

## **Americanization versus Sovietization: Film exchanges between the US and the Soviet Union, 1948–1950**

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Film exchanges between the US and the Soviet Union, 1948–1950**

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**Abstract:**

This article examines film exchanges between the US and the USSR during 1948–1950. It analyzes how American films entered and spread in the Soviet Union, as well as the reverse process of Soviet films entering the US, in order to understand which of these processes was more successful in terms of promotion of values. It starts with investigating factors that determined the distribution of both US and Soviet films in their respective countries, followed by a review of deterrents that limited the process of film distribution. The article concludes that American movies were more widely disseminated and popular in the Soviet Union than Soviet films were in the US, primarily due to the strong support of American private film producers and distributors, though also due to the films' more discreet messages. By contrast, Soviet films were distributed exclusively by the Soviet government and thus represented direct ideological messages.

**Keywords:**

Cold War; films; USA; USSR; Americanization; Sovietization

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## Cover page

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## **Americanization versus Sovietization: Film exchanges between the US and the Soviet Union, 1948–1950**

### **Introduction**

‘One resists the invasion of armies; one does not resist the invasion of ideas,’ said French writer Victor Hugo (1909, 627–628). This idea forms the basis of politics supporting the chief foreign policy line of the United States, known as public diplomacy. In this thinking, ideas are capable of conquering the world by entering the consciousness of people worldwide. In fact, at the beginning of the Cold War, the US and other world and regional powers began to use foreign cultural programs to improve their image abroad and influence public opinion in foreign societies.

In this article, *foreign cultural policy* is defined as a range of informative, academic, and cultural programs financed by a government and targeting foreign audiences to achieve the goals of foreign policy. The terms *cultural diplomacy* and *public diplomacy* are recognized to be interchangeable. However, in American documents of the period under discussion, the terms ‘cultural work’ or ‘information activities’ and ‘information exchanges’ are used (US Congress 1948). Soviet documents preferred the term ‘propaganda’ (Ministry of Cinema Industry 1949b; Ministry of Cinema Industry 1949c; Sovexportfilm 1950e). In this article, the terminology of relevant documents is used, even if current literature describes these processes in the discourse of soft power.

Cinema is not only an art form but also a very attractive aspect of US culture. ‘Pictures often convey values more powerfully than words,’ argued soft power theorist Joseph Nye (2004, 47). Hollywood, the world film industry leader—at least in terms of financial power—is a strong resource for US cultural work. During World War II and in the initial postwar period, the distribution of American films expanded significantly in Europe,

including in the sphere of its wartime ally and Cold War antagonist, the Soviet Union. It should be noted that during this pre-television era, cinema constituted a unique, powerful means of cultural influence.

In this article, the terms ‘motion pictures,’ ‘films,’ and ‘movies’ are used interchangeably as the art form of moving images that are revealed in social, historical, political, industrial, technological, philosophical, psychological, and aesthetic dimensions. Another key term is ‘newsreel,’ which can be defined as a set of short films devoted to events and united in a single reel. A documentary film is a term close to a newsreel; however, unlike a newsreel, it covers actual modern or historical events, editing them and shaping them in order to give a form to the direct observation. Cartoons and animation are getting more and more difficult to define due to the appearance of new techniques and methods, such as computer-generated special effects. However, speaking about 1948–1950, a classical definition can be applied to a cartoon as ‘a motion picture made by photographing successive positions of inanimate objects (such as puppets or mechanical parts)’ or ‘made from a series of drawings simulating motion by means of slight progressive changes’ (Pilling 1997, 1). Cinema is used as the widest term, meaning the art or technique of making moving images, thus englobing all genres of moving pictures listed above.

For our study, the case of the Soviet Union offers several distinct benefits. For one, it provides an ideal context within which to study US information activities involving cinema. For economic, ideological, and political reasons, in 1948-1950, the Soviet Union was a major recipient of American films. American film distributors exerted tremendous efforts to reinforce their presence in the Soviet market, as shown by several archival documents (Motion Picture Association of America 1949; Sovexportfilm 1948a, 1949d, 1949b, 1949c, 1949e, 1950d).

The chronological framework of the present study entails the period from 1948 to 1950, which was characterized by the most active efforts of the US government and American film studios to gain access to the Soviet cinema market, as well as by the responsive actions of the Soviet Union aimed at distributing Soviet films in the US. In 1948, Eric Johnston, the President of Motion Pictures Association of America (MPAA), initiated negotiations with the USSR regarding American film exports to the USSR. By 1950, however, the Soviet Union ceased negotiations.

**Soviet-American film exchanges: Previous literature, conceptual frameworks, and primary documents**

Researchers examining US cultural influence have different conceptual views of the nature of the process of influence. One group of scholars sees US cultural influence as part of the purposeful politics of the US Department of State aimed at the cultural conquest of the world (Sardar and Davies 2003). There has been considerable scholarly investigation of US cultural influence, including studies analyzing it in light of cultural imperialism (Galeota 2004; Parenti 1995; Sardar and Davies 2003; Tsvetkova 2013) and the ‘cultural cold war’ (Caute 2005, Hixson 1997).

