Painting the Town Red: The Impact of Anglo-Soviet Exchange on the Visual Arts in Britain in the 1930s

Abstract

At its peak in the mid-1930s the Society for Cultural Relations with the Soviet Union (SCR) could count among its membership some of the most influential creative practitioners working in Britain at the time. This article will examine the various organisations and initiatives that emerged as a result of the activities of SCR members working in the visual and performing arts, including the Artists International Association (AIA), Marx House, and Kino Films, and their role in promoting Anglo-Soviet cultural exchange in the visual arts in the 1930s. In doing so, I will consider the extent to which these activities transcended the cultural sphere, leading to the emergence of a cadre of politically engaged artists including the muralist Viscount Hastings, the illustrator Pearl Binder, and the filmmaker Ivor Montagu who, inspired by Soviet models, became active across a range of left-wing and anti-fascist organisations and initiatives.

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Although many of those associated with the visual arts among the Society of Cultural Relations' membership, such as the painter Laura Knight, the Director of the National Gallery Kenneth Clark, and Sir William Rothenstein of the Royal College of Art, offered only nominal support - usually by allowing their names to be added to what the Metropolitan Police's Special Branch (a division of the Security Services charged with monitoring domestic extremism) described as "the usual imposing list of vice-presidents" (TNA HO/45/25437) - others adopted a more active role in advancing British-Soviet cultural relations. These included Ivor Montagu, a committed Communist Party member who was subsequently revealed to have acted as an agent for the Comintern, and those, such as Viscount Hastings and Pearl Binder who could be considered "fellow travellers"; that is artists whose interests in the Soviet Union transcended the purely cultural sphere and who were active across a range of political organisations and initiatives.

Similarly, the SCR was not alone in promoting cultural exchange between Britain and the Soviet Union during the 1930s. Indeed, as the decade progressed, the SCR became part of a larger network of pro-Soviet cultural organisations In Britain, developed as a direct response to the growing interest among artists and intellectuals in the emerging anti-fascist Popular Front. Although each of these organisations had a distinctive purpose and focus, all shared a core interest in promoting cultural exchange with the Soviet Union and provided unique opportunities for British audiences to view the work of Soviet artists and filmmakers.

As well as their shared interests, organisations such as the SCR, Marx House, the Artists' International Association (AIA) and Kino, often had a shared membership, with key figures such as Ivor Montagu, Viscount Hastings and Clive Branson working across different organisations. This led to a high level of collaboration and collective working that, in turn, broadened the scope of these initiatives and provided a means through which artists could engage directly in political action.

Viewed as a whole, these organisations encompassed every branch of the visual arts and pursued initiatives that facilitated a co-ordinated programme of cultural exchange, theoretical instruction and collective political activism. These included Ivor Montagu's Kino which, following his success in screening Soviet films to London audiences through the Film Society in the 1920s, was founded in 1935 to produce and distribute films that, according to MI5, "were vehicles for Soviet revolutionary propaganda" (TNA KV5/42-5). Similarly, the Marx House and Workers School, founded in 1933 by the artist Clive Branson, offered 10-week courses on The Russian Revolution and 'Elementary Marxism' (Cohen, 1998) and featured weekly lectures by Montagu on Soviet Cinema. Moreover, the founding of the Artists International Association (AIA) in 1933 drew direct inspiration from artistic practice in the Soviet Union and, according to Tony Rickaby "was part of a general emergence of a militant intelligentsia" committed to the transformation of British society (Rickaby, 1978). Indeed, many of those associated with the AIA had extensive links with other organisations, including the SCR, Marx House and Kino, as well as to the British section of the Writers' International, publishers of *Left Review*, whose editor, Amabel Williams-Ellis was also active in the SCR.

