From the report by the representative of the Soviet Information Bureau in Great Britain, S.N. Rostovsky, ‘On the status of Soviet propaganda in Britain’ to the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (b), 18 December 1946

[...]

1. CRISIS OF SOVIET PROPAGANDA IN BRITAIN

Soviet propaganda in Britain is currently in a crisis which affects all of its aspects: the Soviet newspaper in London, the promotion of Soviet articles into the British press, the distribution of Soviet photographs, the distribution of Soviet books, brochure circulation, listening to Moscow radio, attendance of British-Soviet meetings, etc. The fact that all of these aspects are affected to more or less the same extent (which may sometimes even be proved arithmetically) demonstrates that the crisis is neither accidental nor localised, and that there are deeper roots to it.

The main objective cause of the crisis is the cardinal change in the political situation in Britain after the war. The main subjective cause, that runs in parallel and complicates things, is the fact that Soviet propaganda itself has not adapted to this change in the political situation, has not changed its approaches, and continues the inertia of the war years, using the old methods and directives. The combination of these two causes hits our propaganda on a daily basis, reducing dramatically its practical effectiveness.

While during the war the main Soviet propagandist in Britain was the Red Army, whose tanks carried and broadcast the Soviet Word, leaving those responsible for propaganda in Britain with only the task of oiling the wheels, now these responsible propagandists have to face a decisive and aggressive counter-attack of anti-Soviet imperialism and its propaganda in the country. This anti-Soviet propaganda permeates all of society.

Previously not only the British working class, but the middle class and intelligentsia, the military milieu, the big press, the state radio, the book publishers, and even the Conservative camp were open, due to certain circumstances, to our information, and even demanded and requested it, and the general public entertained exalted feelings towards the Soviet Union. Now with the forced connivance of the ruling circles, the wave of a planned anti-Soviet campaign sweeps over all the technical propaganda channels - the press, radio etc., as well as over the general public, the average British people, including Labour, with an intensity which reminds of the period of the famous “Zinoviev letter”[[1]](#footnote-1) and the Arcos raid in 1927[[2]](#footnote-2).

Every speech by Bevin, every anti-Soviet escapade by Churchill and the British press, every published false report regarding Soviet policy, the proceedings at international conferences, etc., affect, immediately and inevitably, the circulation of our newspaper, the sales of Hutchinson books[[3]](#footnote-3), and, according to the British Communist Party, even the distribution of their own party literature. This tendency may be demonstrated statistically. […]

II. Objective Causes of the Crisis of Soviet Propaganda in Britain

Moving to a more detailed analysis of objective causes of the crisis of Soviet Propaganda in Britain, I see these as follows:

1. Receding interest, which had previously been caused by war-sensation, of the British middle class in the Soviet Union, and the Red Army in particular, as compared with 1941-1945.
2. Violent, daily, and growing anti-Soviet campaign in the British press, society, and the Governmental and Parliamentary circles, which affects the public.
3. Direct pressure from Governmental circles on newspaper and book sellers, as well as on different reader groups (military), to organise sabotage or boycott of the Soviet literature.
4. Political weakening of the British Communist Party, in particular, a serious failure of its mechanism of sales and distribution of the left-wing literature.

On the first item:

The fact is that the circulation of our newspaper in Britain started rising during the period of the general offensive of the Red Army and reached its peak figure (80 000 copies, which is 26 000 more than the average for 1944) in April-June 1945, that is during the Battle of Berlin and the Victory. During this period many of the middle-class unsophisticated public, attracted by the historical events at the Soviet fronts, became our readers, and, had there been enough paper, the circulation could have easily risen to 100 000 copies.

Beginning with the subsequent period, the lack of sensational military news on the Red Army victories, and the news about the Soviet Union being moved from the first pages of the British newspapers to the last ones, led to lower interest from the general public, who are unsophisticated, disloyal, and superficial readers, mainly interested in sensational news. The Red Army, without an offensive, ceased to be what in English is called “the news”, the journalists’ immediate interest, in other words, ceased to be actively Soviet propagandist in Britain (on the contrary, there was a wave of libellous news on the Red Army’s atrocities in the occupied territories).

At the same time a general and characteristically British tiredness and apathy towards all military and political matters struck the middle class public (a well-known tendency called “escapism”, from the verb “escape”, that is, to run from the recent and current reality), and the interest to everything light, unserious, amusing rose greatly (cf. the recent large increase in the number of light-genre, vulgar, comic, and quasi-artistic publications in Britain).

A certain part of our readership acquired during the war and especially after we had been allowed to raise our circulation from 50 000 to 74 000 copies (in summer 1944) undoubtedly belonged to this situational category, and they left when the situation changed. This applies, in particular, to middle class and military readers, as well as to a certain number of working class readers.