Another group of scholars of US cultural influence cites the process of Americanization, which suggests that such cultural influence is part of the general process of globalization and a by-product of the spread American goods (Dard 2008; Guehenno 1999; Kuisel 1993; Rubin 2004; Segrave 1997; Trumbour 2007; Ulf-Møller 2001). The literature has generally defined *Americanization* as the process of cultural and sociocultural adaptation to the standards set by US society (Tsvetkova 2013). Research in this field suggests that the process of spreading US influence in European cultures was accompanied by the reverse influence of European cultural influence on the US (Kuisel 1993; Langmann 2000; Lev 1993; Pells 1997). An equally rich body of literature examines the Soviet case (Ball 2003, Bennett



2001; Brokhin 1976; Kapterev 2009; Roth–Ey 2011; Siefert 2006; Youngblood 1992, Zhuk 2010). Yet, while Americanization is treated in scholarship as a process of a mostly bidirectional, mutual cultural exchange, Sovietization is unconditionally deemed to involve Soviet expansion, imperialism, and hegemony (Tsvetkova 2017).

A third group of scholars prefers to discuss the concept of mutual cultural transfer between different countries (Arndt 2006, De Zoysa and Newman 2002; Gienow–Hecht 2004; Lev 1993; Pells 1997). The concept of cultural transfer challenges the imperial constituents of intercultural relations and implies a dialogic, cross-cultural, mutual interconnection between cultures. Among these conceptual studies, the topic of American cinema’s cultural influence has attracted the attention of several authors, though it remains incompletely explored. Much has been written regarding the use of American films in US foreign politics (Kokarev 2009; Shaw 2007; Shaw and Youngblood 2010; Titova 2003), American information activities and their role in Washington’s foreign policy (Dixon 2006; Mingant 2011; Nye 2004), and the input of American film producers and distributors in gaining the European cinema market (Guback 1969; Mingant 2010). Though these works represent valuable empirical work, recent literature has been less attentive to the flow of Soviet films to the US, instead preferring to study US film exports to the USSR as part of a unidirectional process. In fact, only a few authors address the work of the Soviet government aimed at balancing the flow of cultural products, despite significant evidence of such efforts (Krukones 2009).

In acknowledging the results of previous researchers, it appears that each period of American cultural influence overseas should be discussed using methods involving different concepts. Given the spread of American and Soviet cinema in the USSR and US during 1948–1950, the question is whether it is justified to speak about mutual cultural transfer between the US and Soviet Union in regards to the exchange of film materials or whether

Americanization and Sovietization—or, alternatively, cultural imperialism—more aptly apply.

The objective of this article is thus to reveal whether film exchanges between the US and USSR were balanced and mutual and, if not, which superpower proved to be stronger in this small aspect of the Cultural Cold War, which can be defined as a set of programs and activities undertaken by the US and the USSR in order to proliferate their values and ideas during the Cold War. The Soviet case is also highly appropriate for verifying the present study's primary hypothesis: a successful cultural work using cinema is possible only when a government acts in collaboration with private cinema producers and distributors and only while using the most discreet, indirect political messages.

Empirical findings and our analysis of new archival documents make the discourse of Americanization and Sovietization more suitable for discussing film exchanges between the US and Soviet Union during 1948–1950. To partly close the aforementioned gap in the research, the study analyzes not only unpublished sources from the *Russian State Archive of Literature and Art* concerning negotiations between the MPAA and Soviet Union over American film supplies but also materials regarding the activity of Soviet representatives in the US responsible for distributing and promoting Soviet films stateside, as well as documents from the *U.S. National Archives and Records Administration* (NARA). Soviet sources are important for this research, because they reveal the decision-making process regarding the negotiations about film supplies. However, it should be taken into account that they were written in accordance with the ideology of the day and can't be seen as an unbiased source of information. The comparative historical analysis and documentary analysis based on a case study approach, will allow us to evaluate both processes and identify which was stronger and why.

The study starts with analyzing the factors and incentives for the US and Soviet Union to engage in mutual cultural exchange through cinema. The analysis of the restraints limiting the processes of cinema's entry and spread in both societies follows. The paper concludes with an evaluation of the results of both processes, as well as reflections on which was more successful and why.

### **Promotion of values or economic interests?**

Film uniquely represents a piece of culture and a commercial product at the same time. The processes of Americanization and Sovietization have been pushed by two components: the foreign cultural activities and economic interests of the film industry. One key question of our study thus asks which of these components prevailed in the process of Americanization and Sovietization through cinema during 1948–1950. Were their roles the same in both processes, and what were their impacts in terms of cultural influence?

Our study period is characterized by highly active foreign ideological policies exercised by both the US and Soviet Union. The base of the American government's involvement in the process of the spread of American films in the USSR in 1948-1950 was built already during World War II. Through the Office of War Information, the US government was selecting commercial films to be shown to the civilians in liberated European countries (Jarvie 1990, 279). In the summer of 1942, the US Ambassador to the Soviet Union, William Standley, initiated the Cinema Information Program, which included festivals of official documentaries and strived to improve US-Soviet relations by informing Soviet leaders of various aspects of American life, thereby decreasing their distrust (Bennett 2001, 507). During World War II, there was a collaboration between the cinema industry and politics. Ronald and Allis Radoshes wrote a fascinating book about the involvement of Hollywood professionals in the Communist Party's activities. They also show how, upon the

request of President Roosevelt to produce pro-Soviet films for a wartime ally, Hollywood created such well known pro-Soviet classics as *Mission to Moscow* by Michael Curtiz (1943), *North Star* by Lewis Milestone (1943), and *Song of Russia* by Gregory Ratoff (1944)<sup>i</sup> (Radosh and Radosh 2006).

