

# **“I Don’t Boast About It, but I’m the Most Widely Read Author of This Century”: Howard Fast and International Leftist Literary Culture, ca. Mid-Twentieth Century**

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When Deming Brown, at the time a professor on the faculty of University of Michigan’s Slavic department, visited the Soviet Union in 1956, he noticed that the name of an obscure American writer, Howard Fast, seemed to be on the lips of everybody he talked to (Brown 1962: 282). That Fast should achieve such a status in the Soviet Union seemed to Brown so fascinating, that he subsequently devoted a whole chapter of his book *Soviet Attitudes toward American Writing* (1962) to Fast’s reception in the USSR. Brown was hardly the only American Slavacist curious about the Soviet obsession with Fast: in a later study, *A Decade of Euphoria: Western Literature in Post-Stalin Russia, 1954-1964* (1977), Maurice Friedberg wrote extensively about Fast’s disappearance from Soviet bookshelves after his break with the party in 1957. Like many members of the American Communist Party, Fast was so distraught by the crimes of Stalinism revealed in Khrushchev’s Secret Speech and the subsequent invasion of Hungary that he gave up his party membership. Unlike most CP members who left silently, however, Fast did so after making number of anti-Soviet public statements, which were never forgiven.

Despite the high visibility of this break, post-thaw Soviet *intelligentsia* never forgave him his role as a “friend of the Soviet Union” imposed upon the Soviet reading public. To take one representative utterance by the émigré poet, critic, and scholar Anatoly Liberman, Howard Fast, and Dyson Carter “were read almost only in the USSR” (Liberman 2003). In an otherwise atypically sympathetic preface to his translation of Fast’s memoir *Being Red*, Nikolai Anastas’ev writes of Fast’s “appointment” in the Soviet Union “to the position of the foremost contemporary American writer” (Anastas’ev 2001). These and other statements I heard about Fast while in Moscow all assume symbiosis and collaboration between him and the Soviet literary establishment.

There is much truth in what Western Slavacists and members of (post-)Soviet *intelligentsia* had to say about Howard Fast’s peculiar relationship to the Stalinist USSR. In at least one sense, however, they are factually wrong: Moscow did not, and could not, invent Howard Fast’s status as one of America’s most popular contemporary writers. He was not only one of the most widely read writers in the U.S. in the 1940s but also one of America’s most popular contemporary writers worldwide. Another, deeper problem plagues those assertions and the whole discourse on Fast’s (or any other contemporary international leftist writer’s) relationship with the Stalinist Soviet Union. They typically originate as a response to the question whether Fast was used by Soviet propaganda. The trouble here is not so much with the answer (of course, he was!) but with the question itself, and more specifically, with its

underlying ideological assumptions. The interpretative monopoly on Soviet culture enjoyed in the United States since the 1950s by the Cold-War coalition between American Slavacists and Soviet-bloc literary émigrés ensured that Howard Fast's relationship with the Soviet Union would be used against him. After all, Fast was an heir to the earlier generation of American leftists who had been translating, publishing, and reviewing Soviet culture for the broader American public throughout the 1930s. Though perennially riven by the external crises, the dogmatization and stunning reversals of Stalinist policies, those cultural formations of the American left continued to dominate the translation and interpretation of Soviet literature until they were suppressed during the McCarthy era, clearing the way for the rise of the Slavacist-émigré coalition, whose role in constructing our present understanding of the Soviet project has yet to be fully evaluated. Following a similar, anti-regime logic, the oppositional section of the (now former) Soviet-bloc *intelligentsia*, declared, and continues to declare, writers such as Howard Fast guilty by association with the Soviet regime. Developed over the years of its discursive and other struggles with that regime, the oppositional *intelligentsia*'s cultural authority in the eyes of elite reading publics—both during state socialism and now—and its tendency to mechanically put minuses where official propaganda had once put pluses have practically precluded a more objective reception and study of leftist writers from outside the bloc.

This paper represents less of a call for Howard Fast's literary rehabilitation—he was a writer of popular, politically engaged novels with few pretensions to literary immortality in the first place—than an attempt to reframe the discourse on him and other non-Soviet leftist writers. Thus, instead of asking the worn-out but still dominant question, “Did the Soviet Union use them and how?” it will ask the more open-ended, and hopefully, more interesting questions: “What was it like to be at the interface of their national literary culture, the Soviet literary authorities and their broader international readership? What were the hierarchies in this relationship? How were they mediated?”

