

**Ilona Kiss**

**“The theatre is game, the cinema is life”:**

**The differentiation in the cultural policy on visual arts according to the goals of the propaganda in the period of stagnation in USSR (1964-1984)**

### **Final Report**

*Visegrad Scholarship at the Open Society Archives, Category No. 3 (June – July 2012)*

### **Research Objectives**

The main objectives of my research project awarded by Visegrad Scholarship at OSA were (1) to identify the changes in the key propagandistic ideas of the “apparat” of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and reveal their links with the introduced tools and methods in the field of cinema and theatre; (2) to outline the narrative history of propagandistic ideas and instruments, and the internal differentiation of the target audiences; and (3) to compare the different pragmatic and artistic possibilities of the theatre and cinema on the basis of certain case studies.

During my two-month research at OSA, the above objectives were strictly followed, but the chronological scope of the study was broadened. The preliminary overview of the official Soviet documents and the film and theatre criticism kept in the files of Soviet Red Archives (Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute) showed that the starting point of the examination of the materials had to be moved from 1964 to 1956, or if the materials were available, to 1953–54. The first results clearly demonstrated, that the Khrushchev-era had to be incorporated into the research. The change of the time frame led to some productive modifications in the basic questions of the project: how were the waves of the Soviet ideology and politics reflected in theatre and the cinema: from the liberalization and to stagnation or even the hidden forms of restalinization in the key decade of the Cold War (1957–1967)?

### **Involved Documents**

According to the Research Plan, I examined the archival materials on Soviet culture in general (orders and declarations), on the Press and media (especially the boxes with materials on editorial boards and the readers’ letters to the editors) and on censorship, as well as on Soviet theatre and cinema (especially criticism, associations, conferences). The files on dance also proved to be very valuable (HU OSA 300-80-1 Fonds 355-358, 360, 469, 665, 803, 1011-1013, 1016, 1127). The

quantity of the most important digitalized materials: 360 pages on cinema, 560 pages on theatre, 35 pages on dance. They will be uploaded to the Parallel Archives ([www.osaarchivum.org](http://www.osaarchivum.org)).

The Film library was also widely used. The most important films that were seen: *Burial Ceremony of Stalin / Похороны Сталина* [FL 361]. Soviet Union, 1953, Russian, 72 min, propaganda film, DVD-ROM (Propaganda film); *Ilyich's Gate (aka I Am Twenty) / Застава Ильича aka Мне двадцать лет* [FL 831] Khutsiyev, Marlen, Soviet Union, 1964, Russian, 190 min, fiction film, VHS (Fiction film); *The Bonus / Премия* [FL 812]. Mikaelyan, Sergei, Soviet Union, 1974, Russian, 84 min, fiction film, VHS (Mass-oriented film – fiction with propaganda); *Welcome, Or No Trespassing! (aka No Holiday for Inochkin) / Добро пожаловать, или посторонним вход воспрещен* [FL 838]. Klimov, Elem, Soviet Union, 1964, Russian, 71 min, fiction film, VHS (Satirical film)

### Case Studies

Three case studies were outlined during the research period: (1) on Gennady Tovstogonov's „Idiot” (a play based on Dostoevsky's novel) staged in 1957 and 1967; (2) on Marlen Khutsiev's movie „Ilich's Gate / I Am Twenty”: the original version was made in 1961, but censored after the personal interventions of Khrushchev; Both works are regarded as „cult” pieces of Soviet theatre and cinema of 1957-1967. Both were produced in two redactions: in both cases the differences mark a radical shift in political history and in the „Soviet / Russian” identification paradigm, as well as the changes of ideological-political code and author's obligations concerning its creation / implementation. (3) Leonid Leonov's drama „The Snowstorm” was championed in 1940 only to be banned by Stalin a few months later, while the second redaction's evolution (1961-1967) portrays the relations of three Soviet epochs (Stalin-, Khrushchev- and Brezhnev-era).

31 December, 1957, Leningrad: the first presentation of “The Idiot” staged by Gennady Tovstogonov on the bases of Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel. It is celebrated as a symbolic action of the period of Khrushchev era with good reason: the first (and almost the final) case when the artistic intentions and political expectations completely coincide. This is the first case in the post-Stalin period when free speech could be addressed openly before an audience – even if it was spoken by an “idiot” (a blessed fool / ‘yurodivyy’), a symbolic cultural figure of the Russian history.