Standley was not the only one to support the idea to use motion pictures in cultural diplomacy. W. Averell Harriman, who replaced him as American ambassador to the USSR, also believed that the cinema was a 'vehicle for publicizing the American point of view and as a cultural instrument, especially in the Soviet Union' (US Department of State 1944). According to Todd Bennett, the distribution of American films in the Soviet Union would not be possible without diplomatic participation. The films were brought through the American Embassy and shown to the approved list of people, including Stalin, Molotov, representatives of Sovinformburo, the Ministry of Foreign affairs, and intellectuals (George F. Kennan, 1946). All this testifies to a strong collaboration between American diplomats and the MPAA, led by Eric Johnston, who in 1948 'assured foreign policy makers that "no films that could be used to portray the United States of America in an unfavorable light would be" sold to the Soviets' (US Embassy in Moscow 1948). In 1948, the congressional group of Smith-Mundt issued a report in support of expanding the U.S. information abroad (Senate Passes Mundt Bill for Info Service 1948), which, according to Eric Johnston, became "a recognition by congressional leaders of the importance of motion pictures and other media in telling peoples abroad the story of America and its people" (Johnston Welcomes Wider Info Abroad 1948). Johnston actively defended the idea to include films into the Marshall Plan (Eric Johnston Seeks to include Pictures in the Marshall Plan 1948).

The ideological aspects of Soviet film exports were often discussed in Moscow. In 1948, Soviet films shown in the US were criticized in Kremlin for the 'lack of ideological content' (Communist Organ Hits Russian Pix Quality 1948; Pravda Criticizes Russian Pix

Output 1948). During 1948–1950, though the Soviet Union worked to spread Soviet films in the US, the US was far more active in their respective arena. With a planned economy, the Soviet Union did not have any private initiatives in the cinema industry with which to push Soviet films abroad. Soviet films were sold to the United States through the distribution company Artkino Pictures Inc. Artkino was a private American company registered according to the US legislation, and its president, Nicola Napoli, who was also a member of the Communist Party of the United States, and vice president were registered as agents working for a foreign state (Sovexportfilm 1950e). Yet, since Artkino was virtually founded by Sovexportfilm, all of its circulating capital belonged to Sovexportfilm, and the entire process of Soviet film distribution in the US was controlled by the Soviet government.

Though Soviet officials working for the state’s cinema export agencies tried to take several steps to broaden the network of Soviet film distribution in the US, the arguments for such initiatives invariably upheld ideological reasons. For example, in 1949, the USSR’s Ministry of Cinematography seriously considered the possibility of collaborating with private film producer Boris Morros.<sup>ii</sup> However, the ideology strongly limited the Soviet partnership with the producer. Soviet Minister of Cinematography Bolshakov wrote in a letter to the Information Committee:

We will also be able to influence the topics of the television films not only by refusing inappropriate ideas of Morros concerning the illustration of music pieces, but also by recommending our understanding (Ministry of Cinema Industry 1949b).

Similar problems were expressed by I. Moskovsky, Acting Manager of Sovexportfilm, in his retrospective letter to Minister of Cinematography Bolshakov, dated March 24, 1950, in which he wrote, ‘Taking into account the enormous TV network in the US and high political importance of distributing our films through this network,

Sovexportfilm thought it was possible to make such films because we had no other ways or options for wide distribution of Soviet films in the US' (Council of Ministers of the USSR 1949b). However, the cooperation failed for the ideological divergences between the powers relative to the film production.

The spread of American cinema in the USSR during 1948–1950 cannot be seen only as a result of US public diplomacy due to the need for ideological influence. The United States has always been a country with strong trade interests. American studios had an active interest in entering new foreign markets. In the 1940s, American studios could not stay profitable without winning over foreign markets. In 1948, the US Supreme Court adopted the Paramount Decree, which limited the rights of studios (US Supreme Court 1948), thereby diminishing the number of Americans who would attend theaters and calling into question studios' financial power. At the end of the 1940s, the number of moviegoers in the US decreased by 50% (Cowden 2015), which can be explained by the looming economic crisis and the rapid development of television in the US. This situation pushed American filmmakers into European markets. In 1948, Eric Johnston reported to President Truman 'that attendance at American pix is on the upsurge throughout Europe—even the "Iron Curtain" countries—despite heightened Soviet efforts to promote their pix' (U.S. Pix in European Gains 1948).

The Soviet Union was also a very important target for the MPAA, because entering the Soviet market could eventually help distribute American films in Eastern European countries (Blahova 2010). American studios wanted strengthen their presence in Europe as soon as possible before it was done by the British or Soviets. Already in 1945, these concerns proved to be well founded when the American embassy in Moscow received information that London had already agreed to allow Soviet cinema in Great Britain (US Department of State, 1945a). The fears of American cinema producers and distributors were aggravated after the

Department of State had failed to receive an agreement of the Soviet Union to show films in Eastern Europe (US Department of State, 1945b).

In the USSR, American cinema producers and distributors had an additional incentive. In postwar USSR, American cinema was already broadly shown illegally. These were so-called trophy films taken by the Soviet Army in Europe (mostly in Germany and Poland) and shown in the Soviet Union. Most trophy films were produced during 1936–1939 and had subtitles in European languages, meaning that Russian subtitles had to be printed above them, which almost completely covered the film. Translated subtitles contained appropriate ideological corrections, and showings of trophy films began with a short explanation of the film from the viewpoint of official Soviet ideology. As they were war trophies of the Red Army, the Soviet Union did not pay anything to the right owners. Inevitably, it caused irritation in American film producers, and they tried to put an end to this situation (Kapterev 2009, 791), but at the same time, as *Variety* reported, they ‘expressed the fear that the Russians might dupe the prints since there are no reciprocal copyright laws’ (Russians Still Stalling on Any U.S. Picture Buys 1948).