To approach these issues in the first place we need an understanding of mid-twentieth-century international leftist literary culture, with its cultural formations, institutions, networks, and readership, which is as forgotten today as Fast himself. Only such a rigorously internationalist and archivally-informed perspective can help us challenge the familiar verities about Western leftists as unproblematic and unquestioning loyalists of the Stalinist Soviet Union. In turn, Howard Fast's bright, decade-long trajectory through the world republic of leftist letters will help illuminate its domestic structures and international networks. In particular, using Pascale Casanova's method of delineating the cultural formations and institutions responsible for the reception of foreign literature in France (Casanova 2004), this paper will turn Fast's role as a mediator between local American and broader international leftist culture into a vantage point on several operational principles of the interaction among the national leftist translating-interpreting apparatuses: canonization, excommunication, membrane effect, and monopoly effect. These principles, originating in what one of the members of that republic, Pablo Neruda, would call “the pyramidal politics of the Stalin era” (Neruda 1976: 176) became the reason for the republic's eventual demise. Indeed, once outside the predictable logic of the Cold War and in the

context of an international history of mid-twentieth-century left, the figure of Howard Fast becomes a case study of the way Soviet policies caused the fault-lines and the ultimate fracturing of the global leftist culture.

### **Howard Fast: a short biography**

Since this most widely read of mid-twentieth-century American writers has not been honored with a biography (except for Frank Campenni's 1971 unpublished dissertation), let me offer selectively some biographical details that will help account for Howard Fast's puzzling status between fame and obscurity. Born into a New York working-class Jewish family in 1914, he published his first novel at the age of 18. As a proletarian writer and part of the cultural formations of the Popular Front, especially the John Reed Clubs, he was somewhat unusual in working in the genre of the historical novel.<sup>1</sup> True fame came to him a little later, in the first half of the 1940s, owing to several historical novels he had published over an extremely prolific half-decade: *Conceived in Liberty* (1939), *The Last Frontier* (1941), *The Unvanquished* (1942), *Citizen Tom Paine* (1943), and *Freedom Road* (1944). It was the sequence of these novels that brought Chester Eisinger to conclude that Howard Fast was the "foremost among the American proletarian writers of the 1940s" (Eisinger 1963: 92). Even if the qualification "proletarian" were removed, the statement would still hold. Fast's romance with the leading publishing houses, literary institutions such as Reader's Club and the Book-of-the-Month Club, *The New York Times*, *Saturday Review of Literature* and other prominent review sites ensured that his fiction reached the widest possible readership (Campenni 1971: 114-271). As it was commissioned by the U.S. Army for soldiers fighting abroad, *Citizen Tom Paine*, for example, appeared in a printing far greater than possible for commercial publishers. Most of these novels of the period were staged on Broadway soon after their publication even though it was not until 1960 that Hollywood (or more specifically, Stanley Kubrick) brought one of his novels, the 1951 *Spartacus*, to a much wider audience and four Academy awards.

However, with the onset of McCarthyism in the late 1940s, Fast's literary and political existence became increasingly precarious. An active member of the CP USA since 1943, and a frequent contributor to its main political newspaper (*Daily Worker*) and the literary magazine closest to it (*Masses and Mainstream*), Fast inevitably became a victim of McCarthyism. Upon refusing to name names in a 1948 hearing about the Committee for the Assistance of Spanish Refugees held by the House Un-American Activities Committee, he was sentenced to a three-month prison term, which he served in 1950. Together with John Howard Lawson, Dashiell Hammet, Lilian Hellman, Dorothy Parker, Albert Maltz, and other, less well-known American novelists and screenwriters, he was then officially placed on the Hollywood blacklist.<sup>2</sup>

In his autobiography *Being Red*, Fast vividly illustrates the literary consequences of his political persecution: publishers, who had previously fought for his novels, now rejected them curtly; his efforts at self-publication (his Blue Heron Press) found no adequate channels of distribution; when his books did make it to the reader, few critics, let alone literary institutions

such as the Book-of-the-Month Club, would compromise their reputation with them. On top of it all, Edgar Hoover issued an order to remove his books from American public libraries. The keenly felt assault on his own person accounts for the turn to the present in Fast's novels of the period: *Clarkton* (1947), *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* (1953), *Silas Timberman* (1954), and *Lola Gregg* (1956) all tell stories of the persecution of the American left. Even if his public break with the Communist Party in 1956-57 lifted the official and unofficial restrictions on his publishing activities, the genuine popularity he had enjoyed a decade earlier never fully returned to him. He continued to publish prolifically, but frequently under pseudonyms, and certainly without the readership he had once enjoyed.

