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6. Soviet-Spanish Cultural Relations Prior to the Civil War

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I. The Institutional Framework of Soviet Cultural Policy

That some Spaniards had their attention fixed on the young Soviet state was in no small part the result of Soviet efforts to gain influence on the Iberian Peninsula. It was shown in Chapter One that the ECCI's representatives were instrumental in shaping PCE policies, and in assuring that Spanish Communists adhered closely to Comintern directives. Through its principal agent in Spain, Vittorio Codavilla, the Comintern was able after autumn 1932 to wield significant influence over the PCE's propaganda and cultural policy. But Communist activities in Spain at that time were often subject to violent swings of the political pendulum. While a potential opening existed under the left-leaning Azaña government of 1931-33, the PCE was too small and poorly organized to exploit the opportunity. The conditions were reversed during the subsequent period of 1934-35, when, despite offers of greater assistance from Moscow and a rise in PCE membership, the rightist Madrid government effectively precluded any effective implementation of the Communist agenda.

Only after the Popular Front victory on 16 February 1936 did the PCE and its Comintern taskmasters seek to reinvigorate Communist agit-prop activities in Spain. Less than two weeks after the February elections, the ECCI issued a decree advocating the rapid acceleration of Communist propaganda actions in Spain. This decision, entitled "Resolution on the Development of Publication Activities in Spain," begins with the following directive:

Expand during the course of 1936 the publication in the Spanish language of all varieties and forms of communist and revolutionary-educational literature. Utilize to the greatest degree available the legal avenues to achieve the rapid distribution of our literature in all of Spain, and assure its constant circulation and availability in every corner of the country. ¹

The eight-page resolution described in detail how this literary onslaught would unfold. In addition to decreeing which subservient Spanish publishing house would be used for the bulk of the publications—in the event, Editorial Cenit—the ECCI also ordered the creation of a new cultural journal to allow for the appearance in Spain of shorter articles and speeches. To fund the organization and implementation of this project, the Comintern allocated the not-inconsequential sum of 50,000 pesetas. Included in the resolution was a three-page list of literature and speeches that would constitute the bulk of the literature to be translated and published. This list reveals much about the Comintern's priorities in its foreign operations—at least those in the Spanish Republic. Of the works cited, only ten deal in any way with questions of Spanish history, politics, or society, while the writings of Lenin are represented by seventeen separate titles, and those of Stalin by another nine. The balance of the list includes five works by Comintern officials on international questions, and three titles devoted to recent developments in the USSR.

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Soviet influence in Spain was not limited to the manipulation of the PCE. The broad attraction Soviet society held for many Spaniards was fueled by a variety of Soviet- or Comintern-sponsored organizations that operated in the USSR, Western Europe, and Spain itself. The Soviet agency most effective in disseminating propaganda abroad was the Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, known by its Russian acronym, VOKS. An agency operating within the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs (Narkomindel), VOKS was established by the Soviet regime in 1923 to respond to individual, non-diplomatic

foreign inquiries regarding the Soviet state. From its inception in 1918, the Soviet Union attracted the attention of thousands of people around the world. Some of the curiosity about the communist state transcended political orientation, and centered on social, scientific, or cultural developments within the USSR. ² In the 1920s and early 1930s, a number of major international literary and scientific figures traveled to Moscow to witness firsthand the experiment unfolding within Soviet borders. If today this enthusiasm for the Soviet state among foreigners seems staggeringly misguided or ill informed, it should be recalled that before the mid-1930s, the murderous nature of the Bolshevik regime, and the inherent failure of most of its policies, had yet to be revealed. Spain was just one of many states where a sizeable cult following for the USSR developed in the years after the October Revolution.

As foreign interest in the USSR grew, Moscow received an increasing number of inquiries from abroad. Many foreigners requested permission to travel to the USSR, while others sought information on various aspects of the new state. Still others wished to establish cultural contacts with Soviet institutions or individuals. VOKS was given the responsibility of dealing with these varied requests, serving as a conduit for the exchange of information between the USSR and foreign nationals. ³ In addition to replying to correspondence from abroad, VOKS published two periodicals, *VOKS Bulletin* and *USSR in Construction*, and a newspaper, *Les Nouvelles Soviétiques*. Beginning in the early 1930s, VOKS broadcast informational radio programs throughout Western Europe. VOKS also assisted interested foreigners in presenting exhibitions of Soviet art and cinema, and in organizing trips to the Soviet Union. ⁴

While VOKS was the principal Soviet agency charged with disseminating information to individual foreigners, this was not the organization's sole function. VOKS also used its position as chief official correspondent to gather information from those writing for assistance. The agency aggressively sought allies and informants from among its letter writers, and effectively exploited many of these to improve Moscow's overall understanding of foreign attitudes towards the Soviet regime. In some countries, where Moscow enjoyed no diplomatic or consular relations, VOKS's foreign connections allowed the agency to amass important information concerning local politics, society, and culture. The case of Spain illustrates how VOKS worked collaboratively with existing Communist parties and Comintern front organizations to advance Soviet interests, and thus played a critical role in the Kremlin's broader international strategy.

One of VOKS's principal goals was to assist foreigners in establishing chapters of the Friends of the Soviet Union (in Spain, the Amigos de la Unión Soviética, or AUS), a well-organized Communist front organization dating from 1927. The first chapters were formed with the Kremlin's assistance on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution. ⁵

At the inaugural conference, 947 delegates from forty-three countries participated. ⁶ Returning to their respective countries, FSU chapter members organized at the local level and disseminated Soviet propaganda prepared and translated in Moscow. According to the central governing body of the FSU, the movement was intended to become a "non-party mass organization"; ⁷ that is, it was meant to carry out the propaganda work of a Communist party, but without the political baggage that might prevent a Communist party's operation in unfriendly lands. While the FSU remained active through the 1930s, the march of fascism across Europe silenced most national chapters. Like many of the Comintern's front organizations, its activities all but ceased with the coming of World War II. ⁸

Though Spain was a latecomer to the Friends fraternity, the Iberian country quickly became one of the organization's most successful outposts. The nature of the FSU required that the impetus for the foundation of individual chapters emerge from foreign nationals not

associated with a Communist party, but of course the central Party organization in Moscow did much to encourage expansion. Thus in 1932, Moscow targeted Spain as an ideal location for future FSU chapters. ⁹ The directive bore fruit within the year. In the first three months after its 1933 founding, the Spanish AUS claimed seven thousand members and fourteen district chapters. ¹⁰ The initial membership roster included Spaniards from a variety of left-leaning political parties, including the Left Republicans, the PSOE, the PCE, and the anarchist CNT. Among those signing the founding AUS manifesto were the future prime minister Juan Negrín, the future diplomat Luis Jiménez de Asúa, the medical professors Gregorio Marañón and Juan Planelles, and the writers Ramon Valle-Inclán, Federico García Lorca, Ramón Sender, and Antonio Machado. ¹¹ By 1936, on the eve of the civil war, AUS chapters had been established in more than thirty Spanish cities and towns. ¹² According to Comintern documents, by September 1938 total membership in the Republic had grown to 110,000, with 50,000 in Madrid alone. ¹³



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Apart from the Spanish AUS, the Comintern, and the PCE, Soviet interests were represented in Spain by a number of smaller scale front organizations or publications. The early 1930s saw some activities undertaken in Spain by the front organization International Workers' Aid—most notably the evacuation to the USSR of political exiles following the Asturias uprising of October 1934. ¹⁴ Another active group was the short-lived Asociación de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios (AEAR), which appeared in Madrid in spring 1933. Though formed without Comintern assistance, AEAR appealed in June for recognition by the front organization International Red Aid (MOPR). ¹⁵ In short order, AEAR had become the Spanish section of International Workers' Aid, and thus—after the PCE and AUS—the Comintern's third established group working within Spanish borders. AEAR's avowed purpose was to "gather together all revolutionary literati and authors who are prepared to serve as mentors of the Marxist workers' movement." ¹⁶ Among AEAR's better-known members were Rafael Alberti, Wenceslao Roces, and Joaquín Arderius. ¹⁷ Between June 1933 and April 1934, the organization produced a bi-monthly journal, *Octubre*, many of whose articles celebrated alleged Soviet advances in arts and letters, denounced trends in the capitalist West, and continually highlighted the miseries of the Spanish worker and peasant under the present government.



