment of Aleksandr Fadeev, head of the Union of Writers, and Fadeev’s wife, Valia Gerasimova.<sup>751</sup> He was immediately attracted by current plays, among them Mayakovsky’s presentation of *Roar, China!*, “Meyerhold’s production of *The Wood* (Ostrovski) and of Gogol’s *The Inspector General*.”<sup>752</sup> “The shows were besieged,” he noted, “People invented dangerous stratagems to get themselves seats . . . They watched every move of the actors” as potential models for their own behavior.<sup>753</sup> In all these encounters with the ways theater and film had brought Soviet Russia into the “avant-garde current” of the 1920s he was “revitalized in a bath of energy,” he wrote friends.<sup>754</sup> Often he needed to remind himself that the plays and films he witnessed in production were “all a show” and “not happening at all” except within the sets of a “movie studio” where “actors are happiest.”<sup>755</sup>

When dramatized, historical incidents often provided models in which audiences could see transformation with their own eyes. By staging scenes of social oppression, Bolshevik-era drama could stage solutions that would prove the innate “humanism of socialism” for both New

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<sup>750</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 302.

<sup>751</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson [2 April 1935], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 470. Dos Passos later stated Gerasimova was affiliated with the GPU: Ray Lewis White, “John Dos Passos and the Federal Bureau of Investigation,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 14:1 (Summer 1987), 104, and Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 164.

<sup>752</sup> John Dos Passos – E.E. Cummings [circa August 1928], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 386; John Dos Passos – Dudley Poore [October 1928], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 389; John Dos Passos – Arthur McComb [September-October 1928], Melvin Landsberg, *John Dos Passos’s Correspondence With Arthur K. McComb*, 223.

<sup>753</sup> John Dos Passos, “The New Theatre in Russia,” *The New Republic*, 16 April 1930, 240.

<sup>754</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 273; John Dos Passos – Germaine Lucas-Championniere, 8 December 1928, *Lettres a Germaine Lucas-Championniere*, 259, original in French, my translation; John Dos Passos – Ernest Hemingway [24 December 1928], Ernest Hemingway Collection, Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Library. See also Donald Pizer, “Introduction,” *John Dos Passos: The Major Nonfictional Prose*, ix.

<sup>755</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 291.

Persons and foreign visitors.<sup>756</sup> This procedure was most apparent in Dos Passos's reaction to Sergei Tretyakov's drama *Roar, China!* First presented in 1926, the play was revived in 1928. As with other Tretyakov works, *Roar, China!* used innovative staging to imply a "factual" rather than fictive environment.<sup>757</sup> The formal space of the proscenium stage did not contain all the dramatic action. In order to draw the audience into the play, groups of actors rushed from the audience seats onto the stage and into the single harborside setting depicted. Real trucks moved into place from offstage, while a courier on a motorcycle raced up and down the aisles to deliver "messages" impelling the onstage action. The play was based on an actual incident in a Chinese port in which Asian workers confronted their exploitative British rulers and American business owners. In his stage directions, Tretyakov insisted on a generic, undifferentiated setting to suggest the universality of a conflict between Asians and Anglo-Americans, substituting banners and placards for elaborate scenery. (On no account, Tretyakov stated, should the setting depict an "exoticized" China of "fancifully curved roofs, little umbrellas, dragons, lanterns").<sup>758</sup>

*Roar, China!* offered an example of the universalization of transformative experience, beckoning to the masses through its use of "documentary attention to current events" and disposition of real-life props.<sup>759</sup> To E.E. Cummings, Dos Passos wrote that the play's themes and

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<sup>756</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 99.

<sup>757</sup> Christina Kiaer, "Delivered from Capitalism: Nostalgia, Alienation, and the Future of Reproduction in Tretyakov's *I Want a Child*," in *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Bringing the Revolution Home*, edited by Christine Kiaer and Eric Naiman (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 185.

<sup>758</sup> Sergei Tretyakov, *I Want a Baby and Other Plays*, translated by Robert Leach and Stephen Holland (London: Glagoslav Publications, 2019), 135.

<sup>759</sup> Christina Kiaer, "Delivered from Capitalism: Nostalgia, Alienation, and the Future of Reproduction in Tretyakov's *I Want a Child*," 185.

presentation could appeal as easily to Western audiences as to Russian.<sup>760</sup> The play's dramatic action showed the rising collective class consciousness reacting to efforts to "obliterate" traces of previous culture that supported class differences, here depicted in terms of subject labor.<sup>761</sup> Exchanges between representatives of East (in the form of workers and their self-appointed leaders) and West (British colonial governors and American capitalists) governed the play's dialogue and dramatized how revolutionary consciousness developed among a subjected population. In Christina Kiaer's assessment, Tretyakov's play "rejects traditional dramatic formulas for building emotion" through the development of plot.<sup>762</sup> Instead, the play's action was meant to provoke audience commentary by virtue of questions posed onstage.<sup>763</sup> Here Dos Passos found the revolutionary activity of which only echoes remained in Leningrad's "swept free [and] empty" imitations of Western architecture.<sup>764</sup> The form of the socialist collective implicated the entire theater space, normally reserved for spectators, into the staged activity of a mobilized group activated by class conflict into sweeping away old cultural and social standards in revolutionary modes "meant to astonish and electrify" the audience and "reproduce the stimulus" of the original event.<sup>765</sup> The nontraditional use of this space

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<sup>760</sup> John Dos Passos – E.E. Cummings [circa August 1928], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 386.

<sup>761</sup> Christina Kiaer, "Delivered from Capitalism: Nostalgia, Alienation, and the Future of Reproduction in Tretyakov's *I Want a Child*," 185.

<sup>762</sup> Christina Kiaer, "Delivered from Capitalism: Nostalgia, Alienation, and the Future of Reproduction in Tretyakov's *I Want a Child*," 184.

<sup>763</sup> Christina Kiaer, "Delivered from Capitalism: Nostalgia, Alienation, and the Future of Reproduction in Tretyakov's *I Want a Child*," 184.

<sup>764</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 283.

<sup>765</sup> Boris Wolfson, "Fear on Stage: Afinogenov, Stanislavsky, and the Making of Stalinist Theater," 110.



exemplified the revolution's reach into all social levels, while the staged activity showed masses "delivered from the consequences of capitalist possessiveness" of others' lives.<sup>766</sup>

Dos Passos described the "vitality" of Soviet theater, represented by his enthusiasm over *Roar, China!*, in two different ways. The play served both as an economic contrast between socialism and capitalism and as a vehicle for instructing audiences.<sup>767</sup> Any possibility of utilizing theater in "Americanizing Marx" had to combine the economic and aesthetic modes. Leftist intellectuals in the US proposed an experimental theater that stood in opposition to "commercial theater," which they considered "impossibly competitive, banal, and frivolous."<sup>768</sup> Dos Passos described a typical Soviet performance as commencing "without much formality" before proceeding on a stage "stripped of its decorations," in which "bright nervous spotlights point out the actors dogmatically, like the ferrule of a schoolteacher pointing out equations on a blackboard."<sup>769</sup> (His choice of simile denoted the pedagogical function of "didactic theater"). Experimental theater's pedagogical function relied on a visual aesthetic that made "the individual central" via "searchlights that for a moment make gigantic the drama of a single humble man."<sup>770</sup>

The bare stage correlated with Bolshevism's "urge to sweep away the ugliness of the past," while the instructive methodology of the staging, as Richard Stites observed, invited the audience "to demonstrate and celebrate solidarity in struggle" through a collective act of

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<sup>766</sup> Christina Kiaer, "Delivered from Capitalism: Nostalgia, Alienation, and the Future of Reproduction in Tretyakov's *I Want a Child*," 187-188.

<sup>767</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 308.

<sup>768</sup> Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams*, 253.

<sup>769</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 306.

<sup>770</sup> Linda W. Wagner, *Dos Passos: Artist As American*, 69; John Dos Passos, *Facing the Chair: The Story of the Americanization of Two Foreignborn Workmen* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970, reprint of 1927 edition), 124.

imagination.<sup>771</sup> The bare stage became identifiable with the personal goal of transformation, requiring an imaginative exercise the Bolsheviks coordinated with the “search for community,” as well as part of the era’s “architectural experimentation” centering on artistic movements that “replace[d] color and form by a void, sound by silence.”<sup>772</sup> Minimal set design required the audience to imagine material objects surrounding the actors. Just as *Roar, China!* concluded with questions posed to the audience as to “what would happen next,” Soviet plays in general required the audience to imagine future consequences.<sup>773</sup> Presenting a socialist future but permitting the audience to imagine the form this future would take actuated directors’ and playwrights’ desires to “transport” theme and message “outside the theater walls and reform society.”<sup>774</sup> “Outside the theater,” P.S. Kogan stated, “people are in slavery; [inside] they are powerful” through the use of imagination.<sup>775</sup> Beyond theatricality’s immediate source for innovative staging, however, lay the nexus of disclosure, class identification, and presentation of an “open” and visible society. Official Soviet discourse with Western visitors in no way disclaimed the relationship of entertainment, spectating, and surveillance that became highly developed in the show trials of the mid-Thirties. Theater and policing alike “promote[d] retroactive motivation” (as in bidding the audience to imagine the setting rather than providing a simulacrum with props, and requiring them to understand a play’s denouement in terms of

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<sup>771</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 231.

<sup>772</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 111, 69.

<sup>773</sup> Sergei Tretyakov, *I Want a Baby and Other Plays*, translated by Robert Leach and Stephen Holland (London: Glagoslav Publications, 2019), 135.

<sup>774</sup> James Von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals*, 9.

<sup>775</sup> P.S. Kogan, “The Theater as Tribune,” *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution In Soviet Russia, Part 2*, 135.

previous dramatic speeches) by treating the play's spectators as onstage characters and vice versa.<sup>776</sup>

Arriving in Russia at the very end of the New Economic Policy (NEP), Dos Passos encountered a period in which significant cultural debate as to whether anti-collectivist "behavior could be attributed to environmental factors – the remnants of capitalism and the petty bourgeois milieu" generated by NEP practices.<sup>777</sup> Wilson would note that not even Lenin had wholly succeeded in imposing a socialist economy but "allow[ed] capitalist commerce some further scope" during the NEP.<sup>778</sup> Instituted in 1921, the NEP intended to alleviate shortages of food and goods by permitting the existence of free markets, albeit while retaining party-state oversight. To many leftist intellectuals, the NEP undermined the Revolution's purpose, while also testing ideological commitment to international Bolshevism. This contemporary conflict informed subsequent analyses of theater-as-model in Dos Passos's essays on the subject.

The NEP defined a relationship of periphery to center that outlasted its temporary need and remained in place throughout Stalin's rule. For some Russians Dos Passos encountered, the NEP raised hopes that the planned economy soon would dash. A former "chef in aristocratic families" wanted "to open a small restaurant" of his own with the "little elegances" of the bourgeoisie as a means of acculturating the masses.<sup>779</sup> His wife confessed to Dos Passos, "I don't want you to think I'm against the revolution. It was necessary, but it's very hard."<sup>780</sup> The future "success" she envisioned contained a "little house in the European style," but she was

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<sup>776</sup> Boris Wolfson, "Fear on Stage: Afinogenov, Stanislavsky, and the Making of Stalinist Theater," 103.

<sup>777</sup> David L. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values*, 180.

<sup>778</sup> Edmund Wilson, "Shut Up That Russian Novel," *Literary Essays and Reviews of the 1920s & 30s*, 589.

<sup>779</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 286.

<sup>780</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 287.

“not enthusiastic” about the future under Stalinist rule.<sup>781</sup> On the other hand, NEP practices inhibited the economic growth that the planned economy would facilitate. “The village,” Dos Passos wrote, “needs seeds, clothing, agricultural implements, scientific knowledge, [and] contact with civilization” in exchange for “grain, potatoes, cabbages, [and] intelligent workers who will carry out the changing policies of the center.”<sup>782</sup> This utopian system was threatened by both ideological challenges posed by Bolshevik suspicions regarding accommodating a capitalist market to determining prices and environmental issues. A poor harvest in 1927-1928 caused inequities between agricultural prices and those of manufactured goods. A “shortage of consumer goods” resulted from a consequent slowdown of production in response to lesser demand when prices for grain plunged.<sup>783</sup> Support for the NEP collapsed in 1928, when the low grain yields impelled the collectivization of farms that began the following year to ensure sufficient agricultural production to meet the anticipated demands of industrialization.

For committed Bolsheviks the NEP represented a disagreeable compromise with the free market. Dos Passos used theater to double for the controversy and to explore the deforming pressures capitalism exerted on the writer.<sup>784</sup> Like the “confusion of aims” between avant-garde “art theater” technique and the necessity of raising capital that he experienced in the “American Left theater,” Dos Passos could not judge whether the NEP was a necessary concession to the market or presaged the return of capitalism, as some Bolsheviks feared.<sup>785</sup>

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<sup>781</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 286-287.

<sup>782</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 313.

<sup>783</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 72.

<sup>784</sup> Thomas Strychacz, *Modernism, Mass Culture, and Professionalism*, 132.

<sup>785</sup> John Dos Passos – Francis Faragoh and John Howard Lawson [circa March 1929], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 390; John Dos Passos – John Howard Lawson, 4 November 1937, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 513.

Many, to survive in NEP conditions, participated in the open market of selling “possessions [and] portable objects that had been the goal and prize of life.”<sup>786</sup> Because of ongoing shortages of consumer goods in 1927-1928, this traffic in myriad consumer products became an important secondary economy that helped resolve the lack of their production in the Soviet system. Since individual property did not exist officially under socialism, Dos Passos found determining whether such goods were “personal effects” sacrificed to purchase necessities, or objects purloined from bourgeois homes and sold for immediate profit, to be impossible.<sup>787</sup>

For Dos Passos, the “speculation” supporting and surrounding the “New York theater” analogized its standards with Westerners’ exploitation of the NEP’s transactional economy, a correlation quite consistent with the theme of *Roar, China!* In Bolshevik parlance, “speculation” denoted the “resale of goods with the intention of making a profit.”<sup>788</sup> Dos Passos reported how the NEP “open market” extracted hard currency from well-off Soviet officials and foreign visitors. “Only an occasional foreigner” ventured into the “back room” of speculators “to buy jewels to re-sell in Europe [or] furs or rugs that can be smuggled out of the country [and] are wafted away West in return for dollars and lire and English pounds.”<sup>789</sup> The elimination of these possessions became a symbolic act of clearing the stage of bourgeois enemies of Bolshevism and the goods that identified their class.

Reporters and travelers noted the licit nature of speculation, which only became criminalized in Soviet Russia in 1932, and served as potential consumers.<sup>790</sup> Journalists of the 1920s,

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<sup>786</sup> John Dos Passos, “In A New Republic,” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 58.

<sup>787</sup> John Dos Passos, “In A New Republic,” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 58.

<sup>788</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 250.

<sup>789</sup> John Dos Passos, “In A New Republic,” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 58-59.

<sup>790</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 239.

according to Richard Pipes, often took advantage of NEP open markets by using their foreign connections to do speculating and transshipment of jewels.<sup>791</sup> Speculation of this kind “corrupted” both the authenticity of journalistic accounts and socialist ideology.<sup>792</sup> Dos Passos noted that “foreign correspondents” used their press privileges to “buy furs and fake ikons” sold by haggling “speculators.” Their interest in supplies of these purchasable goods led them to report on the “disinherited” bourgeoisie and “intellectuals who found themselves in the wrong camp during the civil war,” rather than “get[ting] the news.”<sup>793</sup> To Dos Passos the compromise represented the corrupting influence of Western capitalism, as in the Leningrad “black market” where unofficial “speculators” would “change your dollars for rubles.”<sup>794</sup>

Contemporarily, there were fears the relaxed NEP economy presaged an increasing “bourgeois influence on morality.”<sup>795</sup> The free market gave a semblance of European *louche* to urban life. Actors and artists mingled in Leningrad cafes little different from the Parisian haunts of the “lost generation,” where “business men” would “assist you to buy a genuine antique ikon or a young lady’s recumbent halfhour [*sic*].”<sup>796</sup> Like the NEP system’s acceptance of bourgeois standards, capitalist theater depended on the commodification and profitable speculation on returns generated by “sexual excitement, adventure, cocktails, money.”<sup>797</sup> These “various forms of exhibitionism” ensured that such “sharp practices” would squeeze out any displays of

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<sup>791</sup> Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*, 233.

<sup>792</sup> Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*, 235.

<sup>793</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 305, 304, 303.

<sup>794</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 290.

<sup>795</sup> Christina Kiaer, “Delivered from Capitalism: Nostalgia, Alienation, and the Future of Reproduction in Tretyakov’s *I Want a Child*,” 188.

<sup>796</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 290.

<sup>797</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 306.

originality in presentation.<sup>798</sup> The “concealing consolation of eroticism [and] attractive idleness” enabled audiences “to feel themselves part of the imperial American procession towards money . . . that obsesses all their lives.”<sup>799</sup> While the Party regarded NEP compromises as an “attempt to reconcile the intelligentsia to Bolshevik power,” Dos Passos deplored the “grimy microcosm of the capitalist world” that resulted.<sup>800</sup>

The economic basis of experimental theater differentiated the Soviet experiment from its US capitalist model to the advantage of the former. Capitalist audiences, Dos Passos wrote, came to the theater not to participate and be transformed, but “to have others look at them with admiration and envy.”<sup>801</sup> Soviet theater, even pre-Revolution, had “never been a business,” and under Bolshevism became a “public service.”<sup>802</sup> Even the civil war had not interrupted the Russian theatrical tradition, he argued.<sup>803</sup> As much mass spectacle in 1920s Russia was designed for audiences with a relatively low literacy level, the visual appeal and dramatization of themes attracted Dos Passos in a manner that imitated the relationship of Bolshevik authority to the Soviet population. The “crowd still remains a participant in the performance” to “recognize themselves as a great, united whole.”<sup>804</sup>

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<sup>798</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 309, 305.

<sup>799</sup> P.S. Kogan, “The Theater as Tribune,” *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution In Soviet Russia, Part 2*, 134-135; John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 306.

<sup>800</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 290-291; Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*, 116.

<sup>801</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 306.

<sup>802</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 309.

<sup>803</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 307.

<sup>804</sup> P.S. Kogan, “Socialist Theater in the Time of the Revolution” (written 1919), in *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution In Soviet Russia, Part 2*, edited by William C. Rosenberg (Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 145-146.

As theaters were not motivated by profit, oversight within this hierarchy was mainly mutual and complementary. Dos Passos presented this oversight as the embodiment of socialism itself, in which all theaters regardless of size or prestige obtained “some say in the policies [and] the choice of directors and plays.”<sup>805</sup> Because a “central committee” under the aegis of the “Department of Education” headed Soviet theater (as it had the Narkompros delegation Dos Passos joined), pedagogy and transformation were integral to its purpose.<sup>806</sup> Official Soviet agencies such as Proletcult used educational theater as an opportunity “to introduce” their own types of “expressive culture.”<sup>807</sup> These smaller theaters trained both audiences and actors, producing the “germs of new theaters” and furnishing “the tryout grounds for new methods and ideas,” Dos Passos wrote.<sup>808</sup> As “the communalism of the experimental era was spontaneous [and] small in scale,” this hierarchical model performed the direct work of cultivating the new class of workers, such as the “Sanitary Propaganda Theater” operated by “fifteen to eighteenyearolds [sic],” “youngsters” Dos Passos saw “rehearsing” under the tutelage of their theater director.<sup>809</sup> The theatrical company itself originated among proletarians, who were “factoryworkers” in the daytime and “actors at night.”<sup>810</sup> As the name of the company implied, the subject matter they presented centered on the basic culture of hygiene, such as a “play about avoiding syphilis” and another “about cleaning your teeth.”<sup>811</sup> In their totality these playlets expressed the future-oriented message of early Stalinism by

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<sup>805</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 307.

<sup>806</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 309.

<sup>807</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 69.

<sup>808</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 308.

<sup>809</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 241; John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 304, 274.

<sup>810</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 273.

<sup>811</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 274.



depicting the customs of a “world that will stand up so bright and shining when the dark murky scaffolding of today’s struggle” had passed.<sup>812</sup> Watching a similar playlet on dental hygiene for children, Wilson was moved to wonder how many of their parents “ever had a toothbrush at all.”<sup>813</sup> In this regard, the theatrical structure abetted a cultural message that “did not present a snapshot of the future, but rather the path to it.”<sup>814</sup> The Sanitary Theater, for example, not only depicted proper hygienic procedures, but incorporated staged “sanitary trials” that imitated the intertwined “treatments” of “enlightened work in the form of labor” and mutual observance and exhortation.<sup>815</sup>

Dos Passos concluded that freedom from profit-driven capitalism encouraged “subsidiary studios” affiliated with the “big theaters” and gave all the “opportunity for experiment.”<sup>816</sup> Aesthetic experimentation and, ultimately, its broader, international appeal. The financial risk of “break[ing] with the past” inhibited American theater and encouraged its “memoryless” repetition of “vague traditions.”<sup>817</sup> Its capitalist bent limited importation of “methods” derived from “standards other than their own.”<sup>818</sup> Linking artistic “standards” to the “wornout motive” of “profit” prompted Dos Passos to inquire whether the “power of money” “diminished [the] power” of language through “machinemade” production and aggressive commodification of

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<sup>812</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 274.

<sup>813</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 278.

<sup>814</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 99.

<sup>815</sup> David L. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values*, 96.

<sup>816</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 308. This organizational model is substantiated by contemporary accounts: P.S. Kogan, “The Theater as Tribune,” 137, and Huntley Carter, “The Club and Factory Theaters,” 143.

<sup>817</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 308.

<sup>818</sup> John Dos Passos, letter to the *New York Times*, 18 April 1928, *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 111. Dos Passos enlarged on this view in his essay “They Want Ritzy Art”: “any play in the writing of which the author had a more serious aim than making money was highbrow or communistic . . . Authors mustn’t have opinions.” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 113.

language, and encouraged writers to market their work as “daydreams” or “sensation.”<sup>819</sup>

Russian theater remained cognizant of the historical staging of its antecedents, an “institution that was also] an organism with a memory,” for audiences still responded to productions that adhered faithfully to their “original productions.”<sup>820</sup>

Using the rhetoric of production to contrast capitalism with socialism explains Dos Passos’s enthusiastic appreciation of *Roar, China!* As a potential model for the montage form Dos Passos sought for his own work, the play dramatized the Marxist, rational basis of the Soviet system, in which “production” onstage had direct social results, rather than perpetuating the materialistic illusions of class that marred for Dos Passos the conventional “Broadway” play. In terms of Bolshevik class identity, theater brought the intelligentsia “writer” who was “standing around and watching other people do the work” into active involvement with an “engineer, or a mechanic, or a schoolteacher” participating in the Soviet project of “building socialism over one sixth of the world.”<sup>821</sup>

Dos Passos’s encounters with theater and film adumbrated subsequent impressions of the “new person” and the role of the intelligentsia in forming Soviet culture while downplaying its own suspect class origins. As Eisenstein and Tretyakov demonstrated, an intelligentsia identity could be redeemed through service to the party-state’s cultural efforts. By enlarging on Dos Passos’s efforts to assume a proletarian guise, these instances show that the Soviet state was not opposed to the integration of those of suspect class backgrounds into the socialist cause, as

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<sup>819</sup> John Dos Passos, “Introduction to *Three Soldiers*,” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 147, 146; John Dos Passos, “They Want Ritzy Art,” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 112.