On the second item:

Apart from the purely situational readers, we have been losing the readers that were first shocked, then annoyed and isolated from us by the wave of anti-Soviet propaganda. The first immediate effect (which we have immediately felt on our backs) was caused by a wave of libellous news on “atrocities” of the Red Army in the occupied territories, and “rapes” in particular. This wave has been brilliantly organised from a technical stance. The second wave focused on “predatory tendencies” of the Soviet Union on an international scale, “sovietisation” of the Eastern Europe, “obstruction” of the international treaties by our foreign policy, “300 divisions”, etc.

This wave continues to accumulate and grow. The third wave, a slightly newer one, but built on a very old and well-used template, is focused on the internal situation in the USSR: “lack of democracy”, “persecution of culture”, “low living standards”, etc. This wave is most favoured by Labour. There are other occasional smaller waves, too.

There can be no doubt that the objective fact of this “neo-Curzon”[[4]](#footnote-4) anti-Soviet campaign, carried out in accordance with the most modern technique of “democratic” Goebbels-ism and covering virtually all the levels of the British public, has hit, and hit very hard, our propaganda in Britain and has taken away most of our readership and friends in general.

It should be borne in mind that this very campaign immediately affects not only the readers, but also the newspaper sellers on whom we depend. […]

Even a single speech or an escapade by the major British politicians has an immediate impact on our circulation.

In the section on the subjective causes of the crisis of our propaganda below we are forced to conclude that it is very difficult to oppose all this by TASS rebuttals, Moscow Radio broadcasts, or Sovinformburo articles only.

On the third item:

There are facts proving that the anti-Soviet campaign towards our own propaganda through “Soviet News” in London has entered a new phase lately: a phase of direct pressure from above on the newspapers sellers and certain categories of readers, aiming to boycott or to directly prohibit our literature.

Three fifths of our circulation are distributed via shops and bourgeois newsagent stands, mainly through five or six large firms holding the leading positions in this trade. On the whole, bourgeois newspaper sellers decreased their orders for our newspaper by 27% over the current year. In a number of cases we managed to get written proof that the largest one among these firms, Smith Newspapers Trust, refused to increase the order placed by local shops through their central office, as the shops have requested, motivating the refusal by the fact that it was *Soviet Weekly* who did not want to increase the order. We are sure that this is common practice now. As this has an impact on their profit too, the latter being sacred for the British private entrepreneurs, we might only think that they act on a more or less discreet command from above.

On the other line, the direct ban on reading our newspaper, we have only two accidentally acquired items of material proof: two letters received several weeks ago. The first letter was sent by a commander of an air force unit who regretted to inform us that, due to circumstances beyond his control, his unit could not continue to receive the free bulletin that was sent to them on their order previously, but he would be happy if we could change this situation.

[...]

The second letter was from a seaman of the Dutch Navy, who must be staying in a British naval base. He was writing to say that he was called to the court martial for reading our newspaper; he cancelled the subscription and asked us (most desperately) to eliminate any traces of his subscription.

We have no other direct proof that would allow us to generalise, and, given the British circumstances, I myself would consider a cautious approach to the subject advisable. These bans could be of local character. In other cases they may be indirect and disguised. Previously, commanders of the military units (even entire divisions) on their own placed orders for our bulletin. It should be borne in mind that the current British “Co-ordination” Minister of Defence Alexander[[5]](#footnote-5) is one of the most impertinent anti-Soviet figures in the Labour camp.

Similar events may take place in trade union organisations. We do not have any proof. But it is true fact that there is direct sabotage of Soviet literature on a command from above (e.g. through Hutchinson publishing). When needed, the authorities may exercise pressure on the large newsagents and book sellers, such as Smith and others, as well as on other smaller firms through the Newspaper Proprietors’ Association, which unites all the firms and shops.

On the fourth item.

Two fifths of our newspaper are distributed via a network of shops and organisations of the British Communist Party (Central Books, Collects, etc.). It is very characteristic of the objective causes hindering Soviet propaganda in Britain after the war that the sales of Soviet newspaper through the Party network dropped even more than the sales through commercial bourgeois network.

While the sales through the bourgeois network dropped by 47% from 28 June 1945 (maximum circulation) to 1 October 1946, the sales through the Party network in the same period dropped by 48.6%; that is nearly by half. The Party network has lost during this period at least 15 5000 of our readers (of the entire amount of 39 000 lost readers).

In other words, the factors that affected the general mass readership – the receded interest in information on the USSR and the anti-Soviet campaign – were so strong, that they influenced quite significantly the buyers of the left-wing organisations too. The third factor – organised sabotage of Soviet literature – is not present here of course, but it is more than compensated for by another issue, which is a serious failure of the Communist Party’s mechanism for literature distribution. This failure affected the distribution of the British Communist Party’s own literature and is now a subject of serious concern for the British Central Committee.