Other journals of similar ideological orientation, and whose limited runs never exceeded that of *Octubre*, included *Nueva Cultura* and *Nuestro Cinema*. *Nueva Cultura*, a Valencian publication produced by the graphic artist Josep Renau and his associate Pla y Beltrán, professed a revolutionary-artistic agenda identical to that espoused by AEAR. *Nuestro Cinema* was a theoretical review of recent cinema from a Bolshevik perspective. At approximately the same time, there emerged in Madrid a revolutionary theater group calling itself Teatro Proletario Revolucionario. Its politics were unmistakably those of the current Soviet regime. ¹⁸



In sum, the Soviet presence in Spain—whether through the growing PCE, the numerous AUS chapters, or other organizations of similar ideological bent—was not insignificant. These Communist incursions into Spain filled in Moscow's decade-long blind spot in southwestern Europe, and firmly placed the Iberian Peninsula on the Kremlin's map of the world. The propaganda activities of these groups, in particular the AUS, had an immediate and marked impact on the intellectual and cultural scene in Spain. Spaniards with no previous knowledge of communism or Soviet ideology became exposed to the many alleged advances of the USSR. The result was a sudden and discernable popular fascination with the Soviet Union, as exemplified by José Rodríguez's proposed bicycle journey. ¹⁹

II. Varieties of Individual Philo-Sovietism in Spain, 1928-36

In Spain, as elsewhere, interest in the Soviet Union was manifested in a variety of ways. Many Spaniards of different political and social orientations traveled to Russia and returned to write of their experiences in newspapers, periodicals, or book-length travel narratives. Several hundred of these were published in the years between 1920 and 1936. For most Spaniards, of course, a visit to Russia was an impossibility, due to both the high cost of travel and the severe Soviet restrictions on granting visas. Those who were not able to visit Russia could learn about life in the USSR directly from VOKS, or from a local Spanish-Soviet friendship organization.

To satisfy their curiosity, both AUS members and Spanish citizens at large wrote frequent letters to VOKS, enlisting the agency's assistance in their various inquiries. Contact between VOKS and individual Spaniards began in 1927, but was initially impeded by the triad of Spanish forces hostile to the Soviet government: the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, the Bourbon monarchy, and the Catholic Church. Primo fled the country in 1930 and died the same year; Alfonso XIII left Spain in April 1931, as a tide of Republicanism swept the country; the Church, meanwhile, soon found its powers circumscribed by the new constitution of the first left-wing Republican government. Thus the declaration of the Second Republic rendered temporarily powerless Spain's conservative foes of the USSR. As a result, by May 1931, Spaniards were exchanging scores of letters each month with VOKS. This correspondence provides a clear window onto emerging relations between individual Spaniards and the Soviet state institution. Both the content of this correspondence, as well as the socio-political background of the writers, is worth examining in some detail. [20](#)

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For some Spaniards, the main achievement of the USSR was the alleged resolution of what they viewed as some of the key social problems of the era: sexual inequality, pre- and post-natal care, child labor, criminal legislation, eradication of prostitution, and treatment of venereal disease. One ambitious seventeen-year-old Madrileña, María Hildegardt, exchanged numerous letters with VOKS during the two years following the declaration of the Republic. Explaining her fascination with the Soviet Union, she wrote that, "...among not only socialists but also workers, there is the just opinion that everything good will come from Russia." [21](#) Her particular interest was new Soviet



legislation concerning the rights of women and children. She expressed wonder that Moscow had twenty-eight birth control clinics in 1932, and requested documentation regarding abortion practices, pro-natalism, and feminism in general. Using materials supplied by VOKS, Hildegardt published eight short works on Soviet social problems and presented lectures at various intellectual centers in Madrid and Asturias. She was also one of the first Spaniards to organize a center for cultural relations with the Soviet Union. [22](#)



Hildegardt's example is striking only due to her youth and the breadth of her interests. Simultaneously, others were looking to Russia for answers to Spain's social problems.



In the Canary Islands, a group of doctors by July of 1933 had organized a Spanish-Soviet friendship society whose main purpose was the exchange of information regarding medicine, surgery, hospitals, and diseases. [23](#) On the mainland, a Seville doctor took a keen interest in Soviet gynecology and the fight against venereal diseases. [24](#) Similarly, Antonio Hervás, the director of a Madrid organization for the protection of the blind, wrote VOKS asking for information on what communism and the Soviet Union were doing for the blind. VOKS forwarded Hervás' request to the Pan-Russian Society for the Blind, which then supplied the Spaniard with numerous publications detailing their work. [25](#) The result was a laudatory article on Soviet policies toward the blind in the Madrid journal *Los Ciegos* ("The

Blind"). ²⁶ Hervás went on to propose a three-month trip through Russia, during which he would research Soviet advances in the education of the blind and carry them back to Spain. Like Hervás, the Barcelona ophthalmologist Gómez-Márquez hoped to visit Moscow's ophthalmology institute and begin a series of exchanges between specialists in both countries. ²⁷ Even the editor of Madrid's *Monthly Review of the Mouth and Teeth* inquired to VOKS about the possibility of traveling to Russia to assess the state of Soviet teaching in the field of dental surgery. ²⁸

While Spaniards sought to adopt Soviet approaches to social issues, medicine, and the sciences, these themes were primarily discussed only within specialized circles. The fascination with Soviet arts and letters, on the other hand, was the most palpable form of philo-Sovietism at work in Spain during this period. Soviet cinema was especially popular, and films from Russia rapidly gained repute once restrictions on their importation were eased after 1931. Through the first third of the century, Spain had the highest number of cinema seats per capita of any European country. ²⁹ Yet the country had no film industry of its own until the 1930s (according to one reliable scholar, to be precise, not until 1934). ³⁰ The result was a sizable group of eager viewers hungry for new films, nearly all of which had to come from abroad. It is therefore not surprising that the VOKS file contains many letters from Spaniards attempting to bring Soviet cinema to Spain.

The key figure in importing the first Soviet films to Spanish screens was Julio Alvarez del Vayo, a socialist and anti-monarchist who would later serve as the Republic's foreign minister. In the 1920s, Del Vayo traveled frequently to the Soviet Union, and wrote several book-length accounts of his experiences. ³¹ In autumn 1927, Del Vayo met in Moscow with representatives of VOKS and Sovkino (the state film agency) and inquired about the possibility of purchasing Soviet films for the Spanish market. ³² Although at the time anti-Soviet censorship in Spain was so thorough that even some Hollywood films containing Russian themes were being banned, ³³ Del Vayo believed a shift in the political winds was inevitable. VOKS recognized the promise del Vayo held for breaking into the Spanish market. In an October 1928 letter to Sovkino, VOKS recommended that prints of Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* and Vsevolod Pudovkin's *Mother* be forwarded to the Soviet embassy in Paris, where Del Vayo could effect their transfer to Spain. "We would hope that you seize this opportunity," VOKS wrote, "since up to this moment Spain has witnessed no screenings of our films. Given our difficulty in gaining access to Spain, engaging Del Vayo in this exchange could be extremely useful." ³⁴

In Spain, Del Vayo cultivated associations with theater owners and others connected with cinematic enterprises. By the spring of 1929, the owners of two Madrid cinemas, the Goya and Buen Retiro, agreed to screen Soviet feature films. Censorship codes had not been rescinded, but they proved quite easy to get around. On a small scale, and without advance publicity, Del Vayo could assure his collaborators that the risks were minimal, while the potential for profit might be great. Nonetheless, even those willing to assist Del Vayo in screening the films in Madrid cautioned him to choose only non-political pictures. ³⁵ By early May of the same year, Del Vayo had received the first set of Soviet films, including Vsevolod Pudovkin's *Storm over Asia* (1928), Ivan Pravov's *Women of Riazan* (1927) and Iakov Protazanov's *The Lash of the Tsar* (1928). ³⁶ By the end of 1929, these Soviet films finally reached Madrid screens. ³⁷ The response was generally favorable, ³⁸ and Del Vayo informed VOKS that he had received invitations to show the same films in other large Spanish cities. ³⁹ Primo's regime was now rapidly losing its authority, and censorship codes were more relaxed. To be sure, distribution of Soviet films remained limited and, until Primo's fall, the screening of some works, including *Battleship Potemkin*, was strictly forbidden. ⁴⁰