The Soviet film industry had neither enough time nor financial resources to recover after World War II and could not provide its population with the amount of films demanded. According to the USSR’s Deputy Minister of Cinematography, N. K. Semenov, the demand for films in the Soviet Union was far higher than the supply (Ministry of Cinema Industry 1950). For American film distributors, the situation provided unlimited opportunities. Twentieth Century Fox’s representative wrote to Head of the Department of State’s Telecommunications Division, George R. Canty, ‘It would be a great achievement if our industry were permitted to open offices and operate directly in Russia. . . . I hope this will be more than a pious thought’ (Bennett 2001, 513). Twentieth Century Fox committed to spread

‘appropriate films’ in the Soviet Union in exchange for the government’s protection against domestic antitrust legislation.

Starting in 1948, the MPAA greatly increased its efforts to take hold in the Soviet market by signing a film supply agreement with the USSR. In 1948, MPAA President Eric Johnston visited Moscow to learn about the Soviet film industry and initiate negotiations about American film supply with the Soviet Union. Johnston believed that the quality of American films would inevitably ensure the MPAA a place in the Soviet market. American periodicals reported about Johnston’s negotiations and hopes to sell films to the USSR (Eric Johnston going to Moscow 1948; Russians Still Stalling on Any U.S. Picture Buys 1948; ‘Good Chance’ for Soviet Deal – EAJ 1948; EAJ Continues Soviet Talks 1948; Johnston Sells Pix to Soviet 1948; Johnston Expected to Talk With Stalin 1948). ‘Presumably, at such a conference, Johnston would take up the question of the entry of American pix to the Soviet,’ reported *The Film Daily* (Johnston Expected to Talk With Stalin 1948).

Surprisingly, Soviet officials agreed to meet with Johnston for several reasons. For one, Soviets sought to change the hostile position of American cinema circles toward the USSR, expressed namely in the film *The Iron Curtain* (1948), directed by William Wellman. The film tells about the story of Igor Guzenko, a cipher for the Soviet Embassy to Canada, who defected in 1945 and passed to the Canadian government 109 documents concerning Soviet espionage activities. In the Soviet Union, the film was perceived as anti-Soviet. In America, it caused protest attacks by the National Council of American-Soviet friendship against Johnston, which, however, were rejected (Asks Johnston Help Stop ‘Iron Curtain’ 1948; Bookbinder Takes Pix Behind ‘Iron Curtain’ 1948; Court Denies Injunction Against ‘Iron Curtain’ 1948; ‘Iron Curtain’ to Play - Skouras 1948; Melish in New Johnston Blast on Iron Curtain 1948; MPAA Pins Red Label on ‘Curtain’ Protest 1948; Soviet Misquotes ‘Variety’ in Rap At ‘Iron Curtain’ 1948; U.S. Pix in European Gains 1948).



Johnston was invited to visit the Soviet cinema studio Mosfilm and to meet with Soviet film directors (Sovexportfilm 1948b). During Johnston's meeting with Vice Minister of Cinematography V. Ryazanov in the Ministry of Cinematography, Johnston made a business offer concerning American film supply to the USSR. Though he received a general agreement from Ryazanov, the Soviets made it clear that the concrete conditions of the deal would be clarified only after they previewed the suggested movies.

In November 1948, the suggested 100 films were sent to Moscow, from which the Soviets were to choose 20. In his letter to Vasily Ryazanov, Johnston noted the negotiated price of USD \$1 million for 20 films (Motion Picture Association of America 1948). On December 13, the USSR's Ministry of Cinematography replied that most of the films were not of interest to the Soviet Union, since they were from 5 to 13 years old. Nevertheless, Sovexportfilm expressed interest in watching 24 of the 100 presented films (Sovexportfilm 1948c).<sup>iii</sup>

To organize screenings of the selected films and to continue negotiations with the Soviet Union, Central Europe's MPAA Representative, Louis Kanturek, arrived in Moscow from Prague in July 1949. However, this visit was not very successful, because the USSR and US faced a dilemma. Kanturek insisted that during Johnston's previous visit, he had reached an agreement with the Soviet Union that it would buy 20 films for \$1 million. In response, N. Sakontikov from Sovexportfilm argued that the negotiations between Johnston and Ryazanov had resulted only in a general agreement that the Soviets would buy US films and nothing more (Sovexportfilm 1948a). As discussed in greater depth below, the negotiations did not end in the parties' signing an agreement but instead resulted in nothing. Nevertheless, the efforts made by the MPAA and Johnston show that the US film industry and its establishment were very interested in exporting films to the USSR.

In Soviet official documents, Soviet representatives always emphasized that for them, films are, first of all, art pieces and that the artistic and aesthetic characteristics mattered for them more than commercial profits (Ministry of Cinema Industry 1949a). However, one should take into account that these documents were written in accordance with the ideology of that period. Thus, the will of the Soviet government to increase the export share in Soviet foreign commerce should not be underestimated. In his recent book, titled *Red globalization: The political economy of the Soviet Cold War from Stalin to Khrushchev*, Oscar Sanchez-Sibony suggests an interesting and new insight into Soviet attitude towards international trade. Through a detailed analysis, he shows that the USSR, during the interwar and postwar period, was far from being autarkic. Speaking about the priorities of the USSR after World War II, he claims that in this period, the USSR, as never before, strived for international cooperation and inclusion into the international trade system: ‘Even if Stalin expected those imperialist contradictions to erupt in another war, the Soviets sought to buy into the very system of financial and commercial exchange that could guarantee the quick recovery of fortress Soviet Union [...]. Even as the official Soviet discourse hardened around an existential conflict with capitalism – in tandem with domestic repression – the financial and commercial practices of the Soviet state were marked not by enmity and subversion, as virtually all Cold War texts assume, but by a search for accommodation, cooperation, and ultimately acquiescence’ (Sanchez-Sibony 2014, 59). Following this general policy of the USSR aimed at increasing the share of the USSR in foreign trade, Sovexportfilm was financially interested in exporting films. The Soviet government realized that it was not an easy task, especially in the conditions of film famine. The film famine signifies the situation in the Soviet cinema industry in 1943–1953, characterized by the weak cinema industry output in the Soviet Union due to the war. It was aggravated by the government accusing the