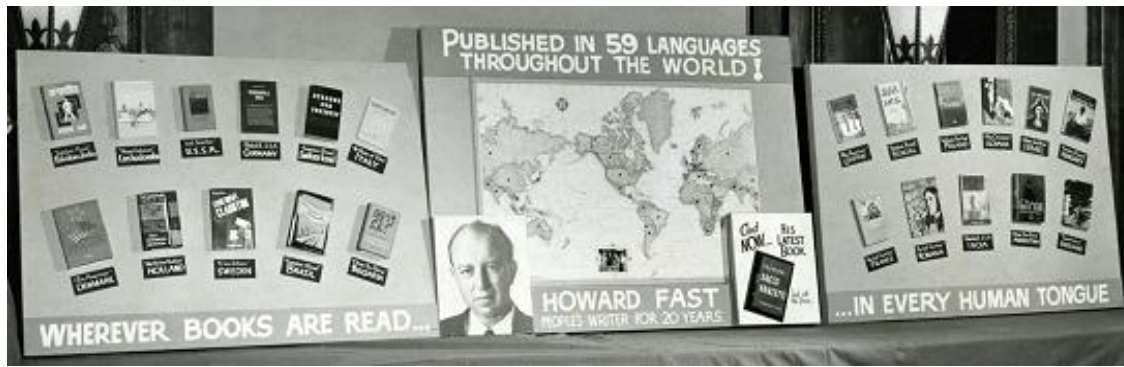
Thus, Maurice Friedberg's astonishment at Howard Fast's popularity in the USSR reflects not only late Stalinist cultural policies but a parallel erasure of the tradition of the proletarian novel in the United States and of Howard Fast's stature as one of the most widely read American writers of the 1940s. Moreover, his subsequent reputation in the post-Stalinist USSR, perpetuated by the oppositional Soviet *intelligentsia*, actually belies the genuinely positive reception he enjoyed among Soviet readership in the late Stalin era (Brown 1962: 282; Grimberg 2009). The novels distinguished themselves against the background of Soviet novels of the postwar period, with a mastery of suspense and fast-paced action, which had never been the forte of Soviet (or Russian, for that matter) literature. While understandably political, Fast's novels were spared the repetitive formulas of the Soviet Socialist Realism of the late 1940s: they emplot the development of political consciousness in more diverse ways than their Soviet counterparts; no wise and elderly Party person nurtures the positive hero (Clark 1984); and at a time when late Stalinist literature came to be shaped by the doctrine of "conflictlessness," Fast's mastery of drama and suspense left few readers doubt. Finally—and Fast could hardly help this—Soviet readers approached his books as, among other things, ethnographic sources on contemporary American life. In the absence of non-censored information on the U.S., geographically curious Soviet citizens satisfied their interest through literature. Indeed, the thinness of late Stalinist print culture and the severity of censorship were turning Soviet readers into consummate bricoleurs.

Like most studies of American leftist cultural producers of the 1930s and 1940s, Campenni's dissertation locates Howard Fast firmly in the national, American context. The possible reasons for this sparseness of the international references are many and varied: scholarly (the dissertation was written long before the "transnational turn" in American studies), pragmatic (there are objective difficulties in conducting international scholarship), and political. After all, as efforts to rehabilitate a Popular-Front literary culture permanently disrupted by literary McCarthyism, such studies seek to avoid its chief charge, namely, that "Kremlin gold had kept running it all" (Denning, 1997: xviii), by understating the internationalism of the leftist writers. Similarly, by viewing Fast purely in light of another national literary field—that of Soviet letters—American Slavicists such as Friedberg and Brown succeed in presenting him as a Soviet invention. With the benefit of archival access and the ability to operate without the ideological mandate with which American Slavic Studies was charged during the Cold War, we can now

revisit the charge that the Soviet Union kept the international leftist literary culture of the 1940s and 1950s “running.”

In its more literal form, namely, that the USSR had financed the leftist writers supportive of it, this accusation is not born out by the facts. Not being a signatory to the Geneva copyright convention until the mid-1970s, the Soviet Union did not pay royalties to the foreign writers its publishing houses and magazines brought out. Naturally, such a policy upset many a foreign writer and complaints about it constituted a major part of their correspondence with the Foreign Section of the Soviet Writers' Union. On rare occasions, after much pleading, some of them, whose loyalty was of particular value to the Writers' Union, did receive wire transfers in hard currency, though their amount was pitifully small compared to the royalties they received from American or other international publishers.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, except for the moneys that came to him with the award of the 1953 Stalin Peace Prize, Howard Fast never received royalties for any of the 2.5 million copies of books published in the Soviet Union. If anything, his CP membership proved enormously costly, not only in terms of the donations he voluntarily made to the CP USA but also in the currency of his domestic literary reputation.<sup>4</sup>

Yet even if we take the idea of “Kremlin gold” more figuratively, as signifying the prestige Soviet literary bureaucrats would bestow to foreign cultural producers, both domestically and internationally, we could still hardly account for Howard Fast's rise in international leftist literary culture (or the very existence of that culture, for that matter) to Moscow's instructions or practices. In comparison to other international publishers, the Soviet literary establishment (a complex consisting of the Culture Division of CP USSR, the Soviet Writers' Union, individual publishing houses and literary magazines) came to consecrate Howard Fast relatively late. His first publication in the USSR came in 1949, by which time his novels had already become best-sellers in a number of countries outside the Soviet bloc: Argentina, Czechoslovakia, France, Denmark, The Netherlands, and Bulgaria. To be sure, his works came out of leftist publishing houses in Buenos Aires, Prague, Paris, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, and Sofia, and reached primarily a leftist readership. Paris, of course, stands out in this sequence: more than any other translation, it was Fast's translation and reception in what Pascale Casanova calls the World Capital of Letters that ensured his subsequent international popularization (Casanova 2004: 87-103). A 1953 photograph from the twentieth anniversary of his literary career features a world map with flags to indicate the cities, where his books had been published. Together, these flags constitute a veritable archipelago of international leftist print culture. A poster just above the map boldly proclaims that Fast's novels have been published in 59 languages, a number that soon would grow to 80. Even if he may have been exaggerating when he made the claim to have been the most widely read author of the century (Fast 1957: 10), at the time he made it, it was quite plausible.