Established by the painter and illustrator Cliff Rowe and the designer Misha Black the AIA was, according to Black, founded as a direct response to the rise of fascism in Europe and the sense "that the political situation was becoming intolerable" (Morris and Radford, 1983). For Rowe, the idea for the AIA was also inspired by his experience of spending 18 months working as an illustrator in the USSR during 1930-31, where his commissions included an international exhibition of revolutionary art sponsored by the Red Army (Rickaby, 1978). Through this, Rowe experienced collective, collaborative work between artists from across different disciplines and nationalities, united by a common purpose; these experiences would inform subsequent AIA initiatives, such as the *Artists Against Fascism and War* exhibition, held in Soho Square, London in November 1935 in protest at the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, and its later participation in the Aid Spain movement during the Spanish Civil War. For Rowe and his AIA colleagues, the Soviet model of collective and politically engaged practice provided the means by which artists in Britain could rally to the anti-fascist cause; a process that would develop further following the influx of refugee artists from Germany, Austria, Spain and Czechoslovakia, and the formation in 1939 of the Free German League of Culture (founded by the AIA's Fred Uhlman) and the AIA's Refugee Artists Committee.

The influence of the SCR on the AIA is, perhaps, best exemplified by their shared emphasis on providing opportunities for artistic and cultural exchange. Alongside Rowe, many AIA members had spent time in the USSR, including Ivor Montagu, Viscount Hastings and Pearl Binder, who were also members of the SCR. In

the same way that the SCR had organised exhibitions and talks on Soviet life and culture (such as *Russia of Today in Posters and Books* in 1925), the AIA endeavoured to include examples of work by their Soviet counterparts in exhibitions such as *The Social Scene* (1934) and *Artists Against Fascism and War* (1935), which featured a room dedicated to work by sixteen Soviet artists. This latter exhibition also set the tone for many of the AIA's subsequent initiatives in that it featured an explanatory catalogue (with a foreword by Aldous Huxley) and an extensive programme of lectures and conferences (AIA 1935). These were often delivered collaboratively in association with other organisations, as in the discussion circle "The Arts and Dictatorship", chaired by Alick West of Marx House and sponsored by *Left Review* (AIA 1935). In the accompanying catalogue for *Artists Against Fascism and War*, the AIA reiterated its commitment to the anti-fascist Popular Front by emphasising a similar approach to cultural collaboration to that endorsed by the SCR:

> The British Section of the Artists International Association is part of this movement of intellectuals, cooperates with the branches abroad, and with the writers', architects' and actors' organisations in that country. We carry on propaganda by means of exhibitions, publications and meetings, and by direct art work for all anti-war and anti-fascist organisations. We hold lectures and study classes so that we may understand important political and cultural questions. (AIA, 1935)

Reflecting back on its first five years, the AIA hailed *Artists Against Fascism and War* as an enormous success, with around 6000 visitors in just two weeks (AIA 1938).

Interest in the accompanying lecture programme, which included "Marxism and Aesthetics" by Alick West and "The Crisis in Culture" by John Strachey, was equally brisk with demand "so great that people were turned away" (AIA, 1938). That the AIA sought a more active political role is also demonstrated in its collaboration with other organisations, such as the National Council for Civil Liberties, formed by left-wing intellectuals including HG Wells and Vera Brittain in 1934, in co-ordinating protest meetings and demonstrations, including the anti-jubilee May Day parade in London in 1935. A number of AIA members, including Montagu, Branson and Rowe were also active members of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).

