Politics and Letters: The 'Soviet Literary Controversy' in Britain

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Abstract

In the course of the so-called Soviet Literary Controversy of 1946, 'decadent' writers were expelled from the Writers' Union and cosmopolitan literary journals were closed down. The Controversy was widely reported in the British media and provoked extensive debate across literary periodicals. This article revisits this moment, paying particular attention to responses from John Lewis, J. B. Priestley, Cyril Connolly and the young Raymond Williams. Recovering the Controversy yields a new level of detail about the politico-cultural realignments of the mid 1940s by challenging the sometimes hindering period frames—the thirties, the forties, the war, the Cold War, the Old Left, the New Left—through which mid-century cultural history is most usually mapped and viewed.

Keywords: New Left; Marxism; Soviet Union; *Horizon*; *Politics and Letters*

In June 1946 the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union launched a magazine, *Culture and Life*, whose opening editorial announced a 'new historical period' requiring 'a development of ideological and cultural work' in line with the 'historic tasks confronting the Soviet State'.¹ Conceived amidst the rapidly shifting geopolitics of the early Cold War and driven by a commission authorised by Stalin himself, the magazine identified literature and especially that appropriately infused with 'ideas of life-giving patriotism' as central to this ideological work.² In this function, literature was to be newly assisted by a more forthright criticism—of the kind to be found in *Culture and Life*—properly alert to 'the party-nature' of literature.³ Two literary magazines, *Zvezda* and *Leningrad*,

were immediately identified as failing. The Party's Central Committee issued a lengthy decree, printed across *Pravda's* front-page, singling out the best-selling comic writer Mikhail Zoschenko for 'slanderingly representing the Soviet people'.⁴ Zoschenko's story 'The Monkey's Adventure', whose primate hero escapes from a zoo and proves comically oblivious to the duties of Soviet citizenry, was described as 'a vulgar lampoon' of the Soviet Union typical of Zoschenko's cynicism.⁵ The ageing poet Anna Akhmatova was charged with different but equally pernicious tendencies in 'drawing-room poetry' stuck in the pessimistic 'attitudes of bourgeois aristocratic aesthetics and decadence'.⁶ Such writing, accused the decree, no less than its authorisation for publication—Zoschenko was on the editorial board of *Zvezda*—revealed 'ideological disjunction and disorganization', 'obsequiousness to modern bourgeois culture of the West', disconnection from Soviet life and disregard for Soviet literature's educative role.⁷ The inclusion of the likes of Zoschenko and Akhmatova in the magazines was attributed to nepotistic and negligent editorial networks among the Executives of the Union of Soviet writers and the Party leadership in Leningrad. The Central Committee intervened: *Leningrad* was closed; a new editor was assigned to *Zvezda* from the Central Committee's own Propaganda Administration;⁸ on 4 September Zoschenko and Akhmatova were expelled from the Writers' Union.⁹ On 20 September the Central Committee's criticisms were relayed to the Leningrad Writers in a lengthy disquisition by the Committee's notoriously hard-line secretary for ideology, A. A. Zhdanov. Appropriately humiliated, the writers passed a self-critical report acknowledging the justice of those criticisms in a document that codified key tenets of an ever-narrowing Socialist Realistic aesthetic. The Soviet Writer's Union then began to identify other writers in which equivalent tendencies were detected.¹⁰ The so-called 'Zhdanovshchina' cultural purge that began with literature would soon spread across other spheres, including children's magazines, theatre, film and, eventually, music.¹¹

Zhdanov's lurid pronunciations proved arresting newspaper copy in the highly charged atmosphere of the early Cold War. The affair attracted extensive coverage in British media through late August and September 1946, by which time it had become known as 'The Soviet Literary Controversy'.¹² (It was a doubly misleading label as it was not strictly a controversy—no opposing views were expressed—and was less about literature than the imposition of ideological orthodoxy.) In the months that followed, the 'Controversy' found its way into the literary periodicals where it provoked substantial debate around the rights and responsibilities of writers and about the relationship between literature and the state in what were clearly new times. Established and emerging literary figures responded—J.B. Priestley, Cyril Connolly and the young Raymond Williams—across periodicals including *Modern Quarterly*, *Horizon*, the *Anglo-Soviet Journal* and *Politics and Letters*.

This article revisits the Controversy's British periodical reception, tracing the unfolding debate across the key publications. Recovering the Controversy in this way, I argue, yields a new level of detail about the politico-cultural realignments of the mid 1940s. The Controversy was, I argue, a significant location in the unmaking of the cultural formations of the 1930s. But it was also a formative, if

now largely forgotten, site in the emergence of a Cold War cultural politics better known via 'anti-Communist' fiction (notably by Grahame Greene, Arthur Koestler and George Orwell) and the flourishing subgenre of Communist renunciation (Douglas Hyde's *I Believed: The Autobiography of a Former British Communist* [1950], Richard Crossman's symposium *The God that Failed* [1950]). Analysing the Controversy in this way, I argue—by reading backwards and forward simultaneously—is to challenge the sometimes hindering period frames—the thirties, the forties, the war, the Cold War, the Old Left, the New Left—through which mid-century cultural history is most usually mapped and viewed.

Modern Times

The Communist Party of Great Britain's response to the Controversy was conducted primarily through the pages of its central theoretical journal, *Modern Quarterly*, now revived after a war-time hiatus and was essentially unsurprising.¹³ For *Modern Quarterly's* editor, John Lewis, formerly a Left Book Club organiser, the journal's function was to expose 'the many and influential sophistries of our time' and to 'create, stimulate and lead the strongest possible ideological struggle against all forms of reactionary ideology'.¹⁴ Bellicose, Soviet-inspired tones in confronting such 'reaction' would be integral to the journal's new identity (the anti-Stalinist Orwell and lapsed Communist Arthur Koestler would be targeted repeatedly). Occurring early in the re-launched journal's life, the Controversy fed into and bolstered these tendencies.

