From Deputy USSR People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, I.M. Maisky’s note to the Chief Information Bureau, A.S. Shcherbakov, dated 27 November 1943

Copy.

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TO COMRADE SHCHERBAKOV[[1]](#footnote-1), HEAD OF THE SOVIET INFORMATION BUREAU[[2]](#footnote-2)

Dear Alexander Sergeevich,

I consider it necessary to make the following observations regarding the use of the contract between “Mezhdunarodnaya Kniga”[[3]](#footnote-3) (“International Book”) and the British publishing company Hutchinson:

1. Concluding this agreement, Hutchinson, being a big publisher, was guided, first of all, of course, by interest in profit. He saw and felt that in present conditions everything related with Russia and the USSR is very "fashionable" and decided to sell this bill of goods. The fact that Hutchinson agreed to sign this agreement for a period of 5 years, testifies to his belief that the “fashion” for everything “Russian” and “Soviet” will last for long. However, in our conversation concerning the contract Hutchinson tried to indulge in big-time politics and assured that he is guided by interest in victory and the British-Soviet rapprochement after the war, but this was no more than an inevitable window dressing with which the British businessmen now try to flavor their pursuit of good profits.

2. According to the above-mentioned, Hutchinson publishes and will publish our books, being guided first and foremost by business conditions in the British market. If we exclude the fact that under the agreement he is obliged to publish upon our request, all the rest will be considered by him from the point of view of profit or loss. Considering this, it is necessary to keep in mind the following two things:

a) Books about war are not very popular in Britain at the moment. On the contrary, in literature, theatre, cinema, etc. there dominates the mood of “escapism”, i.e. desire to forget the war with all its victims and horrors and whenever possible to return to the “norms” of peaceful time. These sentiments became especially strong since the beginning of this year, when our Stalingrad victory proved that Germany’s victory is impossible and thus the danger of Britain’s defeat and the liquidation of the British Empire is no longer present.

b) Traditionally, certain sizes of books published by major publishing houses have been firmly established in the British book market. There are several volumes of published works, especially of fiction particularly which have a traditionally established price: 7.5 shillings, 10.5 shillings, 15 shillings, 21 shilling, etc. British writers generally take these rates into consideration and adjust the sizes of their books to standard particular rubric. Sometimes, if the book size doesn’t absolutely match the standard, the publisher uses a bigger print or thicker paper to adjust it to a given standard. […] As a rule, major publishing houses, such as Hutchinson, do not publish brochure type of works. There are other channels in Britain for publishing brochures (in particular, such channels are available for our embassy in London, besides Hutchinson).

3. At the same time it is necessary to state that the overall market conditions in Britain are now extremely favorable for our books, and they promise to remain so for a long period of time. The war that has so vividly revealed the power of the USSR have made an enormous impression in Great Britain (as well as all over the world). The anti-Soviet propaganda that had been conducted for a quarter of a century before that, managed to strongly brainwash the British people and create in their minds an absolutely wrong picture of our country. The activities of our bodies abroad and of the Soviet Union British friends have of course countered the hostile propaganda, but only to a certain extent. The best proof of this is the fact that at the time of fascist Germany’s attack on the USSR the average common opinion in Britain (besides some better informed groups) was that the Red Army won’t be able to resist Hitler armies for longer than 1.5 - 2 months. The war has completely overturned all these wrong opinions! The war has “opened” the USSR to the British people, has “opened” in an absolutely new way and has proved with indisputable real facts that all their former opinions and estimations of the Soviet Union were erroneous. Therefore every average British person is now preoccupied with the following question: why was the USSR able to not just withstand the blows of the most powerful military system ever known in history, but even to force the German army to retreat and to inflict upon it a long succession of defeats? Where does the Soviet Union gain its strength from? What are the reasons of its success?