Although, like Rowe, Montagu and Branson, many AIA members were sympathetic to Communism and the Soviet system, the organisation itself rejected any attempts to impose the kind of rigid aesthetic doctrine under which their Soviet colleagues had laboured following Stalin's endorsement of "Socialist Realism" - subsequently defined by Andrei Zhdanov at the First Writers' Congress in 1934 as "*the truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development*" (Union of Soviet Writers, 1934). Indeed, the presence of a strong Surrealist wing in the AIA, led by Henry Moore, Eileen Agar, Roland Penrose and Herbert Read (another supporter of the SCR), ensured that the merits (or otherwise) of Socialist Realism remained the subject of intense debate among the AIA membership. This was most clearly demonstrated by the publication of *Five on Revolutionary Art* in 1935 in which Read argued vigorously in favour of the 'modern school' of abstraction as true revolutionary art, as opposed to the "feeble interpretation" of those who considered revolutionary art as "an injunction to paint

pictures of red flags, hammers and sickles, factories and machines, or revolutionary subjects in general" (Rea 1935). Challenging Read's position the art historian Francis Klingender bemoaned the "frantic flight from content" in modern abstraction as the embodiment of the "final decay" of the capitalist classes (Rea, 1935).

Regardless of their stylistic differences, the members of the AIA were united in their attempts to develop the organisation into a forum for collaborative work across different disciplines, and as a means of establishing a trade union to secure improved working conditions for its members; many of whom, like Cliff Rowe, were employed in the applied arts as illustrators, designers and craftsmen, or in art education. Alongside this, the AIA lobbied the British government to make a greater investment in the arts and art education and advocated a programme of publicly funded commissions and initiatives.

Although the AIA's demands drew some inspiration from the creation of the Federal Art Project under Roosevelt's New Deal in the United States, the AIA's conception of the artist as a worker, trained in publicly funded institutions and engaged on state-sponsored commissions for the wider public benefit was clearly modelled on the Soviet example. However, as Misha Black acknowledged in his 1936 article 'Equity for Artists' in *Left Review*, this presented a radical challenge to the dominant perception of the position of the artist in British society:

> That artists should be organising themselves is a heavy blow to the hard boiled yet sentimental businessman. The conception of the artist in his

> garret had so conveniently eased his conscience as to have made him regard an empty stomach as a necessary condition for the production of masterpieces. (Black, 1936)

The AIA's First Congress in 1937 was convened as a means of advancing these aims, opening with a public meeting at Conway Hall to discuss "The Relation of Art to the State and Public" (Radford, 1987). Among the items in the Congress' extensive agenda were discussions of the "representation of artists on the State and municipal councils to advise and assist on public work schemes"; "the responsibility of art schools, other schools and training centres"; and "practical proposals for furthering the cause of Peace, Democracy and Cultural Progress" (AIA, 1937). With committees dedicated to the fields of fine art, industrial design, commercial art, illustration and arts education, the Congress sought to draw together practitioners from across a range of disciplines in support of increased employment opportunities and improvements in terms and conditions. However, the wider political motives underpinning the Congress are also revealed in its attempt "to clarify the position of the artist in relation to the present world situation and what attitude artists should adopt to the problems with which world events face us" (AIA, 1937).

The Congress was accompanied by an exhibition of more than 1000 works, held in a disused mansion in Grosvenor Square, and including pieces by Wassily Kandinsky, Fernand Leger, Joan Miró and Pablo Picasso. Although the

exhibition received favourable reviews in *The Times*, the more political aspects of the Congress itself caused controversy, with several newspapers denouncing it as Communist propaganda, prompting the agents for the landlord of the Grosvenor Square site (the Duke of Westminster) to insist that the Congress' programme of lectures, meetings and round table discussions were relocated to Caxton Hall (McClean, 2013).

Although steadfast in its commitment to the anti-fascist cause, the AIA's interests in the Soviet Union waned as its focus shifted towards Spain. Following the outbreak of the Civil War in 1936, the AIA participated in a variety of Aid Spain initiatives. These included several fundraising exhibitions and the "Portraits for Spain" scheme in which AIA members, including Augustus John, Jacob Epstein, Mark Gertler, Pearl Binder and Viscount Hastings, accepted commissions in return for a fixed donation to the Spanish Medical Aid Committee, based in London.