<sup>820</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 307-308.

<sup>821</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 305, 302.

long as they evinced potential of reforming their alien status. As the example of Tretyakov would show by the time of Wilson's visit, the party-state appealed to writers to integrate themselves in the industrialization campaigns of the early 1930s. In part, as Jochen Hellbeck points out, this was an effort to establish a tutorial role between writers and the proletariat who were encouraged to chronicle their "new person" journey towards "culturedness."<sup>822</sup>

## THE "FAVORED CLASS" AND SOCIALIST REALISM

The Great Break of 1928-1931 signaled the onset of a "heroic age" in which, in the words of Sheila Fitzgerald, the Soviet nation embarked on an accelerated program to "transform itself" and produce "heroic personalities and feats."<sup>823</sup> In 1931, cultural commissar Anatoly Lunacharsky stated "the artist's task was not to describe what existed in the present but to disclose 'the inner essence of life, which comes out of proletarian goals and principles.'"<sup>824</sup> This cultural turn soon ended the "experimentation and contestation over the most appropriate ways to express" a "vision of future society transformed by collective spirit."<sup>825</sup> In presenting a "progressive face" of Soviet achievements, the genre of Socialist Realism attempted to depict how the future would appear by employing a more rigidly prescriptive aesthetic that "presented only the future . . . in the guise of the present."<sup>826</sup> In Thomas Lahusen's formulation

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<sup>822</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 170-171.

<sup>823</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 71.

<sup>824</sup> Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 105.

<sup>825</sup> Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 65; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Cultural Revolution In Russia, 1928-1931* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1978), 30.

<sup>826</sup> Gleb Struve, *Soviet Russian Literature 1917-1950*, 253-255; Thomas Lahusen, *How Life Writes The Book*, 26; Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 105.

of Socialist Realism the present was a “marker” of what the future would resemble, as well as of distanced traveled from “revolutionary development.”<sup>827</sup>

Socialist Realism was closely allied with fictive genres that “contained utopian aspects.”<sup>828</sup> Travel writing too would participate in presenting Soviet Russia “not as [it] currently existed but as [it] would exist at some unspecified time in the future.”<sup>829</sup> Accounts such as Dos Passos’s noted that “everywhere youth, slimness, a look of hope” predominated in Russia where old class identities had “withered away.”<sup>830</sup> In keeping with the “heroic status” accorded workers “who performed exceptional feats involving physical exertion,” public spectacles, owing to their length and duration often conflated cultural and spectator roles and became “instructive and demanding [of] energy and endurance.”<sup>831</sup> Cultural policy toward “evolving documentary genres to promote political goals” had already been discernible in *Roar, China!* and the historical films depicting the Revolution that Dos Passos saw in 1928.<sup>832</sup> In its factual reporting, Socialist Realism could draw criticism for its “varnishing of reality,” deploying what Dos Passos termed a “veneer of phrases” reproduced through mass culture.<sup>833</sup> The “influence of fixed ideas” derived from Stalinist ideology, Wilson stated, demonstrated not “a deliberately dishonest intent” of falsifying historical representation, but the collision of “misreading”

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<sup>827</sup> Thomas Lahusen, *How Life Writes The Book*, 26.

<sup>828</sup> Thomas Lahusen, *How Life Writes The Book*, 27; Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 51.

<sup>829</sup> Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 105.

<sup>830</sup> John Dos Passos, “The Caucasus Under the Soviets,” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 64.

<sup>831</sup> Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 244; Huntley Carter, “The Club and Factory Theaters,” in William C. Rosenberg, ed., *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution In Soviet Russia, Part 2*, 142.

<sup>832</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 196.

<sup>833</sup> Thomas Lahusen, *How Life Writes The Book*, 26; John Dos Passos – Robert Cantwell, 25 January 1935, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 465.

cultural signs with the political “tendency” of the author.<sup>834</sup> Soviet literary trends welcomed accounts of “objective reality,” and the writing of “facts,” in some official views, displaced the traditional plot-driven novel (again, presaged in *Roar, China!*).<sup>835</sup> Literary works essayed a combination of “actual characters and events [that] appear alongside fictitious people and events,” Aleksandr Fadeev stated, a method Dos Passos would use when he commenced work on *U.S.A.* the year following his Russian visit.<sup>836</sup> To some extent, tourism followed the same course, reproducing “official” pronouncements that often derived from the “words of Stalin” or phrases agreed upon through consultation with party leadership.<sup>837</sup> The Comintern invoked old class-based premises to dismiss “criticism” of these facts as “the result of . . . petty bourgeois background” among those opposing this form of “authoritarian thinking.”<sup>838</sup>

Just as Stalinist culture became centered on “the correct rendering of a specific social category” such as the proletarian New Person, acceptable Socialist Realist writing became preoccupied with the correct rendering of party-approved speech and slogans.<sup>839</sup> “Formulas,” Wilson stated, now governed literature in Soviet Russia.<sup>840</sup> “To a foreigner there is something a little pedantic in these efforts on the part of officials to prescribe to the writer what and how he shall write,” he observed.<sup>841</sup> This division between future perfection and present facts played out in expository writing of the Stalinist era, which

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<sup>834</sup> Edmund Wilson, “American Critics, Left and Right,” 523, 521.

<sup>835</sup> Edmund Wilson, “Letter to the Russians About Hemingway,” 501.

<sup>836</sup> Aleksandr Fadeev, letter to Andrei Zhdanov, quoted in Maksim Kazyuchits, “Sergei Gerasimov’s *The Young Guard*: Artistic Method and the Conflict of Discourses of History and Power,” *Studies In Russian & Soviet Cinema* 13:2 (May 2019), 165.

<sup>837</sup> Margaret Tupitsyn, “Gustav Klutssis: Scenarios of Authorial Pursuits,” *The Print Collector’s Newsletter* 22:5 (November-December 1991) 166.

<sup>838</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 248.

<sup>839</sup> Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 105.

<sup>840</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 214.

<sup>841</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 214.

either celebrated “positive heroes” as cultural models, or denounced sabotage and wrecking.<sup>842</sup> Wilson noted this formula impelled concealment of fact with ideology. As a reporter, he wrote, “I should be obliged to ignore or denounce any movement . . . in which the Communists didn’t have a finger.”<sup>843</sup> Further, Wilson said, he would be “forced to steer clear of almost as many forbidden regions and keep on the right side of almost as many delicate questions as if I were writing for the capitalist press.”<sup>844</sup>

Wilson encountered in the person of Sergei Tretyakov an example of how this cultural force reshaped both the life and work of a Soviet writer. *Roar, China!* showed how Tretyakov “had passed through futurism” and collectivist literary organs to become “one of the great champions of ‘fact literature’ as distinguished from ‘plot literature.’”<sup>845</sup> In the years after Dos Passos’s visit Tretyakov became an important functionary in VOKS and facilitated Wilson’s travels outside Moscow by incorporating them into his own “fact-gathering excursions” on behalf of the Writers’ Union.<sup>846</sup> The writings engendered by these visits gave Wilson a preview of the new Soviet novel, which according to Tretyakov would be “a matter of pure documentation.”<sup>847</sup> “The Soviet newspaper,” he declared to Wilson, “was the *War and Peace* of the present.”<sup>848</sup>

Broadly, works of Socialist Realism depicted New Persons in the form of characters (often workers, occasionally peasantry engaged in “modernization” endeavors such as farms or

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<sup>842</sup> Thomas Lahusen, *How Life Writes The Book*, 46.

<sup>843</sup> Edmund Wilson – *New Masses*, 22 March 1934, Edmund Wilson Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, box 51, folder 1373.

<sup>844</sup> Edmund Wilson – *New Masses*, 22 March 1934, Edmund Wilson Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, box 51, folder 1373.

<sup>845</sup> Edmund Wilson, “Letter to the Russians About Hemingway,” 501.

<sup>846</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 220.

<sup>847</sup> Edmund Wilson, “Letter to the Russians About Hemingway,” 501.

<sup>848</sup> Edmund Wilson, “Letter to the Russians About Hemingway,” 501.

seeking to reinvent themselves through interaction with the new industrial forces about them) liberated from the “burden of self-consciousness inculcated through past exploitation and deprivation,” and working so as to “understand the world [and] also to master it.”<sup>849</sup> Wilson connected the liberation from self-consciousness with demands for “concrete reporting” (as in Tretyakov’s “fact” novel) and a “literature [that presented] life more fully” promulgated at the All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in August 1934.<sup>850</sup> The 1934 Congress, Sheila Fitzpatrick stated, “combined conspicuous deference to high culture with an implicit reminder to intellectuals of their obligation to serve the Soviet state.”<sup>851</sup> The following year, the First Writers’ Congress in New York, to which both Dos Passos and Wilson were invited, “did not differ markedly from the imperatives laid down” in Russia, disclosing the close link between the American literary left and its Soviet model.<sup>852</sup> Only “reliable writers” were invited to participate, and Communist Party leadership of the Congress ensured its “domination.”<sup>853</sup>

As a result of political restructuring, the “innumerable schools of literary theory and practice [that] were formed, broken up, and regrouped along aesthetic, ideological, and political lines” in Soviet Russia prior to 1932 were “unified” in 1934 under the Writers’ Union in order to eliminate competition for state resources.<sup>854</sup> Wilson perceived in this agenda a “more general respect for art” that, by liberating writers from economic concerns promoted a “freer attitude

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<sup>849</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 71.

<sup>850</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 214.

<sup>851</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 96.

<sup>852</sup> Daniel Aaron, *Writers On the Left*, 283.

<sup>853</sup> Daniel Aaron, *Writers On the Left*, 284. The Congress was held 26-27 April, 1935. Dos Passos considered attending, but sent his essay “The Writer as Technician” to be read to the assembly: John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson, 27 March 1935, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 468; John Dos Passos – Malcolm Cowley, 28 May 1935, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 477. Wilson, about to depart for Russia, turned down his invitation: Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 27 April 1935, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 263.

<sup>854</sup> Deming Brown, “Dos Passos in Soviet Criticism,” 334, 337; Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 290.

toward technique.”<sup>855</sup> Recalling his 1929 statement concerning “the gifted individual,” he believed employment of the “positive hero” indicated an “official disposition to value men of artistic ability, irrespective of their political zeal, above writers who are merely politically regular.”<sup>856</sup> A “unified ideology and culture” that no longer required revolutionary art comported with Soviet declarations of “socialism achieved.”<sup>857</sup> “Consequently,” Marina Kanevskaya noted in regard to avant-gardism, “rejection of everyday life” and the new trend of documentation “became inappropriate.”<sup>858</sup>

As one of the more dominant media producing a shared culture, theater continued its pedagogical function by dramatizing heroic virtues that could be imitated.<sup>859</sup> “Plays are the art form we need most of all,” Stalin stated in 1932, “We must make our own plays.”<sup>860</sup> Writers who revised older plays, the Party cautioned, were obliged to conduct “careful research” so that any “improvisation” or alteration conformed to current discourse.<sup>861</sup> Works of socialist realism in fiction and theater merged ideological and aesthetic realms through “heroic personalities and feats” pitted against “the forces of nature.”<sup>862</sup> “Political and social discussion” of the mid-Thirties, according to James Von Geldern, “was redefined by the spectator-performer relationship.”<sup>863</sup> Conversely, failure to perform, whether in the workplace to fulfill quotas or to point out the failures of others, became stigmatized, a sign of lack of acculturation.

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<sup>855</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 213.

<sup>856</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 213.

<sup>857</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 122, 216.

<sup>858</sup> Marina Kanevskaya, “The Crisis of the Russian Avant-Garde in Iurii Olesha’s ‘Envy,’” 492.

<sup>859</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 291.

<sup>860</sup> A. Kemp-Welch, *Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia, 1928-1939* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1991), 129-130.

<sup>861</sup> P.S. Kogan, “Socialist Theater in the Time of the Revolution,” in Rosenberg, ed. *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution In Soviet Russia, Part 2*, 149.

<sup>862</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 71. Dos Passos in 1935 would criticize the use of literature and theater as “political force”: John Dos Passos - Matthew Josephson [6 February 1935], Yale University Library.

<sup>863</sup> James Von Geldern, “The Centre and the Periphery,” 194.



The result impressed Wilson as a form of ideological play-acting, in which “proletarians, though the favored class, are dictated to by a governing group.”<sup>864</sup> Wilson immediately perceived the expanded place of the didactic theater. Instead of instructing New Persons, the “popular play” of mid-Thirties Stalinism normally was “written to illustrate some new policy” enacted by the party-state.<sup>865</sup>

#### “FORMIDABLE LOOKING CLOSED DOORS”: WILSON AND THEATER, THE 1930S<sup>866</sup>

On May 23, 1935 Wilson arrived in Leningrad. Like Dos Passos, Wilson was struck by how consideration of the revolution had become an act of imagining the historical past.<sup>867</sup> His immersion in Soviet theater, however, left him even more impressed in certain respects than Dos Passos had been. As he visited theaters in Leningrad and, subsequently, Moscow, Wilson took in a great number of plays, as well as ballet, parades, and even an air show, and noted the “competition” existing between the two cities to outdo each other with spectacles.<sup>868</sup> “I’ve spent a good deal of time going to the theaters . . . and I have never seen such wonderful productions,” he wrote a friend in June.<sup>869</sup> He noted “great interest” in Chekhov because of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the writer’s birth, and reported “They are still packing them in with the Pushkin-Tchaikovsky operas.”<sup>870</sup> “I can’t remember ever witnessing . . . curtain calls so

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<sup>864</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels in Two Democracies*, 223.

<sup>865</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 224.

<sup>866</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 167.

<sup>867</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 283.

<sup>868</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 538. His journals suggest he viewed several dozen plays and at least one film, not all of which he related in *Travels*.

<sup>869</sup> Edmund Wilson - Louise Bogan [June 1935], *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 271.

<sup>870</sup> Edmund Wilson - Louise Bogan [late May 1935], *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 271; Edmund Wilson - Louise Bogan [circa June 1935], *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 271.

prolonged and enthusiastic,” he wrote after one performance.<sup>871</sup> In between, he visited both historical sites and new, model facilities, all conveying, as Nicholas Timasheff observed, “a spiritual vision . . . of national achievements surpassing those of any other nation.”<sup>872</sup> In all, Wilson noted an intentional theatrical ambience that showcased a future in which the “whole world [would be] fairly and sensibly run as Russia is now run.”<sup>873</sup>

The insistent theatricality of Soviet life Wilson perceived referred as much to its mutual, culturally-informed surveillance as to playgoing. “One arrives prepared for anything at the theater,” he related.<sup>874</sup> Socialist Realism’s “free” exposition of cultural discourse made personal behavior critical in terms of coordination with the mass, but also reduced and distanced this behavior to entertainment, a subject for spectators to judge. As Sheila Fitzpatrick observed, “channels of communication between ordinary people and the regime were embedded in complicated processes of surveillance and control.”<sup>875</sup> Since all Soviet public space was a stage, every action was scrutinized and subjected to “extrajudicial” judgment that opened the performance to critiques by both “secret police” and the general population.<sup>876</sup> Viewing theatrical productions employed “close observation” of the construction of Soviet culture, but also penetrated into the relationship between spectatorship and secrecy. The “forms of public

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<sup>871</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 163.

<sup>872</sup> Nicholas Timasheff, *The Great Retreat*, 13-14.

<sup>873</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels in Two Democracies*, 210; Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 536; Edmund Wilson, *The American Earthquake*, 310.

<sup>874</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 173.

<sup>875</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 166.

<sup>876</sup> David L. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917-1941* (Ithaca NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), 180-181.

show” made Soviet Russia “a kind of political spectacle state” in which all activity and behavior was open to view.<sup>877</sup>

The subject of plays as cultural signs, rather than as technical models for American counterparts, primarily occupied Wilson’s attention. In general, he believed “the theater of any place and age has been stamped by the interests and purposes of the society” comprising its audience.<sup>878</sup> The “passing of the pageantry of the Church” combined with Marx’s “scientific view of history” that informed Soviet governance made theater “more important” to Soviet development.<sup>879</sup> The state’s “lavish expenditure on the theater” compensated “for the meagerness of some aspects of [Russians’] lives.”<sup>880</sup> This view correlated with those of the Bolshevik directors of small-scale theater, who also cultivated an evolutionary model of theater and spectacle as replacement for ecclesiastic ritual. “Both,” one theater worker wrote in 1924, “have a religious aspect, one of orthodox Christianity, the other of communistic faith.”<sup>881</sup> On his first night in Russia, Wilson ventured to the opera, where he was immediately exposed to the norms of Soviet acculturation. Verdi’s *Otello* was the production, but Wilson was more “impressed by [the] audience” and its “enthusiasm.”<sup>882</sup> In the lobby stood a statue of Lenin, a counterpart to the larger one outside the Finland Station with “the hand extended as if he were

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<sup>877</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 228.

<sup>878</sup> Edmund Wilson, “The Classics on the Soviet Stage,” 498.

<sup>879</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 212.

<sup>880</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 173.

<sup>881</sup> Huntley Carter, “The Club and Factory Theaters,” in *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution In Soviet Russia, Part 2*, edited by William C. Rosenberg (Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 141.

<sup>882</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 534-535.

at once giving the worker what they had made and opening out the future to humanity,” which gave Wilson his initial apprehension of the “impress of Lenin” upon the nation.<sup>883</sup>

Socialist Realist themes of endurance, self-sacrifice, and publicly-displayed reward were immediately perceptible to Wilson. On his second day in Leningrad, in company with Valentin Stenich, Wilson attended the premiere of Alexei Tolstoy’s revised version of *Peter the First*. The premiere was an “official” spectacle, publicizing Tolstoy’s redemption and reception as “about [Soviet Russia’s] best writer.”<sup>884</sup> Tolstoy was honored at the premiere, seated alongside the President of the Leningrad Soviet amongst “writers [who] attended in a body” by “invitation in [a] special section” of the opulent “gold-and-white theater.”<sup>885</sup> When Wilson asked during the performance whether “there wasn’t a political significance” to the play, Stenich informed him, “certain historical parallels” existed between the tsar’s era and contemporary Russia.<sup>886</sup> These historical parallels, according to other contemporary sources, extended beyond the Petrine period: when the play had debuted, critics drubbed its presentation, and its author was “castigated up to the early Thirties.”<sup>887</sup> Tolstoy’s authorial reputation was restored only when he rewrote the play and “edited [it] to accord with the Party line” and thereby achieved his own rehabilitation.<sup>888</sup> Stalin “identified his own labors on behalf of Russia” with Tolstoy’s depiction of a heroic Peter, with the latter “making the people learn to dance just as the present administration is,” Wilson noted.<sup>889</sup> He observed that the staging heightened Peter’s “tragic

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<sup>883</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 535, 576.

<sup>884</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 173; Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 540.

<sup>885</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 540.

<sup>886</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 540.

<sup>887</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Cultural Revolution In Russia*, 56.

<sup>888</sup> Alexander Barmine, *One Who Survived: The Life Story of a Russian Under the Soviets*, 298.

<sup>889</sup> Alexander Barmine, *One Who Survived: The Life Story of a Russian Under the Soviets*, 298; Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 174.

grandeur” by isolating him through the use of lighting from the “dancers who had to enjoy themselves by command.”<sup>890</sup> One key psychological moment showed Peter, after ordering the execution of his son, undergoing self-interrogation, exclaiming “I can’t execute everyone!”<sup>891</sup> In the play’s denouement, which fascinated Wilson, Peter was left an isolated figure despite his willing sacrifice, while others continued to dance in silhouette behind him. Having sacrificed to build Russia, Peter’s stage characterization modeled Soviet concepts of leadership: personal and private relationships had to be eliminated or rebuilt.

A case of misidentification marred Wilson’s next visit to the theater, which he made in the company of a number of “Eisenstein’s boys,” young assistants to the illustrious director.<sup>892</sup> Expecting to see “*Esmeralda* in the evening” (a stage adaptation of the Dumas novel *La dame aux camellias*), Wilson was perplexed when “instead of a Paris salon, the curtain revealed the deck of a ship” and “C[amille]’s lovers began swarming” onstage attired as sailors.<sup>893</sup> “It turned out,” Wilson wrote in his journal, this was not *Esmeralda* but a performance of “The Optimistic Tragedy” by Vsevolod Vishnevsky, staged by Alexander Tairov.<sup>894</sup> *The Optimistic Tragedy* provided yet another example of current Soviet theater’s use of actual historical incident, for the action was based on an uprising in the Baltic Fleet during the Civil War. *Esmeralda*, on the other hand, remained faithful to its source, which convinced Wilson “the period of extravagant Marxist distortion seems to be pretty well over.”<sup>895</sup>

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<sup>890</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 174.

<sup>891</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 174.

<sup>892</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 537.

<sup>893</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 172; Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 542.

<sup>894</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 542.

<sup>895</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 173.

On May 26 Wilson took in “Meyerhold’s new version” of Pushkin’s *The Queen of Spades*, a text Wilson knew but “had never appreciated before” seeing the director’s innovative staging.<sup>896</sup> He was briefly introduced to Dmitri Shostakovich during the performance.<sup>897</sup> Such ready reception suggested to him the approachability of cultural figures who “shared the revolutionary experiences of his generation.”<sup>898</sup> (Within eight months, Shostakovich would be the subject of an “anti-formalist” denunciation of his work as being too avant-garde in its “intentional repudiation of classical principles” the regime increasingly favored).<sup>899</sup> Wilson found Meyerhold’s presentation of the theme of using the “will” “to cheat on the rules of life” both “disturbing and fascinating.”<sup>900</sup> Going “to bed full of Pushkin,” he chose the next day to compel his Intourist guide to conduct him to the Pushkin Museum before continuing on to the Revolutionary Museum.<sup>901</sup>

A week later, on June 1, Wilson viewed a repertory company’s version of *Romeo and Juliet*, textually rewritten with a “light tone” so as not to “encourage excessively romantic love” among the impressionable Komsomol in the audience, and which “brought laughs” when staged.<sup>902</sup> Similar to the presentation of Peter’s love for his son prior to the sacrifice of the latter in *Peter the Great*, romantic love was “an auxiliary ingredient in the plot” of Socialist Realist works, important only in impelling the hero to fulfilling tasks and “attaining

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<sup>896</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 542.

<sup>897</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 542.

<sup>898</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 542.

<sup>899</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 296-297; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*, 184, 187-188. The denunciation, appearing as a critique of Shostakovich’s “Lady Macbeth” in January 1936, led to virtual excommunication of the composer from the Soviet arts scene.

<sup>900</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 177.

<sup>901</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 543.