4. This causes great interest in Russia and the USSR among most of the British readers. They became convinced that earlier they had been told lies about our country, and they want to find out the truth. The interest of the British readers is very diverse: the history of our country, the nationalities inhabiting it, our state system, our army, economy, culture, science, art, etc. This interest has two trends. On the one hand, the British readers want to know the current news from the war front, from the home front and about foreign policy. This demand is satisfied (not always well) by periodic editions, daily and weekly. In this connection it is necessary to mention Ehrenburg[[4]](#footnote-4): he is now enormously popular in Britain (as well as in other countries) and everything he writes about the war is feverishly consumed by the British readers. On the other hand, the British readers also have a more general and deep interest in our country, they want to understand it and, as far as it is possible, to learn about it. This demand should be satisfied by the books currently published in Britain about the USSR, but their quality is not always satisfactory. No doubt, in Britain at present we have a rare opportunity in history to have a strong influence in shaping the views of its people - especially its young generation - in relation to the USSR. But this opportunity has yet to be realized. To have such an influence it is necessary to use the situation. This requires from our agencies and people charged with this task some skill and a consideration of British psychology.

5. What is necessary to make our propaganda in Britain efficient? For this, first of all it requires that our propaganda does not obviously look like propaganda. The British people are terribly suspicious in this respect and if public opinion brands any book, film, show, etc. as “propaganda”, its political effect will be negative. What conclusions should be made from this in regards to Hutchinson? I would formulate these conclusions as follows:

a) It’s unreasonable to offer Hutchinson at once a big number of books directly connected with the War (especially considering “escapist” mood in Britain); it’s better to mix them with books on general topics. Among the books about the War we should offer only the first-class ones, whenever possible – those written by the writers popular in Britain (Ehrenburg, Sholokhov[[5]](#footnote-5), Tolstoy[[6]](#footnote-6), etc.).

b) It is unwise to offer Hutchinson books by only the Soviet or mainly Soviet writers; they should be mixed with books of our classical literature, our folklore, etc. Among the Soviet writers it is necessary to choose the first-class ones.

c) We shouldn’t offer Hutchinson many poems, since it is very difficult to provide their good translation and poems aren’t popular in Britain at present.

d) It is necessary, at least to a certain extent to consider the British standards of book sizes which were mentioned above.

6. Another very important point is the narration style of the books, which we want to spread to the British market. The content may be fine, but how is it presented to the British readers? Very much depends on this. Certainly without losing our Soviet identity, it is necessary to find such forms of narration which would “reach” the minds and hearts of the British audience. It is necessary to consider both the nature of the British people and their literary habits and traditions. As a rule, the British are phlegmatic, not very emotional, slowly thinking and especially empirical. The British do not like and do not understand grandiose goals, far-reaching plans, huge programs and universal theories. They always prefer concrete facts and practical calculations concerning only the near future. Most difficult for them are big generalizations which open great prospects. Very often British base their actions not so much on reason, but on instinct or on some combination of both. The British are an old nation, with long and difficult history, and they are infected with scepticism to a great degree. They can’t be surprised with anything and do not have trust in anything that much. Though deep inside their souls the British are absolutely convinced that they are the supreme race, they try not to show it, at least in relation to the Europeans. On the contrary, the British consider it good manners to make jokes about themselves, to criticize and sometimes to abuse themselves, to declare that “we are illogical people”, “we are a silly nation”, etc. One can hear such things from the minister and from a simple worker. All these traits of character influence the literary tastes of the British readers. Thus, for example, all kinds of recitations do not inspire the British people, but on the contrary make them smile contemptuously. The French propaganda always suffered badly from this in Britain. The British never believe a writer if he’s writing about this or that country in only positive light. They say: “it can’t be! There is no light without shade!” And they add right away: “propaganda”! After that their minds are immediately covered by an impenetrable armor, from which the author's words bounce like peas off a wall. The British also very much dislike when the writer takes on a didactic tone and underlines his point of view on this or that issue too persistently and obviously. They perceive it as an attempt to “violate” their intellectual freedom. With my long experience I have come to the conclusion that the best method to influence British minds is to mention a number of actual facts in a quiet, almost passionless tone and to let listeners or readers make their own conclusions. Thus, when talking about the USSR, along with the description of achievements and success it is useful to also mention difficulties and failures. Certainly, this method requires the art of choosing facts and of calibrating light and shade, so that ultimately we can achieve the desired effect, but this is the business of writers and editors. The purpose should be making our propaganda "intelligible" for the British mind, and for this purpose it is necessary to consider (not blindly “please”) each eccentric parameter of the British taste and the basic features of British psychology which developed throughout many centuries.