The participation of Viscount Hastings in the "Portraits for Spain" initiative and the AIA's support for the Spanish Medical Aid Committee provides a clear example of the way in which individual artists and groups sought to engage with the wider anti-fascist movement. Although an unlikely "fellow traveller" (as son and heir to the Earl of Huntingdon he attended Eton and Oxford, played varsity polo and joined the Bullingdon Club), Viscount Hastings was one of a number of artists whose artistic and political activities had become closely intertwined. In this respect, Hastings' approach was informed by his experiences of working as an apprentice to the Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera, on mural projects in San Francisco and Detroit

during 1931-1932. Rivera himself had spent time in the USSR in 1927 and considered himself a committed Communist, albeit one with a fairly flexible approach to party discipline, leading him to be dismissed from and readmitted to the Mexican Communist Party on numerous occasions during his lifetime (Craven, 1997). Rivera was eventually expelled from the USA in 1933 following a controversy over his refusal to remove a portrait of Lenin from his mural, *Man at the Crossroads,* at the Rockefeller Centre in New York, and returned to Mexico.

Hastings later spent time with Rivera in Mexico City before returning to the UK in 1934. Back in London, Hastings became involved in a range of activities and organisations; as well as joining the AIA and producing illustrations for *Left Review*, he also lent his support to the activities of the SCR; standing as host at a fundraising fete in Wimbledon where the actor and singer Paul Robeson appeared as the guest of honour (Overy, 2009). In February 1935 Hastings undertook his first visit to the USSR, accompanied by his friend, the writer Alec Waugh. Both Hastings and Waugh kept journals recording their experiences, which included the regulation excursions to a workers' sanatorium and the Moscow Metro, and tea with Ivy Litvinov (the British-born wife of Stalin's Commissar for Foreign Affairs). Although Waugh remained unconvinced by the Soviet system and deeply suspicious of the restrictions placed on their movements by their Intourist guides (Waugh, 1978), Hastings' impressions of the Soviet Union were generally favourable; his journal describes discussing collective artistic processes with the muralist and printmaker Vladimir Favorsky, and dining on quail and caviar (Hastings, HRC papers, 1935).

Hastings' wife, Cristina, meanwhile, joined the CPGB and became treasurer of the Marx House and Workers' School on Clerkenwell Green, working under its Director, Robin Page Arnot. Cristina's association with Marx House resulted in what remains Hastings' best-known mural, *The Worker of the Future Upsetting the Economic Chaos of the Present*. Completed in what was then the lecture hall of the Marx House and Workers' School over several weeks during September and October 1935, the mural received extensive publicity during its construction and helped to establish Hastings' credentials as an artist and political activist. In terms of composition, *The Worker of the Future* bears a strong resemblance to Rivera's ill-fated Rockefeller mural while also making reference to a historical narrative, similar to that employed by Rivera in *Portrait of America* at the New Workers' School in New York in 1933. In *The Worker of the Future,* Hastings presents the destruction of capitalism and its institutions (more specifically, parliament, the church, the military and the banks), within a historical narrative that traces the development of Socialism in Britain from the Chartists to William Morris; although in Hastings' image the central figure of the worker acts alone in reducing the symbols of British capitalism to rubble, his agency is presented as the culmination of this historical process. In doing so Hastings also adopts a clear hierarchy in his depiction of historical figures, and uses the juxtaposition of these figures to convey a version of historical progress; in Hastings' conception of the revolutionary process Karl Marx and Vladimir Ilich Lenin appear as the dominant influence, with Robert Owen, Morris and Freidrich Engels at their shoulders. In placing Owen and Morris on the side of Marx, Hastings is also attempting to establish his vision of a specifically British form of socialist development, distinct and separate from the Soviet model.