Events in the Soviet Union were narrated and applauded across two issues in late 1946 and early 1947.¹⁵ Key Soviet documents were translated, edited and reprinted, including an earlier attack on Zoschenko's writing from the *Bolshevik* from January 1944, presumably republished to stress consistency in Soviet cultural policy.¹⁶ Lewis's editorials insisted that the affair was not, as the western press indicated, an instance of 'an alien and uncomprehending officialdom' berating 'tame hack writers' but rather of a wide and deep cultural conversation—'*the whole of the Soviet Union is arguing about this issue*'—the occurrence of which was a measure of Soviet cultural maturity.¹⁷ That the 'conversation'—actually self-criticisms that dutifully echoed Zhdanov's criticisms—had followed rather than preceded the State's intervention was explained through the logic of democratic centralism: Zhdanov was doing his job and speaking for the people in ways that the writers had immediately recognised as legitimate (*MQ*, 3). Lewis also reminded readers that the Party did not merely represent the people but the historical necessity embodied in 'the new civilisation of Soviet Russia' and hence exceeded the framework of bourgeois moral reproach. The confrontation with the likes of Zoschenko and Akhmatova was a historical struggle between a new Soviet civilisation of 'developed democracy' and 'the last stage of capitalism' that such figures embodied (*MQ*, 11). Zoschenko and Akhmatova had been treated appropriately, even leniently. They had suffered 'no kind of exile or punishment' and had not been 'sent off to a concentration camp'. That they were currently silenced by the withdrawal of all publishing opportunities

was their choice. Their fortunes would be reversed if they wrote 'something a good deal better' (*MQ*, 5).

Zhdanov's decisive interventions into the Soviet Union's cultural life was for Lewis a model of what was desirable closer to home. The Party should lead 'in artistic as all other matters' as it did not subscribe to the bourgeois aesthete's 'creed that art is a sacrosanct province of its own'. The Party *should* correct waywardness in writers mired in reaction just as it should strike off doctors who persisted in practices that predated the discovery of antiseptic surgery (*MQ*, 6). (Socialist Realism was in this sense equivalent to scientific breakthrough.) The disease of Modernism's 'inward-turning, utterly corrupt and anti-social literary tendency' had been the hallmark of 'our dying culture' since Marcel Proust and James Joyce. Its British advocates—ideological and cultural cousins of Anna Akhmatova—would themselves benefit from a purgative 'scalding stream of criticism' like that administered by Zhdanov (*MQ*, 11). So would writers who, like Zoschenko, undermined the cause of progress by attacking civilisation's vanguard, the Soviet Union.¹⁸ Lewis duly impugned Orwell, Koestler and his former Left Book Club associate, Victor Gollancz, for 'carrying on the work of Goebbels' with their warmongering rhetoric of defending civilisation against Bolshevism (*MQ* 11).

Though British Communism was powerless to effect the 'Zhdanovshchina' desired by Lewis at home, it had jurisdiction over itself. The Controversy and its aftermath in the Soviet Union—the latter naturally the lodestar of national Communist Parties—would exert a force on British Communism beyond sharpening the hectoring tone of *Modern Quarterly*. It would help to legitimate the reorientation of the internal cultural world of the Communist Party of Great Britain towards a more interventionist management of its own cultural policies and apparatus. This process, in which Zhdanov became an ideological figurehead, would begin, appropriately enough, with the British party requisitioning a hitherto semi-autonomous communist cultural journal, *Our Time*, a publication itself conspicuously silent on the Controversy.¹⁹ It would be played out at greater length in the years ahead in various episodes, not least the so-called 'Caudwell controversy'—'a small purgative exercise in the Zhdanov mode' for E. P. Thompson—in which the poet and critic's 'idealist' and deviationist tendencies would be ritualistically exposed in the pages of *Modern Quarterly* by those 'administrators', as Thompson put it, 'rehearsing for parts as local Zhdanovs'.²⁰ Lewis and the *Modern Quarterly* would be central to that process.

The Soviet Priestley

A second constituency to respond to the Controversy was that grouped around the newly formed Writers' Group of the longstanding Society for Cultural Relations between the People of the British Commonwealth and the USSR (the SCR).²¹ J. B. Priestley, an author actively promoted and popular in the Soviet Union—his play *An Inspector Calls* was premiered in Moscow in the summer of 1945—was President of the group, which had been created amidst popular wartime warmth

towards Britain's military ally. Conceived to consolidate links between Britain and the USSR in 'the literary sphere', the Group collaborated extensively with VOKS (the Soviet Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries), an organisation founded in 1925 to build positive impressions of the Soviet Union among the non-Communist intelligentsia abroad.²² In its first year alone the Writers' Group published three bulletins on Soviet writing.²³ In 1946 it added Priestley's *Russian Journey*, a pamphlet cast in the mould of the author's depression-era travel book *English Journey* (1933) and charting his VOKS-hosted visit to the USSR in the autumn of 1945.

That trip and its ensuing media coverage, all of which pre-dated the Controversy, established Priestley as a commentator on Soviet affairs all the more valuable to VOKS and the SCR for not being a Communist.²⁴ Post-controversy, he returned to Soviet matters in writing the foreword to *Soviet Writers Reply* (1948), a Writers' Group pamphlet that gathered and reprinted material already published in the SCR's in-house publication, the *Anglo-Soviet Journal*.²⁵ The pamphlet, edited by the distinguished former *Left Review* and *Our Time* editor Edgell Rickword—unseated in British literary Communism's own localised outbreak of Zhdanovism—comprised transcripts of a VOKS meeting held in the Soviet Union in January 1947, amidst the Zhdanovshchina. Here, in what the SCR dubbed an Anglo-Soviet 'Brains Trust', twenty-two Soviet writers had responded to written questions from British writers including Priestley, Agatha Christie and Rose Macaulay.²⁶ The ensuing pamphlet was squarely aligned with the abiding purpose of the SCR—to foster positive representations of the Soviet Union to the British public—and comprised, in effect, the SCR's institutional response to the Controversy and its negative coverage in the British media.