<sup>902</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 552, 551.

consciousness.”<sup>903</sup> While the language itself was not rewritten, Wilson derided its acting style as “Shakespeare for the Komsomol.”<sup>904</sup> The Socialist Realist approach was not confined to onstage action, for Wilson stated the performance, though “containing much more vitality” than New York productions, was “the longest I’ve ever sat through,” running five hours.<sup>905</sup>

Three days later Wilson went to see a production of Ostrovsky’s *Talents and Admirers*. Like *Peter the Great*, *Talents and Admirers* had undergone revision, this time by unknown hands.<sup>906</sup> Through conversation Wilson “learned later that the ending . . . had been changed – the student had originally shot himself,” in order to delete a theme of class warfare.<sup>907</sup> The play now ended with a “revolutionary speech” in which the hero “justifies himself and his work.”<sup>908</sup> Cultural authorities were reclaiming plays discarded by Bolsheviks who tried to “cut off [the] past,” Wilson noted, but in redeeming this cultural heritage the text itself often was altered.<sup>909</sup>

The theme of heroic endurance informed Aleksandr Korneichuk’s play *Platon Krechet*, which Wilson saw later in July. Like several of the foregoing plays, *Platon Krechet* attempted to explain current cultural trajectories through dramatic action. The play had been running since “the day after Stalin’s speech to the graduates of the Red Army Academy [in May], and which was supposed to give a practical application of the new line there laid down.”<sup>910</sup> Wilson’s notes

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<sup>903</sup> Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985, reprint of 1981 edition), 182.

<sup>904</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 550.

<sup>905</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 551, 567-568; Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 191.

<sup>906</sup> The play debuted in 1881; Ostrovsky died in 1886.

<sup>907</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 552; Edmund Wilson – Helen Muchnic, 9 February 1943, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 377.

<sup>908</sup> Edmund Wilson, “The Classics on the Soviet Stage,” *Literary Essays of the 1920s and 30s*, 497.

<sup>909</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 558.

<sup>910</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels in Two Democracies*, 247.

indicated the many ways *Platon Krechet* epitomized Stalinist culture through portraying competition, albeit through characters “free of class and social antagonism.”<sup>911</sup> Wilson discerned notable references to themes of social building and personal “new cultivation.”<sup>912</sup> Platon, the doctor-protagonist, loved a girl also courted by an architect. The doctor was commanded to take charge of an emergency operation, but despite being “on the verge of emotional collapse from nervous strain” managed to save an official’s life and was rewarded with both the hand of the girl and “two months’ vacation” for his service.<sup>913</sup> “This play,” Wilson observed, “represents in many ways a departure” from earlier themes: for example, the antagonist, once defeated, is not sent to “hard labor” but “transferred,” and “acknowledge[d] how badly he has behaved” before “announc[ing] that he is leaving the past behind and embarking on a new and nobler life.”<sup>914</sup> The play concluded with a collective dance in which “everybody is urged to enjoy himself.”<sup>915</sup>

*Platon Krechet* embodied for Wilson the “new ideal of all-around human development” present in Soviet Russia.<sup>916</sup> The hero, though admitting to “nervous strain and overwork,” rose above himself and saved the life of another.<sup>917</sup> This theme of transcending one’s past limitations and personal weakness informed another play Wilson viewed, Nikolai Pogodin’s *Aristocrats*, in which “pickpockets, monks, prostitutes and bourgeois saboteurs” were

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<sup>911</sup> Jesse Gardiner, “No Conflict on the Stage: The Theory of *Beskonfliktnosk’* In Postwar Soviet Drama,” *The Russian Review* 77:3 (July 2018), 428.

<sup>912</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 249.

<sup>913</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 248.

<sup>914</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 250.

<sup>915</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 248-249. The “dance” envoi to the staged action was also present in *Peter the Great*.

<sup>916</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 249.

<sup>917</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 248.



“reformed” through work on the White Sea Canal.<sup>918</sup> The canal project, as Michael David-Fox and Julie Draskoczy have noted, was one of many “showcase models for rehabilitation” shown to travelers that promoted a narrative of “the possibility of reforming.”<sup>919</sup> The “wonders” of a “big piece of construction” acted as transformative catalysts.<sup>920</sup> Wilson noted how the “bourgeois” protagonist “would search his conscience” as to “whether he has been working for the Soviets or simply because he was interested in engineering.”<sup>921</sup> At the play’s end, even the saboteurs and ideological deviationists sentenced to labor celebrated the self-transformation wrought through their collective work.<sup>922</sup>

Wilson’s summaries of Soviet plays offered concise examples of the messages encoded within cultural presentations, but also displayed the pervasiveness of the dialectic between seen and unseen in the politicized Soviet life. Wilson noted, for example, the use of light and shadow in *Peter the First* to conceal onstage actors.<sup>923</sup> The play depicted unseen self-sacrifice, while the rehabilitation of its author was a public presentation that placed recognition in the realm of cultural rewards. A number of plays Wilson saw dramatized the contemplation necessary to refashioning the self, and at least three provided examples of authorial revamping to highlight moments of redemption. Such rewriting also served the purpose of redeeming authors such as Tolstoy and Ostrovsky and demonstrated that, no matter how illustrious their reputations, the artistic integrity of their works was not immune from oversight necessary to

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<sup>918</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 245.

<sup>919</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 130; Julie Draskoczy, “The ‘Put’ of *Perekovka*,” 32.

<sup>920</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 245.

<sup>921</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 245-246.

<sup>922</sup> See Vera Laska, Review of Cynthia A. Ruder, *Making History for Stalin: The Story of the Belomor Canal*, *International Journal on World Peace*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (June 1988), 91.

<sup>923</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 174.

accommodate current cultural demands. At the same time, many plays often ended with mass, choreographed celebration of the “new life” granted to characters, the dominant “rebirth” motif of Socialist Realism.

#### “WORKING FOR THE FUTURE”: THE “CLEAN BRIGHT PLACE” OF THE FACTORY<sup>924</sup>

The investigation and description of model facilities is co-extensive of the Socialist Realist doctrine of writing the future into the present. Like the theater, cultural showcases and models exhibited the “proletarian culture” of the future, while also functioning as areas of observation and speculation necessary to ensuring that future came to realization.<sup>925</sup> The prominence of both factory and theater as Soviet projects attests to their mutual importance in celebrating what Richard Stites termed the “culture of the machine and the factory.”<sup>926</sup> The nominal function of these facilities was to educate the workforce through application of new scientific-based methods for industrial production, but a significant secondary function was stagecraft and the imposition of control and surveillance of social behaviors. The “heroes” of Socialist Realism not only were celebrated through theatrical dramatization of outstanding personal qualities, but provided a means of exhibiting how the “reformation of society” combined “individual freedom with social necessity” by urging citizens to put their immediate needs aside

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<sup>924</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 263; Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 572. Wilson knowingly appropriated and altered the title of Hemingway’s story “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” substituting for the story’s café setting the factory as new site of community under Stalinism.

<sup>925</sup> Dos Passos drew on this concept in his play *Airways Inc.*, in which a “model city of the future” is proposed against an industrial backdrop: *Three Plays: The Garbage Man, Airways Inc., Fortune Heights* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1934), 82.

<sup>926</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 149.

in order to inspect and display this reformation process, a significant theme in both *Platon Krechet* and *Aristocrats*.<sup>927</sup>

A pair of factories outside Leningrad that Dos Passos and Wilson visited comprised noteworthy examples of how the Soviet regime used industry as a showplace of the cultivation of workers. In Richard Stites' view, the "leveling collectivism" envisaged by social utopians in Russia placed workers "under the authority not of the party but of machinery itself," so that industry became a performance space for the New Person.<sup>928</sup> Stites stated that Soviet desires for modernization and "Americanization" of work and social space led the party-state to implement the methods of Frederick W. Taylor and Henry Ford (both figures Dos Passos would denigrate for profiting from mass production in his 1936 novel *The Big Money*) that correlated mechanized "precision, continuity,...and standardization" with cultural efforts toward "righteousness, hygiene, education [and] industrial competence."<sup>929</sup> Strict time management and standardization of labor would bring about the democratization of society initially envisioned by the Bolsheviks, and would assist in constructing impressions of Soviet Russia as a superior model to its capitalist antecedents.<sup>930</sup> Soviet engineers heralded the "need [for] factories to refine people," to "root out uncouthness and ignorance, [and] change ourselves [to] become worthy of a better life."<sup>931</sup> The visibility of the workforce within factory interiors

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<sup>927</sup> P.S. Kagan, "The Theater as Tribune," in Rosenberg, ed. *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution In Soviet Russia, Part 2*, 136-137.

<sup>928</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 151.

<sup>929</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 148, 146.

<sup>930</sup> Julie Draskoczy, "The 'Put' of Perekovka," 38.

<sup>931</sup> I.I. Marshak, *New Russia's Primer: The Story of the Five-Year Plan*, translated by George S. Counts and Nucia P. Lodge (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1931), 158.

was complemented by their use as models prompted by Socialist Realist imperatives to “transport a bit of the future into the present.”<sup>932</sup>

At the time of Dos Passos’s visit, the Leningrad Krasnyi Putilovets factory (commonly known as Red Putilov) was Russia’s principle supplier of railroad cars, tractors, locomotives, and industrial machinery. Already over a century old, Red Putilov underwent reorganization in 1926 and was “celebrated for the radicalism of its workforce.”<sup>933</sup> The factory’s prominence was important to Bolsheviks shaping Soviet Russia through a break with past conditions and to the tutelary function of reforming the nation through labor.<sup>934</sup> The Red Putilov factory was “more like going through a college than a mill,” Dos Passos wrote; “everybody you talk to is lively and hopeful, [and] talks about studying engineering, literature, languages.”<sup>935</sup> Visitors were “shown through the locomotive works,” but discourse was dominated not by the factory itself or its output, but by what the workers were “starting to build.”<sup>936</sup> The anticipated expansion of Red Putilov’s facilities and its workforce manifested Soviet aspirations toward future perfection. Factory representatives showed Dos Passos where “across the road in towards the city rows on rows of new interesting looking comfortable white dwellings [were] going up.”<sup>937</sup> “The ground is levelled,” a guide informed Dos Passos.<sup>938</sup> In the Bolshevik lexicon, “leveling” carried class and

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<sup>932</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 158.

<sup>933</sup> Jonathan Grant, *Big Business in Russia: The Putilov Company in Late Imperial Russia, 1868-1917* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999), 21-22. Red Putilov was renamed to honor Sergei Kirov after his assassination, but regained its original designation after 1991.

<sup>934</sup> Julie Draskoczy, “The ‘Put’ of *Perekovka*,” 38.

<sup>935</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 290.

<sup>936</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 290.

<sup>937</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 290.

<sup>938</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 290.

social meaning that supplemented its topographical application, denoting “the newer conceptions of social class which developed in the urban industrial environment.”<sup>939</sup>

Within a few years, “leveling” would acquire a further definition, when in 1931 Stalin ended the Bolshevik practice of “wage ‘leveling’” and instituted “pay differentials between skilled and unskilled work.”<sup>940</sup> The new policy reinforced a system of reward and inspection in which wage “‘equalization’ was condemned” in favor of payment linked to “each unit of output” as measured by a supervisory level within the factory and imposed through central planning.<sup>941</sup> The close proximity of industrial plants and new worker housing commencing construction in 1928 indicated the watchful relationship of the plant to domestic life that would become a feature of the centrally-directed economy.<sup>942</sup>

Contemporary Soviet debate concerning the form of the “socialist city” to come prompted Dos Passos’s positive remarks about the relationship of factory to new housing for an expanding workforce. Some officials, such as Lazar Kaganovich, the Secretary of the Central Committee, argued that the city of the future would be socialist simply by virtue of its siting within a politically defined nation.<sup>943</sup> The “essence of the planned socialist city,” James H. Bater stated, lay in its provision of space to “accommodate” growth of both population and individual cultural needs.<sup>944</sup> These needs influenced spatial organization of both industrial and cultural sites in order to expose citizens to an environment productive of self-transformation. The

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<sup>939</sup> Julie Draskoczy, “The ‘Put’ of *Perekovka*,” 38; Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 104.

<sup>940</sup> Wendy Z. Goldman, *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin*, 31.

<sup>941</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 204.

<sup>942</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 290.

<sup>943</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 150.

<sup>944</sup> James H. Bater, *The Soviet City: Ideal and Reality*, 30.

“parallel development of industry and housing” focused workers’ energy on production, not on traveling or domestic life, in order to “generate a sense of community” distinct from that centered on family.<sup>945</sup>

The exigencies of industrial growth led many young people to abandon family or tribal communities for urban centers. The Soviet ideology producing the New Person embraced the idea of renouncing old ties to form a new society. Bolsheviks who “expected the family to disappear” within a few decades of the Revolution used the labor needs of industry to accustom workers to think of the factory in terms of a “social family.”<sup>946</sup> As David Greenstein discussed in his analysis of the influence of Ford on Soviet industry, the private and personal life of workers disappeared in service to the industrial plant as “broad aspects of their lives” became reshaped to create a “homogenous [and] efficient workforce capable of performing routinized tasks.”<sup>947</sup> Soviet adaptation of “Fordism” extended to the provision of literacy classes, technical training, and of course the proletarian theater Dos Passos witnessed.<sup>948</sup> Contrarily, old folkways had to be discarded. In Moscow, Dos Passos noted that “authorities frowned on” the “performance” of folk song and dance by newcomers to the city.<sup>949</sup>

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<sup>945</sup> James H. Bater, *The Soviet City: Ideal and Reality*, 24; Julie Draskoczy, “The ‘Put’ of *Perekovka*,” 31.

<sup>946</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 8-9.

<sup>947</sup> David E. Greenstein, “Assembling *Fordizm*: The Production of Automobiles, Americans, and Bolsheviks in Early Soviet Russia,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56:2 (April 2014),” 262.

<sup>948</sup> As Dos Passos stated of Ford in *U.S.A.*, “The same ingenuity that went into improving the performance of a machine could go into improving the performance of the workmen.” John Dos Passos, *U.S.A.*, 809. See also Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 20; and Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 148, for analysis of Ford’s presence in Soviet efforts to “catch up” to US production standards; and David E. Greenstein, “Assembling *Fordizm*,” 270, a more extensive study of the Soviet regime’s attempts to improve upon Ford’s methods of adapting an unskilled, largely rural in origin, workforce to the timed production standards of industrial labor.

<sup>949</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 303.

At several points in “Russian Visa” Dos Passos reported interactions with workers who left family and social connections in outlying regions to venture to urban centers. A few, such as Nikolai Semyonovich distanced themselves from family because of suspect ties to the old bourgeois intelligentsia, but the majority left family for travel and education, purposes similar to Dos Passos’s own. A Kirghiz worker in Leningrad told Dos Passos he and his brother “left the tent of their fathers [and] their herd . . . to find out about the world and the revolution,” the cultural effect of which “was just beginning to reach” those in distant areas<sup>950</sup> Both men appreciated the “contact with civilization” resulting from the move, and the worker’s brother had become a Party member “and was studying at the university.”<sup>951</sup>

In Stephen Kotkin’s estimation, the socialist city denied, as did Soviet society, “any possibility of pluralism” because class struggle left only “one class, the proletariat, universal.”<sup>952</sup> Those recently arrived from remote Soviet republics and “gypsies” were subjects of “reform.”<sup>953</sup> “The government kept interfering . . . trying to induce the young men to work in factories,” Dos Passos related.<sup>954</sup> Admitting that he was a “frustrated architect,” Dos Passos was fascinated by the confluence of “architecture, geography, and sociology” in the new communities of the Soviet experiment.<sup>955</sup> He approved of the utopian possibilities of the “socialist city” as an alternative to the organization of space mimetic of the labor-capital power dynamic. This

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<sup>950</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 284.

<sup>951</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 313, 284.

<sup>952</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 151.

<sup>953</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 303.

<sup>954</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 303.

<sup>955</sup> John Dos Passos, “Contemporary Chronicles,” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 238; Adam R. McKee, “‘Kerist I Wish I Was A Skyscraper’: John Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer*, Skyscrapers, and the Predatory Modern City,” *Journal of Urban Cultural Studies* 5:1 (March 2018), 60.

utopian bent focused on the workplace as a site where “social equity and considerations of hygiene dictated” planning, watchfulness, and time management.<sup>956</sup> In his description of worker housing to come, Dos Passos stressed both identity and individuality as utopian goals. The relation of domestic to factory space further emphasized the “centrality of labor in personal identity” to future fulfillment of the Soviet experiment.<sup>957</sup> Capitalism’s commodification of housing – the theme of Dos Passos’s contemporaneous play *Airways Inc.* – suffered in comparison with Soviet aims.<sup>958</sup> The play dramatized the “industrialized warfare” of private space and capitalist speculation by juxtaposing the degradation of the protagonist’s family’s housing with the “bright future” promised by the planned development represented in the play’s title that would replace the family home.<sup>959</sup> As Stephen Kotkin pointed out, Soviet socialism regarded worker housing as a right, not a site of speculation and profiteering.<sup>960</sup> In the 1930s, Soviet housing became regulated and apportioned along “rational” lines of “health and sanitary standards” evolved from industry.<sup>961</sup>

In his essay “The Writer as Technician” Dos Passos drew on his tour of Red Putilov to identify centralized supervision as antithetical to the personal freedom of technician, writer, and scientist to experiment. The “industry of the printed word,” Dos Passos wrote, “has reached its high point in profusion and wealth” through submission to the techniques of the “conveyor factory system,” leading to mass reproduction of phraseology.<sup>962</sup> The laborer or writer, “though

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<sup>956</sup> James H. Bader, *The Soviet City: Ideal and Reality*, 28.

<sup>957</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 150.

<sup>958</sup> Melvin Landsberg, *Dos Passos’ Path To U.S.A.*, 147. Landsberg points out *Airways Inc.*, though not performed until 1929, had been published in 1928 while Dos Passos was in Russia.

<sup>959</sup> Melvin Landsberg, *Dos Passos’ Path To U.S.A.*, 147.

<sup>960</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 158-159.

<sup>961</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 159.

<sup>962</sup> John Dos Passos, “The Writer as Technician,” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 169.



the mechanical means in his power are growing,” was increasingly pressed by “political partisanship” to comport himself under the “police power” of a supervisory class overseeing “collective undertakings.”<sup>963</sup> Under Stalinism rose a class of managerial supervisors who, much like their contemporaries in VOKS and Intourist, reproduced official language and interpreted everyday life and culture through this language. These supervisors exhorted workers to meet production quotas while eliminating “wreckers” who did not keep up. This further isolated the unproductive through denial of any private space or time obtainable in the positive realizations of the socialist city (such as improved housing). The self-transformative pressure reduced socialist workers to the same condition as their capitalist counterparts, whom Dos Passos termed “steel automatons” subservient to production schedules and “machine-made” pace.<sup>964</sup>

As both Stephen Kotkin and Richard Stites observed, however, Soviet culture glorified the machine and regarded the “automaton” worker as an emblem of modernity, not a sign of industrialism’s dehumanization. Stites pointed to Soviet culture’s emphasis on “self-regulation” in examples such as Lenin’s “commune state” as “the ultimate version of the technocratic society.”<sup>965</sup> To Wilson, the rational coordination of “art and science” in Soviet factories humanized and redeemed “mechanical inventions” toward the end result of “improv[ing] the general human condition.”<sup>966</sup> Not only did the idea of “home space” become subjugated to production space, but workers’ own bodies would overcome their physical “backwardness” through Taylorized management of movement and gesture, and become “self-correcting

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<sup>963</sup> John Dos Passos, “The Writer as Technician,” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 170.

<sup>964</sup> John Dos Passos, *Three Plays: The Garbage Man, Airways Inc., Fortune Heights*, 142.

<sup>965</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 151.

<sup>966</sup> Edmund Wilson – Allen Tate, 20 July 1931, *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 211.

machines.”<sup>967</sup> (Dos Passos captured the latter theme in a set of backdrops he painted for the NPT production of Paul Sifton’s 1927 play *The Belt*, in which workers are shown in identical, contorted postures along an assembly line, rendering them visual complements to mass production’s “professional deformation” of workers and technicians).<sup>968</sup> Soviet “intellectuals and technical personnel . . . revered a system of efficient production,” Stites noted in his analysis of Henry Ford’s influence upon Russian modernization, mainly because Ford’s methods appealed to those who wished to integrate production and social conditions into a single utopian path to progress.<sup>969</sup> Socialist Realism frequently deployed metal-related metaphors to describe the process of refashioning the proletariat within an industrial setting.<sup>970</sup>

It is possible in looking at Dos Passos’s report on Red Putilov to see how the Soviet narrative inflected the impressions of foreign visitors by proffering an alternative to capitalism and how this narrative shaped the overall structure of *In All Countries*, which was composed of essays written over a six-year period (1927-1933). A prevalent view connecting Bolshevism to Stalinism defined socialism as “qualitatively different” from capitalism, in that capitalism during the interwar period signified to the Soviet population not “wealth and freedom, but poverty and exploitation.”<sup>971</sup> Provision of new factories and housing progressed in concert with state administration of personal space, and “afforded [the population] the means to acquire a niche” during their construction by urging workers to think principally of the future they were building.<sup>972</sup> Throughout *In All Countries* Dos Passos juxtaposed

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<sup>967</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 152.

<sup>968</sup> John Dos Passos, “Whom Can We Appeal To?” *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 132. Sketches for these backdrops are reproduced as illustration XXIV in the plates for *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, edited by Townsend Ludington; although Dos Passos painted them in color, the plates offer only black-and-white images.

<sup>969</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 149.

<sup>970</sup> Julie Draskoczy, “The ‘Put’ of *Perekovka*: Transforming Lives at Stalin’s White Sea-Baltic Canal,” 41.

<sup>971</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 153.

<sup>972</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 153.

models of the utopian aspect of the Soviet experiment (which led the book) with the “irrational” and unhealthy living conditions under US capitalism. These included the rundown home of miners in Kentucky “where the floor had caved in,” the Detroit “flophouse” situated in “one of the unused buildings of the Fisher Body Plant,” and the “citizens of Hooverville” living beneath the “veneer” of the “American standard.”<sup>973</sup> Both Dos Passos and Wilson noted that Russian intellectuals persistently questioned them about American social conditions through the lens of housing and labor in order to assert Soviet superiority.<sup>974</sup> Soviet guides blamed capitalism for the inequity of living conditions among exploited groups, such as Appalachian miners or African Americans, and asserted Soviet superiority. When replying to these assertions, Wilson often invoked the “more rational base” of Soviet industrialism’s focus on cultivating its labor force over “American business” and its exploitation.<sup>975</sup>

In the 1930s, industrial work became “theatricalized” around “work stimulation” exemplified by overachievers by taking advantage of the “self-correcting machine” envisioned by utopian Bolsheviks. Official statements declared that the system of rewards was necessary “to prove that traditional approaches to production were inadequate for the challenges of socialist construction.”<sup>976</sup> As “shockwork, spurts of heroic labor performed in headlong fashion” took precedence over “order, efficient management, and detailed training,” Stalin “upset” existing labor relations “from below” at the managerial and supervisory level.<sup>977</sup> Older structures of organized labor were dissolved “in the regime’s efforts to achieve higher productivity, with the

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<sup>973</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 383, 386, 412.

<sup>974</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 154.

<sup>975</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 185.

<sup>976</sup> Clayton Black, “Answering for Bacchanalia: Management, Authority, and the Putilov Tractor Program, 1928-1930,” *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and Eastern European Studies*, no. 1508 (April 2002), 3.

<sup>977</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 244; Julie Draskoczy, “The ‘Put’ of Perekovka,” 33.

unsurprising result that they commanded little respect from workers,” and a technocratic, supervisory class comprised of New Persons replaced the leaders of “workers’ soviets.”<sup>978</sup>

Under the new system, Stephen Kotkin further explained, “each worker was assigned an output quota,” and identified “outstanding work performance” worthy of reward.<sup>979</sup> The new factories demonstrated both the new labor-supervisory relations existing in the workforce and the “future achieved” in terms of modernized production.