Shortly after completion of the Marx House mural, Hastings helped to organise the first Congress of Peace and Friendship with the Soviet Union, held in London in December 1935. This event involved several other members of the SCR, including its Chairman, the lawyer and Labour MP DN Pritt, and the filmmaker Ivor Montagu (also a colleague of Cristina's at Marx House). Opening proceedings at the evening session on Saturday December 7th, Hastings referred directly to his visit to Moscow in contrasting the 'degeneration' in Europe with the USSR's economic achievements and cultural progress (Hastings, HRC papers, 1936). Hastings' speech also addressed the role of the artist within Soviet society, a theme he would later develop, both in his attempts to promote mural painting in Britain, and in his work in support of the AIA's campaign to persuade the British government to commission its members for public art projects:

> When I was in the USSR last winter, I was particularly interested in studying the life and living conditions of painters there. As far as I could see in Moscow there were so many orders for work that the artists did not know how they could meet the demand. Libraries, colleges, club-rooms, collective farms, all wanted paintings. The artists were working as hard as they could to satisfy the patrons. I don't know any other European country where such a state of things exists. (Hastings, HRC papers, 1936)

The roster of supporters for the Congress included many of those associated with the SCR, including Herbert Read, Pearl Binder, Clough and Amabel Williams-

Ellis, and the Labour peer William Hare, Earl of Listowel and author of *A Critical History of Modern Aesthetics* (1933). The Congress itself was also accompanied by an exhibition of Soviet posters, held at the Friends' Meeting House on Euston Road.

As a result of his association with the SCR and the Congress, Viscount Hastings was later commissioned by DN Pritt to create a small mural for his home at The Priory in Beechill, Berkshire. In *Welcome to Pearl Binder* (1936), Hastings reveals his admiration for the Soviet system by contrasting elements of upper and working class life in England against the more progressive, egalitarian Soviet experience. Considerably smaller in scale than the Marx House fresco, the Binder mural was executed over the course of a weekend visit, and produced to commemorate Binder's return from a trip to the Soviet Union during the summer of 1936; an event that provides the subject for the mural. Placing a full-length portrait of Binder herself at the centre of the composition, Hastings used images of the Priory on one side and images of Soviet life on the other to represent the contrast between British and Soviet society. Although keen to emphasise the fundamental differences; contrasting Pritt's ornate flower garden (to indicate the wasteful luxuries enjoyed by the English country house dweller) with the productive land of the modern collective farm, and the sombre Victorian slum terrace with a modern Soviet workers housing block, Hastings places an even greater emphasis on the potential for unity, with the figure of Binder herself acting as a conduit through which both sides could be reconciled. Although the image of Stalin and his comrades waving from the Soviet side could be regarded as symbolic of Binder's departure from the USSR and return to England, it might also represent Hastings' aspirations for a lasting harmony between Britain and

the USSR. Indeed, while the images of a train and a boat in the background indicate Binder's journey, the reference to travel, as well as the relatively narrow body of water and land between the Soviet and British sides, hints at a closer and more enduring relationship; the boat, with it's Soviet and Union flags (as well as its solitary passenger waving farewell to the British side) giving the clearest indication of travel in both directions.

The presence of the portrait of Stalin (conspicuously absent from the Marx House Mural) also demonstrates Hastings' growing adherence to Communist orthodoxy at this time. In this, he may well have been influenced by the increasing activism of his wife Lady Cristina Hastings who, in March of that same year had been arrested and deported from Brazil on charges of espionage. Her arrest, (alongside that of her companion, Hastings' sister, Lady Marion Cameron) made front-page news with Hastings himself petitioning the authorities to intervene with the rather disingenuous claim that "my wife and sister are certainly not Communists" (*Daily Express*, 6th March 1936). Although Lady Hastings claimed to be visiting Brazil in order to research a travel book, intercepts of communiqués between the CPGB and its Soviet contacts subsequently published by MI5 reveal that the purpose of the visit was to gather information on the disappearance of the Brazilian Communist leader Luis Carlos Prestes, and that both the visit and the subsequent media outcry over Lady Hastings' arrest were officially sanctioned and engineered (West, 2007).