Priestley's recent trip to the Soviet Union was repeatedly cited in the pamphlet by Soviet writers as an instance of their country's openness; in general the Russians missed no opportunity to emphasise the benevolence of the Soviet state towards its writers.²⁷ But the forum was also used more directly to reassert and justify the Soviet state's official line over the Controversy via senior Soviet writers. Responding to the question, posed by Mrs Cecil Chesterton, as to whether 'any Soviet writer has a genius for satire equal to Zoschenko's?' (*SWR*, 41), the *Pravda* journalist David Zaslavsky again presented Zoschenko as a residue of a history gladly vanquished. For Igor Satz, formerly an editor at the State Publishing House, the expulsion of Zoschenko from the Writers' Union was, once again, cast as the implementation of the judgement of the Soviet people—'our simple Soviet man or woman'—ably expressed through their representative, Zhdanov (*SWR*, 42).

Most striking about the pamphlet, however, was the dissonance between the discussion's content and Priestley's preface, which mediated the Controversy to SCR and the Writers Group's community of readers. In perhaps a case of what Arthur Koestler would facetiously label 'the dialectics of the unconscious'—a condition he considered common amongst Communist and fellow-travelling intellectuals through which unease about the Soviet Union was repressed by countervailing perceptions, desires, loyalties or impulses that VOKS courtship and hospitality

had in many cases done much to encourage—Priestley bluffly proceeded as though nothing significant had happened in Soviet cultural life in the year following his 1945 visit.²⁸ Eschewing particularities in favour of broader remarks and squarely in the spirit of the SCR's Writers' Group, he consistently emphasised Anglo and Soviet similarities over differences in the name of 'mutual understanding' (*SWR*, 6). He assumed the authority of the recent eye-witness who knew some of the writers personally and arrestingly—given the extensive media coverage the Controversy had generated—expanded reassuringly on remarks from *Russian Journey*, emphasising the relative autonomy of the writer in the Soviet Union. In that earlier text he had insisted that Soviet writers were not obliged 'to work along a narrow Party line' and did not 'feel themselves to be fettered in any way'.²⁹ Rather than revising the statement in the light of the Controversy, he simply restated it. The Soviet writers were not 'ventiloquial dummies' and the current VOKS/SCR project was not 'propaganda stuff' (*SWR*, 5). He attributed the common outlook shared by the Soviet writers to sincerely held collective beliefs rather than to external compulsion. These beliefs, he insisted, were shaped by shared historical experiences—'vast communal experiences'—although his claim that the 'Soviet view' was 'genuinely accepted' by them came close to acknowledging an external agent requiring acceptance that Priestley also disregarded as a propaganda phantom (*SWR*, 7). If one of the central functions of VOKS was to foment—through a carefully managed process involving a combination of hospitality and patronage—a positive image of the Soviet Union and its cultural life amongst prominent fellow-travelling intellectuals, Priestley's role in the SCR's mediation of the Controversy was a striking instance of its success. In *Russian Journey* the success had been manifested in an upbeat tone and lapses into bureaucratise conspicuous in a writer who prided himself on plain-speaking (he referred to the Kulaks being 'abolished', for instance, as though they were an institution).³⁰ His foreword to *Soviet Writers Reply* was now striking for its partial reading of the material he was recommending to others. Its effect was to downplay by omission the significance of the Controversy—upon which the British press had insisted—while also allowing the official positions established through the Controversy to be restated and justified. More particularly, *Soviet Writers Reply* recast those official positions as those of the writers themselves, ratifying the Zhdanov line that the state had dutifully acted on their behalf.

New Horizons

When in his foreword Priestley wrote of English writers who 'profess the doctrine of "pure literature"' (*SWR*, 6)—'pottering and playing about' as he put it in another context—he was alluding to the likes of Cyril Connolly and his *Horizon*, a journal launched in January 1940 whose 'standards' were always 'aesthetic'—that of 'the aesthete in the last ditch' as Connolly's co-editor, Stephen Spender, retrospectively put it—and in which sustained and wilfully provocative coverage of the Controversy now appeared.³¹ If for John Lewis the Controversy was a blueprint for a post-revolutionary cultural policy in Britain and for Priestley no controversy at all, for

Cyril Connolly it was a tipping point demanding politico-cultural realignment from erstwhile Leftist intellectuals whose movement had 'petered out' since the war.³² To that effect, his ten-page 'Comment' editorial in the October 1946 issue knowingly ran the risk of 'saturating' readers. But what was happening, Connolly insisted, was 'so important' that 'a much fuller report of the case' than hitherto available was necessary and he duly re-told the Controversy blow by blow.³³ Zhdanov's bullying and sinister reduction of literature to an educational function called to the Eton-educated Connolly's mind 'an immorality scare in a bad public school': his piece, whose format otherwise mirrored the *Modern Quarterly* coverage whose readings it diametrically opposed, duly intercut long quotations digested from the Soviet press and policy documents with jeering sub-headings in the tone and style of a school magazine—'Trouble Brewing', 'Before the Whole School', 'Expelled', 'All We Like Sheep', 'All's Well That Ends Well Maybe' (*H*, 209). The editorial culminated in a five-point manifesto asserting that the Controversy revealed 'a complete ignorance of what art is about' in the Soviet Union and insisting that Britain 'must be constantly on the lookout against its implications' (*H*, 214). The resonant context was never for Connolly Leningrad but rather life under a Labour government which, as he wrote a few months later, had done 'practically nothing' to assist writers and artists and had resolutely failed to 'stir up either intellect or imagination'; the 'aesthetically-minded Socialist State' to which 1930s Leftists had looked forward now seemed as remote as the literary 'English renaissance' of which his journal had optimistically detected premonitions.³⁴

The relationship between the state and cultural life was for Connolly now the fundamental question in Britain and the signs were ominous, pointing to the expansion rather than the withering of bureaucratic instrumentalism and philistinism under the forward march of Labour. He saw Britain in October 1946 as 'at the beginning of a socialist regime'; looking back to the recent electoral landslide, he cast gloomily through a series of socialist electoral victories to the end of party government and the virtual extinction of 'the vague cultural opposition of an educated leisure class' which his journal knowingly embodied. In this scenario, the state would be in a position to 'ask for the art it likes' (*H*, 206); austerity patriotism, he predicted, would be used to justify 'positive anger against those artists who are not social realists' and who preferred to dance to a more intricate tune (*H*, 207).