On May 25, 1935, Wilson visited the Red Flag Textile Mill outside Leningrad. Designed in 1926 by German architect Erich Mendelsohn, the factory’s architectural style was conspicuously avant-gardist, “incorporat[ing] abstract forms and concrete” to convey its modernized efficiency.<sup>980</sup> Under Bolshevik needs during the NEP the older, capitalist-modeled Red Putilov factory had been reclaimed and appropriated for service to the Soviet state rather than private profit. Red Flag’s novel, “Constructivist” design repudiated the bourgeois style of earlier factories, and displaying instead the intermingling of collectivism (the factory had originated as a project of the Leningrad Textile Trust) with an experimental form intended to preview plants of the future. The openness of its plan and the penetration of light to interior spaces further showed how the avant-garde “principle of aestheticizing life” could serve Stalinism’s “attachment to specific values” that required constant supervision.<sup>981</sup> At the time Wilson visited, the factory actually contained superfluous space provided in anticipation of the growth

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<sup>978</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 206; John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson, [January 1935], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 461.

<sup>979</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 204.

<sup>980</sup> Katherine Bernardo, “Redefining Constructivism Today: The Red Banner Textile Factory,” online at <https://petersburg.blogs.wm.edu/2010/09/20/417/>.

<sup>981</sup> Marina Kanevskaya, “The Crisis of the Russian Avant-Garde in Iurii Olesha’s ‘Envy,’” 492.

of the labor force.<sup>982</sup> Not only was Mendelsohn's design futuristic, the workforce itself needed augmentation to achieve optimal productivity in the future.<sup>983</sup> The Narkompros delegation that Dos Passos joined during its inspection tour of schools serving outlying populations would bring, by the time of Wilson's visit, a more educated proletariat to urban centers and into skilled labor positions at facilities such as Red Flag. Its layout provided greater light and space for workers, but also drew on nineteenth-century concepts of the "panopticon" to make their labor more visible and accessible to inspection by managerial staff. This panoptic visibility also proved a boon to visitors by placing workers in a "very public setting."<sup>984</sup> "Here you see them making the simple and rather inelegant clothes which the people wear on the streets," Wilson noted.<sup>985</sup>

As a model for new factories, Red Flag's layout opened workflow so as to eliminate nonproductive time.<sup>986</sup> Wilson described the effect of working – or even spectating – within this space in terms not unlike his visits to Moscow's theaters. In contrast to the US, where "democracy [has the] tendency to lower cultural standards," supervisory power here acknowledged the superior worker's acculturation through direct observation, forming a democratic, mutually shared power relation.<sup>987</sup> The workers "are divided into brigades, each with a chief – whom they elect," Wilson asserted.<sup>988</sup> Public recognition identified both privileged and punished workers. Outstanding workers had "their photographs . . . posted on a background of red" and their names listed next to the machinery they operated with "the

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<sup>982</sup> Katherine Bernardo, "Redefining Constructivism Today: The Red Banner Textile Factory," online at <https://petersburg.blogs.wm.edu/2010/09/20/417/>.

<sup>983</sup> Katherine Bernardo, "Redefining Constructivism Today: The Red Banner Textile Factory," online at <https://petersburg.blogs.wm.edu/2010/09/20/417/>.

<sup>984</sup> Katherine Bernardo, "Redefining Constructivism Today: The Red Banner Textile Factory," online at <https://petersburg.blogs.wm.edu/2010/09/20/417/>.

<sup>985</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 171.

<sup>986</sup> James H. Bater, *The Soviet City*, 135.

<sup>987</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 185.

<sup>988</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 538-539.

amount of work each has done.”<sup>989</sup> “Those who fall behind” were subjected not to the punishment of deprivation (again, much like the characters in *Platon Krechet*), but to having “their names posted to make their ignominy public.”<sup>990</sup> “Disagreeable work” also brought rewards, or shorter working hours that allowed the worker greater leisure.<sup>991</sup> “Keeping the workers up to scratch,” Wilson stated, required the exposure of the worker to critiques of performance by authorities in the same way visiting “elite” writers submitted to proletarian critiques.<sup>992</sup> In both instances, authority was conventionally “transparent,” articulating both production goals and cultural norms.<sup>993</sup>

For the Bolsheviks, leisure formed a “respectable ‘cultural’ activity,” but only because, in essence, all activity within the socialist sphere had to be designated as such, regardless of content.<sup>994</sup> Leisure was “exhibited” as a sign of the “new culture.”<sup>995</sup> William Chamberlin, whose report on the contemporary cultural effects of industrialism, *Russia’s Iron Age*, both Dos Passos and Wilson read in 1934, quoted a Soviet factory manager that “the worker today is reading more . . . and is therefore less likely to go on the debauch that was often the sole recreation of the laborer in Tsarist times.”<sup>996</sup> “Organized leisure” as a reward for production therefore bore a strong relationship to the ways in which the factory became “a more potent device for transforming people’s way of life.”<sup>997</sup> At Red Flag, Wilson noted that workers, unlike

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<sup>989</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 539.

<sup>990</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 539.

<sup>991</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 539.

<sup>992</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 538.

<sup>993</sup> Julie Draskoczy, “The ‘Put’ of *Perekovka*,” 33.

<sup>994</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 192.

<sup>995</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 190.

<sup>996</sup> William H. Chamberlin, *Russia’s Iron Age*, 276; John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson, 23 December 1934, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 442.

<sup>997</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 190.

their Western counterparts, were provided “an hour off for lunch” and “radio concerts.”<sup>998</sup> However, this leisure time was intended to be spent on “work on the self” and acculturation. Investigating the lunchroom, Wilson found two workers engaged in “practicing ballet” while outside in an open space provided for workers “another couple [was] pirouetting and bending.”<sup>999</sup> (Another, less acculturated to supervision, slept with her head on a table, to Wilson’s annoyance).<sup>1000</sup> Food distribution and dining facilities also were subject to rank; the average workers “seemed to be eating black bread and cabbage soup.”<sup>1001</sup>

Workers had to demonstrate evidence of a desire for self-improvement” as part of their work lives.<sup>1002</sup> This improvement often took the form of attendance at work-sponsored cultural activities, which brought them into contact with literary elites who “had to appear at workers’ meetings” in order not to appear “at odds with society.”<sup>1003</sup> “Every factory had its literary circle,” Wilson observed, at which professional writers presented their work for the “education [of] the workers.”<sup>1004</sup> Wilson was surprised by the vehemence of the criticism voiced by some workers so as to appear engaged with the material, and asked half-humorously whether this manifestation of “culturedness” was in fact “good for the work of the writers.”<sup>1005</sup> Attendance

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<sup>998</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 171. Wilson is here making a tacit comparison to US procedures, as when a Ford plant guide informed him that workers received a half hour for lunch, only to be told *sotto voce* by one laborer that in fact they routinely got twenty minutes. See Edmund Wilson, *The American Earthquake*, 229.

<sup>999</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 171.

<sup>1000</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 171.

<sup>1001</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 539.

<sup>1002</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 215.

<sup>1003</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 166; Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 189.

<sup>1004</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 189.

<sup>1005</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 189.

at the reading provided an “education for the workers” by raising the cultural level, while the subject of the gathering – the writers – often were “told that they’re lousy.”<sup>1006</sup>

Prominent notices and posters contextualized personal failures and shaming in terms of contamination by exploitative capitalism or fascism penetrating from the West.<sup>1007</sup> Factories contained large, visible messages to “remind [workers] of what they were being urged on for and of the danger to the working class” by “outside” influences.<sup>1008</sup> Wilson described one such propaganda poster at Red Flag depicting polluting influences: the “German working class [was] manacled” in the face of a “great red giant” and “held in a barbed wire enclosure by a snarling Nazi.”<sup>1009</sup>

Initially, Red Flag drew upon “peasants who had no training whatsoever” for both its construction and subsequent staffing.<sup>1010</sup> Industrial labor redeemed peasants by including them in a centralized plan. As James Von Geldern stated, the “peasant could be saved, but only by ceasing to be a peasant” in terms of productivity and class identity.<sup>1011</sup> Wilson recorded that “75 percent” of the labor force at one factory were “peasants from the surrounding countryside.”<sup>1012</sup> Acculturation took the form of acquiring “new clothes” and adapting individuals to industrial pace and timekeeping. To accelerate the learning process and facilitate workers’ transitions from limited-skill labor to the technical, overseeing echelons, factory technical schools (abbreviated FZUs) provided classes for workers whose abilities showed

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<sup>1006</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 189.

<sup>1007</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 153.

<sup>1008</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 539.

<sup>1009</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 539.

<sup>1010</sup> Sergej Fedorov and Mathias Pfeifer, “Erich Mendelsohn’s Red Banner Textile Factory in Leningrad 1926 – 1928: Laboratory for Early Concrete Works in the Soviet Union,” Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, online at [http://edoc.hu-berlin.de/fedorov\\_finale.pdf](http://edoc.hu-berlin.de/fedorov_finale.pdf)

<sup>1011</sup> James Von Geldern, “The Centre and the Periphery,” 197.

<sup>1012</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 584.



improvement.<sup>1013</sup> Enrollment in an FZU also provided a convenient way for those of suspect class backgrounds to acquire a “proletarian origin” by learning a usable skill.<sup>1014</sup> Nevertheless, “the workers had a hard time learning about machinery at first,” Wilson found.<sup>1015</sup> He little wondered that literate Russians who knew the modernist canon identified with Jimmy Herf, the protagonist of Dos Passos’s novel *Manhattan Transfer*, who had “difficulty adapting” to “machine” culture.<sup>1016</sup>

Given the challenges of raising output with a neophyte workforce, some industry officials, as Kotkin pointed out, “credited workers for fictitious work.”<sup>1017</sup> This fiction could be maintained either through prolonged, almost superhuman, shockwork to make up for lost time and fulfill quotas, or by revising future predictions “upward” to balance the material output in the future.<sup>1018</sup> Much like the alteration of plays to fit official messages, production statistics could attest to “imaginative” labor that continually deferred actual output to an unspecified future.<sup>1019</sup> Based on this system Wilson thought “it would take decades, even with the Stakhanov version of the American Taylor Plan” for Soviet industry to catch up to US levels of production.<sup>1020</sup> Soviet “boasts” of “mechanical progress” were intended mainly to promote a cultural message that Russian “civilization [would become] overmechanized and materialistic,” and that goods considered signs of privilege in 1935 eventually would become

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<sup>1013</sup> These too had their origins in Ford’s compulsory classes for workers to teach everything from labor skills to proper hygiene, financial probity, and family values: David E. Greenstein, “Assembling *Fordizm*”, 271, describes at length the classes and surveillance of Ford workers by management intent on forming them into efficient laborers.

<sup>1014</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 260.

<sup>1015</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 584.

<sup>1016</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 184-185.

<sup>1017</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 204.

<sup>1018</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 212

<sup>1019</sup> P.S. Kogan, “Socialist Theater in the Time of the Revolution,” in Rosenberg, ed. *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution In Soviet Russia, Part 2*, 149.

<sup>1020</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 272.

commonplace.<sup>1021</sup> Wilson related that many managers and bureaucrats maintained odd daily schedules that imitated Stalin's hours in order to respond immediately to instructions emanating from party-state ministries.<sup>1022</sup> As these odd hours left little time for overseeing actual production, quotas and workloads "tend[ed] to become works of the imagination."<sup>1023</sup> The "fictitious work" maintained the illusion of progress. However, as "work" also applied to the task of self-correction, "fictitious work" carried a denotation of the worker who concealed an unfavorable past with a "veneer" of proper conduct. The manners which so impressed Wilson and represented, in Vera Dunham's term, the "embourgeoisement" of the Soviet experiment in the 1930s, but contributed to the "social force" motivating surveillance.<sup>1024</sup>

The desire to showcase factories implicated American writer-travelers within the larger "fictitious" narrative through contrast with the facilities' US antecedents.<sup>1025</sup> The universality of observation in Stalinist culture ensured a guise of efficiency to industrial operations, but also defended industry against potential "wreckers." The same layout, however, fostered competition and induced a climate of informing and denouncing, as much to get ahead of rivals for rewards as to eliminate waste or identify actual threats to the production system.<sup>1026</sup> While

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<sup>1021</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 272.

<sup>1022</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 192.

<sup>1023</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels in Two Democracies*, 192.

<sup>1024</sup> Vera Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values In Soviet Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 4.

<sup>1025</sup> Stephen A. Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society*, 56. See also Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry*, 8 (1982), 794, which states that the power relations of surveillance imply "at least, *in potential*, a strategy of struggle" than can reverse itself, even in systems of incarceration (or, in the factory, between management and labor).

<sup>1026</sup> In regards to the connection of efficient flow, open sight lines, and the culture of informing, Red Flag was not unlike the counterparts which had served as its model, particularly the Ford assembly plant at River Rouge, MI. Wilson, who toured the River Rouge facility in 1931, noted how windows, used even as interior partitions, produced a culture of watching and spying, the object of which was to root out anything Ford considered a threat to output. See Edmund Wilson, *The American Earthquake*, 214-248; Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 56-58, 265.

“class enemies” were defined as “those who did their work poorly,” the supervisors who failed to report their substandard work performance faced the same publicly-administered penalties.<sup>1027</sup> The poor worker could even leverage a favorable report by threatening to expose failures of oversight by supervisors; thus they played a role in the nexus of power relations and visibility.<sup>1028</sup> Similar to mass spectacle, the power of visibility rested on the knowledge one’s status depended on being seen, and on performing as if this gaze was continuous and unbroken. As Wendy Z. Goldman observed, with the increased top-down pressure and the diminution of the intermediary roles of labor leaders there grew a tendency to view mistakes or slackness as deliberate deviation from party-mandated “formulas.”<sup>1029</sup>

Since “formulas” also guided Socialist Realist discourse, their mass reproduction placed Dos Passos at the very least in opposition to Stalinist epistemology. Dos Passos connected Socialist Realism as a literary technique with the expansion of mutual supervision, particularly in the industrial sector. Those “working in industry, which is just where all trace of democracy has been eliminated” were permitted no open discussion because of the supervening of a bureaucratic echelon more interested in perpetuating the fictive accounts of production.<sup>1030</sup> “If you are working in a trade it seems natural to admire and respect the craftsmen in that trade who really know their business,” he wrote in 1934, and “working in a few Union Square phrases because they are the style doesn’t make a man a good writer or a good party member.”<sup>1031</sup> Little of the relevance of factories to the Sovietized future rested on their actual production of

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<sup>1027</sup> Wendy Z. Goldman, *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin*, 73.

<sup>1028</sup> Stephen A. Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society*, 56-57.

<sup>1029</sup> Wendy Z. Goldman, *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin*, 72.

<sup>1030</sup> John Dos Passos – Robert Cantwell, [September 1934], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 441.

<sup>1031</sup> John Dos Passos – Malcolm Cowley, 1 December 1934, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 456.

goods, which as Wilson indicated often were inferior and lacking in color.<sup>1032</sup> Rather, “lots of factories” signified “lots of happiness and prosperity” and “functioned as a model, an ideal type” for Stalinism’s “utopian rates of growth.”<sup>1033</sup>

## UNABLE TO CLOSE THE CURTAIN: SURVEILLANCE AND MODELS OF REHABILITATION

In his analysis of *Aristocrats* and *Platon Krechet*, Wilson noted the relationship of visibility to rehabilitation in areas of social life that had hitherto remained hidden and free of oversight. Performance long had been a significant aspect of Soviet culture; Bolshevik theatricalization of society depended on “people watching” as an “important social process” of “reformation.”<sup>1034</sup> As Sheila Fitzpatrick noted, Stalinist “official spokesmen claimed” that inculcating in the population a sense of public exposure “demonstrated the strength of socialist democracy” and “brought citizens closer to their government.”<sup>1035</sup> If all were watching, all could become involved in party-state objectives of oversight and reform. The use of “horizontal, mutual surveillance” dispelled the sense of top-down scrutiny.<sup>1036</sup> Projects at the forefront of Soviet claims of superiority, such as medical and engineering work, and the resolution of personal disputes in collective endeavors (seen most explicitly at the conclusion of *Platon Krechet*), centered on using “proletarian discipline” to reform both the willing and the recalcitrant.<sup>1037</sup>

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<sup>1032</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 560.

<sup>1033</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 549; Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 38; Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 83.

<sup>1034</sup> P.S. Kogan, “The Theater as Tribune,” in Rosenberg, ed., *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution In Soviet Russia, Part 2*, 137, 136.

<sup>1035</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 175-176.

<sup>1036</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 163.

<sup>1037</sup> Julie Draskoczy, “The ‘Put’ of *Perekovka*: Transforming Lives at Stalin’s White Sea-Baltic Canal,” 36.

Nor was reform simply directed at ensuring compliance through learning mechanical, rote responses. As Julie Draskoczy pointed out, the object of Soviet reform was “not [for individuals] to perform the same action over again [but] to do it better” each time.<sup>1038</sup> In the judicial system, surveillance was not simply a matter of settling disputes concerning uncultured behavior between the “accused and the witnesses,” but was intended to activate public discussion of the “social motives which contributed to the commission of the crime,” displacing personal responsibility with societal oversight.<sup>1039</sup> In this regard, surveillance operated in a manner similar to Tretyakov’s stated purpose in *Roar, China!* of eliciting future debate and discussion amongst the audience, rather than presenting clear character motivation and the resolution of immediate conflicts. Wilson recognized that Soviet “efforts to rationalize and humanize their punishments” also produced “an orgy of informing” in which “each accus[ed] his neighbor for fear of being implicated himself.”<sup>1040</sup>

While inspecting model facilities, Wilson noted the connection of acculturation to building an apparently inclusive society: “traditional Russians habitually evade responsibility, [but are] just beginning to learn it” and in doing so contribute to the evolution of socialist society.<sup>1041</sup> Within time, Russians no longer would follow “natural causes” of behavior, such as passing on decisions “to the authorities higher up; thus they create their own despots.”<sup>1042</sup> On the other hand, Wilson’s personal aggravation with present behavior led him to rationalize the use of terror. Wilson linked terror in the Russian historical context to the retention of “backward”

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<sup>1038</sup> Julie Draskoczy, “The ‘Put’ of *Perekovka*: Transforming Lives at Stalin’s White Sea-Baltic Canal,” 37.

<sup>1039</sup> Rene Fulop-Miller, *The Mind and Face of Bolshevism*, 139.

<sup>1040</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 244.

<sup>1041</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 243.

<sup>1042</sup> Edmund Wilson, “Shut Up That Russian Novel,” 590.

habits and deferral of reform by citizens.<sup>1043</sup> “There are moments,” he confessed in his journal, when “evasiveness [and] imprecision . . . bring out the Ivan the Terrible in all of us.”<sup>1044</sup>

As part of the reform process, the narratives of the reformed subject’s past equated evasion of authorized work to escaping party-state notice. Policing and supervised labor thereby shared a common rehabilitative function.<sup>1045</sup> Visiting “one of the homes where prostitutes were being reclaimed,” Wilson drew parallels between the narrative of redemptive labor in Socialist Realism and public scrutiny.<sup>1046</sup> The former prostitutes “were doing various kinds of work,” he related, “and when they were cured [of venereal disease] were given jobs.” Yet the criminality of prostitution required a certain level of market visibility (as in Dos Passos’s connection of the NEP to the ability to “purchase” female companionship for a limited time). The reform progressed only so long as the subjects remained visible, and a number “followed us [Wilson’s Intourist group], as we drove off, till we were out of sight.”<sup>1047</sup> Though Wilson did not differentiate between the “cure” effected by treatment of disease and the “cure” of their collective labor, the public nature of their reform expedited re-entry into society.<sup>1048</sup>

The idea of re-entry following submission to scientific treatment and surveilled labor indicates the link between stagecraft and normative behavior that existed in Soviet culture. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the modeling for such behavior excluded deviation at the same time it treated the gaze of an audience as commonplace. Noticing a crowd outside a restaurant

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<sup>1043</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 170.

<sup>1044</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 211.

<sup>1045</sup> Julie Draskoczy, “The ‘Put’ of *Perekovka*: Transforming Lives at Stalin’s White Sea-Baltic Canal,” 42.

<sup>1046</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 276.

<sup>1047</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 276.

<sup>1048</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 276.

window, Wilson investigated just as someone inside “snatched back the heavy red portiere which kept the people outside from seeing” a “party inside dining at a table.”<sup>1049</sup> The diners “could not close the curtain,” Wilson wrote, “and I am by no means sure that they had even the impulse to do so.”<sup>1050</sup> Scrutiny and modeling demanded even the most intimate acts be presented openly. As a result, all activities could become touristic sights. In August, Wilson recorded in his journal a “visit to a maternity hospital,” where “they brought us into the delivery room, where two women were being delivered.”<sup>1051</sup> As he “withdrew” in consternation, Wilson asked a nurse if this sort of public exposure bothered the women, and was told “they have no feeling about anything of that kind.”<sup>1052</sup> The public display of childbirth also represented official Soviet orientation toward the future. Infants were “wrapped up and delivered” to the mothers, and Wilson noted that the latter were “certainly much surer of their babies than the women of the poor” in the US.<sup>1053</sup>

Stephen Barnes proposed that the Soviet camp or gulag replicated Soviet society as a whole, particularly, as Julie Draskoczy and Michael David-Fox indicated, through literalizing Socialist Realist doctrines crafted by Soviet writers such as Maxim Gorky and the utilization of journals and camp newspapers for cultural-reform purposes.<sup>1054</sup> Writers similarly attempted “to get official authority behind them” to receive recognition.<sup>1055</sup> The controlled milieu of the reforming institution with its official and unofficial modes of supervision became the model for

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<sup>1049</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 276.

<sup>1050</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 276.

<sup>1051</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 276-277.

<sup>1052</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 277.

<sup>1053</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 207.

<sup>1054</sup> Stephen A. Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society*, 53; Julie Draskoczy, “The ‘Put’ of *Perekovka*,” 31; Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 169.

<sup>1055</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 213.

life outside.<sup>1056</sup> The most evident features of state supervision were the two levels of police: the militia patrols and the “secret police.” “The militia were supposed to represent the citizens themselves,” Wilson stated.<sup>1057</sup> Having been instituted by Lenin, he found through his research, their methods were more “parliamentary” in engaging with transgressors than “the police of the capitalist state.”<sup>1058</sup> “[Y]ou can talk to them freely because they do not represent the government.”<sup>1059</sup> He witnessed one arrest in which the handcuffed violator repeatedly stopped to plead his case with the two militiamen accompanying him.<sup>1060</sup> While these militia operated on a cultural-enforcement level (Wilson related that their main function was controlling public behavior), the secret police were involved in “checking up” on illicit actions and one’s whereabouts, such as “finding out whether you were sleeping at the address you had given” by calling one’s room and hanging up.<sup>1061</sup> Nor were the transgressive the sole focus of surveillance. Too open fraternization between Russians and Westerners outside official tourist-guide relationships (such as Wilson’s with Tretyakov or Lily Herzog) could attract attention. Several Soviet citizens Wilson casually encountered seemed “afraid to be heard talking . . . to a foreigner in a foreign language.”<sup>1062</sup> He recorded that one time when he was “taking a Russian lady home” they “were followed very closely by a man who seemed to have a special interest in us.”<sup>1063</sup>

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<sup>1056</sup> Stephen A. Barnes, *Death and Redemption: The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society*, 53.