The principal subject of Viscount Hastings' Priory mural, Pearl Binder, was herself an artist and writer and, like Hastings, a member of both the SCR and the AIA.

The daughter of a Russian immigrant tailor, Binder was brought up in Manchester before moving to the East End of London. The Priory mural itself was dedicated to Binder in celebration of her return from the USSR where she had been researching a book, *Misha and Masha*, published in 1936. Binder was a close friend of the Pritts (to whom *Misha and Masha* is dedicated) and a frequent visitor to the Priory. As well as Pritt and his wife Molly, the group welcoming Binder back in the Priory mural also includes her fiancée, Frederick Elwyn Jones, a lawyer who would later act as junior prosecuting counsel for the British government at the Nuremberg Trials and who subsequently served as Attorney General, before becoming Lord Chancellor in 1974.

Misha and Masha, a collection of short stories, offers a series of "before and after" narratives, in which Binder compares the privations of life in Tsarist Russia and during the Civil War against the opportunities provided in the new Soviet state. In the title story, we follow the fortunes of Misha as he becomes a Young Communist; loves and then leaves the shallow, treacherous counterrevolutionary Masha, before finding solace and self-improvement in the great works of literature provided in his workers' library.

Like Rowe, Binder's political and artistic activities were directly influenced by her experiences of Soviet life and culture. Binder had made several trips to the USSR between 1934 and 1936, and had found work as an illustrator for the satirical magazine *Krokodil.* Unusually for a British contemporary artist, (particularly a female one), Binder had also enjoyed a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Western Art in Moscow. Like Hastings, Binder also worked across a range of organisations in

the UK, including producing illustrations for *Left Review*. Alongside her AIA colleagues James Holland, James Fitton and James Boswell, Binder later served on the Editorial Committee of *Left Review* and became a regular contributor. Although best known for its support for the emerging literary talent of the likes of Stephen Spender and WH Auden, and for the publication of Nancy Cunard's *Authors Take Sides* (1936) in which leading literary figures were canvassed for their views on the Spanish Civil War, *Left Review* also provided extensive coverage of developments in the visual arts, as well as commissioning illustrations and photographs. Alongside its editorial and literary content, *Left Review* also contained advertisements for the activities of other organisations, including the AIA and Marx House, as well as those advertising the services of VOKS, the Soviet agency responsible for advancing cultural relations abroad, including the provision of organised tours, for any readers seeking to experience Soviet life first hand.

In 1938 Binder also contributed illustrations to *Everyday Life in Russia*, written by Bertha Malnick, a lecturer at the University of London's School of Slavonic Studies, and, later, a member of the SCR's Literature Section. Like *Misha and Masha*, Malnick's book aimed "to satisfy the ordinary English reader's desire to understand the daily life of his Soviet counterpart" (Malnick, 1938) and charted Soviet developments, such as the Collectivisation of agriculture, through "life-stories" of individual citizens. Despite Malnick's academic credentials, however, her highly idealised view of Soviet accomplishments put forward in *Everyday Life in Russia*, as demonstrated by Binder's illustration *Open Air Concert on A Collective Farm* (which shows the workers at rest and play, enjoying music from a concert pianist whose

instrument has been mounted on the back of a truck) was largely undermined by widespread coverage of the Stalinist purges and show trials that had been circulating among the British press since the mid-1930s. Indeed, one reviewer in the *Irish Monthly* accuses Malnick of "vast *suppressio veri*" in failing to address "the unpleasant, less favourable side of Russian Soviet life" (E.J.C., 1939)

Alongside the activities of artists and illustrators such as Rowe, Branson, Hastings and Binder, one of the most effective means of advancing Anglo-Soviet cultural relations during the inter-war period was through the medium of film. Although widely screened across continental Europe, British audiences had been unable to view Soviet films until the formation of the Film Society by Ivor Montagu in 1925. Like Viscount and Lady Hastings, Montagu seemed an unlikely recruit to the Soviet cause; the youngest son of Lord Swaythling, Montagu had spent his childhood moving between the family's Townhill estate in Hampshire and their palatial residence in Kensington, where guests included government ministers, senior members of the royal family and visiting foreign dignitaries (Montagu, 1970). However, membership of the Heretics Club at Cambridge had brought Montagu into contact with the Communists Robin Page Arnot and Alex Tudor-Hart (both of whom he would later work with at Marx House), and prompted an enduring interest in Soviet cinema.