**Figure 1:** Howard Fast: People's Writer for Twenty Years. Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Rare Books Library.

## Canonization

What the Soviet Union could and did do for a writer of Howard Fast's credentials—genuine popularity at home and abroad, political commitment, and a prison sentence to show for it—was to include him in its official framework of literary internationalism. The first instance that I have been able to find of such inclusion for Fast in that framework was his mention (as Buard (sic!) Fast) in the projected invitee list of leftist Western writers at the International Stalingrad Conference of Writers from the People's Democracies. The Conference was planned for the summer of 1948 with the dual aims of consolidating the Soviet-bloc literary space and reuniting the international Popular-Front literary coalition of the 1930s, disrupted by the Moscow show trials, the Stalin-Hitler Pact, and finally and most drastically by the near-complete breakdown of literary exchanges during the Second World War (Anon. 1948). That the event did not take place was probably due to the World Congress of Intellectuals for Peace organized at the same time (and with a similar purpose and cast of characters) at the initiative of the Polish and French Communist Parties in Wrocław, Poland. That Congress was to be the founding of the Partisans for Peace, probably the foremost among the several international mass organization in the earliest and sharpest phase of the Cold War, through which the Soviet Union attempted to appeal to the publics outside of the bloc: the World Federation of Democratic Youth, the World Federation of Trade Unions, the World Federation of Women and others. Atop the Partisans for Peace movement, in a typical Stalinist fashion, was the World Peace Council.

Unlike the anti-fascist International Association of Writers for the Defense of Culture of the late 1930s, the Peace Council was not specifically a literary organization. Rather, its first, most important congresses (Wrocław 1948, Paris-Prague 1949, Warsaw 1950, Vienna 1952) and its initiatives brought together internationally famous writers, scholars (mostly physicists, wielding a new prestige after the atomic bomb), and other public figures all over the world sympathetic to the Soviet cause. However, the Peace Movement's organizers repeatedly emphasized its origins in the earlier International Association of Writers for the Defense of

Culture. The continuity was reinforced by the presence of many of the veterans of the Popular-Front struggles for culture among the Council Members: Anna Seghers, Johannes Becher, Georg Lukacs, Louis Aragon, Ilya Ehrenburg, Jose Bergamin, Emi Siao, Nazim Hikmet, Paul Robeson, Pablo Picasso, Diego Rivera, Pablo Neruda, and Jorge Amado. Such a genealogy aimed to lend the prestige of the anti-fascist movement of yesterday to the anti-imperialist, or in practice, anti-American movement of that later time (Behrends 2008).<sup>5</sup> During the Wroclaw congress, the stridently anti-American tone of the Soviet delegation and its chairman Alexander Fadeev, head of the Soviet Writers' Union, set a veritable tradition of not only alienating the more moderate members but also embarrassed the more moderate delegates to the congress, who had hoped for a more ecumenical coalition of all progressive forces. That the Polish organizers succeeded in toning down the harshness of the Soviet delegation and thus saved the Congress speaks to the limits of Soviet influence and the ultimately contested nature of such spaces (Shore 2006: 271-273).

At a time when borders were closing and nations were undergoing symbolic purification campaigns, whether of the McCarthyist or anti-cosmopolitan variety, attendance at these congresses and especially membership in the World Peace Council assured participants' ability to cross the Iron Curtain, and hence, their cosmopolitan status. An additional form of consecration, awarded by the Council was the Peace Prize, awarded between 1950 and 1957. That was, however, overshadowed by and frequently confused with the Soviet-awarded International Prize for Strengthening Peace, which first bore Stalin's name and after 1956—Lenin's. Fast won the latter in 1953, the same year as the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda and the Polish novelist Leon Kruczkowski. Both awards, whose recipients frequently overlapped as many of them were drawn from among the Council members themselves, were intended and functioned as the international socialist alternative to the Nobel Prize. Indicating the immense ideological hopes the Soviet authorities and WPC participants placed on literature, half of the recipients of both Peace Prizes were writers.