<sup>1057</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 186.

<sup>1058</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 186.

<sup>1059</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 194.

<sup>1060</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 184.

<sup>1061</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 186.

<sup>1062</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 225.

<sup>1063</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 186-187.



The very public nature of renaming and excision from historical texts was strikingly at odds with the commission of terror itself, which rested upon unseen actions. The official disbanding of the Cheka, the Bolshevik state police, by Lenin in 1921 led many Westerners (Dos Passos included) into believing former methods of coercive surveillance no longer existed. “Workers,” one proletarian told Dos Passos, were allowed to say “about what they pleased” with minimal reprisal.<sup>1064</sup> In reality, secret arrests continued, but reverted to the “offstage” activity of tsarist policing. “No arrests are ever seen,” one Muscovite related to Dos Passos, “No one who sees them ever tells anyone.”<sup>1065</sup> When Dos Passos protested that official statements denied the existence of such a police force and the former Chekists “shot,” the Muscovite informed him most of the Cheka had “been members of the Okhrana” and were more interested in torture for its own sake than in identifying “class enemies.”<sup>1066</sup>

Dos Passos was unsure how to take this information. In “Russian Visa” he stated the news made him “a little dizzy.”<sup>1067</sup> Subjects disappeared into unseen facilities, as official reports seldom described the network of prisons and labor camps.<sup>1068</sup> Instead, these institutions were embedded within a narrative of rehabilitation and reforming that, as Julie Draskoczy observed, foregrounded the “performative” nature of Stalinist culture.<sup>1069</sup> Because the nature of the transgressive act could be refashioned to conform to a historical narrative, the act of terror

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<sup>1064</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 284.

<sup>1065</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 310.

<sup>1066</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 310.

<sup>1067</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 310.

<sup>1068</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 268.

<sup>1069</sup> Julie Draskoczy, “The ‘Put’ of *Perekovka*,” 31.

itself (arrest, interrogation) could be known but not seen. Removal or excision from performance became a form of punishment.

Official narratives conveyed in public displays contrasted and opposed party-state surveillance of the “self-correcting worker” with the coercive means deployed by tsarist authority. The “comradely self-discipline” engendered during the Revolution and prominent during the Bolshevik era replaced “elitist” tsarist compulsion through direct surveillance, Richard Stites contended.<sup>1070</sup> In order to perpetuate this revolutionary sense of self-direction, “equality of authority” in a visual sense became the “central motif of the experiments” of Soviet culture in the 1920s, as in the intrusion of the spatial plane of the stage into the space occupied by the audience in *Roar, China!*<sup>1071</sup> Treating observer as of coequal authority with actor dissolved the boundaries separating spectator from performer, theater from outside world, and became the norm for a “democratized” form of policing. Soviet displays of tsarist police methods used tableaux to show the old regime’s procedure of identifying and isolating the suspected criminal. The contrast between the harsh methods of the past with those of the socialist future rested on the public nature of the latter: criminals now were portrayed as expiating their past errors and reforming publicly, rather than confessing to inspectors behind walls. (The cultural show involved in these displays depicted anonymous tsarist police officials but identifiable revolutionists, such as Lenin and Nazdezhda Krupskaya; the narrative content indicated an overlap of Bolshevik hardship with heroic self-sacrifice characteristic of Socialist Realism).<sup>1072</sup> Viewing the Peter and Paul Fortress in Leningrad led Wilson to reflect on the

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<sup>1070</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 140.

<sup>1071</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 140.

<sup>1072</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 166.

proximity of surveillance, confession, punishment, and redemption within the relationship of “Church and State side by side” prior to the Revolution.<sup>1073</sup> At the Museum of the Revolution he viewed the static “waxwork” figures poring over “police records, albums of political suspects,” and officials “through whose hands the misery and revolt passes in the form of papers.”<sup>1074</sup> The implied message – that torture and coercion were immobilized in the past by a dynamic, future-oriented cultural mission – opened a path for “humane” methods utilizing public scrutiny rather than the hidden processes of tsarist interrogation and Orthodox confessionals.<sup>1075</sup> “[N]obody is self-conscious,” Wilson averred, because there was “no class of petty officials to snap at people and keep them from doing things.”<sup>1076</sup>

For visitors unaccustomed to constant self-exposure, reform and correction could prove uncomfortable. The *dacha* to which he gained admittance through his cultural entente with the Alymovs recalled for Wilson the instructive use of leisure in the factory, but observations and speculations Wilson confined to his journal confirmed that he was regarded as an outsider by other residents, who embarked on reforming his habits in a fashion he compared to the social manners depicted in “Chekhov’s plays.”<sup>1077</sup> He found “it was considered extremely improper to put bathing-suits on in the house and then walk to the river;” instead, one got “undressed in

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<sup>1073</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 167-168.

<sup>1074</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 166. In a case of life imitating art, Wilson’s visit to the Museum of the Revolution closely echoed a similar scene in his 1929 novel *I Thought of Daisy*, in which the narrator conducts Daisy to a “Coney Island” sideshow containing tableaux of a primitive past, such as an execution, a “Cannibal Feast,” and examples of corporal punishment presided over by “Mephistopheles in the background.” The implied connection between Soviet Russia and Coney Island points to the theatricality and artifice inherent in both displays. Edmund Wilson, *I Thought of Daisy* (Toronto ON: W.H. Allen, 1931), 237-238.

<sup>1075</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 159.

<sup>1076</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 204.

<sup>1077</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 218.

broad daylight” on the riverbank and “put on a bathing-suit” or simply went “naked.”<sup>1078</sup>

Nakedness, in this context, was not merely bodily but a literalization of the individual who has nothing to hide in an “open” society. However, after several visits, Wilson drew greater scrutiny: “Who was I? What was I up to?”<sup>1079</sup> Though he believed he had established open, cordial relations with the other cultural elites in residence (“all technical or professional people”), Wilson chose exile: “They were beginning not to want me . . . The other boarders had complained” and “were coming to shy at the most commonplace questions on my part.”<sup>1080</sup> He “never went to the *dacha* again” after that.<sup>1081</sup>

The paradigm of public exposure especially intrigued Wilson in regard to Stalin. The ubiquity of the leader’s image impressed him as unparalleled even among other Western counterparts of differing ideologies (such as Hitler, Mussolini, or Roosevelt) and challenged his notion of the “rational base” of Soviet policies. Either the Soviet party-state of 1935 could not rightfully claim evolution from Marxism and Leninism, rendering the old connection of Church and State power “obsolete, abandoned, and mute,” he believed, or the “cult of Stalin” represented a vestigial remnant of pre-revolutionary Russia.<sup>1082</sup> The 1934 All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers issued directives that controlled the form and reproduction of how Stalin would be represented (as in the careful seeding of Stalin’s name into plays, which elicited “bursts of applause” from audiences).<sup>1083</sup> Wilson understood “Stalin apotheosized” in terms of a “reciprocal” relationship

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<sup>1078</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 239-240.

<sup>1079</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 241.

<sup>1080</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 236, 241.

<sup>1081</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 241.

<sup>1082</sup> Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 161; Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 203.

<sup>1083</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 224.

“between the leader and his public.”<sup>1084</sup> A fellow “tourist” related to him “that when she had asked a guide whether the Kremlin was where Stalin lived, the guide had replied, ‘Comrade Stalin is an employee of the government. His private life is none of our business.’”<sup>1085</sup>

Had Stalin not existed, Wilson believed, “people would have tried to invent” a presence on which to focus their gaze.<sup>1086</sup> One individual informed Wilson “they [the population] have to have an ikon.”<sup>1087</sup> Stalin’s pronouncements often were disguised as emanating from public demands. Wilson gave an example of its “communoid” language: the “administration propagandizes” while “formulating its policies” by framing them in language such as “The indignant proletariat demand.”<sup>1088</sup> “It is the Russian character to be imprecise” and to fabricate details to gain a favorable reception; this rewriting “is partly to blame for the Terror,” he averred.<sup>1089</sup> He reasoned that the veneration of Stalin arose because “revolutions are almost always followed by bureaucracies and ‘strong men’ who come to be a force of inertia.”<sup>1090</sup> For Wilson, Stalin’s omnipresence indicated a holdover, part of the lagging Russia yet to catch up to Western rationality; therefore the reception of the leader, not the leader himself, was “opposed to the interests of progress.”<sup>1091</sup> When he queried Russians, many responded “that Stalin did not like” seeing his image reproduced everywhere, conveying the impression that the leader, if truly undemocratic, could exert powers of supervision he presently held in check.<sup>1092</sup>

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<sup>1084</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 224.

<sup>1085</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 196.

<sup>1086</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 224.

<sup>1087</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 222.

<sup>1088</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 223.

<sup>1089</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 243.

<sup>1090</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 11 January 1935, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 255.

<sup>1091</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 11 January 1935, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 255.

<sup>1092</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 222.

The reciprocal relationship between Stalin and everyday Russians closely approximated Soviet policies toward the West. During the 1928-1931 period of the Great Break, party-state fears of capitalist “hostile capitalist encirclement” propelled both industrialization and cultural show.<sup>1093</sup> These fears helped consolidate Stalin’s power, leaving little space for alternate leadership. However, because the narrative could be subjected to alterations by Stalin at any time, the illusion that the regime “must give way” to the population’s desires could be perpetuated, Wilson noted.<sup>1094</sup> When he pressed for further understanding of this relationship, Soviet citizens “either refer you to the official statements” in *Pravda* or evaded the issue, protesting that it was “difficult for a foreigner to understand.”<sup>1095</sup>

In the relation of Soviet power to seeing and exposure evident in these examples, Wilson did not present them as unusual, but as part of the writer-traveler’s obligation to penetrate into the culture he describes. He shared with contemporary Stalinism an epistemological desire to “expose the polluting Other within the revolutionary movement” and excise offending examples to bring about utopian perfection.<sup>1096</sup> In the theatricalized society, even the most personal activities were publicly presented as showcases that counteracted “outside” impressions that Soviet society was conditioned by secrecy.<sup>1097</sup> In foregrounding its public nature, Soviet culture also revealed its inverse need for policing and observation to sustain this nature. The very fact activities of exposure were carried out in the open, and displayed citizens

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<sup>1093</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 213. See also Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 188.

<sup>1094</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 224-225.

<sup>1095</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 242.

<sup>1096</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 362.

<sup>1097</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson [2 April 1935], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 461; Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*

who prominently figured in party-state propaganda (infants, Komsomol youth, mothers) rendered these activities immune from disavowal by the party-state.<sup>1098</sup> Indeed, in several cases Wilson appeared to enjoy the entertainment factor contained within the power of seeing, in which the party-state's desire for openness produced what in other contexts would have constituted intrusive voyeurism. "For the mid-30s," James Von Geldern observed, "it was a matter of seeing" rather than "doing" mass activity.<sup>1099</sup> In Socialist Realism, exposure of the private self to inspection extended to the physical body in both labor (via the attention given to heroic acts of workers) and leisure.<sup>1100</sup> Drawing a moral conclusion from examples of exposure, Wilson attributed the openness of behavior in 1930s Russia to a "lack of prudery" resulting from enlightened acculturation.<sup>1101</sup> The new Soviet person had no difficulty with public display and semi-nudity, and he related several occasions of more egregious forms of exposure after his own social gaffe at the *dacha*. Men and women were nude in front of each other "without 'seriously incommoding anyone.'"<sup>1102</sup> At a Stalingrad factory, female workers appeared "attractive in working clothes" because their tightness accentuated physical form, rendering them virtually nude to the spectating visitor.<sup>1103</sup> At a performance of a "plastic ballet," Wilson noted the "almost complete nudity" of the performers.<sup>1104</sup> "Rowing on the river at Marmontorka" on July 18, he described in his journal the sight of "blonde girls with white skin,

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<sup>1098</sup> The Komsomol, for instance, were instrumental in acts of public disgrace or denunciation explained as "civic defense." See Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 274-275.

<sup>1099</sup> James Von Geldern, "The Centre and the Periphery," 194.

<sup>1100</sup> Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 182.

<sup>1101</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 588.

<sup>1102</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 575.

<sup>1103</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 584.

<sup>1104</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 585.

thick round legs and big round breasts [and] boys burned brown except around the hips.”<sup>1105</sup>

“Bathing suits seem to be becoming more and more perfunctory,” he wrote.<sup>1106</sup>

#### “THE IMPRESSION BECAME OVERWHELMING”: STALINIST PUBLIC SPECTACLE

The relation between culture and surveillance was most evident to Wilson in representations of party-state power, particularly public spectacles that merged rigid, geometric formations of massed objects or bodies (the latter often semi-clothed) with Stalin’s name or image. By 1935, Stalin had been incorporated into a Socialist Realist narrative in which he epitomized the attributes of the “positive hero”: “immortal, infallible, and capable of absolute perfection.”<sup>1107</sup> (This presentation, Wilson wrote, was contrary to Marxist instructions that “the ruler was a human, and hence fallible, representative of the interests” of the masses).<sup>1108</sup> Cultural show depicted how the top of the hierarchy connected with the masses.<sup>1109</sup> “[E]very speech and important public document ends with a tribute to Stalin, like the prayer at the end of a sermon,” Wilson noted.<sup>1110</sup> At an air meet, gliders performed “ballet patterns” and planes in “symmetrical” formation flew over and at the end formed the name Stalin.<sup>1111</sup> Because he so often was regarded at a remove, when seen close up the “apotheosized Stalin” incurred an apprehensive reverence that again challenged rational interpretation by visitors familiar with

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<sup>1105</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 574-575.

<sup>1106</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 575.

<sup>1107</sup> Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 149, 310; Julie Draskoczky, “The ‘Put’ of Perekovka,” 39.

<sup>1108</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 225.

<sup>1109</sup> James Von Geldern, “The Centre and the Periphery,” 193; Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 254.

<sup>1110</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 222.

<sup>1111</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 185.



Marxism. One woman who related to Wilson that “Stalin and Kaganovich came up the stairs here and came to our apartment” confessed to being “terribly frightened” by the leader’s proximity to her personal space, suggesting again the overlap between the leader’s supervisory power and the tendency toward confessing even “imaginary” faults.<sup>1112</sup>

What Wilson termed the “Physkultur Parade,” held from June 30 through July 3, 1935 in Moscow, drew together the “heroic performance” of supervision with nationalistic spectacle, ultimately centering on the exposure and celebration of Stalin. The parade was the third most important spectacle in Soviet Russia, after the May Day and November 7<sup>th</sup> celebrations.<sup>1113</sup> Its “cultural geography” of spectators and participants expressed the dichotomy inherent in Soviet culture.<sup>1114</sup> The spectacle was less a festival of sport (which, Wilson noted, “the Russians have only just got . . . since the Revolution, with the founding of proletarian athletic clubs”) than a testament to the centrality of Stalin as leader.<sup>1115</sup> Beginning with the circling of Red Square by a car bearing Stalin and “the Minister of Physkultur,” the leader was the true cynosure of the event and supplied its meaning.<sup>1116</sup> Exposure to the official gaze of inspecting and approval distinguished the spectacle of ranks of massed athletes marching past the reviewing dais. “Men with shaved heads, bared chests, and fixed bayonets” marched while carrying visual images that connected the present leader to the revolutionary past through posters “hung with great faces of Lenin and Stalin and with pictures of runners and hurdlers.”<sup>1117</sup> Upon reaching the

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<sup>1112</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 227.

<sup>1113</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 219.

<sup>1114</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 233.

<sup>1115</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 219-220; Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 233.

<sup>1116</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 219-220.

<sup>1117</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels in Two Democracies*, 219.

viewing stands, Wilson immediately noted that spectators were restricted to the “privileged,” such as “Communists, near-Communists, and foreign visitors.”<sup>1118</sup> The audience therefore indicated the essentiality of Western recognition to claims of Moscow’s centrality to Communist discourse.<sup>1119</sup>

Wilson’s visit occurred at a moment of transition in the nature and use of public spectacle and theater. Older celebrations of heroic action continued (e.g. *The Optimistic Tragedy*, which depicted the Russian Baltic Fleet during the Civil War), but the Physkultur Parade presented mass heroic display for nationalistic “mobilization purposes” rather than for internationalizing socialism.<sup>1120</sup> In general, the parade demonstrated the “stiffening” that public spectacle underwent between the 1920s and 1930s, “diminishing spontaneity and expression”<sup>1121</sup> This change was most perceptible in the rigid, geometric proportions of the participants and their separation from spectators, the repetition of official slogans, and the inclusion of militarism as part of the display, as in the message on banners, “Ready for Labor and Defense.”<sup>1122</sup> Many banners displayed “greetings to Stalin, ‘Thanks to Comrade Stalin for the good life’.”<sup>1123</sup> Aesthetic expression adopted similar codification. That same week Wilson attended “an exhibition of paintings” that “turned into a revolutionary museum” with displays of atrocities worse than those in the Peter and Paul Fortress – worse because these utilized the Socialist Realist doctrine of documentation.<sup>1124</sup> He was appalled when he saw “little children who have

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<sup>1118</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 219.

<sup>1119</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 233.

<sup>1120</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 227; Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 567.

<sup>1121</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 98.

<sup>1122</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 567.

<sup>1123</sup> Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 160-161; Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 567.

<sup>1124</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 205.

come out for a holiday . . . looking at photographs of Communists having their penises strung up by Nazis, and wax tableaux of women with their breasts cut off.”<sup>1125</sup>

A few days after the Physkultur Parade, Wilson viewed the crowds in Gorky Park on the occasion of the first Constitution Day celebration. This was the “first nighttime carnival” of the Stalin era, “carefully scripted and staged” with the “intention to invent a tradition,” Sheila Fitzpatrick claimed.<sup>1126</sup> The reduction of spontaneity rendered this “big carnival” a “depressing” spectacle for Wilson, who found it “heartbreaking to see the people strolling so listlessly and dumbly, in their carnival masks and false noses” without “the gaiety and the fantasy” of true enjoyment.<sup>1127</sup> The park’s “amusements” struck Wilson as “mostly intended to train people for aviation.”<sup>1128</sup> As in the parade, celebration and militarism were combined: “The young people go in for performances” that imitated the heroic actions of celebrated aviators, using “mechanical contrivances” for “looping the loop” or “jump[ing] from a spiral tower in parachutes fastened to strings . . . to develop their sense of equilibrium.”<sup>1129</sup> In both layout and purpose, the park became the “prototype” for similar facilities catering to “the new kind of cultured leisure.”<sup>1130</sup> Wilson strolled in its counterpart in Rostov-on-Don in August, where his impression was more favorable than his remarks on its Moscow model. The park, he decided, represented the Russia of the future as a stage for Russian youth of the present.<sup>1131</sup>

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<sup>1125</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 205.

<sup>1126</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 95.

<sup>1127</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 237.

<sup>1128</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 205.

<sup>1129</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 205.

<sup>1130</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 94.

<sup>1131</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 275.

These examples also display the collision of the experimental forms of Bolshevik mass spectacle with the role expected of the Stalinist passive viewer. Spectating itself became a sign of privilege. “Many of the people I knew in Moscow, in spite of repeated application, had never even seen a May Day celebration and envied the fortunate tourist,” Wilson wrote.<sup>1132</sup> He noted upon immediate arrival at the Physkultur Parade that spectators were restricted to the “privileged,” such as “Communists, near-Communists, and foreign visitors.”<sup>1133</sup> The audience therefore indicated the essentiality of Western recognition to claims of Moscow’s centrality to Communist discourse.<sup>1134</sup> However, the privileged view also required imitating the oversight emanating from the apex of the hierarchy, Stalin himself. The “concentration of effort from all directions on one spot” directed audience attention to Stalin’s physical presence as well as the images carried by parade participants.<sup>1135</sup> Though he had “no direct part,” Stalin served as its inspiration, and just as the paraders themselves moved in choreographed ranks, spectators too followed Stalin’s lead.<sup>1136</sup> “Everybody had to stand up the entire afternoon” because Stalin did so, Wilson reported, and if anyone attempted to sit, “he was smilingly admonished by a militiaman that it was not polite.”<sup>1137</sup>

Such constant attention to both personal behavior and the kinetic movement of the spectacle proved unnerving and exhausting. A portion of Wilson’s fatigue can be ascribed to his efforts to differentiate the individual self from the captivating masses. The “impression became

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<sup>1132</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 221-222.

<sup>1133</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 219.

<sup>1134</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 233.

<sup>1135</sup> James Von Geldern, “The Centre and the Periphery,” 191.

<sup>1136</sup> James Von Geldern, “The Centre and the Periphery,” 192.

<sup>1137</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 221.

overwhelming and remained with me all the rest of the day, during which they still seemed to be marching through my mind.”<sup>1138</sup> As revealed in his description, only political figures (Stalin, members of the Supreme Council of Physical Culture) remained singular, or like Lenin were reduced to images, “great faces of Lenin and Stalin [combined] with pictures of runners and hurdlers,” whose message and meaning could be controlled discursively by party-state language.<sup>1139</sup> The individual body did not receive attention, and existed only in relation to coordinated masses under the gaze of the political leader. Wilson correctly assessed the need for such parades in Soviet Russia, for their purpose emphasized national identity through the incorporation of athletes from various republics into one spectacle, and the use of folk traditions such as dance and costuming to foreground a specifically Russian heritage. Such a parade was both unnecessary and redundant in the US where the individual body was accepted, but Russia had no preconception of personal fitness or hygiene as a cultural matter.<sup>1140</sup> To celebrate personal health would be to particularize the “new person” and to challenge the discursive relationship of Stalin to the masses.

Wilson’s fatigue also points to a common difficulty among Western visitors who pitted retention of individual character against the “socialized consciousness” demanded by Soviet culture.<sup>1141</sup> Both Wilson and Dos Passos phrased this fatigue in terms of the difficulty in understanding the discursive relationship between citizen and party-state. Dos Passos frequently remarked in letters on the difficulty he experienced speaking and reading Russian. “I

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<sup>1138</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 567-568.

<sup>1139</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels in Two Democracies*, 219.

<sup>1140</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 219-220.

<sup>1141</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 159.

spend the time breaking my head studying the Russian language and drinking tea with preserves. Then I try to talk . . . in Russian that I have learned from the Hugo method, but they don't understand me at all," he wrote one friend.<sup>1142</sup> Wilson's struggles with the language provided a clue as to larger efforts by Soviet agencies to wrest approval from visitors by diminishing their possession of personal time and an individual body by harrying them into attending cultural events. Wilson admitted he viewed the physkultur parade only on the first of its four days, for example. Soviet tourism, like the spectacles foreigners were privileged to observe, tended to be all-consuming.

#### "ARRAIGNED ON THE STAGE OF THE THEATER"

A particular historical incident intensified and expanded the relationship between spectating, stagecraft, and surveillance. Just as Dos Passos's perceptions of theatrical vitality were shaped by NEP practices, the centralization of party-state authority at the time of Wilson's visit contributed to his impression of "all-demanding vigilance."<sup>1143</sup> On December 1, 1934, the head of the Leningrad Soviet, Sergei Kirov, was assassinated. Dos Passos quickly perceived the import of the ensuing prosecutions and the process of identifying "class enemies." In letters to Wilson analyzing the "new terror" he criticized the expansion of state supervision.<sup>1144</sup> "Even if [the Kirov "conspirators"] were 'guilty,'" he wrote, Soviet vigilance amounted to "oppression" that was "alienating the working class movement of the world" and "left the Kremlin absolutely

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<sup>1142</sup> John Dos Passos – Germaine Lucas-Championniere, 9 October 1928, *Lettres a Germaine Lucas-Championniere*, 182.