To underscore the point that the Controversy should be read as a caution—a dystopian future evermore possible in contemporary Britain—he cast his account of it in the subjunctive mood (a later editorial reworked the device, projecting a philistine state coordinating a national 'offensive against Art' complete with a proto-Orwellian hate campaign against artists).³⁵ In October 1946, presenting the Controversy as a possible future from which the values embodied in *Horizon* would be expunged from the culture, he figuratively substituted Prime Minister Atlee and social realism with Stalin and Socialist realism, Zoschenko with Evelyn Waugh. Akhmatova he cast as 'something of a Virginia Woolf or Edith Sitwell' with Labour frontbenchers Nye Bevan or John Strachey as Zhdanov. The equivalent of the Controversy, he asserted, fully imagining the process that John Lewis

had regarded as all too desirable, would be the suspension of *Horizon* and John Lehmann's periodical *New Writing*, the public denunciation of Waugh, Woolf and Sitwell and those like-minded and supportive writers tarred with the same brush—here he mentioned his *Horizon* co-editor Stephen Spender and T.S. Eliot (*H*, 207).

His editorial's closing manifesto insisted that an illiterate state was better than one that took a 'positive interest in literature' and that the only tolerable state position on the arts would be one that 'encourages art for its own sake'—here he cited the month-old highbrow BBC Third Programme as an indication of what was sufferable (*H*, 214). The market, affectionately lampooned as a 'ballyhoo travelling circus' (*H*, 214), was presented by Connolly as preferable to the State as culture's context, a preference that would assume an increasingly pro-American inflection in *Horizon* in the months ahead (American art would feature increasingly and Connolly would soon include in *Horizon* an ironic advertisement appealing to American sympathisers to donate cash and food to support a cultured minority cut adrift by a Philistine government).³⁶ Liberalism, widely regarded in the 1930s as a historically defunct ideology from which radicalised intellectuals such as Connolly's co-editor Spender had needed to advance themselves, was repositioned, without being re-assessed or critically rehabilitated, as indubitable and the *sine qua non* of meaningful creativity.³⁷ The true source of art, Connolly wrote in his peroration, lay not in 'patriotism or policy or mass demand or the yells of a political commissar' but rather 'the ferment of an unhappy childhood working through a noble imagination' (*H*, 214). Art, he argued, happily reinforcing the perception of his and *Horizon*'s aestheticism, was a product of 'internal conflict in the subconscious'. The 'Soviet conception of art', with its institutional, instrumental emphasis, was, by contrast, 'the extreme of illiberality'. He concluded with a call to arms. All writers 'with liberal opinions' should be 'prepared to go into the breach' against 'the Soviet view' just as 'he went into action' to confront the Nazis. This was a 'terrible and tragic conclusion', he conceded but, in his eyes, the situation was 'no less tragic' (*H*, 214). An editorial that had begun by identifying 'next-war talk' as a sign of 'the complicated illness of our culture' knowingly culminated with an outbreak of those symptoms (*H*, 205).

Politics, Letters

In a significant early essay that has never been republished, the twenty-five-year-old Raymond Williams responded at length to the Controversy and its coverage in the British newspapers and periodicals. Ten pages long, 'The Soviet Literary Controversy in Retrospect' appeared in the first issue of Williams's new co-edited quarterly *Politics and Letters* in the summer of 1947. Intended to bring the journal's defining 'preoccupation to bear on a current disagreement', the essay focussed many of the new journal's concerns, doubling as an extended editorial, which in turn framed a printed symposium, 'Politics & Letters', where key positions were established.³⁸

If the new journal's title was what Francis Mulhern calls a 'broken register', that was a mimetic effect and precisely the point.³⁹ Its central intervention was to confront

what it saw as a dangerous contraction of and polarisation between the spheres of 'politics' and 'letters', a broad intellectual tendency it regarded as sharply intensified in the post-war context. As increasingly conceived, it argued, politics lacked culture or engagement with 'the deepest levels of personality which is traditionally associated with the arts', while letters and their surrounding discourses comprised an increasingly apolitical or aestheticised space remote from 'any detailed experience of living'.⁴⁰ The ultimate test of politics, it insisted, the 'structure of society, its institutions and directions', was precisely its ability to preserve, recreate and expand 'the distinctive values of living embodied in our literary tradition'.⁴¹ Here the journal drew on one of its key sources, F. R. Leavis and his journal *Scrutiny*, an affiliation that was 'guarded' but 'none the less quite strong', as Williams later put it.⁴²

But though the journal was Leavisite in its cultural definitions of social quality, it did not accept what was for Leavis the political corollary of that position: that advanced industrial society was inherently inimical to an organically integrated culture; this position Williams would soon characterise as 'pseudo-aristocratic authoritarianism'.⁴³ Instead *Politics and Letters*, whose editorial board were Leftists variously involved in adult education, was committed to 'development towards a planned, rational' society (*PL*, 31). It was formed, in fact, to 'unite radical left politics with Leavisite literary criticism' in staging what Williams later called 'the great debate' that had not occurred in the thirties. That is, it sought to test, enlarge and politicise what was valuable in Leavis's project—the close reading of key works conducted within a broader assessment of the processes of the fragmentation of an organically integrated cultural world in the course of industrial modernity—and reconcile this with a forward-facing politics committed to structural transformation.⁴⁴ Though the journal's political orientations were strategically underplayed in the name of bringing about the necessary conversation, for Williams the intervention was conceived to reinvigorate and develop the Marxism of the Popular Front period and its sincere if admittedly tentative and fragmentary attempts to formulate a materialist account of culture responsive to textual specificity.⁴⁵