The canonical status accorded by the Soviet Union to a narrow circle of writers such as Howard Fast belied the sheer paucity of literary exchanges between Soviet and foreign writers and literary institutions in the first post-war decade. In comparison to the 1930s, the foreign correspondence deposited in the archive of the Foreign Section of the Writers' Union and the cross-border travel of leftist writers during the post-war decade shrank enormously. Similarly, the symbolic prestige accorded to the writers, who were members of the World Peace Council, disguised the real attenuation of leftist literary culture on their side of the Iron Curtain. The central literary consequence of that decline was the relegation of that literary culture's dominant genre—the worldwide proletarian novel (Denning 2004: 51-72)—to a peripheral status in different national literary fields.

## **Excommunication**

As another ultimately destructive literary strategy introduced into the international literary movement by the Soviet cultural authorities, excommunication was just the opposite to canonization. After Fast was himself excommunicated in 1957, he wrote an exposé, *The Naked God: The Writer and the Communist Party*, in which he describes the incredible trauma that process and the accompanying Party campaign caused to many a leftist writer. Depending on the strength of an excommunication in non-socialist societies, and the extent to which critics and readers were willing to follow it, it deprived the author of part of her readership and some publication and distribution outlets. Fast's own excommunication stood out mainly in its international scope, which placed it almost on a par with Andre Gide's in 1936.

In this sense, it is almost ironic that Howard Fast's unusual popularity in the USSR was a product of a series of excommunications passed in the Soviet Union against the major literary figures of the American Popular Front such as John Dos Passos, Upton Sinclair, John Steinbeck, Richard Wright, or Ernest Hemingway. Dos Passos had been proscribed for his romance with Trotskyism and the outspoken anti-Soviet public statements he made, especially in the wake of his friend Jose Robles's execution by communists during the Spanish Civil War. Further translation and publication of his books in the Soviet Union immediately ceased and library copies were destroyed, removed, and rendered unavailable to readers, as was the practice with purged Soviet authors. Sinclair and Steinbeck, widely published in the USSR during the Popular-Front years, were excommunicated during the anti-American campaign of the late 1940s. The last Soviet article on Sinclair that doomed him to unpublishability for the rest of the late Stalinist period was entitled, "Wall Street's Cosmopolitan Lackey," while "Let's Stand Up to the Preacher of Hatred" announced Steinbeck's effective ban. Richard Wright, whose *Native Son* was translated to wide acclaim in the Soviet Union in 1939, had, as Raisa Orlova put it, also "gone over to the side of reaction."<sup>6</sup> Ernest Hemingway, well-received by Soviet readers in the 1930s, and after his literary comeback in 1955—by far the most popular foreign writer in the USSR—was in the interim rendered unpublishable (without being officially excommunicated: he had made no official anti-Soviet statements) owing to some "anti-Soviet" episodes in his Spanish Civil War novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. With few other leading contemporary American novelists on the left to choose from, Howard Fast was the best Soviet publishers and magazines could find.

With the gradual Sovietization of Eastern and Central Europe, the power of literary excommunication came to extend to the whole Soviet bloc. Indeed, the records of the Fast case in the Cultural Section of the Soviet CP's archive ended with a directive to the Soviet Writers' Union that it mobilize the writers of China, Bulgaria and Romania to expose Fast as a renegade in public statements (Various 1956-57). (Because of the events of 1956, Poland, originally named on the list, was subsequently deleted while Hungary was never mentioned.) A note in the archive of Anna Seghers, the then-president of the East German Writers' Union, lists the American authors "not recommended for publication in the Soviet Union" (Seghers, n.d.). The meaning of such notes becomes apparent upon examination of the catalogs of the major Eastern European state libraries: like many Soviet writers purged or simply thrust into official disgrace



during Stalinism, Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, and Upton Sinclair began their return to Eastern European bookstores in the mid-1950s, only after they first received their literary rehabilitations in the Soviet Union.

The effectiveness of Soviet literary excommunications outside of the Second World was a much more uncertain matter and depended on the relative influence of the CP in that particular society and the authority of the Soviet CP over that particular CP. In the post-Stalin years both of these factors steadily declined in importance. The very significant drop in worldwide publication of Fast's novels between 1956 and 1958, however, speaks to the pervasive, if not absolute, effectiveness of international excommunication. And while many more Western writers had yet to publicly part ways with the Soviet Union, Fast was probably the last of the prominent Western literary "renegades." Subsequent excommunication by the Soviet Union was never accompanied by such a virulent international campaign of defamation.

### **Membrane effect**

While excommunications depleted the ranks and caused major controversies in the world republic of leftist letters, the more general rift between Western leftist readers and their Soviet counterparts was caused by the literary Iron Curtain, for whose descent Soviet cultural authorities bear much of the responsibility. Their extreme caution and conservatism in allowing foreign culture to the USSR is best illustrated by a list produced by GlavLit (the major censorship institution) of the 270 writers foreign writers of all periods and geographical place, ranging from Aristophanes to Pablo Neruda, who were allowed for publication without a censorship permit (Omel'chenko 1948). In other words, the publication of any authors of fiction, poetry, and drama not on that list would mean engaging in the kind of bureaucratic struggle that only the hardest Soviet publishers would be prepared to take on.