Although discouraged by his father, (who was then engaged in attempts to secure repayment of Tsarist debts from the Soviet government and feared Montagu might be abducted), Montagu's first visits to the USSR were largely facilitated by his

family's status and connections, which enabled him to obtain letters of introduction from both the Foreign Secretary and the Soviet Ambassador in London. It was during his second visit, also in 1925, that Montagu began cultivating the contacts necessary to obtain prints of Soviet films for use by his newly formed Film Society. According to Thorold Dickinson (a colleague of Montagu at both the Film Society and the Progressive Film Institute), the Society was inspired by similar organisations in Paris and Berlin and sought to provide an opportunity for London audiences to view hitherto unavailable foreign films (Dickinson, 1969). As well as organising screenings in the New Gallery and Tivoli cinemas in London, the Film Society also arranged for English subtitles to be provided, as well as live performances of the original score. Financed by subscriptions from its members and sponsors (including Lord Swaythling, HG Wells and George Bernard Saw), the Film Society was also able to use its status as a private members club to circumvent government censorship. This occurred, most notably, in the case of Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), which had been placed on the Home Secretary's list of proscribed films on the grounds that "it dealt with mutiny against properly constituted authority" (Costello, 1988), but which was screened by the Film Society in association with the SCR in 1929. Montagu was also successful in arranging for both Vsevolod Pudovkin and Eisenstein to visit London in 1929, the latter giving a series of lectures that would eventually form the basis for his teaching at the Moscow All-Union State Institute of Cinematography.

Eager to progress to producing films rather than simply screening them, Montagu also began collaborating with Michael Balcon at Gaumont Pictures, taking

on the role as editor for Alfred Hitchcock's directorial debut *The Lodger* (1927). Following a brief sojourn to Hollywood in 1929 to assist Eisenstein, Montagu returned to London to resume his partnership with Balcon and Hitchcock, acting as Assistant Producer for *The 39 Steps* (1935) and *The Secret Agent* (1936). Alongside such commercial successes, Montagu's political activism had intensified; as well as membership of the CPGB and the SCR, Montagu had also become a founder member of the National Council for Civil Liberties, a regular contributor to *Left Review* and the *Daily Worker* and an active participant in the the work of the Comintern-led World Committee for the Relief of Victims of Fascism. Responding to the call by the 1933 Moscow Congress of the International Union of Revolutionary Theatres to exploit the propaganda potential of films (Smith, 2013), Montagu sought to reconcile his film career with his political work by founding both the Progressive Film Institute (PFI) and Kino. The principle aim of the PFI was to produce propaganda films; most notably, *Defence of Madrid* (1936), the first of a series of documentaries on the Spanish Civil War, while Kino was established in 1935 to organise the distribution of British-made and Soviet films for screenings at political meetings and working men's clubs throughout the UK.

Like the AIA, the Film Society and the SCR before it, Kino also sought the endorsement of prominent public figures, including a number of Montagu's colleagues from the SCR, such as DN Pritt, JD Bernal and Viscount Hastings. Although several who served on the General Council, including Paul Rotha and Alberto Cavalcanti, were established film practitioners others, such as Sir Stafford Cripps, the Bishop of Birmingham and Bertrand Russell added prestige and credibility to an

enterprise that might otherwise have been dismissed as a Communist front organisation. That said, the extensive surveillance files kept on Kino's activities by MI5 reveal the extent of the CPGB's support for the organisation, particularly in respect of urging its local branches to make use of Kino's services (TNA KV5/44).