film directors of misunderstanding Soviet realities and demanding them to create a new positive Soviet hero (Kozovoi 2014).

The US was not the only example of Soviet film export efforts. NARA contains some fascinating records regarding Sovexportfilm's efforts to export films and help the film industry in Germany (Office of Military Government for Germany 1947a; Office of Military Government for Germany 1947b; Office of Military Government for Germany 1947c; Office of Military Government Berlin Sector 1947d; Office of Military Government for Germany 1947e; Office of Military Government for Germany 1947f; U.S. Civil Censorship Commission 1947b; U.S. Civil Censorship Commission 1947a; Office of Military Government for Germany 1947c) and distribute Soviet films in Japan (General Headquarters, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers 1947a; General Headquarters, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers 1947b; General Headquarters, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers 1947c; General Headquarters, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers 1947d; General Headquarters, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers 1947e; General Headquarters, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers 1947f; General Headquarters, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers 1948; Allied Council for Japan 1947a; Allied Council for Japan 1947b).

However, as a commercial project, the distribution of Soviet films in the US was far from being financially successful. According to the record of the meeting of the President of Artkino, Nicola Napoli, with representatives of Sovexportfilm in May 1950, by January 1, 1950, the debt of Artkino to Sovexportfilm constituted 55,683.98 dollars (Sovexportfilm 1950c). From the perspective of interests and incentives, the flow of American films to the USSR was neither equivalent nor proportionate to that of Soviet films to the US.

#### **Americanization and Sovietization: Cultural influence restraints**

The deterrents that Americanization and Sovietization faced were not the same for the two superpowers. The first deterrent of American cinema in the USSR was the resistance of Soviet authorities. Even if the Soviet Union needed American films as a tool to entertain people after World War II, first, it could not afford the high price offered by the MPAA. In fact, price was again the chief obstacle during US-Soviet negotiations in Moscow during 1948–1950. In the record of the conversation between MPAA Representative Kanturek and Sovexportfilm Manager Sakontikov on May 20, 1949, the latter repeatedly emphasized that during previous negotiations with Johnston, the Soviets never discussed or approved the suggested price (Sovexportfilm 1948a). While the intentions of the Soviet Union cannot be called unserious, the Soviet government simply could not afford the price of \$50,000 for a film, as suggested by the MPAA. Orders signed by Deputy President of the Soviet of Ministers of the USSR Anastas Mikoyan and Stalin show their approval of the possibility of buying 20 American films for \$30,000 per film instead of the price suggested by the MPAA (Council of Ministers of the USSR 1949a, 1949b). At the same time, by August 1948, the Soviet Union possessed 3,544 ‘trophy films,’ among which American films were the most numerous, totaling 1,531 films, such as John Ford’s *Stagecoach* (1939) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). The earlier is a western movie telling the adventures of a group of strangers traveling across Arizona in 1880, and the latter is a drama based on John Steinbeck’s novel. The film shows the story of a family from Oklahoma who lost their farm during the Great Depression and became migrant workers. For the Soviet government, it was an appropriate tool to show to Soviet people ‘the cruel face of capitalism.’ Other examples of trophy films are William Dieterle’s *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937), a biographical movie telling about French author Emile Zola, and *Juarez* (1939), a historical drama about the conflict between Maximilian I, installed as the emperor of Mexico by France, and Mexican president Benito Juárez. (Kapterev 2009, 779). All these films were imported to the Soviet Union without any

contracts, meaning that they could be shown in theaters with ideological correction. Such unlimited censorship would not be possible if these US films had been bought.

Political aspects of buying US films were as important as financial aspects. After World War II, Eastern Europe came under the Soviet sphere of influence and eventually played host to communist propaganda. The Soviet Union prevented Eastern European countries from signing any agreements with the MPAA and from importing American films. US-Soviet negotiations initiated by Johnston had been widely covered by the press (Eric Johnston going to Moscow 1948; Russians Still Stalling on Any U.S. Picture Buys 1948; 'Good Chance' for Soviet Deal – EAJ 1948; EAJ Continues Soviet Talks 1948; Johnston Sells Pix to Soviet 1948; Johnston Expected to Talk With Stalin 1948) and could not help but to irritate Eastern European film producers, who were highly recommended by the Soviets to avoid all contracts with the MPAA and, by the way, very interested in entering this market (Bookbinder Takes Pix Behind 'Iron Curtain' 1948; Europe Needs More Pix, Congress Told 1948; U.S. Czech Filming in Doubt 1948).