<sup>1143</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 255.

<sup>1144</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson, 23 December 1934, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 459.

supreme” in directing international socialist discourse.<sup>1145</sup> The incipient terror presented no viable alternative to the lack of “human freedom under monopoly capitalism.”<sup>1146</sup> As the prosecutions unfolded in early 1935, Wilson expressed to Dos Passos his belief that, once those accused had been eliminated, the vigilance demanded by the Soviet Communist Party would relax, and that continued terror was not, as Dos Passos feared, an inevitable historical model but an aberration.<sup>1147</sup> Dos Passos disagreed. If international Communism generated the dictatorship of Stalin in Russia, would application of socialist doctrine result in an identical process in the US? “The whole Marxian radical movement is in a moment of intense disintegration,” he wrote Wilson, “My enthusiastic feelings personally about the U.S.S.R. have been on a continual decline.”<sup>1148</sup> “Surely it’s unnecessary to worry about the probability of a Stalinist regime in America,” Wilson responded, “I can’t imagine an American Stalin.”<sup>1149</sup>

Wilson’s visit during the prosecution of those suspected and accused of the political assassination of Kirov was highly influenced by the atmosphere of “vigilance and action” the events conditioned.<sup>1150</sup> By claiming to be a proletarian dictatorship, the expansion of the party-state’s monitory power during the Kirov trials legitimized and consolidated its authority and reinforced its need to supervise Soviet “actors.” During July 1935, Wilson learned of a “brilliant theatrical director” who staged “a chronicle play of the life of Lenin” that subsequently was found to have “been based on a little biographical sketch of Lenin done by [Grigory]

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<sup>1145</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson [January 1935], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 461.

<sup>1146</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson [January 1935], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 461.

<sup>1147</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 11 January 1935, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 255-256.

<sup>1148</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson, 23 March 1934, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 435; John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson [January 1935], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 462.

<sup>1149</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 31 January 1935, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 257.

<sup>1150</sup> Wendy Goldman, *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin: The Social Dynamics of Oppression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 56.

Zinoviev . . . a notorious opponent of Stalin who had just been disgraced and exiled” after implication in the Kirov assassination.<sup>1151</sup> Zinoviev’s connection meant the text was “corrupted with inaccuracies amounting to heresy” according to officials, who then “arraigned” the director in a public trial conducted “on the stage of his theater.”<sup>1152</sup>

If the Kirov murder, as is widely accepted by Sovietologists, was both a harbinger of the show trials and purges of 1936-1938 and an indicator of Stalinist paranoia, it also epitomized the rigid encoding of viewing and observation that passed for “self-correction.”<sup>1153</sup> The Kirov trials paralleled the advance of Socialist Realism in that both depended upon dominant modes of reading the present in terms of the “imagined” future and the exercise of social control in the guise of cultural performance. The Party used theater to expand reminders to be vigilant into “an attack on the former left opposition.”<sup>1154</sup> The increased scrutiny produced greater conformity in language, directing attention to those who could be identified by alternate forms of politicized speech.<sup>1155</sup> Wilson noted the discursive discrepancy inherent in “why a phrase which certainly represents one of the commonplaces of current Soviet thought [in this case, ‘Either socialism or fascism’] should be all right for a Communist speech but dangerous for a private conversation.”<sup>1156</sup> Conversing with an acquaintance in his Moscow hotel room, Wilson

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<sup>1151</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 234. See also Hugh Dewar, *Assassins at Large: Being a Fully Documented and Hitherto Unpublished Account of the Executions Outside Russia Ordered by the GPU* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952), 61-65, for a fuller account of the relation of surveillance and accusations arising from this event, and the ways in which “confessions” fit Socialist Realist projections of a perfected future.

<sup>1152</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 234-235.

<sup>1153</sup> See, for example, Robert Conquest, *Stalin: Breaker of Nations* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991), 195; Hugh Dewar, *Assassins at Large*, 75-76.

<sup>1154</sup> Wendy Z. Goldman, *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin*, 72.

<sup>1155</sup> Wendy Z. Goldman, *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin*, 62-63.

<sup>1156</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels in Two Democracies*, 236.



was cautioned “Microphone!” when speaking about the Red Army.<sup>1157</sup> The same city produced a region-specific “tic”: “people always looked over their shoulders before venturing to say anything about politics.”<sup>1158</sup> The gesture frustrated his efforts to report their views, though he confessed “I find that I do it, too.”<sup>1159</sup>

Tourists were not exempted from the “rhetorical enforcement of vigilance” intended to identify and correct social infractions.<sup>1160</sup> Since the “Kirov shooting,” “visitors are not allowed to see” the center of power, the “jewel box” of the Kremlin, Wilson reported.<sup>1161</sup> Nor were visitors supposed to see images of the alleged conspirators, whose names and visages were removed from texts. Through the trials of the Kirov suspects, Wilson connected the Soviet penchant for watchfulness with official erasure of the suspects’ presence. “The Soviets,” he commented, were currently engaged in an “effort to get Zinoviev and Kamenev out of their histories, their albums of the Revolution, and their libraries, as made, after the expulsion of Trotsky, to strike his name from the Revolution.”<sup>1162</sup> The Soviet “mania for renaming things” to reconstitute the environment as a revolutionary stage, as in the new cities renamed “Leningrad, Gorky, Zinovievsk,” could be applied inversely. The city of “Zinovievsk” was rechristened “Kirovsk,” replacing the suspect by commemorating the victim.<sup>1163</sup> These erased figures become the counterpart of Wilson’s vanished gift books.

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<sup>1157</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 256-257.

<sup>1158</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels in Two Democracies*, 190.

<sup>1159</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels in Two Democracies*, 190.

<sup>1160</sup> Wendy Z. Goldman, *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin*, 66.

<sup>1161</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 291, 300; Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 181.

<sup>1162</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 235.

<sup>1163</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 577.

The very public nature of renaming and excision from historical texts was strikingly at odds with the commission of terror itself, which rested upon unseen actions. The official disbanding of the Cheka, the Bolshevik state police, by Lenin in 1921 led many Westerners (Dos Passos included) into believing former methods of coercive surveillance no longer existed. In reality, secret arrests continued, but reverted to the “offstage” activity of tsarist policing. “No arrests are ever seen,” one Muscovite related to Dos Passos, “No one who sees them ever tells anyone.”<sup>1164</sup> When Dos Passos protested that official statements denied the existence of such a police force and the former Chekists “shot,” the Muscovite informed him most of the Cheka had “been members of the Okhrana” and were more interested in torture for its own sake than in identifying “class enemies.”<sup>1165</sup>

Wilson provided a significant example of vigilance by reproducing for the reader of *Travels* an entire “announcement [that] appeared in *The Moscow Daily News*,” the only time he did so in the entire book.<sup>1166</sup> The article concerned the evaluation by the “Plenum of the Central Committee of the CPSU” of the Secretariat of the Central Executive Committee, Avel Yenukidze, whom Lenin appointed to the position of supervisor of “the administration and personnel of the Kremlin” in 1918.<sup>1167</sup> In June 1935 Yenukidze was accused of “falsifying history” by Lavrentii Beria, a co-member of the Central Committee, for having “provided himself highly favourable

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<sup>1164</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 310.

<sup>1165</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 310.

<sup>1166</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 195. Wilson’s use of newspaper headlines and texts is here similar to Dos Passos’s use of the same in the “Newsreel” sections of *U.S.A.*, and illustrates Wilson’s accommodation of Socialist Realism’s overlap of “factual” reportage and personal narrative.

<sup>1167</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 195; Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 554. Although some sources state Yenukidze’s arrest occurred in July, 1935, Wilson’s journal clearly dates the event to early June, as he recorded the “dismissal” in an entry on June 8. See also Adam B. Ulam, *Stalin: The Man and His Era* (New York: Viking, 1979), 396. Only a few months earlier Yenukidze had been one of the prosecutors of the man accused of Kirov’s murder, Leonid Nikolaev: Hugh Dewar, *Assassins at Large*, 75-76.

entries in some reference books.”<sup>1168</sup> Subsequently Yenukidze was implicated in the larger post-Kirov allegations of conspiracies against Stalin’s authority. Chief among the accusations was that Yenukidze had failed to be sufficiently vigilant against class enemies. As Robert Conquest indicated, he had allowed “former aristocrats to take jobs in the Kremlin,” and his accusers stated that he had misused “state funds” by assisting these “former oppositionists.”<sup>1169</sup> Yet the article Wilson provided left these charges unmentioned. Instead, the plenum “approve[d] the measures of the control organ for checking up and improving the Personnel of the Secretariat” due to Yenukidze’s “political and personal dissoluteness.”<sup>1170</sup> “His political dissoluteness,” Wilson stated, “is supposed to consist of leniency with political prisoners; his personal dissoluteness, of ballet-girls.”<sup>1171</sup> Yenukidze subsequently was denounced as a “Fascist traitor” and many among the “American colony” (though not Wilson) presumed his guilt.<sup>1172</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the Kirov assassination, the Party called for increased vigilance, and events that formerly could be ascribed to mischance were pervaded with deliberate intent. complicating accidents with attributions of “sabotage or incompetence.”<sup>1173</sup> Wilson recorded one such example of this “uncertainty” in relating “the crash of the *Maxim Gorky*.”<sup>1174</sup> Then the largest airplane of its time, constructed in 1934 and named for the writer, the *Gorky* crashed after a midair collision above Moscow on 18 May, ten days before Wilson’s

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<sup>1168</sup> Robert H. McNeal, *Stalin: Man and Ruler* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 111. McNeal intimated this accusation was one of the maneuvers by Beria to gain supremacy over Genrikh Iagoda, the chief of the NKVD.

<sup>1169</sup> Robert Conquest, *Stalin: Breaker of Nations*, 195; Wendy Z. Goldman, *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin*, 64.

<sup>1170</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 195-196.

<sup>1171</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 196.

<sup>1172</sup> Edmund Wilson – Muriel Draper, 14 November 1938, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 311. In this letter Wilson recalled discussing Yenukidze’s arrest with Draper while both were in Moscow.

<sup>1173</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 243.

<sup>1174</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 195.

arrival in the city.<sup>1175</sup> Its destruction was a source of intense speculation as to whether “showing off” for spectators caused “a foolish accident,” or signified “a terrible piece of sabotage” committed by those willing to tarnish Soviet achievement.<sup>1176</sup>

At several points in his travel account, Wilson replicated the juridical format of the public trial. Socialist Realism’s future-oriented narrative caused discrepancy with observable results, producing what Wilson termed the “systematic falsification” of “the human record” of class origins, work accomplished, and party-produced language.<sup>1177</sup> In determining for himself (and the reader) the truth of any observable phenomenon or social encounter, Wilson engaged in his own quasi-judicial process, analyzing and weighing evidence, as in recording the parallel responses to the *Gorky* disaster. He noted how the process of falsification of the past in order to highlight a productive future inhabited Soviet legal processes. One such instance Wilson cited were accounts of the trial of Leonid Ramzin, an engineer accused in 1930 of “planned wrecking” and whose prosecution led to widespread anathematization of “technical intelligentsia” suspected of delaying early phases of the First Five-Year Plan.<sup>1178</sup> During the trial, Ramzin was the sole “expert” to “‘confess’ to committing acts of sabotage on instructions from

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<sup>1175</sup> The *Gorky* engaged in a series of flights between Russian cities early in 1935 to publicize Soviet technical accomplishments, hence the catastrophe became viewed as the result of anti-Soviet “wrecking.” Capable of carrying up to 40 passengers, the plane did not make scheduled flights, but short round-trips were offered as a reward to the “outstandingly productive.” The plane with which the *Gorky* collided was engaged in taking publicity photos; all aboard both planes were killed. See Maurie White, “The People’s Plane,” *American Heritage* 48:6 (October 1997), 20-22, and *The New York Times*, 19 May 1935, 22. Had the plane not crashed, Wilson likely would have viewed it at the “air meet” he attended in Moscow on May 30, 1935.

<sup>1176</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 243-244.

<sup>1177</sup> Wilson typified this process as “one of the very worst features contributed by the Stalinist Communists to the international revolutionary movement”: Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 235.

<sup>1178</sup> Edmund Wilson – Malcolm Cowley, 15 April 1937, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 286. See also *Wreckers On Trial: A Record of the Trial of the Industrial Party Held In Moscow, Nov.-Dec. 1930*, edited with a foreword by Andrew Rothstein (New York: Workers’ Library Publishers, 1931), vii.

abroad.”<sup>1179</sup> In order to coerce others, Stalin encouraged officials to force additional, imagined, and fabricated testimony that would corroborate Ramzin’s. A uniform narrative of what the conspirators had planned for the future would result.<sup>1180</sup> “Do the persons” accused “always know” the difference between falsified and real charges? Wilson asked, recalling his earlier inability to distinguish between the “dream world” of utopian desires and reportage.<sup>1181</sup> “How much of the Ramzin trial was a fairy-tale worked up for propaganda? Was it a fairy-tale in which Ramzin himself was finally persuaded to believe?”<sup>1182</sup>

To Wilson, these procedural investigations emanated directly from Stalin’s persona. The leader, he stated in *Travels* (and perhaps significantly, not in the journal he kept during his visit), had learned the power of “denunciation,” to charge others about “whom nothing was actually known” with violations of trust.<sup>1183</sup> Denunciation, he concluded, “has always been a favorite weapon of Stalin’s” and therefore an element likely to be imitated by those around him, just as Soviet bureaucrats adjusted their own work schedules around the leader’s.<sup>1184</sup> By failing to remain vigilant against stated class enemies, Yenukidze himself was subjected to increased official vigilance. A few days after the report of Yenukidze’s arrest, Wilson met with Boris Souvarine, a French leftist intellectual who had lived in Soviet Russia on an irregular basis since shortly after the Revolution.<sup>1185</sup> Wilson already had read Souvarine’s biography of Stalin,

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<sup>1179</sup> Sarah Davies and James Harris, *Stalin’s World: Dictating the Soviet Order* (New Haven: Yale university Press, 2014) 75.

<sup>1180</sup> Sarah Davies and James Harris, *Stalin’s World*, 75, 111.

<sup>1181</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 552.

<sup>1182</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 243.

<sup>1183</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 243.

<sup>1184</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 243.

<sup>1185</sup> Souvarine was the French-born son of a Russian émigré; Wilson used the Russian equivalent of his name, Suvarin, in *Travels*, one of the few times he cited a proper name in his account. See Herve Guiheneuf, “Voir plutôt

and from that reading perceived that the leader could be “suspicious and intolerant.”<sup>1186</sup>

Souvarine informed Wilson that Yenukidze’s own publicly-issued biography was substantially correct concerning his role among the Social Democrats in Tiflis, where Stalin first had been active in the party, but failed to grant Stalin sufficient attention. Stalin likely had “betrayed a political rival to the [tsarist] authorities” in Tiflis before the revolution, and now wanted to quash any possibility of “evidence” coming to light through Yenukidze’s personal recollections.<sup>1187</sup>

Wilson’s brief meeting with Souvarine also pointed to the theatricality surrounding rumor and gossip as sources of reports (which Wilson was careful to distinguish from his own “factual” reportage in *Travels*). In “Russian Visa” Dos Passos compared the “lies-by-common-consent” prevalent in the official language of Bolshevism to “stage scenery” that, as long as one recognized its falsity, could be utilized as a shelter from outside forces.<sup>1188</sup> As a result of Dos Passos’s warning not to “believe anything anybody tells you in English or French – there are more lies and more hush dope in Moscow – just as there’s more of anything else – than in any other capital in the world,” Wilson noted the dominance of rumor as a medium of news transmission.<sup>1189</sup> In the article reporting Yenukidze’s arrest, for example, real motives were subverted through reportage of rumor and gossip which, despite stringent Party warnings, tended to fill in lacunae. Since “charges never have to be substantiated,” Wilson wrote, “public

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de croire: L’expérience du travail d’Yvon en Union Soviétique et les récits de ses désillusions,” *Le Mouvement Social* 205 (October-December 2003), 24.

<sup>1186</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 243. Souvarine’s book, *Staline, aperçu historique du bolchevisme*, had been published in Paris by Plon earlier in 1935; an English translation did not appear until 1939.

<sup>1187</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 243.

<sup>1188</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 291.

<sup>1189</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson [2 April 1935], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 471.

opinion” composed a “tabloid journalism of [its] own” that became equivalent to reportage, as both employed the same language of supervision.<sup>1190</sup> “I have never heard more scandalous stories circulated about public figures than those that get whispered about in Moscow,” he added.<sup>1191</sup> When authorities arrested Yenukidze “a rumor among the newspaper men” with whom Wilson socialized stated he had been led from his residence in handcuffs.<sup>1192</sup> Wilson even heard “rumors” of the “reappearance” of Lenin, despite the open display of the former leader’s body in the tomb outside the Kremlin, which had become a site of pilgrimage.<sup>1193</sup> Because Soviet officials often disseminated rumors in the guise of “official” news, Wilson found himself doubting confidential utterances. When the US Supreme Court ruled the National Recovery Act unconstitutional at the end of May, 1935, at which time Wilson was newly-arrived in Moscow, he disbelieved conversational references to the decision. “Little confidence though I had in the N.R.A.,” Wilson wrote, “I was so unprepared for this . . . that I thought they said *constitutional*.”<sup>1194</sup> The following day Wilson verified the news, revealing that “subconsciously no doubt [I] was loth to admit it.”<sup>1195</sup> The manufactured discourse of rumor, Wilson deduced, tended to drive out factual news and produced “alternations of enthusiasm and disappointment” at all levels of the party-state.<sup>1196</sup> Rumor provoked informing, so that even the most trivial of mistakes in behavior now attained the proportions of “anti-Soviet” activities. As a result of the Kirov prosecutions, Soviet policing stepped up efforts to identify “oppositional

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<sup>1190</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 196.

<sup>1191</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 196.

<sup>1192</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 196; Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 565-566.

<sup>1193</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 246.

<sup>1194</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 183.

<sup>1195</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 183.

<sup>1196</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 208.

beliefs” that circulated through misgivings about the trial during the spring and summer of 1935.<sup>1197</sup> Official efforts to contain and correct the virulence of rumor and gossip led to a backdrop to Wilson’s journey as he departed Moscow in late July. Wilson’s subsequent meditations focused on how even the sick body was assessed in terms of integration into social and collective needs, in both pathology and treatment.

#### A CONTRACTING WORLD: THE OLD AND THE NEW

Wilson’s appreciation of Soviet theatricality took an unexpected course in mid-August, 1935. After leaving Moscow and traveling to Gorky (Nizhny Novgorod) and down the Volga to Ulyanovsk, he continued to Stalingrad, Rostov-on-Don, and Kiev before entraining for Odessa. “All this time I had been getting sick,” he wrote in his journal; once he reached Odessa, he “stayed in bed and got sicker and sicker.”<sup>1198</sup> A doctor Wilson summoned “put on a wonderful act” dressed in “white trousers and a white Russian [peasant] shirt,” and diagnosed the writer with scarlet fever.<sup>1199</sup> Wilson moved to a hospital, where he was “observed” by doctors, staff, and other patients (mostly children, as he was confined to a childrens’ ward), and where he finished the remainder of his Russian visit.<sup>1200</sup> In an abrupt turn, he became the subject of others’ notice, as when a deputation from the “Workers’ Inspection” visited the hospital and queried him about his treatment.<sup>1201</sup> In this facility’s dynamic between “old” and “new,” power

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<sup>1197</sup> Wendy Z. Goldman, *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin*, 62-63.

<sup>1198</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 278, 283.

<sup>1199</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 284, 283.

<sup>1200</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 289, 291.

<sup>1201</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 295.



relations were inscribed within circuits of visibility. “I was hoping that the hospital might turn out to be one of their more up-to-date institutions,” Wilson wrote, but he soon learned the hospital was “built about 1795 – one of the oldest public buildings in Odessa.”<sup>1202</sup>

Like theater, medical care was a spectacle in Stalin’s Russia, a “public service” for which “nobody paid a kopeck,” even covering the cost of Wilson’s telegrams to the Guggenheim Foundation.<sup>1203</sup> Prevented from further travel until late September, by which time his visa was set to expire, Wilson divided his convalescence between “reading Marx and Engels in the daytime and Gibbon in the evenings.”<sup>1204</sup> The doctors permitted him to divide his convalescence between relative privacy in an anteroom of the hospital director’s office and the much more public space of a children’s ward. Based on what he could view from his window, Wilson concluded Odessa, far from Moscow, was “neglected in the Soviet programs” and the port was “of little value now.”<sup>1205</sup> Though city authorities had proclaimed an epidemic, no one had thought it necessary to take public measures.<sup>1206</sup> At the same time, Odessa’s distance from centralized supervision allowed “life” to be “much more spontaneous and lively.”<sup>1207</sup> In *Travels* he commented how his “world had contracted.”<sup>1208</sup>

As both Barnes and Draskoczy note, a narrative of rehabilitation infused Soviet institutions and allied them with theater: the culture of confinement revolved around licit acts of

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<sup>1202</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 285, 290. He noted the visibility of graffiti and incised dates made in the walls by patients, most of which predated the Revolution.

<sup>1203</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 291.

<sup>1204</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 289.

<sup>1205</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 290.

<sup>1206</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 289.

<sup>1207</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 300.

<sup>1208</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 289.

improvement and a corresponding distancing from previous self-identity.<sup>1209</sup> Thomas Lahusen determined that the “future” promoted through the Socialist Realist text could be “threatened by the return” of the past, or by potential contamination that would divert the path away from achieving perfection.<sup>1210</sup> Wilson invested his confinement with a similar rehabilitative cast, in which medical staff met his material needs immediately but regarded outside communication as potentially contaminating. To Wilson the nurses seemed “uneducated” because they failed to see the vermin Wilson did, unless he directed their attention, leading him to conclude their reluctance derived from his own shortcomings as an observer.<sup>1211</sup> “I came to sympathize with [the Communists’] trials in making the other Russians get things done,” he wrote.<sup>1212</sup> The subject of infection incited a debate between a “theatrical” doctor and the Sovietized New Person Director concerning methods of examination. Asking to send some letters, Wilson ignited a sharp disagreement that took place in his presence. “The director was for letting me send the letters. ‘But,’ the old [doctor] insisted, ‘. . . the people who get the letters will get scarlatina!’” “[T]hat’s nothing but *pedantizm*. People aren’t likely to get diseases from letters,” the Director replied, before conceding to “disinfect them” to “save face.”<sup>1213</sup> The treatments Wilson described also alternated between outmoded methods indicative of containment (cupping, wrapping) and the new culture of openness (exposure to fresh air and light).<sup>1214</sup> The illness itself served a self-revealing purpose: during his feverish reveries, Wilson envisioned himself as an actor upon a stage in “a play which I had written, and which I had called ‘A Bit of

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<sup>1209</sup> Julie Draskoczy, “The ‘Put’ of *Perekovka*,” 38.