Even though Howard Fast's name, like the name of any other living American writer for that matter, was missing from that list—to be added a little later—the list's logic helps explain Fast's near-monopoly status as *the* contemporary American writer in the USSR and most Soviet-bloc countries. Both that list and Fast's place in it are two fascinating consequences of the Iron Curtain's reduced permeability, or what I shall call the "membrane effect." When only a fraction of the cultural production from one state is allowed to enter another, in the eyes of cultural consumers in the latter, that fraction achieves a truly representative status. The underlying principles of the process apply to other fields such as scholarship and borders other than those between ideological blocs: for example, when deconstruction and other species of post-structuralist theories from France penetrated the American academic field, they became synonymous with French cultural theory, while most other theoretical developments in France remained largely untranslated, and hence, unknown in the U.S. The effect, however, becomes most visible at times when national and ideological borders are least penetrable to foreign cultural production, such as the early Cold War. Consequently, the representative power of writers who for some reason penetrate the membrane is immensely magnified. In the post-war

period, the works of only five living American writers were published: Howard Fast, Albert Maltz, Alexander Saxton, Lloyd Brown, and Sinclair Lewis.<sup>7</sup> Sinclair Lewis may have been something of an exception in this line-up: his status in the USSR at the time was suspect, but his novel *Kingsblood Royal* served as a much-needed illustration of the racism in the South. Alexander Saxton and Lloyd Brown were minor writers in the U.S. and certainly remained so in the Soviet Union, where their novels, *The Great Midland* and *Iron City*, respectively, were published in relatively small printings. Albert Maltz was another matter: from the late 1930s, when his first translations in Russian appeared, to 1954, 750,000 copies of his books were published in seven languages of the Soviet Union. However, it was Howard Fast who dwarfed them all in number of publications and copies during the decade of his Soviet literary life: between 1949 and 1957, 2,500,000 copies of his books came out in twelve Soviet languages. In the absence of any alternatives, he became *the* representative contemporary American writer in the Soviet Union.

To a less dramatic extent, the membrane effect shaped the reception of other Western literatures in the late Stalinist USSR (and since all other Soviet-bloc Writers' Unions and publishers were to one degree or another taking their cue from their senior partner). Foreign writers friendly to the Soviet Union came to represent the whole of their contemporary national literature. As far as the Soviet reader was concerned, of all major national literatures, the membrane separating her from American literature was the least permeable, producing a "minor canon" of contemporary American literature in the Soviet Union, which even the most orthodox among the American communist readers would not have recognized. Given the strength of the communist movement in France and the larger number of writers with communist sympathies there, for example, the membrane between French and Soviet literary fields was more permeable as it had been during the Popular-Front years. For this reason, contemporary French literature as available to Soviet readers bore much greater resemblance to French literature in France. As literature supplied the common text that sustained the global leftist community and the aesthetic forms in terms of which it imagined and represented itself, the production of such minor canons effectively meant a fracturing of that community.

### **Monopoly effect**

Most importantly, Howard Fast was not merely a function of the membrane separating American and Soviet culture. He became a significant factor in its very permeability. Despite the near-consensus in scholarship about the unilateralness of late Stalinist cultural policies, non-Soviet cultural mediators such as Fast himself were in a position to shape the flow of cultural production (Soviet or American) that could pass through that membrane. That role I shall call the "monopoly effect." At its most basic, the effect meant that the Soviet Union relied heavily on his expert advice with regard to American letters. It was Fast's advice, for example, that added Alexander Saxton to the very short list of living American writers publishable in the Soviet Union (Fadeev 1948). Unlike Fast, however, Saxton never achieved much popularity or reached

a broader audience at home, let alone abroad. That such an obscure author should receive a captive Soviet audience was entirely thanks to Fast's recommendation. Fast also drew up the list of American writers to be invited to the Second Soviet Writers' Congress in 1954, which he himself was unable to attend after being denied an American passport.

The role of the monopolist did not exhaust itself to occasional consultations on contemporary American literature: to a surprising extent people like Howard Fast actively interfered with Soviet publication practices, usually in the direction of synchronizing them with their national literary fields. In a letter to Alexander Fadeev, the Chairman of the Soviet Writers' Union, Fast offers a blistering critique of R. Samarin's article "Miles Americanus," which appeared in the third issue for 1949 of the English version of *Soviet Literature* (the magazine into which *International Literature* had been very tellingly transformed in 1946). Part of the anti-American campaign in Soviet literary criticism at the time, the piece upset Fast with its dismissal of committed American leftists such as Stephen Vincent Bennett, John Hersey, and Bill Mauldin as confused or unreliable political chameleons. Indeed, Samarin's was the kind of article that most offended foreign sympathizers of the Soviet Union: that it was "stupid and ill-informed," as Fast justly calls it, was only half the problem; that such a text could come out of the Moscow they trusted was nothing short of embarrassing. Fast wrote to that effect to Fadeev and other Soviet cultural officials, who in turn instructed the editor of *Soviet Literature* "to correct the mistake by giving a correct evaluation of Mr. Bennett's work and of the public position held by Mr. Hersey and Mr. Maudlin" (Ibid.). In addition to confronting the excesses of Soviet anti-Americanism and in the process, assuming the role of a peripheral censor of Soviet publishers, Fast participated in shaping Soviet literature's reception in the U.S. While not a Russian speaker, he wrote the introductions—and thus played a role in their American reception—to a number of Soviet novels published in the U.S. during the height of the Cold War.