With the coming of the Second Spanish Republic, restrictions on Soviet cinema disappeared, and screenings were soon common in large theaters or, more often, in private cinema clubs. In April 1931, Eisenstein's *The General Line* was screened in both Madrid and Barcelona ⁴¹; by August, the picture reached Alicante, and was shown as part of an event organized by the local chapter of the Amigos de Rusia, or "Friends of Russia" a group distinct from the AUS. ⁴² In June alone, three Soviet features were playing in Valencia. ⁴³ In October of the same year, Antonio Bonet organized a festival of Soviet cinema, screening *Potemkin*, *The Blue Express*, and a documentary. ⁴⁴



Screening films imported from Russia was a complicated affair, made difficult because of both censorship and language. Perhaps more than actually watching Soviet cinema, Spaniards read and wrote about it. From 1931 to 1934, numerous periodicals appeared which were either partially or entirely devoted to Soviet film. ⁴⁵ VOKS frequently received inquiries from freelance writers or newspaper editors who were interested in running features on Soviet cinema. The editor of Gijón's daily, *El Noreste*, used VOKS materials on cinema to write articles and give lectures, ⁴⁶ as did a writer for Valencia's *Publi Cíema*. ⁴⁷ Similarly, a Galician, Antonio de Quevedo, had VOKS forward him Russian-language articles on cinema, which he translated for insertion in local publications. ⁴⁸

Along with Soviet cinema came music and drama. A Mallorcan musician managed to commission new compositions from the Union of Soviet Composers for performance by his unusual chamber ensemble of piano, trumpet, trombone, alto and tenor saxophone, jazz banjo, and violin. ⁴⁹ A Barcelona magazine editor requested information from VOKS on new Soviet composers, promising to try to get works performed wherever he could. ⁵⁰ Francisco Gil, the artistic director of the Chamber Orchestra of Valencia, began programming contemporary Russian music in the 1932-33 season. ⁵¹ Under his baton, the Second Symphony of Nikolai Maiakovskii became a surprise hit, and Gil's orchestra performed it on several stages to enthusiastic reviews. ⁵² The warm reception of the Russian works soon had Gil requesting more new compositions from Moscow. By the end of the season, VOKS had sent over sixty more scores to maestro Gil, who programmed many for the coming year and forwarded some to colleagues in other orchestras. ⁵³

As was the case with orchestral music, individuals involved in the theater looked toward the Soviet example. In a letter to Moscow requesting new Soviet plays, one VOKS correspondent wrote hyperbolically that Spain was a blank slate in terms of drama: "We have no theaters, no actors, no impresarios, no plays and no public." ⁵⁴ A Barcelona writer expressed nearly the same obviously exaggerated sentiments, entreating VOKS to send new Soviet plays:

There is a crisis of theater in Spain, and there are currently no good works available, be they comedies or dramas. I ask that you send us works of your modern writers so that I can have a Russian friend translate them and we will have them performed in our theater. ⁵⁵

Another thespian lamented that in mid-1931 only two contemporary Soviet plays had been translated into Spanish. ⁵⁶ But within a few years, more Soviet works had found their way into Spanish theaters. One Madrid theater director worked with VOKS and a local translator and by 1934 was staging Soviet plays. ⁵⁷ The same year, another Madrid drama enthusiast published the first Spanish study of new Russian theater, *The Theater in the Soviet Union*. ⁵⁸

The most ambitious and overt early embrace of Soviet culture was the May 1933 art exposition in Madrid's *Círculo de Bellas Artes*. Organized as the first public demonstration of the Madrid AUS, the show included poster art, etchings, phonograph recordings of revolutionary hymns, photographs, and illustrated children's books. ⁵⁹ Given the lack of official diplomatic and commercial ties at this time, the exposition's unveiling in Madrid's most prestigious exhibition space was a considerable achievement for both VOKS and its Spanish correspondents. Response to the exposition was mixed: the rightist press dismissed the show as pure Communist propaganda, while moderate and leftist newspapers were more receptive and positive. ⁶⁰ Certainly this was the most important indicator up to this point of the increasing interest in Soviet arts and letters in Spain.

Apart from those Spaniards organizing large-scale manifestations of philo-Sovietism, such as cinema screenings, concerts, and the art exposition of 1933, many more sought a more personal and individual connection with the Soviet Union. The most common Spanish request to VOKS during the Second Republic was for pen pals. Spanish science students, in particular, often sought Russian pen pals, as the belief was widespread that the USSR was in the scientific vanguard. One medical student, Conchita del Río, attempted in early 1931 to organize through VOKS a letter exchange between members of her class and students in Russia pursuing similar studies. ⁶¹ Not only Soviet medicine, but also the new pedagogical practices in Russia led Spaniards to seek correspondents. Future teachers such as Carmen González of Madrid wrote to VOKS requesting a Russian pen pal with whom she could share ideas about teaching philosophies. ⁶² Indeed, throughout the period of the Second Republic, pedagogy students from towns as diverse as Murcia, ⁶³ Toledo, ⁶⁴ and Badajoz ⁶⁵ wrote VOKS for the same reason.

Some of VOKS's Spanish correspondents ignored the pressing social and scholarly issues of the day and instead pursued a distinct agenda: romance. A 1934 letter from a young man studying science expressed an interest in meeting a like-minded revolutionary Soviet female. ⁶⁶ In the same year, a metallurgical worker in Leon wrote in asking for a young female pen pal, ⁶⁷ as did another in Madrid. ⁶⁸ The following year, José Ribas of Tarragona did the same. ⁶⁹ Spanish women also sought out Soviet men. Pilar González, a twenty-year-old Madrid teacher, asked VOKS for the address of a Soviet man involved in her vocation. ⁷⁰ Anita Orís, of the small village of Aguilas, wanted not only a male pen pal for herself but a female one for a Spanish man she knew. ⁷¹ Considerately, José Santo of Madrid put in a request for a woman but mentioned that he would also settle for a man. ⁷² Another correspondent from Barcelona wrote that he needed one of each. ⁷³ The Catalan Jaime Prat was less flexible. In 1935, he asked VOKS to set him up with a Soviet pen pal who was, "female, intellectual, young and beautiful." ⁷⁴ A Madrid man was slightly more amenable, specifying only "female, non-student and someone from a village." ⁷⁵ On occasion the Iberian masculine spirit was clearly at odds with the no-nonsense Soviet functionaries at VOKS, who clearly grew weary of Spanish men seeing the Moscow organization as an international matchmaking agency. When a group of young Asturian men requested pictures and addresses of the winners of recent Soviet beauty pageants, ⁷⁶ VOKS drew the line and admonished them this way:



We do not hold beauty pageants like the capitalist states, nor do we have time to occupy ourselves with such foolishness. These things are not included in our Five-Year Plan. For us, the beauty of a woman is not measured by her face, but rather by what she possesses inside, by her strength, education and devotion to collective work. ⁷⁷

Some Spaniards who wrote to VOKS sought not Russian correspondents, but rather individual edification. A surprisingly large number, for example, undertook to study the Russian language, and many of these went on to translate Soviet works into Spanish. After having been banned throughout most of the twenties, Russian language classes were again offered in Madrid's Ateneo, just one week after the Republic's declaration. ⁷⁸ The following month, in May 1931, instruction also began at the newly formed Hispano-Slavic Committee, also in Madrid. ⁷⁹

