

Scholars amidst borders: Soviet representation to the League's Committee on Intellectual Cooperation as an attempt of cross-ideological cooperation in the interwar Europe

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Contesting and contested – these two attributes grasp well the very character of interactions between the newly founded Soviet state and many offices and branches of the League of Nations. Over the two interwar decades, these interactions were shaped by a complex interplay of ideological tensions, mutual aversion and still cautious interest – be it for the sake of prestige or out of economic considerations.

While the young Bolshevik state, with its arduous strife for the world Communist revolution and active support of its own Internationals¹⁸ lived and disseminated what can be roughly summarized as an alternative scenario¹⁹ to the Wilsonian moment²⁰, this endeavour was requited with equally strong a sentiment on side of international organizations. The League's fund providers, such as Rockefeller Foundation encountered Soviet scout for recognition, cooperation, and money with whole-hearted rejection of the political regime²¹.

It was often the utilitarian spirit that dictated many of the League's committees and affiliated organizations to steer at least some cooperation with the Bolshevik state nonetheless. In these terms, the League's Health Organization worked with the Soviet Russia²² in realm of Public Health – this endeavour brought relief to hunger and helped to stop epidemics within the Bolshevik state, but also, largely, from spreading westwards into the core states of the League²³. The International Committee on Intellectual Co-operation (ICIC) had to encounter Soviet Russia from many perspectives, too.

Bound to its mission to support scholarly communication, severely aggravated by the ruptures of the World War I, the ICIC sought to restore and expand pre-war networks of academic and then cultural circulation. This restoration demanded interventions for immediate relief to the intellectuals affected by economic calamities all across Europe (apart from Russia, one might speak of the ICIC effort in Austria²⁴). In case of scholars from the collapsed Russian Empire, the challenge was even more demanding. The revolution of 1917 scattered many throughout the world as political refugees – while some remained equally desolate within the Soviet Russia's political turmoil²⁵. ICIC's early engagement with the Russian issue aimed at

¹⁸ Dogliani in Sluga & Clavin, 2017: 38-60

¹⁹ Armstrong, 1993: 158ff

²⁰ Manela 2007 (in Conrad & Sachsenmaier: 121-150) and 2009

²¹ Gross Solomon, 2000

²² Borowy in Gross Solomon, Murard & Zylberman, 2008: 87-113

²³ Weindling, 1995

²⁴ Feichtinger in Becker & Wheatley, 2020: 167-190

²⁵ See continuous address of the Russian issue throughout the minutes of the ICIC early sessions: the initiative to send books to Russian scholars inside of the new Bolshevik state (Minutes of the First Session, held in Geneva, August 1st to 5th, 1922, Geneva, 11 October 1922), appeal for cooperation to provide fleeing Russian intellectuals with necessary visas and scholarly credentials (Minutes of the Second Session, held in Geneva, July 26th to August 2nd, 1923, Geneva, 1 September 1923), Ukrainian and Russian intellectuals as refugees (Minutes of the Third Session, held in Paris, December 5th to 8th, 1923, Geneva 1 January 1924) etc.

immediate relief to intellectuals, custodian to the political change, and their soon re-integration within the largely international peer community.

As the decade progressed to its close, the ICIC like other offices of the Leagues had to adapt its initiatives according to the growing inner-state consolidation of Communists and gradual recognition of this new regime by ever more states. This political switch deepened the pre-existent ambivalence even further: the strife to adjust visible from the Committee's mid-twenties' debate on changes in source submitting the list of essential academic publications for the Russian segment: an emigrant scholarly bibliographer Nikolai Roubakine or the Soviet state-driven agency²⁶. The choice here was of strategic, but also of programmatic nature. To opt Soviet meant to give in to very logical and pragmatic facts: the vast majority of Russian-language scholarship was being produced within the Soviet state. However, politically, the ICIC struggled with the side effects such a decision would have: exclusion of emigrant scholars and factual recognition of collaboration with state-controlled academia of the Communist regime. This qualitatively new degree of state intervention into academia changed the whole interface of the Russian-speaking scholarship in new Soviet borders – and it is precisely this dramatic and persistent change that brought me to the ICIC dealing with the Soviets.