The cultural formation that had sustained that earlier, broken body of analysis—crystallised in key institutions including the Left Book Club and the journal *Left Review*—had fractured under the weight of the well-documented episodes of disillusionment with the Soviet Union that soon fixed the 1930s as 'low' and 'dishonest': the Show Trials, Communist *realpolitik* in Spain, the Nazi-Soviet pact.⁴⁶ For Williams, the Controversy now graphically illustrated that the Soviet Union should be regarded as another site of a deep crisis in the relationship between modern politics and letters, rather than of its privileged historical resolution. The Controversy's reception in Britain, meanwhile, looked set to entrench dominant and reductive positions. Keen to avoid what he saw as an irresponsible anti-communism, Williams reminded readers of what the Soviet Union had achieved in the face of adversity (*PL*, 30). But the now former Communist Williams nonetheless broke decisively with orthodox Party Marxism. He insisted that the Controversy had, by no means for the first time, revealed in the Soviet Union a mistaken impulse at 'stabilising the quality' of 'civilization at its present level' through a

narrowly programmatic and interventionist approach to culture (*PL*, 30). That J. B. Priestley's 'literary productions' were 'highly esteemed' in Russia and that the author himself 'felt happy' about the situation was, for Williams, sufficient evidence that the stabilisation was premature, a point subsequently echoed by F. R. Leavis in his one contribution to the short-lived journal (*PL*, 30). And that Zoschenko's 'slight' story 'The Monkey's Adventure' was taken seriously through feverish symbol hunting revealed not only of a lack of cultural maturity but also of critical faculty, a shortcoming for Williams also strikingly manifest in the tone and argument of John Lewis' *Modern Quarterly* editorials (*PL*, 25). For Williams, the cultural analysis now dominant in the Soviet Union and loyally echoed by Lewis and other British Marxists not only failed to distinguish between politics and letters, administrative practices and creative ones but was sufficiently wrongheaded to make a virtue of that failure in insisting that two were one and the same.

But though Williams' analysis of the Controversy's British reception was in part angled at a degenerating and increasingly culturally illiterate Marxism embodied by Lewis—a figure Williams would later equate with a dominant Communist Marxism—it was equally concerned with the elitist and self-styled metropolitan cultural minoritarians at *Horizon* and the always unacknowledged political orientations implicit in their project.⁴⁷ Drawing on Q. D. Leavis's *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), Williams emphasised the damaging cultural standardisation driven by the market in the US and, increasingly, Britain. He did so in order to destabilise the opposition between cultural freedom under actually existing capitalism and the Soviet Union's unfreedom upon which Connolly's case hinged. The way in which the popular press had 'retailed' the Controversy to the public in Britain under the guise of 'potential war' was in itself an instance of the mass media's 'vicious exploitation of human irrationality, ignorance and weakness' and one that *Horizon* had reproduced (*PL*, 24). And that this overwhelming reality had failed to unsettle Connolly's conviction that the 'Reading Public' or the culture industry that serviced it represented the 'only judge of books'—'a ballyhoo travelling circus', being 'safer than the best-intentioned crumb of state patronage' as Connolly had put it—was a marker for Williams of Connolly's failure to formulate—as Leavis had—'mass-produced existence' as a critical or historical problem (*PL* 24–5). Connolly's ironic distance from mass culture—manifest here in that 'ballyhoo'—masked that he was its 'passive ally' (*PL* 25). For Williams, the problem was not only critical short-sightedness but also structural complicity: the metropolitan minority culture championed by Connolly—falsely and narrowly selected and constituted as 'our literary tradition' in his journal—was, Williams argued, ultimately dependent upon the very structures and commercial processes from which it also recoiled, a point Williams would later find confirmed in Connolly's begging bowl editorials 'appealing for American friends to fund the British cultural enterprise' (*PL* 25).⁴⁸ In the next issue Williams would openly politicise the double-standard charge, challenging Connolly to write about McCarthy and the American Congress Committee on Un-American Activities with the same zeal with which he had criticised Zhdanov and the Soviet State.⁴⁹

Whether or not Connolly even read Williams' critique isn't clear but he would

soon be troubled by *Politics and Letters* no more, a journal that only ever sold a fraction as many copies as his own.⁵⁰ *Politics and Letters* was not only beset by the well-chronicled problems facing all journals in a period of paper rationing and shrinking markets but was ultimately inadequate to the divisive forces it had been created to confront and that had flared up so vividly through the Controversy.⁵¹ The great debate between Leavis and the now ebbed currents of a preferable, culturally sensitive Popular Front Marxism barely materialised. The formerly culturally sensitive CP historian Christopher Hill was invited to contribute and did so in the minor-key Zhdanovist spirit of early Cold War British Communism, defensively, calling for *Politics and Letters* to either move into politics or stay out and ridiculing the journal for creating 'a Literary Critics' Party to defend "traditional values."⁵² Leavis was persuaded to respond to Hill and did so in kind. Leavis's own brief rapprochement with Marxism was now fifteen years in the past and he was reminded in reading Hill's contribution why conversation with orthodox Marxists was impossible. Hill's insistence that measures of cultural value were historically produced was, for Leavis, risible: if that were true, he scoffed, Priestley was the best writer in Britain.⁵³ The journal, whose great debate never advanced beyond ill-tempered skirmish, folded after just four issues. It was caught between many forces, prominent among them an inward-turning Communism—its zeal augmented by the Controversy—and a mystifying Leavisite conception of culture as literary tradition by no means straightforwardly compatible with the journal's own hazily conceived commitment to political and social change.