We shall not discuss it here; this concerns the general political situation of the British Communist Party and certain organisational circumstances. It is, however, a fact that the Soviet propaganda in Britain was hit by the Communist Party too, as the latter could not cope with the new situation and counteract on its own the attack of reactionary (Conservative and Labour) forces.

The General Director of Collets network of newsagent and bookstores of the Communist Party, Wasserman[[6]](#footnote-6), in a recent conversation, replying to my reproaches regarding their insufficient activity with our newspaper, told me that some of the political editions by Hutchinson, which they had ordered by a thousand during the war, they are now ordering literally by a dozen. At some point in time the Party shops became so depressed that they started selling, along with the left-wing editions, tabloid books and even the Bible. The general director of the Central Party Network Central Books and the Secretary of the Central Committee’s commission for literature Bagenal Harvey was recently fired and expelled from the Party. The network of the Party members who sold left-wing literature at the factories and plants decreased drastically and partially disappeared. *Daily Worker*, the main organ of the Communist Party, can hardly keep its circulation at 90-100 000.

Thus it should be acknowledged that a certain weakening of the British Communist Party after the war is one of the external causes that hit the Soviet propaganda in the country.

Analysing the extent of objective causes of the current crisis of the Soviet propaganda in Britain, I should underline that I by no means believe that they alone can explain and, so to say, justify the crisis.

On the contrary, I deeply believe that, in spite of all this, we could fight the crisis and go on, was it not for the subjective causes, that is, our own ineptitude and inertia, inability to quickly and flexibly adapt to new conditions, repel and outdo the enemy, refresh and revamp all the equipment, fight so as to win back our British consumer, not by the Red Army magnetism, but through Soviet Socialist beliefs, Soviet critique of the adversary, and the talent of Soviet propaganda.

Unfortunately this has not taken place yet. In spite of all appeals, there was no such reconstruction during the six months since the end of the war, and that time has been lost, to our great detriment. Unless we undertake reconstruction now, or should we do something wrong during the reconstruction, we may incur unrecoverable losses.

I now move to listing the subjective factors as I see them from London.

III. SUBJECTIVE CAUSES OF SOVIET PROPAGANDA CRISIS IN BRITAIN

I believe there are twelve such causes.

1. The Soviet authors and propagandists in Moscow (in the press as well as in radio broadcasts) insufficiently distinguish the British readers from the Russian readers in their editorial approaches to the format of presentation and propaganda in general; often internal and external propaganda formats are used thoughtlessly together.
2. Insufficient supply of talented authors writing for foreign readers in general; too many second-rate authors, almost Slovenes, who can only adapt someone else’s words; lack of professional foreign propagandists which are now in greatest demand.
3. Obsolete equipment; insufficiently quick and flexible responses to new problems and requirements arising abroad; insufficiently timely and quick selection of topics; very often the topics are picked mechanically without any connection with the situation abroad, on the other hand, important anti-Soviet escapades and lies abroad remain unanswered.
4. Poor and insufficiently bright description of the main elements of the Soviet system, the Soviet Socialist system and the Soviet policy; very often all these are substituted with a dry, formalistic, harangue, which is unclear for the foreign reader, diluted with empty wordings and eulogies, with boisterous boasting, which may irritate even the most friendly foreign reader, instead of a sensible, lively and dignified presentation which would evoke interest and respect.
5. Bad quality of some translations into English, which is caused either by low qualification of the translators, or by their fear to move away from word-for-word translation. The result is the so-called Anglo-Russian language, which is much laughed at in Britain, and causes much trouble to our editorial office in London by creating huge amounts of extra work of rewriting and editing.
6. The absence of live communication between the management in London and Moscow; over five and a half years the head of the office in London has only been to Moscow twice; the head of the British department in Moscow has never been to London.
7. The poorly equipped London office: no own premises, no car, etc., chronic and painful lack of funds, which prevents us, for example, from promoting the commercial campaign for our newspaper which is now sorely needed.
8. It would significantly facilitate the work in Moscow, if the Moscow editorial office hired a professional British journalist, with recent experience in journalism, as a consultant and editor; there is no such specialist there presently.
9. The lack of new specialists and a reserve for the current management in London, from among the truly talented and knowledgeable young Soviet professionals, with a really good knowledge of British and true adaptability to foreign situation.
10. Certain significant shortcomings in the selection and technical design of Soviet photographs for foreign readers, although not to the extent of the shortcomings in articles.
11. Inadequacy of the agreement with Hutchinson on books; division and competition between individual Soviet organisations (Mezhdunarodnaya Kniga, Sovinformburo, VOKS) with regards to this issue, as well as many others.
12. Certain shortcomings in the work of Moscow Radio on British broadcasting.