The symbolic significance of this action is multiplied by that fact, that this free speech was to be heard on the stage of the theatre named after Maxim Gorky. The Russian-Soviet writer-ideologist personally declared the anti-Soviet character of such Russian heroes as the “idiot” (Prince Mishkin), the incarnation of the “spiritual beauty” proclaimed in an antagonistic contradiction with the new Soviet ideal of man. The staging of “The Idiot” at **that** moment and in **that** place has challenged the whole previous Soviet ideology. Firstly, free speech was rehabilitated (at least on the stage), secondly, the Russian culture was reintegrated into the Soviet (at least one of its most controversial pieces), thirdly, the Soviet image of the “ideal man” was questioned (at least

an experiment was conducted to replace it with the Russian ideal of complexity and reflexivity). In other words: Tovstonogov's Idiot wasn't a Russian hero: his Mishkin was a Soviet prince, even if Smogtunovsky (the first significant role of the famous Soviet artist) created a new model of representation of Soviet mentality. One of the key hypotheses to be justified throughout the research is: this new model provided a quite flexible latitude to reintroduce the Russian content into the Soviet frame while this frame could not be questioned and challenged at all.

### **Key consequences**

The cultural history of the post-Stalin period cannot be reduced only to the history of how the creative intelligentsia tried to be in accordance with the censorship of the given period. They were obliged not only apply the written rules of Central Committee and other party (or state) authorities but they had to be involved in the creation of censorship rules themselves. The hypothesis of the further research is the following: the most relevant cultural actors had to play a very proactive role in the identification of the rules and borders of censorship.

The political history of the culture and cultural policy in the early Soviet period is well researched in Russian, European and American Slavonic studies. Since the Glasnost' and Perestroika period, a significant number of publications have appeared with the archival documents and other materials on the new phenomenon of "Soviet Culture". The struggle for dominancy in cultural policy and parallel cultural tendencies during the 1920s is widely presented, the process of the centralization and institutionalization of the direct state control is quite deeply explored. There is a huge number of descriptive and analytical works on the history of individual fields of art (literature, cinema, theatre, music, mass-celebrations etc.) but in most of the cases they scrutinize the given field in isolation from the other.

The mechanisms and institutions of the censorship are presented relatively broadly, but a lot less publications are devoted to the creation and changes of the internal rules of cultural control. The role and relationship of different actors of the controlling structures are also shrouded in mystery. The unexplainable substance of the processes how and why the hard version of Soviet culture was constructed, how and why the Russian culture was neglected, banned, denied and why and when was sovietized, led to the emerging of mystified narratives and / or fragmented legends.

### **Planned publications and further research**

**The preliminary results** of the research, presented at OSA (10 July 2012), focused on the period of 1957-1967, on the jubilee years of the October Revolution: how the propaganda goals and forms were changed. The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary was dedicated not only to celebrate and reaffirm

the victory and universal priority of the Soviet system, but also to create some new forms and channels for delivering the party ideology and cultural policy. The theatre should have played a key role in this process, but as the official critics declared, it failed to perform this duty. The reasons of failures and the contradictions of the new propaganda goals will be summarized in the framework of a case study on theatre performance and criticism of 1967 prepared on the basis of OSA/RFA (Red Archives) materials. **A comprehensive analytical study** on the topic of the research is planned in Hungarian and in Russian.

**A new project** was prepared on the basis of the findings of this research, and submitted as a proposal to the Marie Curie Actions (Call: FP7-PEOPLE-2012-IOF). The proposed project aims to explore the Russification of the Soviet mentality and the Sovietization of Russian heritage on the case studies of Gennady Tovstogonov's „Idiot”, Marlen Khutsiev's movie „Ilich's Gate / I Am Twenty”, and Leonid Leonov's drama „The Snowstorm”. The whole transition process will be summarized in the Mikhail Bulgakov case study: how the first (censored) publication of “The Master and Margarita” (1966-1967) was incorporated into the „Soviet heritage” retrospectively, even though the novel (then almost three decades old!) shows how the Soviet system casts out the individualistic values and ethical categories of Russian (and European) culture, by replacing them with simplified Soviet political terms. The project is designed to contribute to the academic reframing of the controversial process of Vergangenheitsbewältigung in Russia which never reached a global scope and was put to halt in 2011. However, its stakes are high: the approach to being Russian and coping with the Soviet past is the key to the re-integration of Russia into the European culture. It is not merely an internal issue, but also a fundamental question of the global intellectual discourse.

*Ilona Kiss is a researcher and translator of Russian literature and history of ideas. She received a PhD in Literary Science for her doctoral thesis on Bulgakov's works. Previously she was the editor-in-chief of the former Hungarian Samizdat journal “Beszélő” (1996-2003) and the director of the Hungarian Cultural Centre in Russia, as well as the cultural counselor of Hungary in Russia (2003-2008). As a program manager, she also worked for the OSI/COLPI.*