Far from playing the role of senior partners in their correspondence with him, leading bureaucrats of the Soviet Writers' Union such as Boris Polevoi had been writing appeasing, sometimes fawning, letters well before the crisis of 1956-57, when they desperately tried to persuade him to remain in the movement (Polevoi 1956-57). Prominent party functionaries within the Division of Culture of the Soviet CP were so concerned about the prospect of his defection that they personally edited Polevoi's letters to Fast multiple times before those could be sent out (Ibid.). Probably the most remarkable illustration of the political power Fast's monopolist status gave him, however, came earlier, when he delivered the American Communist Party's official charge of anti-semitism against its Soviet counterpart during the Paris Peace Congress in 1949 (Fast 1990: 217-218).

Fast may not be the most prominent case of the monopoly effect, especially as this kind of editing of Soviet cultural production from outside of the USSR reached its climax after he had left that world republic of leftist letters. Louis Aragon, for example, was notorious for his monopolization of post-war French-Soviet literary relations. The publishing house he ran (*Editeurs français réunis*) enjoyed exclusive rights over the translation and publication of Soviet literature in France, and his prolific prefaces and reviews to a significant extent determined the

French reception of a given Soviet book, which often diverged from official Soviet evaluations. Although greatly limited in his publishing decisions by the offerings of Soviet cultural bureaucrats, Aragon often exasperated them with his unorthodox choices. He also exercised a powerful influence over what kind of French (and through the colonies, African) literature appeared in the Soviet Union, especially from the mid-1950s on, often aggressively meddling in Soviet publication practices, vetoing the publication of some French author in favor of another, and repeatedly securing the Russian translation of his wife's (the writer Elsa Triolet) novels over the opposition of Soviet cultural bureaucrats (Graevskaia *et al* 1959).

The list of such monopolists could easily be extended beyond France and the U.S. to all societies with leftist movements and leftist culture. Pablo Neruda occupied the same position with respect to Chilean (or more broadly, Latin American) cultural ties with the USSR; Jorge Amado maintained the Soviet-Brazilian connection; Katherine Susan Pritchard was in charge of the Soviet-Australian one; and Mulk Raj Anand enjoyed exclusive rights over the Soviet Union's literary relationship with India. The leading Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet, a resident of Moscow from 1950 on, after a decade and a half spent in Turkish prisons, was the Soviet Union's chief liaison with his national literary culture. The more limited the Soviet cultural ties with a particular country, the more independent the role of the monopolist. Soviet literary exchanges with other socialist states, especially in the early years of Sovietization, were, too, mediated by such "monopolists." In Bulgaria, for example, that role was played by Lyudmil Stoyanov, a veteran of the 1935 Paris Writers' Congress for the Defense of Culture and a long-time correspondent of the Foreign Section of the Soviet Writers' Union, who served as Chairman of the Bulgarian Writers' Union in the late 1940s. The new German Democratic Republic may have been atypical in having a very large number of cultural mediators between East German and Soviet literary fields: Johannes Becher, Anna Segers, Alfred Kurella, Willie Bredel, and others, who had all proven their loyalty and steadfastness during the literary and other struggles of the 1930s and many of whom had actually lived as anti-fascist exiles in the USSR. Their sheer number diluted the monopoly effect.

The structural power vested in the figure of the monopolist introduced an unfortunate hierarchy in his domestic literary field. In the Soviet bloc, the monopolist often assumed the role of a major functionary, sometimes that of the Chair of the Writers' Union (such as Seghers or Stoyanov) or Minister of Culture (Becher). The prestige and bureaucratic authority granted to the monopolists upset leftist cultural producers denied this kind of access, as testified by one of the editors of *Mainstream and Masses*, Joseph Starobin:

Howard became in the CP the oracle on every issue from Negro rights to socialist realism; he ran for office on tickets that weren't his own, and headed every conceivable committee ... He won many prizes, was photographed with the happy children of beaming—and temporary—consular officials at the UN cocktail parties, and accepted the invitations to write on every conceivable subject or

distant magazines whose editors cabled him as though he were a world power (Starobin 1957: 42-56).