While Montagu's work with the PFI in Spain made a considerable contribution to the Aid Spain movement in Britain (Fyrth, 1986), Kino was only moderately successful. Indeed, although its first year of operation drew a total audience of around 100 000, the costs involved in transporting equipment and providing suitably qualified projectionists meant that Kino operated at a loss and was eventually dissolved in 1939 (Smith, 2013). That said, the activities of Kino provided a unique opportunity for those outside of London to view Soviet films, as well as providing an additional stimulus, through its support for PFI and the Workers' Film and Photo League, to the emerging British Documentary Film Movement, led by John Grierson at the GPO Film Unit, whose debut documentary, *Grifters* (1929) had been the supporting feature at the Film Society's screening of *Battleship Potemkin* in 1929

As these examples demonstrate, the SCR functioned as the conduit for the emergence of a much wider network of cultural organisations sympathetic to the Soviet Union during the 1930s. Not only did the SCR provide the inspiration for organisations such as the AIA and Marx House, it also provided, through its association with VOKS, the opportunity for many of those involved in establishing these organisations to travel to the USSR to experience Soviet life and culture first

hand, albeit within the context of the strictly controlled "Potemkinised" tours organised by Intourist. Furthermore, the SCR provided an operational model on which others could draw, most notably in respect of securing support from prominent personages, providing educational and promotional opportunities in the form of lectures and discussion groups and, most importantly, by promoting collaborative activities with other organisations. The fact that many of the founder members of the AIA, The Congress of Peace and Friendship with the USSR, The Film Society, Marx House, *Left Review* and Kino were also members of the SCR suggests that the SCR had provided sufficient stimulus in its own activities to encourage members to pursue further initiatives within their respective fields. One must also remember, however, the specific context in which these initiatives developed and, more specifically, the extent to which their support for the Soviet Union was informed both by the social and political effects of the economic depression in Britain, and by the rise of Fascism in Europe. Indeed, as fellow members of the SCR, the AIA and signatories to *Authors Take Sides* (1936), both Ivor Montagu and Pearl Binder represent the dual imperatives that drew many artists and intellectuals to identify with the Soviet cause at this time. For Binder, the AIA and *Left Review* provided artists with an opportunity to draw inspiration from their Soviet counterparts by making an active contribution to the anti-fascist Popular Front, while also attempting to address the dearth of professional opportunities for artists in Britain by advocating state sponsorship for the arts. Similarly, for Montagu, his involvement with Marx House, *Left Review*, the PFI and Kino enabled him to pursue his ideological and propagandist aims as a member of the CPGB and the Communist International, while also providing a means of creating and distributing films

independent of the commercial pressures that informed his work with Balcon and Hitchcock at Gaumont. The significance of the specific historical and political context in which these organisations emerged is also demonstrated in the relatively short-lived contribution of Viscount Hastings who, after an intense period of activism that spanned almost all of the organisations considered here, had, by 1939, settled into relative obscurity as a Labour member of the House of Lords.

In conclusion, while the late 1930s demonstrates a high point in Soviet influence over the visual arts in Britain, its ascendancy owed much to the energies of those individual members, like Montagu, Binder, Rowe, Branson and Hastings, whose activities spanned a range of organisations and initiatives. Furthermore, the emergence of organisations such as the AIA, Marx House, *Left Review* and Kino also took place within the context of growing support among artists and intellectuals for the anti-fascist Popular Front and a corresponding desire to find a means of placing cultural production at the service of anti-fascism. Similarly, the Soviet example of state-sponsored cultural production, which was being successfully replicated under Roosevelt's New Deal in the United States, also offered a compelling model for addressing the deteriorating conditions for artists in Britain during a prolonged period of economic depression.

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