7. Proceeding from all the above-stated reasons, I consider it useful to make a list of books that we recommend to Hutchinson for publishing, on the following approximate grounds:

a) Different official materials, such as speeches and orders of Comrade Stalin, notes of Comrade Molotov about fascist atrocities, collections of the documents concerning war, etc.

b) Books directly about the war – by Ehrenburg, Grossman[[7]](#footnote-7), Sholokhov, Gorbatov[[8]](#footnote-8), Korneichuk[[9]](#footnote-9), Vanda Vasilevskaya[[10]](#footnote-10), etc.

c) Books connected with war indirectly, such as Sobolev's collection “Sea soul”[[11]](#footnote-11).

d) Works of Soviet literature.

e) Works of classical literature.

f) Works of folklore (in particular, a collection of Russian fairy tales for British children).

g) Various scientific books (in particular, on history and geography of our country).

h) Biographies and memoirs of great people (British people are big fans of such books, but, of course, the choice of great people is important).

i) Political and economic books on the USSR.

8. As for the edition of our fiction, I think it reasonable to issue in English a series of one-volume editions, each with selected creations of a certain classic or Soviet writer. It would be useful to publish also one-volume editions on our history, geography, literature, music, etc.

9. For all the reasons set forth above I believe there should be made a list of books recommended to Hutchinson for publishing.

ASSISTANT PEOPLE’S COMMISSAR OF

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

I. MAISKY

# 27.11.43

[AP RF, f. 3, inv. 64, file 365, pp. 177–184]

Keywords: Inter-allied relations

1. Scherbakov, Alexander (1901 - 1945) - Soviet statesman and party leader, Colonel-General of the Red Army, Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU (b) (1941 - 1945), head of the CPSU International Information (b) (1943 - 1945) , head of the Soviet Information Bureau (1941 -. 1945), Chief of the Main political Directorate of the Red Army (1942 - 1945). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Assed in handwriting: From Comrade Maisky. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Joint Stock Company, then an All-Union foreign trade association engaged in the export and import of books, audio and video products. Founded in 1923. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ehrenburg, Ilya G. (1891 - 1967) - Soviet writer, poet, social activist. During the war he became known for his antifascist and anti-German articles. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sholokhov, Mikhail Aleksandrovich (1905 - 1984) - Soviet writer, war correspondent during World War II, author of patriotic essays and articles (‘Oni srazhalis’ za Rodinu’ and others.). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Tolstoy, Alexey Nikolaevich (1882/83 - 1945) - Russian and Soviet writer and author of numerous essays and journalistic materials during the war. He repeatedly turned to themes from Russian history and folklore. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Grossman, Vasily (1905 - 1964) - Soviet writer and journalist, war correspondent for the newspaper "Krasnaya Zvezda". [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Gorbatov, Boris L. (1908 - 1954) - Soviet writer and journalist, war correspondent during World War II, author of the book Pis’ma k tovarishchu (1941 - 1944). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Korniychuk, Alexander Antonovich (1905 - 1972) - Soviet and Ukrainian state and political figure, writer, deputy of the USSR People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs (1943 - 1944), the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the Ukrainian SSR (1944), Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Ukrainian SSR (1947 - 1953). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Wasilewska, Wanda L. (1905 - 1964) - Soviet and Polish public figure, writer, member of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR (1940 - 1962), member of the General Political Department of the Red Army (1941 - 1943), chairwoman of the Union of Polish Patriots (1943 1945), and a member of the Polish Committee of National Liberation (1944 - 1945). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Sobolev, Leonid Sergeyevich (1898 - 1971) - Soviet writer and journalist, war correspondent for ‘Pravda” and the Soviet Information Bureau, and author of a collection of front-line stories, “Morskaya dusha” (1942). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)