According to a letter from Sovexportfilm's representative in Czechoslovakia, Petr Lebedev, to Vice Minister of Cinematography of the USSR, N.I. Sakontikov, the leaders of the film industries of socialist countries in Europe suggested elaborating a common policy toward the MPAA: 'It was caused, on the one hand, by their wish to get rid of the pernicious influence of American films on their people, and on the other hand by the fact that in all of these countries our representatives fought against these countries' having any contracts with the MPAA regarding film imports' (Sovexportfilm 1949f). In his letter, Lebedev claims that following the orders of Sovexportfilm, he and the USSR ambassador to Czechoslovakia were resisting any contract between the MPAA and Czechoslovakia and states that such negotiations would cease. The chief rationale here was that the USSR did not import American films. The negotiations between Johnston and Sovexportfilm call into question the

consistency of Soviet policy on the issue and gave the MPAA a chance to bring American films to Eastern Europe, which was inadmissible for the USSR in the early conditions of the Cold War. As a result of these restraints, in 1950, the USSR decided to cease negotiations with the MPAA, using as a pretext anti-Soviet claims of the co-founder and CEO of MGM Louis B. Mayer on April 13, 1950, published by *Film Daily* (Sovexportfilm 1950d).

According to Sovexportfilm, it was much more profitable to collaborate with independent American film producers than with the MPAA. Independent film producers had more modest expectations regarding the price of films and were considered by Soviets to be 'less reactionary' than the anti-Soviet MPAA (Sovexportfilm 1950d). However, negotiations with independent film producers did not bear any fruit, either. For example, Boris Morros, owner of an independent cinema company, visited the Soviet Union and offered his services and influence in popularizing Russian and Soviet music via musical films to be shown on American television (Ministry of Cinema Industry 1949c). However, contact with independent US film professionals regarding possible collaboration failed to produce any results and, in effect, seems to have been highly superficial. Since Morros proved to be a Soviet agent and FBI double agent, his contacts with Sovexportfilm were more likely a pretext for visiting Moscow.

The Soviet Union also had great problems with introducing its films in the US market. These problems ranged from the poor condition of the Soviet cinema industry and, as a result, the low quality of the films and their incapacity to compete with American commercial films to the censorship and unwillingness of American distributors to collaborate with communist counterparts.

The period of film famine was accompanied by severe criticism by the Soviet government against Soviet film directors and script writers. An example of such censorship was the Decree of Organizational Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party

of the Soviet Union regarding the film *A Great Life. Part 2*. This film, directed by Leonid Lukov in 1946, was the second part of the previous film *A Great Life*, which was directed by Lukov in 1940 and was honored with the Stalin Prize of the second degree in 1941. The film is depicting the liberation of Donets Basin in 1943. However, the film was prohibited because of its supposed misrepresentation and underestimation of Soviet realities, the achievements of Soviet industry, and the Soviet government (Organizational Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1946). In such conditions, it was difficult and dangerous for the film directors to create strong films about modern life capable of competing with American cinema.

The only channel for Soviet film distribution in the United States was Artkino; the Soviet government could not afford more effective, wider channels. To make matters worse, Artkino's activity was mostly ineffective, given the lack of investments from Soviets. At the beginning of the Cold War, Sovexportfilm was deprived of the possibility to directly control Artkino through the Soviet Consulate and Amtorg: the Consulate in New York was closed in 1948, and Amtorg was strongly prohibited from participating in any communications regarding Soviet film import (Sovexportfilm, 1950e).

The main difficulty in the process of Soviet film distribution in the US was the Soviet cinema industry itself. It is absolutely impossible to compare the Soviet and American film industries in terms of financial resources. Even before World War II, the Soviet film industry met only 20–30 % of its quotas (Bennet 2001, 510). With German occupation, the Soviet film studio in Kiev could not function anymore; many units were relocated to Central Asia. It inevitably resulted in a decrease of cinema production. In these conditions, the Soviet industry was incapable of supplying the US with the same or even comparable amount and quality of films as Hollywood offered to the USSR. In a letter to Andrievsky, Kalatozov wrote, 'American audiences have certain requirements for films, and we must take some of

them into account. Firstly, the titles and subtitles should be essentially neat. Our films are released in a terrible condition. The reason is primitive work, lack of even the least professionalism, and the ignorance of Artkino's staff.' (Committee for Cinema Affairs of the USSR's Council of People's Commissars 1943d).

The solution suggested by Moscow was to increase the number of viewers by facilitating large movie theaters with large audiences, but neither American studios nor the US government wanted to admit Soviet films into the US market. While the former did not want to share the market with anyone else, the latter deemed Soviet films communist propaganda. According to Soviet documents, which of course should be read with allowance to their biased character but nevertheless deserve attention and consideration, the difficulties with promoting Soviet films in the US could be explained by war hysteria, widespread anti-Soviet propaganda, reactionary circles, the American press and radio, and the influence of churches (Sovexportfilm 1950e).

### **Soviet-American exchanges: Impact on audiences**

Regarding cross-cultural exchange—namely, that of film—the two cases of the US and USSR suggest that film diplomacy is often the will of the government, although this can not be realized without two conditions. First, film is merchandise, and to win a foreign market, this merchandise should be of good quality, correspond to foreign public needs, and be advertised well. Second, the promotion of film is more powerful when made by both the government and private businesses.

Did American cinema in the USSR and Soviet cinema in the US meet these requirements? Regardless of significant obstacles in the way of American cinema in the USSR, American film did reach Soviet audiences. Officially, by 1950, the USSR bought only 23 American films, many of which had both pro-Soviet sentiments and an entertaining plot



without direct propaganda, thereby satisfying the needs of the population tired of war (Sovexportfilm 1950g). This number does not take into account trophy films, which were broadly shown in Soviet movie theaters. By August 1948, the USSR's trophy film fund had 1,531 American films (Kapterev 2009, 779), the most viewed of which was *The Great Waltz* by Julien Duvivier (1938), a musical biographical film about Johann Strauss, which was watched by 25.7 million Soviets (*The Great Waltz. Statistical data about the film 2014*). By comparison, 20.7 million people saw *Sun Valley Serenade* by Bruce Humberstone (1941), a musical comedy featuring the Glenn Miller Orchestra and showing the love story of a band pianist and a young refugee from Europe in a ski resort in Idaho (*Sun Valley Serenade. Statistical data about the film 2014*).