There are some more issues, but these are the main ones. Of the above twelve causes I believe the first four are the most important. It is because of them that our day-to-day work is paralysed and we cannot return to the propaganda highway. Eliminating these causes will give us the decisive impetus.

The main formula, by which our material for the foreign audience should be built, is Soviet content in a foreign format. Format is the main principle for the foreign propagandist; if it is not accounted for, or is used clumsily in practice, then no information flow, no use of funds, labour, and energy, no ideological pressure will help: our propaganda will not be heard by those at whom it is aimed and will be predominantly wasted. The British, as far as I know, are exactly counting on the fact that the Soviet propagandist has not yet learnt how to address their nation; they do not think our propaganda a really serious threat, although they try to isolate it as much as possible.

While the Soviet propagandist, whose target is the foreign audience, writes or speaks in the same format as he does for the Soviet reader or listener, his work is not artful, but amateurish, he does not attain his goal, he does not meet the requirements of his profession (which is relatively new for us in general, if we speak of Sovinformburo). This does not mean that we should go cheap, play along, adapt ourselves to the bourgeois, tabloid, vulgar press, that is, change the contents.

[...]

However, in our own press a special language has developed, a language of a socialist citizen speaking to a socialist citizen, and this required 29 years of educating the people. This language is unusual for the people, the public (even left-wing public) in capitalistic countries, it is even incomprehensible, it misses its target, and such propaganda is mostly blank-firing. I think this will be confirmed by all the comrades who have practical work experience in this field abroad. This is the main subjective cause of our post-war crisis, after the Red Army had ceased to be the “general propagandist”.

We will not be able to overcome this crisis and to expand our work without a talented propagandist, trained to address the foreign audience, much in the same way as diplomats and foreign trade professionals are trained. His task would be to achieve the following: ideologically, irreconcilably Soviet contents, technically, the format that would be understandable and common for the foreign reader, accessible for him at the stage of development and under the circumstances he is now, the format that would crash the iron curtain of the West that is now in the way of the Soviet Word.

We have not been doing it before because our propagandists (with the exception of authors like Ehrenburg and other big names or those with foreign experience) in most cases treated the foreign reader as a double of Soviet reader; we have fought back the attack of the anti-Soviet campaign abroad after the war and have missed big opportunities.

[…]

Undoubtedly, the selection of material, topics covered, was very often poor. The amount of articles did not compensate for the lack of material showing and explaining to inexpert or totally ignorant foreign readers the main elements of the Soviet life, Soviet system, Soviet ethics and Soviet goals. Such material, presented in a bright, clear and artful way, is absolutely essential.

The main idea of such material is to skilfully (not crudely or superficially) demonstrate advantages of the Soviet system and Soviet socialism over capitalism. The comparison is needed here, otherwise the local reader will not perceive the material, he must compare it with his own life and circumstances in order to really understand it. Generalising should be in the end, not in the beginning of the material for such a reader. In the beginning there should be comparison with the foreign circumstances or coverage of this or that current moment, event or “news”.

Summing up, I conclude that the subjective causes of the crisis of our propaganda in Britain cannot be fully eliminated immediately, through some urgent organisational steps. It will take a certain process of improving staff training and selection. However, a number of significant concrete steps to improve the work are urgently required in Moscow as well as in London. I enumerate below the steps that in my view cannot be postponed any longer.

[RSASPH, f. 17, inv. 128, fold. 1006, file 219, pp. 188–220]

Keywords: post-war USSR, propaganda

1. A counterfeit document that purported to be a directive from the Comintern for British Communists, calling on them to increase subversive activities in preparation for a coming civil war. Its authorship was attributed to the then Chairman of the Comintern G.E. Zinoviev and was dated 15 September 1924. It was published in the *Daily Mail* on 25 October, several days before parliamentary elections in Great Britain. A number of scholars are of the opinion that the letter was compiled in Russian émigré circles in Riga and ended up in London via Secret Intelligence Service channels. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A British police search operation on 12 May 1927 in the lodgings of a Soviet trade representative in Great Britain and the residence of the All Russian Cooperative Society Limited (ARCOS); its aim was to find documents that would compromise the Soviet representative. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Maisky’s note dated 27 November 1943. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Named after the British Foreign Secretary in 1919 – 1924, G.N. Curzon (1859 – 1925), who was renowned for his anti-Soviet policies. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Alexander, Albert Victor (1885 – 1965) – British statesman and politician (Labour). First Lord of Admiralty (1929 – 1931, 1940 – 1945, 1945 – 1946), Minister of Defence (1946 – 1950), Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (1950 – 1951). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Waterman (later Wasserman), Alec (1907 – 1966. born Nasibirski) – Polish and British communist of Jewish origin, General Manager of Collet’s (Communist bookshop chain in the UK) (1942 – 1952). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)