My current project²⁷, which gradually progresses towards its completion, is focused on the 1970-1980s. Yet over and over, it unavoidably references the international, inner-political, and scholarly antecedents in the Interwar. What ripened into an epistemic clash in one field in Brezhnevism springs from the deep and sustainable transformation of the whole interface how Soviet scholarship functioned both practically and epistemically. I, too, work with a largely accepted consensus among researchers, that the Interwar period was, for post-Tsarist scholars, a period of forced and violent detachment from their international networks, rupture of effective scholarly exchanges, a state-induced attack upon the circulation of knowledge and expertise that sealed the isolation of now-Soviet scholars and made them vulnerable to political abuse upon them and through them upon the population.

This abstract sets on to a critical reassessment of this tacitly consensual narrative of detachment and rupture. In this regard, the International Committee on Intellectual Co-operation is a perfect agency from the Interwar that can shed light upon the early phase of the Russian scholarship transforming into Soviet. I modify the argument of rupture as I reconstruct two decades of strategy, with which the ICIC encountered Russian-Soviet transformation, as it sought to secure the uninterrupted circulation of scholars and scholarliness and to support intellectuals now stranded on various political poles. As an example of its later stage strategy of cooperation, I discuss a largely international path of Nikolay Ossinsky²⁸, a Soviet high-state officer and a member to the LON International Committee on Intellectual Co-operation.

Despite the marginal Soviet participation with the League and an air of mutual distrust between the Bolsheviks, the LON offices and the fund-givers at the Rockefeller Foundation, a certain amount of cooperation could be carried out on shoulders of few impactful professionals. For the Soviet players here, their borderline status both in the USSR and the international community protected and endangered them at the same time. The newly-founded state yearned recognition – this allowed the few impactful players like Ossinsky a good share of action space, but put themselves at risk of political repression at home.

With the aid of archival sources from the UNESCO- and the League of Nations archives, I reconstruct the ambivalent and cautious stride of the ICIC with relation to intellectuals and scholarliness caught in the happening Russian to Soviet transformation. I trace the change of narratives from complete over partial rejection of the Communist regime and targeted work with refugee intellectuals – to *volens nolens* cooperation with the Soviets on behalf of scholars in it. For this stage of cooperation, Ossinsky serves as a good example of a scholar amidst borders – between states, political ideologies, and the newly created boundaries within the Soviet academia, too.

the entanglements of roles and agencies: as a scholar, as an international officer, and as a communist ideologist, – which allowed Ossinsky, and other Soviet representatives to the ICIC, too, to function as an ideological border-crosser and inter-epistemic mediator, negotiating deals in Soviet interest, while

²⁶ Minutes of the Eleventh Session, held in Geneva, July 22nd to 26th, 1929, Geneva 14 September 1929).

²⁷ <https://ifg.univie.ac.at/ueber-uns/mitarbeiterinnen/wissenschaftliche-mitarbeiterinnen/anastassiya-schacht/>

²⁸ <http://www.lonsea.de/pub/person/7160> (retrieved on October 27, 2021)

maneuvering the ever narrower political landscape of rising Stalinism, pursuing international intellectual cooperation on behalf of an ever self-isolating state that, finally, after two years of representative membership in the Intellectual Committee, cost Ossinsky his career and life in 1938.

Ossinsky's international career and individual fate in Grand Terror serves as an exemplary inference to draw a larger and complex picture of intellectual cooperation between the international and the Soviet as they were: estranged, yet ever cautiously observing each other players. Their interaction, well traceable through the documents of the ICIC in 1920-1930s, contributes to a better understanding of Interwar international entanglements, which, unresolved, carried their impact on into the tensions of the Cold War – and of the present day.

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