However we interpret Starobin's embittered remark, the Soviet practice of granting monopoly rights on literary relations to the Soviet Union to one or a very small number of writers from a particular foreign country proved enormously costly in the long run. While the Soviet cultural bureaucrats never enjoyed the kind of control they would have wanted over who participated in the world republic of letters, what kind of cultural production was came out of it, and how it was consumed, they did succeed in introducing into it certain pyramidal organizational forms. Stemming from the Stalinist practice of concentrating authority of particular fields in the hands of a single person (Gorky in literature, Lysenko in biology, Academician Marr in linguistics), those forms helped reduce the vast majority of the members of leftist literary formations to mediated, second-hand relationships with Soviet-bloc or international leftist culture. This practice was one of the reasons why the generation of leftist cultural producers that grew up in this period and came of age in the late 1950s and 1960s was much more ignorant of, and less interested in, that culture. To many Western cultural producers of that new generation, the Soviet Union became a little bit of an embarrassment: they neither wanted to speak out in its defense, opening themselves to all lines of attack by domestic anti-communists; nor did they particularly want to join the latter's anti-Soviet Cold-War rhetoric. Keeping silence *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union became the preferred way of navigating the Scylla and Charybdis of the discursive Cold War. It was this silence that assured the interpretative monopoly of the coalition between Western Slavicists and the growing number of East European émigrés, and the anti-Soviet dissidents from which the latter had emerged.

The interpretative work performed by that coalition was produced in the process of its discursive struggle with the ideological institutions of the state socialism. A meaningful critique of that work can never be based on evoking the language those institutions employed against that coalition. At best, it represents the latter's inverted image; it worst, it is made up of half-truths and smearing. An additional difficulty in launching such a critique lies in the unquestionable contribution of Western Slavic studies to our understanding of Russian and Eastern European cultures, the insurmountable trauma experienced by generations of East European émigrés from Vladimir Nabokov to Milan Kundera driven out of their native countries, and the undeniable civil courage of dissidents who chose to "live in truth" despite the enormous cost of that kind of living. These must be always acknowledged and born in mind. Yet only such a thoroughgoing critique will reveal the origins of some discursive problems plaguing the post-socialist world and its scholars where the interpretative power of that coalition has been the greatest: a narrow and elite understanding of human rights (often limited to freedom of speech), underdeveloped discourse on economic justice and equality (seen as the province of the Soviet state), and more generally, a thoroughgoing conflation of the underlying ideological impetus behind socialism with the historic experience and actual regimes of state socialism.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The John Reed Club was established by the staff of the *New Masses* literary magazine in 1929 to support the work of leftist writers. It quickly developed into a nationwide network of approximately 30 chapters. As a response to the Popular Front movement of the time, in 1936 they were dissolved into the larger antifascist American Artists' Congress.

<sup>2</sup> It is telling that the main legislative act in the field of culture to be passed during McCarthyism concerned the film industry. While the anti-communist campaign swept through the American literary field as well, authorities devoted far more attention to Hollywood. In the Soviet Union, as we will see, literature was the art form that the Party and the different sections of intelligentsia considered of greater ideological value.

<sup>3</sup> The records of Theodore Dreiser's haggling with the *International Literature* magazine can be found in both the Russian State Archive for Literature and the Arts (f. 1397, op. 1, ex. 832) and in the folder Correspondence with the Soviet Writers' Union in Dreiser's personal archive at University of Pennsylvania Rare Book Library.

<sup>4</sup> The Soviet Union's main form of repayment, to which only the most loyal and well-known foreign writers were entitled, was an invitation to visit the country. To the best of my knowledge, after Erskine Caldwell's visit to the USSR in 1941, no other American writer was treated to such an invitation until the Second Congress of the Soviet Writers' Union (1954).

<sup>5</sup> Since the movement was not really co-optable, by the logic of the Cold War, the CIA resorted to mimicry, creating the Peace Movement's anti-Soviet Doppelgänger, the Congress of Cultural Freedom, where international writers also took center stage.

<sup>6</sup> See V. Gallant's "Kosmopolitstvuiushchii lakei Wall-strita." *Leningradskaia Pravda* 18.05.1949; M. Polikanov's "Otpor propovedniku nenavisti." *Pravda* 14.9.1948; R. Orlova, "Vospitanie landsknekhtov," *Novyi Mir*, 3(1948), p. 202-203. For more information on Soviet reception of American literature of the period, refer to Chapter 7 "From WWII to 1955" of Brown 1962.

<sup>7</sup> Among the other American writers published in this period, one should note Theodore Dreiser, who had died in 1945, months after joining the Communist Party, only to be promptly canonized by the Soviet literary authorities. In terms of numbers of copies published and sold by an American author in the USSR over this period, he was surpassed only by Jack London, who together with O. Henry, had been a perennial favorite of the Soviet readership. The remaining group of American writers published over this period—Bret Harte, Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, and Harriet Beecher Stowe—were safely in the nineteenth century and provided a sense of cultural stability. For more detailed information on Soviet publishing practices of American literature, see Brown 1954 and 1962.

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