Few Spaniards had access to formal Russian classes, and many wrote VOKS for assistance in finding dictionaries and other study guides. Joseph Fornas of Barcelona complained that no Russian dictionaries were available in Spain in 1931, whether in Spanish, English, French, German, or Italian. He was in fact forced to begin his Russian study with two books for toddlers that he received from VOKS. ⁸⁰ Another Russophile, this time from Santander, wrote that he possessed a small collection of contemporary Soviet works, but had no way to read them without a dictionary. ⁸¹ VOKS responded to this letter with apologies, and promised that the Soviet state press would publish a Russian-Spanish volume the following year. ⁸² Meanwhile, other Spaniards made frustrated progress. Antonio Martinez lamented having to learn Russian with a 1905 grammar full of errors. ⁸³ A polyglot librarian wrote that, in 1934, no modern method existed for learning Russian through Spanish. In light of the tremendous appeal and potential of Russian in Spain, he suggested that VOKS commission a new grammar as soon as possible. Exasperated, the writer added, "I am acquainted with one comrade who is in the process of learning Russian through German, which he does not even know." ⁸⁴ As late as 1935, VOKS was still receiving letters from Spaniards who could not find the proper materials to pursue their study of Russian. ⁸⁵ Moscow's inability to adequately cope with the language issue in its Iberian operations would continue during the civil war, though with far more detrimental consequences. ⁸⁶

Whether linguistically prepared or not, a few Spaniards planned and carried out trips to Soviet Russia during the Second Republic, and it was often through VOKS that these trips were organized. As early as 1927, one Barcelona travel agency was specializing in travel to Russia, and they received brochures, photos, hotel listings, and itineraries from VOKS. ⁸⁷ In 1931, one of the first Spanish groups to organize a Soviet friendship society planned to send a group of workers and intellectuals to Russia. ⁸⁸ At this time, Madrid's General Association of Teachers also organized a similar delegation, ⁸⁹ and a Soria man wrote VOKS with plans of sending a group of workers from his region. ⁹⁰

Many of the Spaniards VOKS aided in getting to Russia returned to write up published travelogues, either in monographs, periodicals, or newspapers. Spanish travel literature on the Soviet Union is perhaps beyond the scope of this study, but it is worth mentioning as an area requiring further research. ⁹¹ In terms of the cultural and political evolution of the Second Republic, this large body of literature bears witness to changing attitudes within Spain towards the Soviet Union. While Russia had been viewed throughout the twenties as a revolutionary threat, most Spanish tourists who returned in the thirties came to see the Communist state as a progressive social and cultural laboratory, though their accounts did not lack for criticism either. ⁹²



A number of VOKS's Spanish correspondents went beyond simple tourism, and enlisted the agency's assistance in emigrating to the USSR. The *ABC* correspondent Javier Bueno told VOKS in early 1931 that he wanted to emigrate to the Soviet Union with his wife and three sons, in order to "live out [his] ideals as reality" and "save [his] sons from exploitative

capitalism, and allow them to live under a just government." ⁹³

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Though often lacking such lofty rhetoric, many others hoped to go to Russia to live and work, such as the electrician Antonio Muñoz, ⁹⁴ and the construction worker Federico Villacampa. ⁹⁵ As seen above, doctors were among the groups most drawn to the Soviet Union. One Barcelona professor of medicine wished to work in the Soviet Union and "collaborate in the project." ⁹⁶ Another doctor inquired to VOKS about work in 1935, declaring that he had more enthusiasm for the Soviet Union than ever. ⁹⁷

This representative sample of the extant letters to VOKS from individuals living in Spain reveals that more than a few Spaniards looked to Soviet Russia as a model of the ideal new civilization. For the Spanish correspondents, the USSR could be many things: a template for successful revolution, fascism's only worthy foe, a land of sexual freedom and equality, the new frontier of medicine and science, or the vanguard of the arts. For some Spaniards caught up in the key political and social struggles of the age—those over modernization, democracy, and equality—the Soviet Union seemed to offer answers. But this individual enthusiasm and curiosity is but one aspect of the complex interplay between the Soviet state and the citizens of Spain. Let us next turn our attention to VOKS's response to and manipulation of its Spanish correspondents.

III. VOKS: Cultural Exchange, Agit-prop, or Information Gathering?

On the surface, it would appear that VOKS responded to individual inquiries and generally assisted Spaniards in learning more about Soviet culture. In truth, these correspondents, however enthusiastic, gained little insight into the Soviet Union, certainly no more than they would find in Soviet propaganda sheets available in dozens of languages throughout the world. Indeed, despite the wide-ranging interests expressed in the letters to VOKS, most correspondents received in return nothing more than a VOKS publication: *VOKS Bulletin*, *USSR in Construction*, or *Les Nouvelles Soviétiques*.

In fact, the reverse was true: the VOKS archive demonstrates that the Soviets were keenly interested in extracting as much information as possible from their new correspondents. If the Spaniards were sent boilerplate propaganda, VOKS requested and often received information that was of great use to the Soviets. Through their letters, Spanish correspondents with VOKS supplied Moscow with valuable details about Spain's political parties, the slant of publications, and the names and activities of those individuals who were sympathizers or foes of the Soviet experiment. This information, processed through VOKS, was translated, copied, and forwarded to other Soviet institutions, including the Foreign Ministry (Narkomindel), Internal Affairs (NKVD), and the Executive Committees of the Comintern and the Communist Party, as well as the Commissariats of Trade and Education.

How exactly did VOKS go about exploiting its correspondents for the valuable information that it supplied to the Soviet ministries? Generally, VOKS always supplied a correspondent with requested material before broaching the subject of the agency's own information needs. In July of 1929, for example, the editor of *Acción Cooperatista*, Lluís Ardiaca Alés, sent a letter to VOKS requesting examples of Soviet poster art devoted to cooperative societies. ⁹⁸ Within weeks, the Moscow office dispatched twenty-nine posters for the Barcelona exhibition. Shortly thereafter, VOKS wrote to Ardiaca Alés again: "We would very much appreciate receiving back from you any reactions at all to these posters on cooperatives, and if possible, a catalogue of your poster exhibit." ⁹⁹

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Those Spanish correspondents who had already won the trust of Moscow were regularly

called upon to report on the press reactions to pro-Soviet activities. When VOKS learned in March 1932 that a Spaniard who had recently toured the Soviet Union was giving a series of lectures on his travels, the agency contacted a loyal correspondent, Enrique Díaz, and asked that he send them any clippings regarding the talks. ¹⁰⁰ VOKS was often concerned more with monitoring its own propaganda's success than engaging in genuine cultural exchange. Shortly after the agency oversaw the 1933 Soviet graphic art show in Madrid, VOKS reprimanded the exhibit's organizers for not promptly forwarding to Moscow all newspaper clippings and reviews:

We regret very much not yet possessing all press articles and other materials (announcements, posters and photos) associated with the exposition. These materials are very necessary for our consideration and organization of other similar expositions in your city.... We request that you promptly supply us with all the materials you can procure regarding the graphic art exhibit. ¹⁰¹

Similarly, VOKS recruited its correspondents to assist the agency in closely monitoring any local book or pamphlet publication on topics related to the Soviet Union. The authorities in Moscow placed a high priority on detecting as early as possible any anti-Soviet attitudes appearing in print. In January 1931, following up on an initial letter of introduction, VOKS solicited from the editor of Editorial Ibero-Americano a list of all books published in Spain in the previous five years which concerned the USSR, as well as all works of traditional Russian literature translated into Spanish. ¹⁰² By the end of the same year, VOKS's intense curiosity about the reputation of the Soviet Union as reflected through Spanish publishing led it to add this inquiry practically as boilerplate in all letters to frequent correspondents. ¹⁰³ Such requests were not limited to individual Spaniards. By the end of 1932, VOKS had provided the Hemeroteca Municipal de Madrid—the principal periodical library in the city—with free subscriptions to the main Soviet propaganda broadsheets. ¹⁰⁴ In February 1933, VOKS boldly requested that the Hemeroteca send Moscow any publications appearing in Spain that were on or about the USSR. ¹⁰⁵