<sup>1210</sup> Thomas Lahusen, *How Life Writes The Book*, 26.

<sup>1211</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 294.

<sup>1212</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 294.

<sup>1213</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 294-295.

<sup>1214</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 286, 294-295.

the New” or “Quite A Lot of the Old.”<sup>1215</sup> “I resolved to go on in the second act,” he wrote, “made up” with false whiskers, which he would remove to “deliver a long speech bearing vitally on the plot of the play, but unconnected” to its actual performance.<sup>1216</sup>

In the ward, Wilson interacted frequently with the next Soviet generation. His comments centered on performance, privilege, and learning to speak a new language – all common features of mid-Thirties Stalinism. Most of the children, he noted, “were acting” for the benefit of both himself and the staff.<sup>1217</sup> As none spoke English, Wilson augmented his Russian by appealing to them for translation. “I had only to ask a child . . . and they would act it out for me,” he observed.<sup>1218</sup> The children also showed Wilson their pictures of “soldiers, cannon, aeroplanes, gunboats and tanks” drawn with “considerable technical accuracy.”<sup>1219</sup>

Wilson’s hospital stay consolidated several themes attached to observations during his four months in Russia: the interplay of exposure and theatricality, the bellicose nationalism that seemed at variance with official proclamations of internationality through the Popular Front, and the cultural conflict of old and new methods and behaviors. Although Wilson recognized the artificiality of much of Soviet everyday life, he also showed willingness to become a passive participant in the Stalinist mode in its utopian projects. The prominence granted technical experts and engineers spilled over into the literary fold as writers composed narratives along

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<sup>1215</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 287. He later related his feverish reveries “were conducted in four languages”: Edmund Wilson – Muriel Draper, 14 November 1938, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 311. The title possibly refers to Eisenstein’s 1929 film *Id and New*, with which Wilson was familiar: Edmund Wilson, *The American Earthquake*, 221-222.

<sup>1216</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 288.

<sup>1217</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 299.

<sup>1218</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 299.

<sup>1219</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 297.

Socialist Realist contours, and theatrical presentations offered thematic examples of self-conduct and the Stalinist regime's relationship to the individual citizen. Far from upset by his prolonged and unplanned stay, Wilson spent the last days in the Odessa hospital working on translations of Russian children's stories. "I tried to divert myself with the children's books," he wrote, some of which "were intended for political instruction."<sup>1220</sup> He printed an example of one of "Pushkin's fairy-tales in verse" in the text of *Travels*.<sup>1221</sup> To the end he remained engaged with the "productive self" demanded of the New Person, and commenced the work of translating and interpreting Russian literature that would remain an activity the rest of his life.

#### SUMMARY: ESCAPING THE STAGE

Travel accounts of Soviet Russia in the 1930s often concluded with motifs of deliverance and rebirth mimetic of Socialist Realist tropes. Waldo Frank's *Dawn In Russia* epitomized this trend, using figures of light and emergence, while E.E. Cummings's *Eimi* used irony to compare the Soviet experience to the redemptive framework of Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*, in which the traveler-narrator escaped a restrictive Hell. Dos Passos ended his Russian travelogue not with his departure, but with his reporter persona outside a village, in a setting that consciously imitated the "stripped bare" stage of experimental theater. The village's temporal location "at night at the beginning of winter" stood in contradistinction to the summer weeks he spent in Leningrad, when the "nearest thing to darkness is a dense bluish gloaming," though

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<sup>1220</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 305.

<sup>1221</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 305, 311.

he conceded “the days are [not] very bright either.”<sup>1222</sup> In private correspondence, however, he likened leaving Russia to “getting out of a cementfactory [sic]” or lifted from a coal mine.<sup>1223</sup> Wilson partially concurred, as his confinement to hospital gave his departure a likeness to “getting out of jail.”<sup>1224</sup> However, Wilson’s narrative also conformed to contemporary presentations by emphasizing rebirth, in which “all my senses had been rendered abnormally sensitive.”<sup>1225</sup> Soviet Russia, he decided, “in spite of the difficulties involved in getting to and living” there “seemed to me a relaxation” compared to the “force” by which capitalism operated.<sup>1226</sup> “The certainty of work means a lot” to all those like himself who struggled to earn a living during the 1930s.<sup>1227</sup>

The travel writings of Dos Passos and Wilson indicate the degree to which theatricality and dramaturgical devices inhabited Soviet life, increasingly greatly in coordination with Socialist Realist precepts. The “eclectic art forms” of the Twenties that tolerated avant-gardism gave way to a “culture shared by the whole country” that was easily transmitted to the masses.<sup>1228</sup> The “militant ferment” that accompanied the unification of literary factions eager to promote Socialist Realism “repelled Western intellectuals” such as Dos Passos who had been “attracted

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<sup>1222</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 289.

<sup>1223</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 274; John Dos Passos – Germaine Lucas-Championniere, 8 December 1928, *Lettres a Germaine Lucas-Championniere*, 259, original in French; my translation.

<sup>1224</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 313.

<sup>1225</sup> John Dos Passos – Ernest Hemingway [24 December 1928], Ernest Hemingway Collection, Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Library; Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 313.

<sup>1226</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 208.

<sup>1227</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 208.

<sup>1228</sup> Jerry F. Hough, “The Cultural Revolution and Western Understanding of the Soviet System,” in *Cultural Revolution In Russia, 1928-1931*, edited by Sheila Fitzpatrick (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1978), 243; James Von Geldern, “The Centre and the Periphery,” 187.

by the Soviet avant-garde” in the 1920s.<sup>1229</sup> The programmatic means of rehearsing and improving (and, occasionally, rewriting) evident in Wilson’s analysis of Soviet plays of 1935 extended well beyond the confines of the theater, much as Dos Passos anticipated in experimental stagecraft. Contrarily, this expansion did not always energize Soviet subjects. As Wilson’s encounters often showed, New Persons approached each other in public warily, anxious not to be seen doing the wrong thing or speaking to the wrong person. Instead, the “vitality” of theater became translated into processes of horizontal, mutual observation, speculation, and increasing suspicion.

The expansion of theatrical modes into all areas of life, turning workplaces into models of new communities and exposing even the most private or bodily acts to public scrutiny, left both Dos Passos and Wilson with the impression theater was among the most “autonomous” institutions in Soviet Russia because of the apparent absence of official interference with “the great theatrical producers” and the “personal freedom” granted personnel.<sup>1230</sup> These modes informed how mass appreciation for the Russian dramatic tradition constituted a sign of acculturation for Soviet New Persons. The restaging and perpetuation of “original productions” that Dos Passos observed in 1928 carried a different cultural function by 1935. Under Stalinist cultural guidance, they had become emblems of a national heritage that demanded exact fidelity, in keeping with the Socialist Realist theme of careful reproduction.<sup>1231</sup>

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<sup>1229</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 297; Marina Kanevskaya, “The Crisis of the Russian Avant-Garde in Iurii Olesha’s ‘Envy,’” 492.

<sup>1230</sup> Edmund Wilson, “The Classics on the Soviet Stage,” *Literary Essays of the 1920s and 30s*, 499.

<sup>1231</sup> John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 476.

In the face of these divergent receptions, the importance of performance to culture remained a constant from the Bolshevik to the Stalinist eras. New Persons learned through performance, and outstanding performers became the “positive heroes” of the Soviet drama of building a future-oriented society. As a result, Soviet society became increasingly centered on visibility and strategies of surveillance. Stagecraft meant to direct attention to new projects or reformed structures and institutions also exposed the “old” function of surveillance under tsarism, with its external coercion, and posited the superiority of the “new” system, in which surveillance, required by accelerated industrial production, was mutual and connected to reward as well as punishment. Increasing surveillance undermined Dos Passos’s confidence in Soviet socialism as an alternative for capitalism. The hardships undergone by the Bolshevik New Person gave way to perquisites meant to be shown off, and as material rewards and model behavior took center stage, “Marx is beginning to dematerialize,” Wilson punned.<sup>1232</sup>

Theater adeptly provided both a useful trope and a language by which to understand, as Dos Passos and Wilson endeavored to show, the dialectic of Soviet culture, as both performing and spectating. Cultural show could articulate as well as cloak the convergence of conspiratorial and surveillance strategies that became integral to the show trials, purges, and executions of the late 1930s. Individuals following the directions of cadres could be denounced as “enemies” of the party-state because a lack of cultured habits could be interpreted as a sign of resistance. However, an inverse interpretation also held sway and increased in proportion to Party demands for vigilance on the cultural front. Orlando Figes related a number of documents in

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<sup>1232</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 203.

which the relatives of an accused person held during the show trials doubted the charges of anti-Soviet agitation against a family member, but conceded the possibility the accused had been “acting” the role of a good Soviet citizen.<sup>1233</sup> Some, presented with the “facts” prompting an accusation, discounted their veracity but admitted they may have been fooled by a superior job of acting.<sup>1234</sup> The cultured veneer might prove merely an outward “performance” that masked inner thoughts opposing the regime. Since everyone was performing, and thoughts could not be seen, such suspicions were difficult to refute.<sup>1235</sup> Performative activities suggested the individual only acted obediently outwardly, while “real” actions remained controlled by forces hostile to the regime. While watching “respectable couples” dance in a pavilion in Gorky Park, Wilson was reminded by their “sharp stiff staccato way” of moving how new and unfamiliar the movements were to everyone. “They have only been allowed to dance for about three years, and they learn the steps carefully and perform them very seriously,” he noted.<sup>1236</sup> Incited by reminders to remain vigilant, the population came to regard self-conscious uniformity of performance as a sign not of the imminence of the utopian future, but of the betrayal of the system. Spontaneity became entirely eliminated from the cultural front, prompted by the consolidation of literary-cultural agencies in 1932-1934 and the militant expression of Socialist Realism. As informing on suspicious anti-Soviet “actors” accelerated in 1936-1937, the absence of news about suspects who disappeared from public view further fueled the swirling “lies and hush dope” that Dos Passos and Wilson recognized as a specialty of

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<sup>1233</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 300.

<sup>1234</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 302.

<sup>1235</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 302-304.

<sup>1236</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Thirties*, 538, 570. Public dancing, anathematized by the Bolsheviks as bourgeois, was officially permitted again at the outset of the Second Five-Year Plan in 1932. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 68, and Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 159.



Moscow life. Renunciation of those accused of anti-Soviet agitation also acquired a performative aspect. Family members, friends, and work colleagues often made public declarations repudiating contact with the suspects, or composed lengthy memoranda for NKVD consumption filled with the scripted language of Stalinism, such as “enemy of the people,” “wrecker,” or “Trotskyist.”<sup>1237</sup> These phrases, along with reiteration of “Party slogans” such as those Wilson saw adorning public spaces, indicated their performative function in discourse between the populace and the party-state.<sup>1238</sup> The incorporation of visitors into cultural objectives aided the party narrative of inclusion, but contact, as seen in the instances of Dos Passos and Wilson, also could expose the consequences of deviation through exposure of incorrect class backgrounds or political rivalry disguised in ideological terms. The trope assisted readers of the travel notes in understanding the evolution of Soviet theater from its aesthetic and cultural force as an alternative to the capitalist system, to the frenzy of surveillance, reporting, and informing that characterized the show trials.

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<sup>1237</sup> See Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 304-305; Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror*, 222; Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 302-304. A much more detailed analysis of the semiotic relationship of performance to state-disseminated language as a characteristic of “high Stalinism” occurs in Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 51-53.

<sup>1238</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 306.

## Conclusion: “After Considerable Travel”

“... as an experiment in human organization communism was of interest . . . In your lab you could perform your experiment, report the findings.” – John Dos Passos<sup>1239</sup>

“Marxism is the opiate of the intellectuals.” - Edmund Wilson<sup>1240</sup>

Travel books of the nineteenth century often focused on the past of the areas through which the writer traveled, reflecting the Romantic attachment to antiquities that pervaded Western culture of the era.<sup>1241</sup> Literary modernism of the interwar period more often foregrounded the writer as observer and his/her “dramatizing interactions” with culture through observable phenomena (clothing, architecture, social habits).<sup>1242</sup> Because of Soviet emphasis on a model-based cultural program, the Soviet travel account represents a distinct variation. The typical material of a vivid, first-person encounter with a culture was interpreted as a sign of what the fully socialist future would become. In Richard Stites’s phrase, Soviet culture of the period relayed “the stretching power of Soviet imagination and its severe limitations,” or in Dos Passos’s and Wilson’s terms, both the “uncharted, unsurveyed [and] unaccountable till now to civilization” “breadth” of the country’s future and the vast expansion of its potential for influencing the US.<sup>1243</sup> Soviet culture at the “height of the interwar ‘pilgrimage’ of Western visitors” offered something to attract everyone, regardless of ideological sympathy, because

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<sup>1239</sup> John Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 191.

<sup>1240</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos [May 1938], *Letters on Literature and Politics*, 302.

<sup>1241</sup> Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 91.

<sup>1242</sup> Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 97; Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between The Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 203.

<sup>1243</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 189; Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 211.

every individual envisioned a distinct future where “life will be better.”<sup>1244</sup> When pre-revolutionary Russia was mentioned at all in a Soviet travel account, it tended to follow the procedures of VOKS and the Comintern of contrasting “yesterday and today.”<sup>1245</sup> These agencies “involved [writers] in a transaction” that entailed their reliance on or susceptibility to official guidance.<sup>1246</sup> Wilson commented on the extent to which the Soviet regime and population, in endeavoring to imagine an “impossible” future, instead produced the inverse effect of a “backward country.”<sup>1247</sup> The best way to highlight “the cult of the machine and the image of an electrified nation saturated the arts as well as the political discourse of the age” was for the writer to contrast “backward” areas that existed virtually outside of time with the “great switchboard” of Moscow’s centralized planning, as Dos Passos did.<sup>1248</sup> Through commentary on these signs, travel accounts conformed to Soviet culture itself. The latter’s “positive heroes” and model facilities, though “spaced [as] far apart” as the bottles providing “window dressing” in the National Café that Wilson visited in Moscow, were meant to be regarded as a template for the experiment’s fulfillment.<sup>1249</sup>

The stress on the life story was not unique to the Soviet travel account, and was a common feature of the interwar travel narrative’s emphasis on the writer’s ability to perceive aspects of the culture he or she presented to the reader.<sup>1250</sup> The Soviet example’s singularity rested on the

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<sup>1244</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 288, 231; I.I. Marshak, *New Russia’s Primer*, 158; John Dos Passos – Arthur McComb [September-October 1928], Melvin Landsberg, *John Dos Passos’s Correspondence With Arthur K. McComb*, 223. In this letter, Dos Passos averred that even McComb, a self-professed “arch-conservative,” would find certain aspects of Moscow life appealing.

<sup>1245</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 231.

<sup>1246</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 231.

<sup>1247</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels in Two Democracies*, 162.

<sup>1248</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 169; John Dos Passos, *In All Countries*, 299, 302.

<sup>1249</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 229.

<sup>1250</sup> Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 17-18.

affinity authors demonstrated with the life trajectories of Soviet citizens themselves. This was not, as it may seem, a simple incidence of self-identification, though the biographies of Dos Passos and Wilson contained notable parallels to the awakening of the revolutionary consciousness and refining of the revolutionary self that was the object of Soviet acculturation. Rather, Soviet travel enhanced one's "revolutionary" status in the literary realm, and established the writer as possessing insight into the future of Soviet culture and ideology.

To the extent that Socialist Realism represented a formal literary genre, the distinction between reportage and fiction was erased when the genre became the official standard for writing in 1934. Cultural authorities expected writers to convey exact impressions of the Soviet Union of the future out of notable present-day examples, while identifying and critiquing the elements obstructing such progress. Informing and denunciation rested on a foundation of proper conduct and model facilities hailed in Socialist Realist "reports." As with many among the "circle" of foreigners who traveled in Russia in the interwar period, Dos Passos and Wilson understood they were "involved in a transaction" with Soviet policies.<sup>1251</sup> They conformed to reporting Soviet achievements such as "popular enlightenment" occurring in aesthetic ventures such as the theater, which could be adopted for the progressive purposes of a "revolutionary theater" in the US. However, Dos Passos balked at content that simply repeated Soviet formulas, whether Wilson's "manifesto" of 1932 or accounts employing "words [writers] don't know the meaning of in [the] blood and pain" of actual revolutionary participation.<sup>1252</sup>

Reportage became allied with other surveillance techniques, reminding readers of the need for

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<sup>1251</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 246.

<sup>1252</sup> John Dos Passos – Matthew Josephson [6 February 1935], Matthew Josephson Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

“self-correction” in fulfilling one’s historical role, instead of “treat[ing] the realities of the situation (in literature or politics) in this country or the world.”<sup>1253</sup>

In significant ways, Dos Passos’s and Wilson’s accounts of the Soviet Union did fulfill the goal, rendered in a contemporary Soviet slogan, of “letting the future be embodied in the present.”<sup>1254</sup> Dos Passos connected the experimental theater that so captivated him to other Bolshevik programs he thought heralded the advance of international socialism. Stalin’s Great Break, commencing the year after Dos Passos’s visit, diminished the possibility of Soviet internationalism by substituting a nationalist focus on industrial output and collectivized agriculture. The “convolutions” of Socialist Realist doctrine and repression in 1935 caused him to lose what he termed his “benefit-of-the-doubt attitude towards the Stalinists.”<sup>1255</sup> Martin Malia considered the “shared institutional heritage” of Russia with central Europe facilitated expansion of Communist influence in that region prior to the Popular Front of 1936.<sup>1256</sup> The “crash” of the “liberal mitteleuropa culture in Europe,” Dos Passos wrote in mid-1934, left “people nothing but their feudal reflexes” to follow the strongest leader, whether Fascist or Communist.<sup>1257</sup> Dos Passos remained concerned that in the absence of countervailing political alternatives in Europe, the dissemination of Soviet “successes” would “leave the Kremlin absolutely supreme.”<sup>1258</sup> At the same time, he refused to engage in public denunciation of

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<sup>1253</sup> John Dos Passos – Matthew Josephson [6 February 1935], Matthew Josephson Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

<sup>1254</sup> Marina Kanevskaya, “The Crisis of the Russian Avant-Garde in Iurii Olesha’s ‘Envy,’” 492.

<sup>1255</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson, 23 December 1934, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 459.

<sup>1256</sup> Martin Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes*, 325.

<sup>1257</sup> John Dos Passos – John Howard Lawson [circa fall 1934], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 446.

<sup>1258</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson [January 1935], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 462.

Soviet Russia.<sup>1259</sup> “I don’t think anything can be gained by denouncing [the Soviets] or publicizing the situation,” he wrote Wilson.<sup>1260</sup> Only two years after the publication of *Travels*, Wilson also confessed that he downplayed “the hierarchy of social groups” under Stalin in his text because “I wanted to give [the Soviets] the benefit of every doubt.”<sup>1261</sup>

The atmosphere of denunciation and its corollary, the self-policing of speech antithetical to international Communism, was familiar to Dos Passos and Wilson well before the show trials. In this aspect, their Russian travels had prepared them for the deployment of rhetorical tactics featured in the trials. In early 1934 Dos Passos publicly expressed disagreement with Communist Party tactics that disrupted a socialist meeting in New York, first by signing an “Open Letter” of objections, then by composing an essay-letter to *New Masses* expressing “the growing conviction that only a dramatic change of policy and of mentality can save the radical movement in this country . . . I do not pretend to be an industrial worker; as a writer I think it is my business to let my work speak for itself.”<sup>1262</sup> Several affiliated with the literary left, including his former colleague at the NPT, John Howard Lawson, rebutted Dos Passos. “The [Communist] movement is right regardless of mistakes made along the way,” Lawson wrote Dos Passos, warning that party adherents were “beginning to accuse you of consorting with their enemies.”<sup>1263</sup> The following year Wilson advised Dos Passos of the treatment given literary critic Granville Hicks, a member of the CPUSA and frequent contributor to *New Masses*, by other

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<sup>1259</sup> John Dos Passos – John Howard Lawson [circa fall 1934], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 447; John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson, 5 February 1935, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 465.

<sup>1260</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson, 23 December 1934, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 459.

<sup>1261</sup> Edmund Wilson – Muriel Draper, 14 November 1938, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 311.

<sup>1262</sup> John Dos Passos – *New Masses*, 27 March 1934, quoted in Melvin Landsberg, *Dos Passos’ Path to U.S.A.*, 183. This controversy ended Dos Passos’s eight-year affiliation with *New Masses*: see Daniel Aaron, *Writers On The Left*, 353.

<sup>1263</sup> John Howard Lawson-John Dos Passos, 9 April 1934, quoted in Virginia Spencer Carr, *Dos Passos: A Life*, 328.

Communists. Hicks “had been working his head off to comply with what he understood to be the official attitude” but had been denounced in print before discovering the “new line” prescribed for literary figures.<sup>1264</sup> (Wilson admitted “perplexity” over whether the Party ought to dismiss ‘heretical groups’ and confess its intolerance of anyone using language that did not follow the official line, or reconcile itself to including “all revolutionary writers” as it claimed to do).<sup>1265</sup> Hicks, along with Matthew Josephson and Robert Cantwell, used appraisals of *In All Countries* in early 1935 to attempt correction of Dos Passos’s writing along proper Socialist Realist contours. These critics faulted Dos Passos for saying too little about the Soviet future, and not describing the heroism of both proletariat and the growth of the Soviet “white collar class” as models for the US.<sup>1266</sup> The “danger of sectarian opinions,” Dos Passos wrote Cantwell, was that “they always accept the formulas of past events as useful for the measurement for future events.”<sup>1267</sup> Several Soviet critics also wrote Dos Passos, including Valentin Stenich. Formerly, many had praised Dos Passos and “suggest[ed] that Soviet literature would profit by emulating him.”<sup>1268</sup> Now there was almost universal condemnation of Dos Passos as a “formalist” who ought not to be “allowed to influence Soviet writers” because his “methods were intrinsically reactionary” and did not show “the rise of the new” that was replacing “bourgeois decay.”<sup>1269</sup> As “formalists” were now perceived by the Soviet system as “enemies of

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<sup>1264</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 9 May 1935, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 266; Daniel Aaron, *Writers On the Left*, 295.

<sup>1265</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 9 May 1935, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 266.

<sup>1266</sup> John Dos Passos – Matthew Josephson, [6 February 1935], Matthew Josephson Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

<sup>1267</sup> John Dos Passos – Robert Cantwell, 25 January 1935, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 463.

<sup>1268</sup> Deming Brown, “Dos Passos in Soviet Criticism,” 343.