Coda

The Controversy set off a new phase of cultural repression in the Soviet Union and brought a new focus and tone to the coverage of Soviet cultural matters in the British media.⁵⁴ Here it also had a significant impact on cultural groupings and formations and occupies a complex position in terms of the period frames through which the intellectual and cultural history of mid-century Britain is retrospectively viewed.

It was another, belated, end of 'the thirties' if the period is understood in part as one whose radicalisations, while primarily driven by economic crisis and spreading fascism, were often deeply enmeshed in the alternative promise of the Soviet Union. Though J. B. Priestley had remained immediately unperturbed by the Controversy, he would very soon begin to disentangle himself from the SCR—a 'merely disguised Communist platform'—while his increasingly critical line on the Soviet Union would bring him into collision with the Party and the satellite cultural organisations that he had formerly supported in the Popular Front and wartime periods.⁵⁵

Connolly's response to the Controversy via an emboldened aestheticism, meanwhile, marked a final stage in the renunciation of his 1930s political alignments, a distancing always implicit in the project of *Horizon* away from positions only ever, in his case, ambivalently held. If, as George Orwell had it, Connolly's wartime journal *Unquiet Grave* (1945) was a richly wrought account of that ambiv-

alence—‘a cry of despair from the rentier who feels he has no right to exist’—the Controversy was a site in the fashioning of a new sense of self in which the values embodied in a cultured minority, however privileged, were instead recast as a bulwark against encroaching totalitarianism.⁵⁶ In its reading of the Soviet Union through the prism of Attlee’s Britain, Connolly’s editorial was, in short, an emphatic and early articulation of a soon very familiar rhetoric—anti-Soviet, liberal, individualistic, pro-American—that would reverberate not only through the journal itself but across the well-known texts, institutions and transatlantic alliances of the cultural Cold War, from Stephen Spender’s fervid call for American intellectual and cultural leadership in his *New York Times* essay, ‘We Can Win the Battle for the Mind of Europe’ (1948), through to the CIA funded projects *The God that Failed* (1950) and *Horizon*’s successor, the periodical *Encounter* (1953–90).⁵⁷

More particularly, Connolly’s pugnacious editorial was an early sounding of a Cold War ideological appropriation and reloading of an aestheticism whose political value was precisely that it appeared to have none. Modernist works, celebrated for the very interiority and subjectivism that had been so suspect to the 1930s Left, would become ideologically resonant in this context. They would function not only as aesthetic manifestations of an unfettered, exuberant individualism—in contrast to the collectivism so unconvincingly projected by Socialist Realism’s repertoire of metallic clichés—but also attest to the liberal tolerance of the societies that stimulated, valued and displayed them, regardless of the works’ rebarbative opacity.⁵⁸ As Williams himself would later write, the narrow selection and invention of Modernism in these terms in and through ‘the post-war settlement’ corralled a ‘once liberating’ and diverse Modernism into a ‘bitter impasse’—one that would soon be called the end of history—beyond which it was increasingly difficult to imagine a different future, cultural or otherwise.⁵⁹

More immediately, the Controversy spiked the ardour of committed Communists like those prominent in the pages of *Modern Quarterly*, driving a new insularity and furnishing a new denunciatory Zhdanovite rhetoric jarringly out of key with Popular Front and wartime Communist coalition building, however strategic that had been for hardliners. As such, the Controversy loaded new pressure onto the remaining cultural institutions established in the Popular Front years, a period that always straddled the 1930s and 1940s, anti-fascism and the years of Anglo-Soviet alliance, in ways obscured by thinking in decades, ‘low and dishonest’ or otherwise. The Artists’ International Association, for instance, founded in 1933 and highly visible in the periods of the Popular Front and Anglo-Soviet alliance (1941–45), was now increasingly polarised around Soviet cultural edicts wholly unacceptable to its non-Communist members; it would split to the left in 1951 and fold two years later.⁶⁰ Though Communists had cut ties with the Left Book Club in the wake of the Nazi-Soviet pact, what remained of the Club’s defining Popular Front ethos felt increasingly obsolete in the new context and the organisation was wound up in 1948. That the Party itself now had no further use for Popular Frontism was demonstrated not only by its co-opting and closing of *Our Time*—a journal originally conceived to take forward Popular Front concerns in a period of Anglo-Soviet

alliance—but by its rejections of Jack Lindsay's 1947 proposals for a broad-based Union of Intellectuals along the lines of earlier Popular Front models such as the anti-fascist body, For Intellectual Liberty.⁶¹

Read in this frame, *Politics and Letters* was clearly out of time, an unseasonal and voluntarist expression of a now residual Popular Front structure of feeling to which contemporary history resoundingly would not answer. But another analysis is available, by looking forward rather than back. From this perspective, the journal becomes a historically premature incarnation of an anti-Stalinist and anti-Atlanticist New Left, which would refuse to choose between Moscow and New York and to whom an enlarged conception of culture—in all its ordinary variety, expanded far beyond Leavisite terms—would be key. The *annus mirabilis* of 1956, the year of the CPSU's Twentieth Congress, the Suez Crisis and the Soviet invasion of Hungary, would be necessary to catalyse a social movement along these lines—a movement to which now former Communists, including E. P. Thompson, John Saville, Doris Lessing and Christopher Hill, would be integral. But the journal had already, prematurely, sought to establish a space for a mode of socialist cultural politics that would be materialised in that New Left a decade later. In terms of Williams' trajectory, the link between the intimation and the formation would be the book he retreated to write after the failure of *Politics and Letters*, *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (1958), which was a full decade in the making.⁶² In its emphasis on reconceptualising and probing, through historicisation, the relationship between social formations and their ideas of culture, no less than in its tentative but powerfully suggestive differentiation between 'the spirit of Marxist criticism' and the 'observable aspects of communist policy' congealed in the pages of *Modern Quarterly* and the like, the book would have a galvanising effect on a New Left engaged in shaping a culturally attuned and active Marxism beyond the Communist Party.⁶³

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1 Editorial, *Culture and Life*, 28 June 1946. Text reproduced in *Horizon* (October 1946), 207–8, 207.