While tracking recent publications and news of the Soviet Union in the Spanish press, VOKS also encouraged its correspondents to publish feature articles on the USSR in local Spanish newspapers and journals. In few cases were these stories independently written by philo-Soviet Spaniards; rather, VOKS encouraged its collaborators to translate and submit to the press copy prepared in Moscow. As early as December 1930, Spanish correspondents with VOKS were inserting verbatim Soviet articles into the local press. ¹⁰⁶ Even to devoted Iberian supporters of the Soviet cause, VOKS's approach to propagandizing in Spain at times became tiresome. In early May 1931, after receiving a wide array of Soviet articles and the usual accompanying request to publish them locally, one VOKS correspondent was forced to inform Moscow that everything they had sent had already appeared in the Spanish press many times over. ¹⁰⁷

As was indicated above, in the early 1930s very little Soviet literature or propaganda had been translated into Spanish. The paucity of Soviet citizens trained to translate into Spanish forced VOKS to turn to its correspondents for assistance. Yet just as VOKS needed philo-Soviet Spaniards to aid in translating and disseminating propaganda, the agency was loath to relinquish any control over its informational services. In early 1931, VOKS attempted to oversee translation work with the editor of Editorial Ibero-Americano. The agency explicitly stated that because "the Russian language has undergone considerable modifications" since the Revolution, older émigré writers who have no experience living in the contemporary USSR "can be considered poor translators." ¹⁰⁸ Similarly, when VOKS learned from a correspondent that an old Russian émigré was translating literature and had begun teaching Russian in the Madrid Ateneo,



Moscow reacted with undisguised disapproval:

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We are sorry that [the students] have a professor who belongs to the old regime, for he does not know the various changes which our language has experienced in the introduction of words and expressions created for the new way of life and new ideology which characterizes contemporary Soviet society. [109](#)

Moreover, on those occasions when Spaniards took the initiative in translating Soviet works, VOKS often demanded details about their background and training. When a Barcelona drama enthusiast asked VOKS to send copies of recent Soviet plays for his friend to translate, the agency responded not with the requested dramas—VOKS wrote that it had forwarded the inquiry to the Central Theatre of Russia—but with detailed questions regarding the translator. VOKS asked for the names of any Russian translators acquainted with the correspondent, as well as any other information about him. The justification for these queries VOKS put simply but vaguely: "There are real problems translating modern Russian works." [110](#)

Just as the agency could categorically reject any collaboration with older Russian émigrés not indoctrinated in Soviet customs, VOKS was also quick to dissuade Spanish translators from tackling pre-Revolutionary literature. In January 1931, VOKS received notice from a Bilbao translator who requested publications for review. The Spaniard ended his letter by adding that he "leans towards the classics." [111](#) VOKS replied promptly, but agreed to send only Soviet literature, and no Russian classics:

It seems to us that the translation of contemporary works would be of greater interest to the readers of your country. [These works] would give them a literary vision of a new ideology, of a new life and the enormous project of fundamental reconstruction that is building a new society. [112](#)

In this manner, VOKS effectively prevented the shipment of any antiquated or non-revolutionary Russian literature to its correspondents and translators in Spain.

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The single-mindedness of VOKS's propaganda policy should by now be sufficiently clear. It is nonetheless worth noting that, at the same time the agency rejected Spanish requests for copies of Chekhov and Tolstoy, VOKS was targeting the Iberian toddler set with contemporary propaganda. In March 1931, VOKS informed a correspondent that Moscow was preparing a special work translated for Spanish children: *El Relato del Gran Plano por la mentalidad infantil* ("The Five-Year Plan for a Child's Mentality"). [113](#)

In terms of familiarizing itself with Spanish personalities and politics, VOKS made its deepest inroads when dealing with the dozens of AUS chapters that sprang up around the Republic between 1930 and 1933. Indeed, VOKS took the lead in founding and expanding many branches. In June 1931, VOKS requested a frequent Spanish correspondent to "look into the possibility of organizing a center in Madrid which will concern itself with creating and developing cultural relations between the two countries." VOKS added that, while the organization might begin as a small nucleus, it could grow "little by little into a society of greater vitality." [114](#)

In some cases, VOKS was contacted by groups of Spanish supporters of the USSR who had formed friendship societies without first consulting Moscow. This practice invariably led to a flurry of hastily dispatched inquiries from VOKS as the agency attempted to assess the potential benefits and risks of a new group. For example, in November 1932 the secretary of the newly formed Amigos de Rusia de Alicante wrote to VOKS requesting propaganda

materials from the Soviet Union. ¹¹⁵ VOKS supplied the group with the usual array of pamphlets and posters, but also insisted on being apprised of all details regarding the group, including who the members were, their professions and social classes, their plans of activities for 1933, and what they had accomplished in 1932. ¹¹⁶ VOKS's next letter to the group suggested that they replace the "Rusia" in their name with "URSS." ¹¹⁷ Satisfied with the group's responses to that point, VOKS's next letter was an unabashed attempt to gain insight into the Spanish press; the agency requested detailed descriptions of the political and social tendencies of the leading Spanish newspapers and journals. ¹¹⁸

There can be no doubt that Spaniards who worked with VOKS in establishing friendship societies were among the agency's most trusted allies in Spain. One of VOKS's most enthusiastic collaborators was Pedro de Répide, a frequent traveler to the Soviet Union and the author of several works on Soviet life. Répide began working with VOKS during the twilight of the Primo dictatorship, and by the time of the Second Republic Répide was for all intents and purposes a VOKS agent on the Iberian Peninsula. In the dozens of letters exchanged between Moscow and Répide, VOKS continually coaxed more and more information out of the Spaniard, often requesting specific details:

We have various things to go over with you. We have proposals from the publisher Aguilar y Teivos. What do you know about them? We are also interested in learning more about this news that a Unión de Escritores Proletarios has been formed. Can you send details about them? Who founded it? What are their goals, orientation, plan of work? Who is in charge? Who are the notable writers in the group? By what criterion may they be considered proletarian? We'd also appreciate any information on the Asociación de Libre Pensadores. ¹¹⁹

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The VOKS file on Spain cannot alone explain Soviet-Spanish cultural relations during the early and mid-1930s, but these letters certainly underscore an obvious paradox. Though in all cases it was Spanish men and women who initiated contact with Moscow authorities, it was VOKS and not individual Spaniards that profited from the exchange. For all of their attempts to learn more about Soviet life, Spanish correspondents were never given more than boilerplate propaganda sheets. The majority of their requests and inquiries were ignored; indeed, none of VOKS's Spanish correspondents appear to have ever been put into direct contact with the Soviet organizations or individuals they sought to correspond with.

The Soviets, meanwhile, extracted vast amounts of information from these same correspondents regarding the political and social landscape in Spain. The activities of VOKS, taken together with the parallel information-gathering and alliance-building carried out in Spain by the PCE, the Comintern, and other front organizations, had by 1936 made Spain a much more familiar place to the Soviet regime than scholars have previously estimated. When the civil war erupted in July of that year, the Soviets already had in place a wide array of informants, collaborators, and propaganda disseminators, and they had detailed lists of potential foes. But here we arrive at a surprising paradox. It would seem likely that, with the emergence by autumn 1936 of the Soviet Union as the Republic's only reliable military ally, Moscow's advance agit-prop preparations in Spain would have been quickly rewarded. In the event, however, the Kremlin's cultural offensive in Loyalist Spain, like its military participation, was marked more by failure than success.

Notes:

Note 1: "Resolution on the Development of Publication Activities in Spain." The decision was the eighth item on the agenda of the ECCI session of 28 Feb. 1936, Protocol No. 30.

Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History; hereafter, RGASPI) (formerly Rossiiskii Tsentri Khraneniia i Izucheniia Dokumentov Noveishei Istorii, or RTsKhIDNI), f. 495, op. 18, del. 1078, ll. 317-324. [Back.](#)

Note 2: Few scholarly studies have adequately addressed the issue of the myth of the USSR in the West, certainly none in English. The topic is well-covered in *Il Mito dell'URSS: La cultura occidentale e l'Unione Sovietica* (Milan: Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, 1990), though it appeared too early to exploit the post-Soviet archival declassifications. Also, see Fred Kupferman's excellent study of interwar French travel writing on the USSR, *Au pays de Soviets* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979). [Back.](#)

Note 3: Given its important role in informing foreigners about the USSR, one suspects that Soviet officials created the VOKS acronym with an eye for the Latin vox. For most foreigners, VOKS was the voice of the Soviet Union. [Back.](#)

Note 4: Western historians have carried out surprisingly little research on the activities of VOKS. Among the few scholarly overviews of the organization are Frederick C. Barghoorn, *The Soviet Cultural Offensive: The Role of Cultural Diplomacy in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), and Louis Nemtzer, "The Soviet Friendship Societies," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 13:2 (Summer 1949): 265-284. The VOKS archive at what was then the Central State Archive of the October Revolution (today GARF) was not available to either of these authors, given their early dates of publication. [Back.](#)

Note 5: Little Western scholarship exists on the Friends, though accessible archival collections in the former Party Archive, Rossiiskii Tsentri Khraneniia i Izucheniia Dokumentov Noveishei Istorii (RGASPI), now permit a broad reassessment of the organization's activities. For pre-1991 analysis, see Louis Nemtzer, "Soviet Friendship Societies," 266-267, and E. H. Carr, *Foundations of a Planned Economy, 1926-1929* (New York: Macmillan, 1976), 307-10. [Back.](#)

Note 6: More than half of those in attendance were German, French, or British. See "World Congress of Friends of the USSR," *VOKS Weekly News Bulletin* 2 (Dec. 1927): 10-12; and E. H. Carr, *Foundations*, 307-308. [Back.](#)

Note 7: "Resolution on the activities of the Friends of the Soviet Union during 1932 and the tasks for 1933." RGASPI, f. 495, op. 99, del. 34, ll. 299-308. [Back.](#)

Note 8: E. H. Carr is mistaken in his assessment of the FSU in the 1930s, claiming that no FSU international conferences were held after 1930. In addition, Carr asserts that, "the only country where the national society of Friends of the Soviet Union retained some spontaneous vitality was Britain." See Carr, *Twilight of the Comintern* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 385. The FSU maintained chapters in many countries, right up to the end of the decade. Indeed, numerous separate documents in RGASPI's Comintern archive are devoted to the FSU, with reports on worldwide activities and international conferences continuing into 1937 and 1938. See f. 495, op. 99, and op. 18, del. 1259. [Back.](#)

Note 9: "Resolution on the activities of the AUS during 1932 and the tasks for 1933." RGASPI, f. 495, op. 99, del. 34, l. 307. [Back.](#)

Note 10: "Report on the work of the Friends of the Soviet Union for the First Half of 1933." RGASPI, f. 495, op. 99, del. 35, l. 102. [Back.](#)

Note 11: The demographics of AUS membership are taken up in Antonio San Román Sevillano, "Los amigos de la Unión Soviética: Propaganda política en España: 1933-1938," Ph.D. diss. (Universidad de Salamanca, 1993), 35-38. [Back.](#)

Note 12: Ibid., 136. [Back.](#)

Note 13: "General Activities of the World Committee [of the Friends of the Soviet Union]." Report presented to the ECCI, 20 Nov. 1938. RGASPI, f. 495, op. 18, del. 1259, l. 81. [Back.](#)

Note 14: Most of the evacuees were assisted by International Workers' Aid. [Back.](#)

Note 15: Antonio Elorza and Marta Bizcarrondo, *Queridos Camaradas: La Internacional Comunista y España, 1919-1939* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1999), 197. [Back.](#)

Note 16: Enrique Matorrás, *El comunismo en España* (Madrid: Ediciones Fax, 1935), 152. [Back.](#)

Note 17: San Román Sevillano, "Los amigos de la Unión Soviética," 29. [Back.](#)

Note 18: Matorrás, *El comunismo en España*, 152-153. [Back.](#)

Note 19: The general topic of Spanish-Soviet cultural ties has only recently begun to receive adequate attention from scholars. See Juan Avilés Farré, *La fe que vino de Rusia* (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 1999), 283-300; and Antonio Elorza and Marta Bizcarrondo, *Queridos Camaradas*. Even these recent entries make limited use of the newly accessible Moscow archives. Avilés Farré relies entirely on Western sources; Elorza and Bizcarrondo have incorporated references from the former Comintern archive only. [Back.](#)

Note 20: The VOKS archive, located today in the immense archival suburb GARF, is organized into separate opisi (or "inventories") according to country. Within each country, *delas* ("files") are organized by individual letter writers or organizations, and then chronologically. The archive holds files for most countries in the world from 1923 to the late-1930s. The activities of VOKS appear to have ceased with Soviet entry into World War II. Although I am not able to offer an authoritative analysis of which countries had the greatest number of letters sent to or from VOKS, a preliminary survey revealed that the number of Spanish files is comparable to those of other large Western states. The files of France and the United States are larger than Spain's, Germany's somewhat smaller—no doubt due in part to Hitler's victory a decade into the VOKS operation. Smaller countries, such as the Benelux, Eastern European, and Latin republics are significantly smaller. Spain's VOKS files may thus be seen as proportionate to its size and population. [Back.](#)

Note 21: María Hildegardt to the Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS) 12 Jan. 1932. State Archive of the Russian Federation (hereafter, GARF), f. 5283, op. 7, del. 707, l. 18. [Back.](#)

Note 22: Hildegardt to VOKS, 19 May 1932. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, ll. 7-8. [Back.](#)

Note 23: Group of Canary Island doctors to VOKS, 7 Jul. 1933. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 715, l. 3. [Back.](#)

Note 24: Dr. José Martínez y Martínez to VOKS, 15 Jul. 1934. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 805, l. 35. [Back.](#)

Note 25: Correspondence between VOKS and Antonio Hervás, July 1932-July 1933. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 767, ll. 165-170. [Back.](#)

Note 26: *Los Ciegos* (Madrid), January 1933, 3. [Back.](#)

Note 27: Dr. Gómez-Márquez to VOKS, 14 Oct. 1935. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 973, ll. 39-40. [Back.](#)

Note 28: B. Landete to VOKS, 21 May 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 670, l. 8. [Back.](#)

Note 29: Raymond Carr, *Spain, 1808-1975* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1982), 767. [Back.](#)

Note 30: See John Hopewell, *Out of the Past: Spanish Cinema after Franco* (London: British Film Institute, 1986), 15-17. [Back.](#)

Note 31: See Julio Alvarez del Vayo, *La nueva Rusia* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpa, 1926); *La senda roja* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpa, 1928); *Rusia, doce años después* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpa, 1929); and *The Last Optimist* (New York: Viking, 1950), 138-152. [Back.](#)

Note 32: On Del Vayo's admiration for Eisenstein, and his friendship with the director during his two years as the Spanish ambassador to Mexico, see *The Last Optimist*, 146-147 and 234-235. [Back.](#)

Note 33: Del Vayo to the Soviet Commercial Attaché in Berlin, 8 Apr. 1928. GARF, f. 5283, op. 3, del. 667, l. 103. According to del Vayo, banned films included Josef von Sternberg's *The Last Order*, which starred Emil Jannings and Cecil B De Mille's *The Volga Boatman* (1926). See also *Sovetskoe kino* 8-9 (1927): 30. [Back.](#)

Note 34: VOKS to Sovkino, 2 Oct. 1928. GARF, f. 5283, op. 3, del. 666, l. 83. [Back.](#)

Note 35: Enrique de Orbe to del Vayo, undated. GARF, f. 5283, op. 3, del. 667, l. 102. [Back.](#)

Note 36: Soviet commercial attaché in Berlin to Commissariat for Foreign Trade (NKVT), 7 May 1929. GARF, f. 5283, op. 3, del. 667, l. 109. The original titles of the films are *Potomok Chingis Khana*, *Baby Ryazanskiye*, *Plenniki Morii*, and *Belyj Oryol*. [Back.](#)

Note 37: *Kinogazieta*, 10 Feb. 1930, 1. [Back.](#)

Note 38: See *El Sol*, 1 Jan. 1931. [Back.](#)

Note 39: GARF, f. 5283, op. 2, del. 96, l. 5. [Back.](#)

Note 40: Sergei M. Eisenstein, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia*, 6 vols. (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1964), I: 312. [Back.](#)

Note 41: Correspondence between VOKS and the Catalan Federation of Regional Cooperatives, GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 669, ll. 88-91. [Back.](#)