By contrast, lacking private capital and the means to make special films for the American public, the USSR sought to push direct propaganda messages that were simply unacceptable to American audiences. Soviet films were shown only in three theaters in New York, as well as in scattered theaters in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, and several other cities. They were also distributed through NGOs, schools, and colleges (Sovexportfilm, 1950f).

Yet, in 1949, American audiences watched 70 Soviet fiction films and documentaries, and during the first four months of 1950, American theaters screened 50 Soviet films (Sovexportfilm 1950e). Though such quantities far exceed the number of American films bought by the USSR, with the trophy films widely distributed in the USSR, the balance of power was not in the USSR's favor. In 1949, only 6,281,869 Americans watched Soviet films (Sovexportfilm 1950e); according to Kalatozov, that is only about 4.2% of the US population and thus far less than the 25.7 million Soviet people who watched only *The Great Waltz* directed by Julien Duvivier (1938).

According to these statistics, the period of 1948–1950 marked the victory of American films over Soviet ones. This claim is supported by audiences' reactions. The Soviet public watched American films despite strong anti-American propaganda, for as usual, Soviet mass media continued to blame American culture and the political regime. For example, on June 29, 1948, the newspaper *Pravda* wrote: 'Showing an immense superiority of Soviet regime and its progressive culture over the tainting bourgeois regime, our propagandists [...] help shaping a new spiritual image of a Soviet citizen, cultivates a feeling of patriotism.' (*Pravda*, June 29, 1948).

Yet, the general anti-American sentiment did not decrease Soviet curiosity in American films. Soviet writer Vasily Aksyonov<sup>iv</sup> remembers watching the already mentioned western *Stagecoach* by John Ford (1939) at least 10 times and *The Roaring Twenties* (1939), a crime thriller by Raoul Walsh telling about the Prohibition period in the US, at least 15 times: 'There was a period when we spoke to our friends almost entirely in quotes from American movies' (Kapterev 2009, 789). Despite limits on the import of American films and Soviet media's skeptical attitude toward American cinema,<sup>v</sup> American films 'opened the eyes' of the Soviet people who were culturally isolated for decades.

By contrast, Soviet films in the US were not as popular. Their literate promotion by the Soviet Union amid widespread anti-Soviet campaigns in the US could not be fruitful. The audiences of Soviet films were limited to former Russian citizens. As for most Americans, Soviet films were unable to make them sympathize with Soviet values. Records of meetings between representatives of Sovexportfilm and Artkino President Napoli suggest information about numerous negative actions by the American population aimed against Soviet films, as well as cinema theaters showing them. For example, in New York, during the showing of a Soviet documentary about the signing of the treaty between the USSR and China, one theater's visitor broke a storefront showing portraits of Stalin and Molotov. The owner of the

theater sued him in court but lost the case. According to the judge, the theater visitor was right; the portraits of Soviet leaders should not be exhibited in the US. According to Napoli, people going by Artkino's office turned away contemptuously and spit in its direction (Sovexportfilm 1950b). In San Francisco, during the showing of the Soviet historical biographical film *Academic Pavlov* (1949) by Grigori Roshal, portraying the life of the famous Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov, at the Rio theater, which coincided with an incident near the Soviet military base Libava, in which an American reconnaissance aircraft violated Soviet airspace and was shot by Soviet military forces, the American press started a wide campaign against Soviet films. Local governments even asked the federal government to ban the showing of Soviet films in the US (Sovexportfilm 1950b). Soviet films drew little attention of American periodicals. There were articles announcing new Soviet films to be distributed by Artkino (*The Great Glinka* 1948; *Village Teacher* 1948; *The Great Glinka* 1948; *Russian Yiddish Shorts at Stanley* 1948; *New Soviet Pic into Stanley* 1948), but most of them were very short and took just several lines. Speaking about the effectiveness of Soviet messages through the cinema, the results also did not seem satisfactory: according to *The Film Daily*, only 7% of Americans thought that Communist propaganda through cinema was effective, while 49% gave the opposite answer (*Only 7 Per Cent See Communist Propaganda in Films, Star Tribune Finds in Minneapolis Poll* 1948).

### **Conclusion**

Based on these results, during 1948–1950, the American and Soviet mutual film exchanges were not balanced, though the events should not be discussed in terms of mutual cultural transfer. Soviet influence through cinema failed on the one hand because of the absence of any private Soviet cinema industry interested in foreign markets and, on the other hand, because of the inability of the Soviet government to present high-quality films oriented to American audiences. Though cultural influence amid the conditions of the Cold War was a

highly challenging task, in the sphere of films, American diplomacy and the US film industry succeeded in spite of the failure of Johnston's mission in 1950.

Afterwards, in the 1960s, the process of the spread of American culture in the world was an issue of concern for scientists in the United States and society in general. The academic discussion about cultural imperialism started, and it goes on today. The discussion about American cultural imperialism passed through three stages. The first stage consisted of accusing the American government of failing to realize aggressive information activities. In the 1960s, a new stage of the discussion began when some critics of cultural imperialism accused the government of global economic expansion and enslaving other countries under the auspices of American culture export. Finally, on the current stage of discussion, a new idea appeared: the resistance from the conservative part of a foreign society to American cultural influence decreases the import of American cultural products; so, in fact, the "imperialism" does not exist anymore (Tsvetkova 2013).