2 Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin: Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton, 2000), p. 208; *Horizon* (October 1946), 207.

3 *Horizon* (October 1946), 208.

4 Unsigned, 'Russian Writers Denounced', *Manchester Guardian* 22 August 1946. The *Pravda* coverage was on 21 August 1946.

5 *Pravda*, 21 August 1946; cited in *Horizon* (October 1946), 208.

6 *Ibid.*; cited in *Horizon* (October 1946), 209.

7 *Ibid.*; cited in *Horizon* (October 1946), 209, 210.

8 *Ibid.*; cited in *Horizon* (October 1946), 208–10.

9 This history is given in Laurel E. Fay, *Shostakovich, A Life* (New York, 2000), p. 150 and Brown *Comrade Stalin*, 208–9.

10 Fay, *Shostakovich*, p. 150; Brown, *Comrade Stalin*, 209

11 On 29 August 1946, *Pravda* took issue with children's magazines; theatres were criticised on 2 September 1946; clauses were subsequently added to the Central Committee's Resolution addressing theatre on 26 August 1946 and film on 4 September 1946. Fay, *Shostakovich*, p. 150; Brown, *Comrade Stalin*, p. 209. The assault on music came a little later, beginning in December 1947. See Fay, pp. 154–65.

12 The *Manchester Guardian* covered the story most extensively, with articles on 22 August 1946 ('Russian Writers Denounced'), 26 August 1946 ('The Artist's Freedom'), 27 August 1946 ('The Intelligentsia'); the story resurfaced in September around Zhdanov's address and was covered on 23 September 1946 ('A Period of Rest after the War'), 24 September 1946 ('The Soviet Writer's Task'), 27 September 1946 ('Miscellany') and 30 September 1946 ('The Artist's Freedom'). The *Sunday Times* ran the story on 25 August 1946 ('Communist Drive in Russia').

13 The journal was launched in 1938. Its earlier incarnation had reflected a coalitionist Popular Front ethos and encompassed non-Communists, including Labour Party economist, historian and Left Book Club selector Harold Laski and scientist Joseph Needham.

14 Editorial, *Modern Quarterly*, 1:1 (December 1945), 2; the journal's Statement of Aims, quoted in the editorial board minutes from the meeting of 18 July 1946. Minutes in Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester, CP/Ind/Mont/05/03.

15 The editorials appeared in the *Modern Quarterly*, 2:1 (1946–7), 3–15 and again in issue 2:2 (1947), 99–103.

16 Documents were gathered under the heading the 'The Soviet Literary Controversy', *Modern Quarterly*, 2:1 (1946–7), 74–85.

17 Editorial, *Modern Quarterly* (1946–7), 6, 4; Lewis' italics. References to this article are hereafter cited parenthetically, prefixed *MQ*.

18 *Modern Quarterly*, 2:2 (1947), 101.

19 The CPGB's in-house press issued Zhdanov's key speeches, including those delivered during the Controversy, as *On Literature, Music and Philosophy* (London, 1950). These, according to the book's unsigned preface, were 'among the most important contributions defining and clarifying the new socialist attitude to art and literature' (unnumbered page). For hagiography, see 'Death of Andrei Alexandrovich Zhdanov', *World News and Views* (11 September 1948), 394. The fate of *Our Time* is described by Andrew Croft, 'The Boys Round the Corner: the Story of Fore Publications' in Croft (ed.), *A Weapon in the Struggle: The Cultural History of the Communist Party in Britain* (London, 1998), pp. 142–62.

20 E. P. Thompson, 'Christopher Caudwell', *Socialist Register 1977* (London, 1977), p. 232; Thompson, 'Edgell Rickword', *PN Review*, 6:1 (1979), xxvi.

21 Emily Lygo, 'Promoting Soviet Culture in Britain: The History of the Society for Cultural Relations between the Peoples of the British Commonwealth and the USSR, 1924–1945', *Modern Language Review*, 108:2 (2013), 571–96.

22 Quotation from SCR Writers Group statement in back sleeve of Edgell Rickword (ed.), *Soviet Writers Reply*. For VOKS, see Ludmilla Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920–40* (London, 2007), p. 7.

23 Lygo, 'Promoting', p. 595.

24 Priestley's Russian trip also informed his next pamphlet, *The Secret Dream* (London, 1946). This text formed the basis of three BBC radio broadcast transmitted in late January and early February in 1946. Priestley also wrote dispatches from the Soviet Union for the *Sunday Express*, printed in November and December 1945. For the trip, see Vincent Broome, *J. B. Priestley* (London, 1988), pp. 294–98.

25 The final instalment appeared in the *Anglo-Soviet Journal* (December 1947), 7–52.

26 'Soviet Writers Answer their Questions', *Anglo-Soviet Journal* (December 1947), 33.