Note 42: El Luchador (Alicante), 3 Aug. 1933. Moscow was rather displeased with the unaffiliated Amigos de Rusia, an organization whose founding preceded that of the official Spanish AUS by two years. Indeed, VOKS attempted to persuade the group to change its name to *The Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR*, or in any case to jettison the (in VOKS's view) anachronistic term *Rusia*. See VOKS to Amigos de Rusia, 25 Jan. 1933. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 727, l. 11. [Back.](#)

Note 43: *Kinogazeta*, 22 June 1931, 4. [Back.](#)

Note 44: Antonio Bonet to VOKS, 26 Aug. 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 669, l. 159. [Back.](#)

Note 45: For example, *Publi Cinema*, *Popular Film*, *Nuestro Cinema*, *Cinema nuevo*, *Octubre: Artistas revolucionarias*, and *Rusia de Hoy*. [Back.](#)

Note 46: Ovidio Gondi to VOKS, 3 Mar. 1932. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del., 812, l 35. [Back.](#)

Note 47: Vincent Brú to VOKS, 5 Jan. 1936. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 993, l. 24. [Back.](#)

Note 48: Antonio Garcia de Quevedo to VOKS, 25 Jul. 1932. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 708, l. 6. [Back.](#)

Note 49: Bartolome Ballester Roig to VOKS, 13 Jun. 1935. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 972, ll. 26-27. [Back.](#)

Note 50: Unsigned letter to VOKS, 21 Jul. 1934. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 772, l. 1. [Back.](#)

Note 51: Correspondence between VOKS and Francisco Gil, 1932-33. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 762, ll. 19-34. [Back.](#)

Note 52: See *La Voix de Valencia*, 2 Jan. 1933. [Back.](#)

Note 53: Francisco Gil to VOKS, 24 May 1933. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 762, l. 1. [Back.](#)

Note 54: M. Vilalta to VOKS, 21 Jul. 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 669, ll. 152-156. [Back.](#)

Note 55: Vichel Vilalta Faura to VOKS, 23 Mar. 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 670, l. 95. It need hardly be noted that the Spanish theater of the early 1930s can in no objective way be dismissed this conclusively. In truth, many scholars of Spanish *belles lettres* agree that, after a comparatively unremarkable nineteenth century, Spanish arts experienced a silver age in the three decades after 1898. Indeed, if one considers the plays of Garcia Lorca alone, the Spanish theater appears far richer in 1931 than the scene in the USSR. [Back.](#)

Note 56: Antonio Bonet to VOKS, 26 Aug. 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 670, l. 159. [Back.](#)

Note 57: Isaac Pacheco to VOKS, 31 Jul. 1934. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 805, l. 8. [Back.](#)

Note 58: Santiago Masferrer to VOKS, 6 Aug. 1934. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, l. 20. [Back.](#)

Note 59: Correspondence between Madrid AUS and VOKS, May-Dec. 1933. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 783, ll. 1-12; "Los Amigos de la Unión Soviética," in *Rusia de Hoy*, 1st epoch, no. 2, July 1933. [Back.](#)

Note 60: For negative reviews, see *El Sol*, 24 May 1933 and *El Debate*, 11 May 1933. Enthusiastic reviews included *Luz*, 13 May 1933 and *La Tierra*, 11 May 1933, the latter of which called the show "one of the most important exhibitions to appear in Madrid in years." [Back.](#)

Note 61: Conchita Silva del Rio, C. R. Gavilanes and Camilo Rodriguez to VOKS, Feb.-Mar. 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 670, ll. 127-135. [Back.](#)

Note 62: Carmen Gonzalez to VOKS, no date. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 805, l. 33. [Back.](#)

Note 63: Letter to VOKS, no name, 12 Feb. 1935. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 972, l. 20. [Back.](#)

Note 64: Letter to VOKS, no name, 14 Oct. 1935. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 972, l. 14. [Back.](#)

Note 65: Letter to VOKS, no name, 13 Dec. 1932. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 763, l. 3. [Back.](#)

Note 66: Letter to VOKS, no name or date. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 805, l. 69. [Back.](#)

Note 67: M. Melgar to VOKS, 28 Oct. 1934. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 767, l. 155. [Back.](#)

Note 68: Rafael Martin to VOKS, 13 Sept. 1934. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 805, l. 2. [Back.](#)

Note 69: José Martinez Ribas to VOKS, 28 Oct. 1935. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 972, ll. 4-5. [Back.](#)

Note 70: Pilar Hoyos Gonzalez to VOKS, 26 Nov. 1935. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 973, ll. 35-36. [Back.](#)

Note 71: Anita Orís to VOKS, no date. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 814, ll. 9-19. [Back.](#)

Note 72: José Santo Candiera to VOKS, 10 Jul. 1933. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 812, l. 12. [Back.](#)

Note 73: Letter to VOKS, no name, 30 Jul. 1935. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 973, ll. 28-29. [Back.](#)

Note 74: Jaime Prat to VOKS, Jul. 1935. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 973, l. 5. [Back.](#)

Note 75: Letter to VOKS, no name, 8 Jul. 1935. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, l. 27. [Back.](#)

Note 76: Ramón Espina to VOKS, 9 Oct. 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 669, l. 1. [Back.](#)

Note 77: VOKS to Ramón Espina, 29 Oct. 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 669, l. 6. The letter merits partial reproduction in the original: "Tengo que contestar a sus compañeros que me piden retratos de bellezas rusas, que no tenemos concursos de belleza como en los países capitalistas, ni tenemos el tiempo de ocuparnos de estas boberias. Estas cosas no estan incluidas en nuestro plan quinquenal. La belleza de la mujer para nosotros no es la del rastro lindo, sino la del ser interior, de la fuerza, de la cultura, de la conciencia del trabajo colectivo. A nuestras muchachas -- fuertes, sanas, alegres, entusiastas por la educion y el trabajo comun, no les viene la idea de concursos, ni de bellezas y se reeen de estas invenciones borguesas para desviar la atencion de la mujer de la vida politica y social y empedirle la participacion en ella." [Back.](#)

Note 78: Rafael Martínez Alonso to VOKS, 22 Apr. 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 669, l. 32. [Back.](#)

Note 79: Ramón Menendez Pidál to VOKS, 20 May 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 669, l. 19. [Back.](#)

Note 80: Joseph Fornas to VOKS, 9 Oct. 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, l. 90. [Back.](#)

Note 81: W.W. Coupe to VOKS, 22 Mar. 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 669, l. 97. [Back.](#)

Note 82: VOKS to Joseph Fornas, 21 Oct. 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 669, l. 89. [Back.](#)

Note 83: Antonio Martínez Jurado to VOKS, 2 May 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 669, l. 56. [Back.](#)

Note 84: Letter to VOKS, no name, 23 Jun.1934. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 805, l. 65. [Back.](#)

Note 85: Juan Vicens to VOKS, 4 Apr. 1935. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 828, l. 7. Vicens wrote, "There are many people who want to learn Russian, or who are trying, and they cannot get dictionaries or grammars. The situation is now desperate and has been for some time." [Back.](#)

Note 86: A subject treated at length in Chapters Thirteen and Sixteen below. [Back.](#)

Note 87: Guerrera Viajes (Barcelona) to VOKS, 29 Nov. 1927. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 666, l. 51. [Back.](#)

Note 88: Daniel Montserrat (Barcelona Amigos de Rusia) to VOKS, 27 Apr. 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 669, l. 68. [Back.](#)

Note 89: The General Teachers Association of Madrid to VOKS, 3 May 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, l. 5. [Back.](#)

Note 90: Florencio Liso to VOKS, 11 Jul. 1932. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 763, ll. 19-20. [Back.](#)