The analysis of film exchanges between the USSR and the US brings us to the conclusion that cinema had immense value as a means of culture propagation and cultural dominance in the world.

In spite of the fact that American mass culture and its values are quite controversial and that their export has always been viewed ambiguously, the global influence of American culture is evident. The distribution of American film is a phenomenon that is crucial today and will be even more crucial in future. Whether it is called "cultural imperialism," "Americanization," "cultural transfer," or "cultural colonization," it becomes more and more important. Today, it is unjustified to study the superficial influence or cultural cooperation when the American film industry dominates the world, most of all financially. Therefore, it is impossible to speak about an equal film exchange between countries. The process of

American film distribution is a part of the globalization process, moved in large part by American capital and strengthened by US foreign policy institutions.

The example of film exchanges between the US and the USSR in the period of 1948-1950 enabled us to state that the export and distribution of films became a powerful tool of information activities to secure the long-term foreign policy interests of the country while expanding the market share of film companies abroad. Because the United States has no rivaling equal in the world in the realm of film distribution, the American case of cultural influence abroad through cinema is a unique research problem. In 1948-1950, at the very beginning of the Cold War, this convergence of interests of American public diplomacy and Hollywood was especially strong, and American film, together with other aspects of public diplomacy, became an important part of the US foreign policy mechanism and a necessary part of their foreign policy strategy.

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ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

## Public interest statement

During periods of interstate conflict, countries intensify their cultural diplomacy in exchanges of exhibitions, films, art, and athleticism. As ideological hostility between the United States and the Soviet Union unfolded during the early years of Cold War, both superpowers sought to distribute their films in the other's cinema market, especially from 1948 to 1950, and thereby achieve political goals by winning their adversary's audiences.

However, as audiences repeatedly denied the politicization of films inherent in their offensive cinema-oriented campaigns, the question became which country, the United States or the Soviet Union, had gained and which had lost ground as a result.

In response to unclear answers to that question, we offer a new, detailed, complex narrative about American–Soviet cinema exchanges. In particular, we reveal the strengths and weaknesses of Americanization and Sovietization that accompanied the distribution of American and Soviet films in the societies of both powers.

## About the authors

Professor Natalia Tsvetkova, Associate Professor Ivan Tsvetkov, and Postdoctoral Researcher Irina Barber are affiliated with the American Studies Department at St. Petersburg State University, Russia. Their recent research addresses the Cultural Cold War, public diplomacy, and cultural exchanges and political interactions of the United States and the Soviet Union/Russia.

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<sup>i</sup> All three movies take place in wartime Soviet Union. *Mission to Moscow* shows the experiences of the ambassador Joseph E. Davies in the Soviet Union. He visits the factories, speaks with Soviet people, and admires the successes of the Soviet industry. In *Song of Russia*, the main hero, a famous American conductor named John who loves the music of Tchaikovsky, falls in love with a Russian girl, Nadya, from a village and eventually marries her, which symbolizes Soviet-American war alliance. The movie *North Star* shows heroic deeds and sacrifices of the Soviet people fighting for their Fatherland.

<sup>ii</sup> Morros proved to be a KGB spy and an American double spy (Vassiliev 1999, 138), which makes his negotiations with the Soviet Union look quite controversial.

<sup>iii</sup> These films included: *The Black Swan* by Henry King (1942), *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* by Arthur Lubin (1944), *Anna and the King of Siam* by John Cromwell (1946), *Bring 'Em Back Alive* by Clyde E. Elliott (1932), *Can't Help Singing* by Frank Ryan (1944), *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* by John Huston (1948), *Western Union* by Fritz Lang (1941), *13 Rue Madeleine* by Henry Hathaway (1947), *The Paleface* by Norman Z. McLeod (1948), *Madame Curie* by Mervyn LeRoy (1943), *The Jolson Story* by Alfred E. Green (1946), *The Egg and I* by Chester Erskine (1947), *The Dude Goes West* by Kurt Neumann (1948), *Cloak and Dagger* by Fritz Lang (1946), *The Adventures of Mark Twain* by Irving Rapper (1944), *The Farmer's Daughter* by Henry C. Potter (1947), *Going My Way* by Leo McCarey (1944), *I've always loved you* by Frank Borzage (1946), *Rhapsody in Blue* by Irving Rapper (1945), *Specter of the Rose* by Ben Hecht (1946), *State Fair* by Walter Lang (1945), and others (Sovexportfilm, 1949a).

<sup>iv</sup> Vasily Pavlovich Aksyonov is a Soviet and Russian writer famous worldwide for his novels *The Burn* (1975) and *Generations of Winter* (1992), a family saga that depicts three generations of the Gradov family from 1925 to 1953.

<sup>v</sup> In the 1950s, chief Soviet film magazine *Sovetskiy Ekran* (*Soviet Screen*) hardly covered American films. American cinema appeared only once in the 'Jokes' section in one issue from 1957, in which there is a cartoon depicting a film set with an American film director saying, 'The death scene was not convincing enough. Repeat the jump.' His assistant replies, 'It's impossible sir. The actor is dead indeed.' (Humor 1957, 17). An exception was made for Charlie Chaplin's films, which were nevertheless commented upon from an anti-American, anti-capitalist point of view (Averenius 1958, 10–11).