- 27 Rickword (ed.), *Soviet Writers Reply*, p. 57, p. 62. References to this text are hereafter cited parenthetically, prefixed *SWR*.
- 28 Arthur Koestler, untitled essay in Richard H. Crossman (ed.), *The God That Failed* (1950; New York, 2001), pp. 15–76, p. 59.
- 29 J. B. Priestley, *Russian Journey* (London, 1946), p. 37
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- 31 Priestley, *The Arts Under Socialism* (London, 1947), p. 5; Connolly, 'Comment', *Horizon* (January 1940), p. 5; Stephen Spender, *The Thirties and After: Poetry Politics, People 1933–1975* (London, 1978) p. 88.
- 32 Connolly, 'Comment', *Horizon* (July 1947), 1.
- 33 Connolly, 'Comment', *Horizon* (October 1946), 207. References will hereafter be cited parenthetically, prefixed *H*.
- 34 Connolly, 'Comment', *Horizon* (July 1947), 1.
- 35 Connolly, 'Comment', *Horizon* (November 1947), 227–29, 227.
- 36 The October 1947 issue would be devoted to American art; in the previous issue, September 1947, Connolly had run a full-page notice entitled 'Our American Begging Bowl', appealing for donations to sustain artists in austerity Britain; the *News Chronicle* took issue with Connolly's gesture, seeing it as conceived to humiliate the Labour government. Unrepentant, Connolly reran the advertisement in December 1947. See Michael Shelden, *Friends of Promise: Cyril Connolly and the World of Horizon* (London, 1989), pp. 185–6.
- 37 The key text here was Stephen Spender's Left Book Club title, *Forward from Liberalism* (London, 1937).
- 38 'For Continuity and Change', Editorial, *Politics & Letters*, 1:1 (1947), 4.
- 39 Francis Mulhern, *Culture/Metaculture* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 65.
- 40 'For Continuity and Change', Editorial, *Politics & Letters*, 1:1 (1947), 3.
- 41 *Ibid.*; Raymond Williams, 'The Soviet Literary Controversy in Retrospect', *Politics & Letters*, 1:1 (1947), 21–31, at 31. Hereafter cited parenthetically, prefixed *PL*.
- 42 Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London, 1981), p. 65. For sharp analysis of the journal's life, see John Higgins, *Raymond Williams: Literature, Marxism and Cultural Materialism* (London, 1999), pp. 9–14.
- 43 As Higgins notes, the title of the first editorial, 'For Continuity in Change', both echoed and challenged that of Leavis' *For Continuity* (1933); Higgins, p. 10. Williams, *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (1958; Harmondsworth, 1961), p. 256.
- 44 Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews*, p. 44, p. 65.
- 45 'For Continuity and Change', Editorial, *Politics & Letters*, 1:1 (1947), 3; Williams described a strategic reticence 'if we had declared our allegiance the alliance between left politics and Leavisite criticism would never have got off the ground'. *Politics and Letters: Interviews*, p. 76.
- 46 See Ben Harker, "'Communism is English': Edgell Rickword, Jack Lindsay and the Cultural Politics of the Popular Front', *Literature and History*, 20:2 (2011), 23–40.
- 47 Williams, 'Notes on Marxism in Britain Since 1945', in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London, 1980), pp. 240–41. Lewis, though not mentioned by name, was the author of the *Modern Quarterly* article on the Festival of Britain that Williams criticises. Quoted but not referenced by Williams, the article was 'The Moral Complexion of Our People: A Further Essay in Marxism and Ethics', *Modern Quarterly*, 6:1 (1950–51), 52–69.
- 48 Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews*, p. 72.
- 49 Williams, 'Lower Fourth at St. Harry's', *Politics and Letters* 2–3 (1947 [double issue]), 105–6.
- 50 As Williams explained in his interviews with *New Left Review*, *Politics and Letters* hoped to achieve a circulation of 1500–2000 but seems to have fallen some way short of that

(p. 68); the circulation of *Horizon* peaked at eight-thousand in April 1940. Figure given in Croft, *A Weapon*, p. 161, note 18.

51 For the contracting periodical market, see Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?*, p. 166.

52 Christopher Hill, 'A Comment', *Politics and Letters*, 1:1 (1947), 4–43, 42.

53 Leavis's main engagement with Marxism was conducted in the form of a debate with A. L. Morton in *Scrutiny*. The key essay is 'Under which king, Bezonian?', *Scrutiny*, 1:3 (1932), 205–14; Leavis, 'Critic and Leviathan (3)', p. 58.

54 See, for instance, Edward Crankshaw, 'Russia: The New Purge', *The Observer*, 24 August 1947; and the articles by Alexander Werth for the *Guardian* including 'The "Reform" of Soviet Music' (30 March 1948), 'Ukranian Literature' (29 December 1947), 'Spring in Moscow' (26 May 1947), 'How Russia Looks at 1948' (8 January 1948).

55 Priestley's withdrawal from the SCR 'several years ago' is described in a letter dated 11 September 1951 in his MI5 file. He had been contacted by an unnamed source asking whether he was aware of the implications of supporting the SCR. His reply was shared with MI5 and added to his file. Spender was contacted at the same time; see James Smith *British Writers and MI5 Surveillance, 1930–1960* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 73. Priestley also wrote a series of articles for the American magazine *Collier's* in which he criticised the Soviet Union. As a result, he was asked to withdraw from the board of the Communist-dominated Unity Theatre, an organisation with which he had been closely involved in the Popular Front and war period. See 'Priestley disowned by Unity', *Daily Worker*, 24 January 1952.

56 Cited in Higgins, *Raymond Williams*, p. 181, note 19.

57 For these formations, see Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?*, Hugh Wilford, *The CIA, The British Left and the Cold War: Calling the Tune* (London, 2003) and *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America* (Cambridge, 2008). The Spender essay, published on 25 April 1948, is discussed by Stonor Saunders on pp. 171–2.

58 These positions are elaborated in the secondary literature on the cultural Cold War, notably Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?*, who details the CIA's unlikely promotion and support, through various intermediaries, of American modern art, particularly Abstract Expressionism (pp. 252–60). See also Wilford, *The CIA* and *The Mighty Wurlitzer*.

59 Raymond Williams, *Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (London, 1989), p. 34, p. 139. For a cogent account of this book, see Peter Brooker, 'Raymond Williams and *The Politics of Modernism*', *Modernist Cultures*, 6:2 (2011), 201–14. Fredric Jameson makes a similar argument in describing how 'the power of the various aesthetic modernisms was, during the Cold War . . . displaced and invested in essentially antipolitical forms of aestheticism'. Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London, 2002), p. 165.

60 Lynda Morris and Robert Radford, *The AIA* (Oxford, 1983), p. 3.

61 Minutes of CP National Cultural Committee, 19 April 1947, LHASC, CP Cent/Cult/1/1. For Popular Front cultural Communism, see Harker, "Communism is English", pp. 23–40.

62 For the book's long making, see Francis Mulhern, 'Culture and Society, Then and Now', *New Left Review*, 55 (2009); accessed online 4 June 2014.

63 Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 275.

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