Note 91: Spanish travel literature on the Soviet Union includes several hundred individual books and articles from this period alone, the best known of which are Julio Alvarez del Vayo, *Rusia, doce años después* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpa, 1929); Rodolfo Llopis, *Cómo se forja un pueblo* (Madrid: Editorial España, 1929); Luis Marichalar y Monreal, *Vizconde de Eza, Rusia, ¿un peligro o una lección?* (Madrid: Imprenta y Encuadración, M. Minuesa de los Ríos, 1931); Julián Zugazagoitia, *Rusia al día* (Madrid: Editorial España, 1932); Luis Amado Blanco, *Ocho días en Leningrado* (Madrid: Plutarco, 1932); Luis Hoyos Gascón, *El meridiano de Moscú o la Rusia que yo ví* (Madrid, [s.n.] 1933); Ramón Sender, *Madrid-Moscú, notas de un viaje, 1933-34* (Madrid, 1934); Eloy Montero, *Lo que ví en Rusia* (Madrid: Luz y Vida, 1935); and Pablo Balsalls, *La enseñanza en la URSS* (Girona: Dalmau Carles, 1936). [Back.](#)

Note 92: For an engaging introduction to the topic, which compares positive and negative reactions by foreigners to the Soviet state, see Luis Lavaur, "El viaje a la Rusia Soviética en los años treinta," in *Ayeres: Cuadernos de Historia* 4:8 (June 1994): 35-45. Related to this, at least tangentially, is Sasha David Pack's current research on post-civil-war tourism in Spain, which bears a number of striking similarities to the development of tourism in 1930s Soviet Russia. See "Spain in the Age of Mass Tourism, Modernization, and Dictatorship, 1946-1975," Ph.D. diss. (University of Wisconsin, forthcoming). [Back.](#)

Note 93: "Pues por vivir la realidad de mi ideal. Por salvar a mis hijos del capitalismo explotador y dejarles en un regimen de justicia." Javier Bueno to VOKS, 12 Jan. 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 669, l. 131. [Back.](#)

Note 94: Antonio Muñoz to VOKS, 6 Nov. 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 767, l. 151. [Back.](#)

Note 95: Federico Villacampa to VOKS, 8 Mar. 1933. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 767, l. 105. [Back.](#)

Note 96: Letter to VOKS, author unknown, 15 Aug. 1932. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del., 814, l. 65. [Back.](#)

Note 97: Luis Cajal Murillo to VOKS, 20 Dec. 1935. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 993, l. 5. [Back.](#)

Note 98: Lluís Ardiaca Alés to VOKS, 11 Jul. 1929. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 667, l. 31. [Back.](#)

Note 99: VOKS to Lluís Ardiaca Alés, 17 Aug. 1929. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 667, l. 33. [Back.](#)

Note 100: VOKS to Enrique Diaz, 2 Mar. 1932. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 767, l. 31. By this date Diaz had exchanged ten letters with VOKS. [Back.](#)

Note 101: VOKS to Madrid AUS, 23 Jun. 1933. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del., 783, l. 11. The agency's patronizing tone merits reproducing the original French: "Nous étions très heureux d'avoir appris que l'expo d'art graphique de l'URSS préparée par nos soins avait eu un si grand succès à Madrid. Mais nous regrettons beaucoup de ne pas avoir toutes les coupures de la presse et d'autres matériaux (annonces, affiches et photos), se rapportant à cette expo. D'autant plus, que ces matériaux nous sont très nécessaires pour les prendre en consideration, en organisant d'autres nouvelles expos analogues dans votre ville ainsi que pour pouvoir les communiquer aux auteurs des oeuvres exposées." [Back.](#)

Note 102: VOKS to Rafael Martinez Alonso, 29 Jan. 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 669, l. 53. It should be noted that during the civil war, Moscow became so desperate for qualified translators that even White Russian emigrants were allowed to serve alongside Soviet advisors. [Back.](#)

Note 103: In a letter dated 17 May 1931, VOKS requests that Félix Díez Mateo send them "a list of the different publishers in Spain interested in translating Russian books ... and a list of the books regarding the USSR translated into Spanish in the last few years." GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 669, l. 103. [Back.](#)

Note 104: GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 827, ll. 9-16. [Back.](#)

Note 105: VOKS to Hemeroteca Municipal de Madrid, 7 Feb. 1933. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, l. 8. [Back.](#)

Note 106: In a 13 December 1930 letter to VOKS from the Madrid journal *Revista España Forestal*, the editor thanked the agency for two articles on Russian forestry, and assured Moscow he would publish them as written in the next issue. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 668, l. 3. [Back.](#)

Note 107: Felix Díez Mateo to VOKS, 3 May 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 669, l. 104. [Back.](#)

Note 108: This letter, dated 9 Feb. 1931, bears reproducing in the original: "Cuanto a la cuestión de las traducciones, nos agradaría conocer los nombres de las personas que conociendo el ruso pudieran emprender una serie de traducciones. También deseáramos tener unos ejemplares de las obras traducidas para poder juzgar de la calidad, literaria de las versiones. Es que la lingua rusa ha sufrido modificaciones considerables, habiéndose introducido palabras nuevas para expresar la ideología nueva creada por la Revolución. Una persona que no conoce la vida actual en la URSS le será muy difícil de encontrar en español las expresiones adecuadas para traducir la terminología nueva. Por lo tanto se pueden considerar malos traductores los emigrados que ya hace años han perdido el contacto con su país y no podían seguir el desarrollo filológico de su idioma natal." GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 669, l. 52. [Back.](#)

Note 109: VOKS to Rafael Martinez Alonso, 21 Jun. 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, l. 31. The original appeared as follows: "Sentimos que tienen un profesor que pertenece más bien al antiguo régimen, pues no conocerá las varias modificaciones que sufrió nuestro idioma con la introducción de palabras y expresiones creadas por las nuevas formas de la vida y la nueva ideología que caracteriza la actualidad soviética." [Back.](#)

Note 110: VOKS to Michel Vilalta Faura, 16 Apr. 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 670, l. 94. [Back.](#)

Note 111: Felix Díez Mateo to VOKS, 20 Jan. 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 669, l. 107. [Back.](#)

Note 112: VOKS to Felix Díez Mateo, 1 Feb. 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, l. 106. Again, the original: "Con sumo agrado nos hemos enterado de sus trabajos de traducción que

contribuyen a la difusion entre el público español de los conocimientos mas amplios acerca de la literatura ruso tanto clasica como actual. Segun nuestro parecer, la traduccion de las obras contemporaneos seria de mayor interes por los lectores de su pais, dandole una vision literaria de una nueva ideologia, de una nueva vida y de la enorme obra de reconstruccion fundamental que lleva un nuevo pueblo." [Back.](#)

Note 113: VOKS to Javier Bueno, 28 Mar. 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, l. 137. [Back.](#)

Note 114: VOKS to Rafael Martinez Alonso, 21 Jun. 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, l 31. [Back.](#)

Note 115: Amigos de Rusia de Alicante to VOKS, 23 Nov. 1932. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 727, l. 18. [Back.](#)

Note 116: VOKS to Amigos de Rusia de Alicante, 2 Feb. 1933. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 727, l. 15. [Back.](#)

Note 117: VOKS to Amigos de Rusia de Alicante, 25 Jan. 1933. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 727, l 11. [Back.](#)

Note 118: "Finally, we ask that you provide us information regarding the political and social tendencies of the following newspapers and journals, which we have received and with which you are certainly better acquainted than us: *Luz, Heraldo de Madrid, La Tierra, La Libertad, El Sol, Mundo, Grafico, Estampa, Nuevo Mundo, Crónica, Actividad, Estudios, La Rambla, La Nau, Justicia Social, Servicio Social* (Chile)." ("Pour finir, nous vous prions de bien vouloir nous renseigner sur les tendances politiques et sociales des journaux et revue suivantes que nous recevons et que vous êtes a même de connaitre, certainement mieux que nous: *Luz, Heraldo de Madrid, La Tierra, La Libertad, El Sol, Mundo, Grafico, Estampa, Nuevo Mundo, Cronica, Actividad, Estudios, La Rambla, Le Nau, Justicia Social, Servicio Social* (Chile).") VOKS to Amigos de Rusia de Alicante, 23 Feb. 1933. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 727, l. 12. [Back.](#)

Note 119: VOKS to Pedro de Répide, 21 Aug. 1931. GARF, f. 5283, op. 7, del. 669, l. 60. [Back.](#)

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