<sup>1269</sup> Deming Brown, “Dos Passos in Soviet Criticism,” 346-347. Stenich, who composed several essays on Dos Passos in the mid-1930s, often sounded as though he were still acting as the writer’s guide, as he had done in Leningrad, attempting to show him the path to “maturity.” See Deming Brown, “Dos Passos in Soviet Criticism,” 344, 346, which quotes several of Stenich’s reviews.

the people,” even those Dos Passos had admired in the Soviet avant-garde, such as Stenich, warned him against pursuing aesthetic style over documenting the “revolutionary political and social ideas” of Stalin’s Five Year Plans.<sup>1270</sup>

In 1936, shortly after Gorky’s death, the Writers’ Union was rent by denunciations. Many “Stalinist Westernizers” of Dos Passos’s acquaintance, such as Stenich, Tretyakov, and Meyerhold, were executed during the subsequent purges.<sup>1271</sup> Others, such as Wilson’s friend, literary critic D.S. Mirsky, had old charges from the past reopened. (Mirsky had served with the White Army during the Civil War and was exiled by the Bolsheviks as a member of the old aristocracy; he returned to Russia in 1932 and perished in June, 1937).<sup>1272</sup> Lily Herzog fled the Soviet Union in the late 1930s and settled in the US, where she and Wilson continued to correspond. A scant few, such as Alexander Fadeev, with whom Dos Passos stayed in Moscow, and Sergei Dinamov of *International Literature*, retained their positions in literary cultural affairs into the 1960s. Wilson deplored the elimination in the purges of “most intelligent Russians, however loyal” to Stalin, which ended his admiration for the leader’s “positiveness.”<sup>1273</sup>

The show trials further distanced Dos Passos from identification with the “ends” of the Soviet state. At the time of his visit “Stalin was relatively unknown internationally,” and he

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<sup>1270</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 269; Deming Brown, “Dos Passos in Soviet Criticism,” 340.

<sup>1271</sup> See Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 309, for greater analysis of those writers eliminated during the purges, and John Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 176-177, where he discussed the fate of several of those he met during his travels.

<sup>1272</sup> Edmund Wilson – Gleb Struve, 5 September 1955, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 576; Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 193-194. Wilson dedicated the last book published during his lifetime, *A Window On Russia* (1972), to Mirsky. As Mirsky had given Wilson insights into the poetry of Aleksandr Pushkin, Wilson deliberately echoed in his title Peter the Great’s famous statement on opening “a window to the West” at the founding of St. Petersburg.

<sup>1273</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 224.



viewed Soviet cultural consolidation and literary prescription of the early 1930s as manifestations of the leader's desire to control the narrative of Soviet life and perpetuate the "delusion of the exceptional Now."<sup>1274</sup> The emergence and growth of Stalin's personality cult and the terror and show trials dispelled Dos Passos's previous "sympathy" for Bolshevism's apparent "pacifist foreign policy" and efforts toward "cultural autonomy."<sup>1275</sup> Stalinist repression "damage[ed] to the causes they pretend to serve," he wrote.<sup>1276</sup> In 1937 he publicly addressed current "United Front" appeals by the Communist Party by arguing in favor of "an America cut off from Europe's ruling cliques."<sup>1277</sup> He no longer thought that Soviet Russia's "new form of society . . . show[ed] any signs of being a superior frame for the individual."<sup>1278</sup> "Five years ago," he told Theodore Dreiser the same year, "a great many Americans pretended to be very hopeful about Russia," but no longer did he think the task of trying to "Russianize" America possible.<sup>1279</sup> The Soviet future rested upon the Marxist ethos that "the end justifies the means and I think that all you have in politics is the means; ends are always illusory," he stated, adding "that [his] position was reached after considerable travel."<sup>1280</sup>

Wilson too had sufficient glimpses of the Soviet future of self-correcting performance not to profess surprise at the outset of the show trials. Imitating the Soviet model, US literary Communists began a campaign of denunciation in the mid-1930s that grew more heated as the anti-Soviet trials in Moscow advanced, with bitter recriminations flung between those who

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<sup>1274</sup> John Dos Passos, *The Ground We Stand On* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1941), 3.

<sup>1275</sup> John Dos Passos, *The Best Times*, 192, 195.

<sup>1276</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson [January 1935], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 461.

<sup>1277</sup> Daniel Aaron, *Writers On the Left*, 351.

<sup>1278</sup> John Dos Passos – John Howard Lawson [circa November 1937], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 514.

<sup>1279</sup> Daniel Aaron, *Writers On the Left*, 351, 352.

<sup>1280</sup> John Dos Passos – John Howard Lawson [circa November 1937], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 514.

accepted the veracity of testimony given during the trials as a necessity to maintain the “United Front” against fascism, and those who, like Wilson and Dos Passos, believed the trials “diverted” attention from the failures of socialism.<sup>1281</sup> As early as 1934 *New Masses* “charged” Wilson publicly with “vacillating” in his political interests.<sup>1282</sup> “I could not possibly accept all the policies which literary Communists have to accept,” Wilson wrote, without having his “published opinion . . . dictated by the antagonisms of party politics.”<sup>1283</sup> Following a March 1937 Central Committee plenum warning against “capitalist encirclement,” the NKVD denounced cultural leaders who had guided Wilson and other Western writer-travelers on grounds of corruption within Soviet cultural-diplomatic agencies.<sup>1284</sup> Even the format of the show trials victims’ confessions formularized “patriotic service to sacrifice oneself in such a cause,” Wilson noted.<sup>1285</sup> “This comes out clearly in the edifying speeches . . . which the accused usually make before they are sentenced.”<sup>1286</sup>

When Karl Radek, the Deputy Commissar for Heavy Industry, was arrested in January 1937 “for industrial espionage and sabotage” leading to shortfalls in factory output, Wilson read the transcripts of Radek’s trial and conviction.<sup>1287</sup> “I can’t see that there’s anything . . . left of

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<sup>1281</sup> Edmund Wilson – Malcolm Cowley, 15 April 1937, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 287.

<sup>1282</sup> Edmund Wilson – *New Masses*, 22 March 1934, Edmund Wilson Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, box 51, folder 1373; John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson, 23 March 1934, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 435.

<sup>1283</sup> Edmund Wilson – *New Masses*, 22 March 1934, Edmund Wilson Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, box 51, folder 1373.

<sup>1284</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 300.

<sup>1285</sup> Edmund Wilson – Malcolm Cowley, 15 April 1937, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 286.

<sup>1286</sup> Edmund Wilson – Malcolm Cowley, 15 April 1937, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 287.

<sup>1287</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 219; Wendy Z. Goldman, *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin*, 105; Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*, 237. In the early 1930s Radek “became Stalin’s top international advisor” and one of the editors of *Izvestiia*, in which capacity he may have met Wilson in 1935, though there is no mention of Radek in Wilson’s journals of the time. The official charges notwithstanding, Radek’s real crime, Goldman contended, was supposed anti-Stalinism that emerged through testimony during the Kirov trials.

international socialism,” he wrote Dos Passos, and to another correspondent stated he could not “see now . . . any possible reason for pretending that Russia is all right.”<sup>1288</sup> The show trials had the inverse effect to their political intent to “cement an entente cordiale” with the US, Wilson believed.<sup>1289</sup> The official statements concerning the motivation of the trials stated that “the Soviets [no longer] consider the battle [to be] one of socialism against capitalism.”<sup>1290</sup> Denouncing Wilson as one of many leftist intellectuals “calling themselves Marxists and revolutionaries” when they were only reviewing books, Malcolm Cowley stated that Stalin intended the trials to foreground the “individual and military resources” necessary to overcoming fascism.<sup>1291</sup> The “personal character of Stalin” was “unimportant.”<sup>1292</sup>

“I imagine that not a word of these confessions was true,” Wilson responded, but “the technique evidently is to tell [the accused] that they can only vindicate themselves by putting on acts.”<sup>1293</sup> “Nobody who hasn’t seen the Russians at home” as he had, he informed Cowley, was likely to lend credence to reports in *Izvestiia* or *Pravda*, which “hadn’t a word of news or sense in them.”<sup>1294</sup> When Cowley circulated “endorsements” of the trials, Wilson attempted to correct his “invidious” imitation of the “old Stalinist line.”<sup>1295</sup> Soviet discourse embraced “a double standard of truth . . . one for the official groups among themselves and another for

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<sup>1288</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 12 February 1937, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 286; Edmund Wilson – Muriel Draper, 14 November 1938, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 311.

<sup>1289</sup> Edmund Wilson – James T. Farrell, 23 January 1937 [the day of Radek’s conviction], *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 285.

<sup>1290</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 12 February 1937, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 286.

<sup>1291</sup> Malcolm Cowley – Edmund Wilson, 31 October 1938, quoted in Daniel Aaron, *Writers On the Left*, 337, 438.

<sup>1292</sup> Daniel Aaron, *Writers On the Left*, 336, 350; Malcolm Cowley, “Stalin or Satan,” *The New Republic*, LXXIX (January 20, 1937), 48.

<sup>1293</sup> Edmund Wilson – Malcolm Cowley, 15 April 1937, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 286.

<sup>1294</sup> Edmund Wilson – Malcolm Cowley, 15 April 1937, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 287.

<sup>1295</sup> Edmund Wilson – Malcolm Cowley, 20 October 1938, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 310.

manipulating the people.” The cultural fixation on the future, he added, allowed the official groups to expunge “everything that has happened before” from the “historical record” that did not correspond to the “immediate ends” dictated by the ruling elite.<sup>1296</sup>

The orientation toward a perfected future had two consequences for Dos Passos, Wilson, and the majority of fellow-travelers. The first was that, as for the Soviet population itself, dissent from the official “party line” signified opposition to “rational” future perfection, a key motive for the show trials. The idea, which became central to evaluating socialist writing in *To The Finland Station*, derived from contemporary Soviet insistence on recognizing Stalin as the “Lenin of today.”<sup>1297</sup> Dos Passos quickly distanced himself from this reinterpretation of Marxism, writing Wilson and others that by Marxism he meant “the enormously valuable body of ideas, aspirations, [and] humane rebellions” contained in the writings of Marx and Engels, a “good grounding” in which he regarded as “essential” to understanding “the real structure of society.”<sup>1298</sup> He did not view Marxist “political groups” that derived their authority from Stalinist pronouncements as “of use to us in this country,” he wrote Wilson.<sup>1299</sup> Eventually, Stalin’s total supervision of the party-state invalidated the prospect of Americanizing Marx he had discussed with Wilson years earlier. “No man can base his political thinking on Marx anymore,” he stated in 1947.<sup>1300</sup>

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<sup>1296</sup> Edmund Wilson – Malcolm Cowley, 15 April 1937, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 287.

<sup>1297</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 234.

<sup>1298</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson, 5 February 1935, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 465; John Dos Passos – Matthew Josephson [6 February 1935], John Dos Passos – Matthew Josephson [6 February 1935], Matthew Josephson Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

<sup>1299</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson [January 1935], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 461.

<sup>1300</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson, 29 October 1947, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 579.

The second consequence was that, even retrospectively, Dos Passos's and Wilson's Russian travels gave them "an assurance in their right to judge" the predicted outcome of the Soviet experiment.<sup>1301</sup> Among interwar travel narratives, prognostication was almost unique to the Soviet examples, and elicited questions concerning whether the writer had foreseen signs of the consequences of refashioning and performing that distinguished Soviet culture. Most often, Michael David-Fox observed, the "cream of the interwar cultural and intellectual elite" that visited Russia at the height of Western curiosity had their conclusions judged to be "grotesquely wrong" by later historical events.<sup>1302</sup>

Public acknowledgement of wrongness about Soviet Russia was part of the rehabilitative process.<sup>1303</sup> Dos Passos dated the onset of his disillusionment with the Soviet experiment to the time of his visit, writing in 1953 that in the late 1920s he had been "captured" by the utopian prospects of Soviet socialism as an alternative to corporate capitalism, which "seemed to be running the [US] government [and] would destroy civil liberties."<sup>1304</sup> "I was carried away by the class-war emotions of the period," he confessed, "to the point of cooperating" on certain cultural projects endorsed by the party-state.<sup>1305</sup> "I came away with the highly erroneous notion that there was still a chance to develop self-governing institutions there," he added.<sup>1306</sup>

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<sup>1301</sup> John Dos Passos – Edmund Wilson [January 1935], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 461; Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2001), 65.

<sup>1302</sup> Michael David-Fox, "The Fellow Travelers Revisited," 300.

<sup>1303</sup> Julie Draskoczy, "The 'Put' of *Perekovka*," 38.

<sup>1304</sup> John Dos Passos – Matthew Josephson, 2 August 1953, Matthew Josephson Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

<sup>1305</sup> John Dos Passos – Matthew Josephson, 2 August 1953, Matthew Josephson Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

<sup>1306</sup> John Dos Passos – Matthew Josephson, 2 August 1953, Matthew Josephson Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

At the same time, both Dos Passos and Wilson ran afoul of Party statements that the Soviet system's superiority rested on its anti-fascist stance. Approval of cultural adventures in Russia contained an implied anti-fascist critique that Dos Passos challenged in 1937.<sup>1307</sup> A writer "trying for objective reality," he wrote Robert Cantwell, could not "start with any such rubber stamp as 'Fascism' even in the fringe of his mind."<sup>1308</sup> Despite accusations from Communists that opposition to the party gave "aid and comfort" to fascism, Dos Passos argued that "the foreign liberals and radicals were very wrong not to protest against the Russian terror" from its outset.<sup>1309</sup> He later confessed he "left Spain [in 1937] feeling that a country dominated by the Communists would be as bad as one dominated by the Fascists."<sup>1310</sup>

The insurmountable difficulty with Soviet travel accounts, as Dos Passos and Wilson found, occurred when their content described aspects of Stalin's personality cult even as Soviet pronouncements denied this cult's existence.<sup>1311</sup> Wilson acknowledged Stalin's magnified public presence but hesitated to regard the leader's "socialist dictatorship" as an obstacle to the international spread of socialism.<sup>1312</sup> He believed that Stalinist terror constituted a historical and logical development of the revolutionary impulse, a "natural tendency to reproduce the histories of the bourgeois countries [that proved] stronger than socialist principles."<sup>1313</sup> The "avidity" with which New Persons educated themselves convinced him that Stalin's expanding

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<sup>1307</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 227.

<sup>1308</sup> John Dos Passos – Robert Cantwell, 25 January 1935, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 463.

<sup>1309</sup> John Dos Passos – John Howard Lawson [circa November 1937], *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 514.

<sup>1310</sup> John Dos Passos – Matthew Josephson, 2 August 1953, Matthew Josephson Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

<sup>1311</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 229.

<sup>1312</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 225.

<sup>1313</sup> Edmund Wilson, "Shut Up That Russian Novel," 589-590.

power was an aberration.<sup>1314</sup> For a time he clung to the idea that Stalin's "adherence to . . . Marxism" would rein in his excesses, and reassert the leader's "importance to Europe at the present time."<sup>1315</sup> Privately, however, he believed his intellectual generation had come to realize "political movements are failing in practice to live up to their pretensions" concerning utopian projects of refashioning society.<sup>1316</sup>

Travel accounts could serve the purpose of describing Soviet achievements, but no longer could contain even "implied criticism" of Stalin's plans.<sup>1317</sup> The "equanimity" Dos Passos described as an essential quality of reportage depended on presenting both existence and concealment, in a manner quite similar to how intellectuals under Bolshevik scrutiny simultaneously acknowledged the faults of their class background and engaged on work that redeemed their past affiliations. Moreover, the extent to which the travel writer touted Soviet achievements as signs of future perfection of industry and social life determined how Soviet cultural authorities could verify that their efforts were gaining Western support via respected authors.<sup>1318</sup> As Michael David-Fox stated, such an approach opened Western writers to later charges of being dupes of the system, if they failed to acknowledge the Stalinist cult, while contemporary figures on the literary left denounced them for downplaying Soviet opposition to fascism.<sup>1319</sup> The issue of theatricality, historically, played out in events (show trials, purges, military interference) long cited as explanations for the "disillusionment" of Dos Passos, Wilson,

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<sup>1314</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 223.

<sup>1315</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Travels In Two Democracies*, 224.

<sup>1316</sup> Edmund Wilson – John Dos Passos, 31 January 1935, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 257.

<sup>1317</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 236.

<sup>1318</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 227.

<sup>1319</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 321.

and other writers on the American Left.<sup>1320</sup> One explanation, advanced by Paul Hollander, was the attraction of the Soviet experiment for “alienated” figures who willingly turned a blind eye to oppressive practices.<sup>1321</sup> This possibility exists given Wilson’s own study of literary modernists such as James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and T.S. Eliot whose literary styles evolved from Romanticism and French Symbolism and who were alienated and exiled from the culture and political climates of their time.<sup>1322</sup> In David Caute’s analysis, the desire to participate in the utopian project of Soviet socialism animated the alienated intellectuals who visited interwar Russia.<sup>1323</sup> Distancing occurred, Caute stated, as a consequence of the loss of “secular faith” in the Soviet model.<sup>1324</sup> Just as the New Person’s perspective became transformed, disavowal of Soviet ideology and practices contained a “conversion element,” indicating how even the

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<sup>1320</sup> Richard H. Crossman, ed., *The God That Failed* (New York: Harper, 1949), 75-88. Granville Hicks, “The Politics of John Dos Passos,” *The Antioch Review* 10:1 (Spring, 1950), 95, indicated the necessity of preserving a singular form of politically-charged discourse displayed “the brutal literalness with which the party line could be applied,” citing several instances where Dos Passos expressed disagreement with both message and tactics. Daniel Aaron, in *Writers on the Left*, 337, stated that during this period “many liberals found it impossible to reconcile the internal and external policies of the U.S.S.R.” John Trombold, in “From the Future to the Past: The Disillusionment of John Dos Passos,” 237, went further and assigned a stylistic and aesthetic change in Dos Passos’s work after the mid-1930s to a “simultaneous disavowal of revolutionary futurism” and the American Left’s “political reversal,” with the author re-orienting toward the historical past and a “more traditional narrative form.” Significantly, Linda W. Wagner saw disillusionment as a recurrent theme within Dos Passos’s literary career, beginning with his World War I experiences, then the Sacco-Vanzetti protests, and lastly his disenchantment with socialism between 1934 and 1939: *Dos Passos: Artist As American*, 65. A number of recent literary biographies have employed this “disillusionment” narrative in regard to Dos Passos, e.g. Stephen Koch’s *The Breaking Point: Hemingway, Dos Passos, and the Murder of Jose Robles* (New York: Counterpoint, 2006), which contrasts the “idealist” Dos Passos with the realities of Soviet control of the Loyalists during the Spanish Civil War. In his 1937 article “Farewell to Europe,” Dos Passos established the epistemological basis for his disillusionment, the “slogans of the past” reproduced and mass-disseminated as an “instrument for power” and “oppression” by the Communist Popular Front: *The Major Nonfictional Prose*, 183, 185. Around the same time, Wilson expressed privately in correspondence his view of the “corruption” of the “Stalin regime” through “totalitarian domination” of discourse: see Edmund Wilson – Muriel Draper, 14 November 1938, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 310-311.

<sup>1321</sup> Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims*, 284

<sup>1322</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Axel’s Castle*, in *Literary Essays of the 1920s and 30s*, edited by Lewis M. Dabney (New York: Library of America, 2007), 659.

<sup>1323</sup> David Caute, *The Fellow-Travelers*, 264.

<sup>1324</sup> David Caute, *The Fellow-Travelers*, 12; Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 245.



discourse of disillusion and repudiation remained “dominated by Russian arguments and approaches.”<sup>1325</sup>

During the Cold War, each writer would call upon, and revise, their experiences in Russia in response to current geopolitical tensions. Their travels qualified them as cultural experts on Soviet Russia. Wilson, inverting his relationship of traveler to guide, corresponded with and advised a number of later Sovietologists. His approach typified that of Russophiles who contributed to the “burgeoning specialized scholarship on Russian literature” in the post-Second World War era.<sup>1326</sup> As his confidence in his ability to guide increased, Wilson’s access to these figures suggested a repetition of his tentative involvement with official Soviet party-state cultural objectives, in that he now acted as informal critic of US State Department inquiries into Soviet culture. He formed close scholarly relationships with figures important in contemporary Russian historiography, such as Richard Pipes and Gleb Struve, and befriended notable Russian exiles (most prominently Vladimir Nabokov and his brother Nicholas, and Svetlana Alliluyeva, Stalin’s daughter, with whom he corresponded after her arrival in the US in 1967). He also inverted his role as literary missionary: where in the 1930s he attempted to introduce the works of US literary modernists to Russia, he now promoted Russian literature as “a full member of the European cultural milieu and tradition.”<sup>1327</sup> He composed critiques and analyses of Russian authors of the classic period (Pushkin, Dostoyevsky) and brought to the attention of US readers the “dissident literature” of writers such as Boris Pasternak. He later advised

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<sup>1325</sup> David Engerman, *Know Your Enemy*, 151.

<sup>1326</sup> David Engerman, *Know Your Enemy*, 149.

<sup>1327</sup> David Engerman, *Know Your Enemy*, 136.

scholars on the difficulties of translating Pasternak's work after the appearance of *Doctor Zhivago* in English in 1958, which he stated to be "one of the great books of our times."<sup>1328</sup>

Dos Passos drew on his experiences to verify allegations of Communist cultural "infiltration."<sup>1329</sup> An FBI report in 1952 quoted him as stating that he traveled to Russia only because "he was interested in 'seeing what the Soviet Union had.'"<sup>1330</sup> In a deposition to the House Un-American Activities Committee the following year, Dos Passos related that "the evolution of my thinking is well known in literary circles and . . . I have paid a certain penalty for my change in attitude [from] a leftist approach."<sup>1331</sup> This change, together with what he viewed in Soviet Russia, "enabled me to determine with confidence whether or not a given person or a given point of view shows Communist sympathy. I know very well the turns in the party line for thirty years, and I know what talk and action . . . denoted the party member, the fellow-traveler, the Communist sympathizer, [and] the deluded but innocent liberal."<sup>1332</sup>

Dos Passos and Wilson remained cognizant of Soviet authority's monitory power and ability to stage events. This awareness, however, did not preclude either from participating in cultural show themselves, blurring the distinction between actor and audience, reporter and subject.

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<sup>1328</sup> Edmund Wilson – Avrahm Yarmolinsky, 1 November 1958, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 582; Edmund Wilson – Helen Muchnic, 12 September 1958, *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 582.

<sup>1329</sup> John Dos Passos – Matthew Josephson, 2 August 1953, Matthew Josephson Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

<sup>1330</sup> Ray Lewis White, "John Dos Passos and the Federal Bureau of Investigation," 104-105.

<sup>1331</sup> John Dos Passos, Statement prepared for the House Un-American Activities Committee, 22 January 1953, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 601. This deposition was made on behalf of W. Horsley Gantt, the American assistant to Pavlov Dos Passos met in 1928, who returned to the US in the mid-1930s and whose political affiliations were under investigation by the committee. Dos Passos himself was not the subject of an inquiry. Even so, Dos Passos's cooperation with the committee at this time was strikingly at variance with others of his acquaintance (such as John Howard Lawson) who refused to comply with investigatory demands.

<sup>1332</sup> John Dos Passos, Statement prepared for the House Un-American Activities Committee, 22 January 1953, *The Fourteenth Chronicle*, 601.

For them, as for many fellow-travelers, the encounter with the Soviet experiment dramatized the existing “divide between intellectuals and power.”<sup>1333</sup> In many aspects, the travel writings become canonical texts for understanding the attraction of writers to Soviet Russia during the interwar period. “I like to believe,” Wilson wrote Daniel Aaron in 1961 when the latter was working on *Writers On the Left*, “we in this country did our share in bringing . . . the basic philosophy and fallacies of Marxism . . . into the open.”<sup>1334</sup>

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<sup>1333</sup> Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 233.

<sup>1334</sup> Edmund Wilson – Daniel Aaron [1961], *Letters On Literature and Politics*, 360.

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