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Final report of the project “Knowledge Propaganda: Soviet Socialism as an Epistemic Project”

I came to OSA in July 2024 to work on my current book project, which explores the history of the Soviet knowledge communication campaign. The project’s goal is to examine how, throughout the Cold War, Soviet society became increasingly saturated with knowledge, as well as to study the social and cultural effects the Soviet scientific literacy campaign produced. In their everyday lives, Soviet citizens encountered scientific facts, political opinions, epistemic structures, and narratives that originated in academic and professional contexts—such as science, medicine, and education—and became embedded in Soviet life through various sources and media. Over the last four decades of the Soviet Union, this knowledge communication campaign resulted in a diverse and autonomous network of people and ideas that was only partially controlled by the state, ultimately altering the ways of thinking and speaking about science, politics, and other aspects of life in Soviet society.

The Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives in Budapest incorporate, among their other acquisitions, the archive of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s (RFE/RL) Research Institute (HU OSA 300). The RFE/RL Research Institute was formed when the research departments of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty (as well as parent organizations themselves) merged in 1976 and shared the same goal with its predecessors, namely, to provide multi-faceted expertise on the Eastern bloc. Along multiple collections on political, economic, and social issues, its USSR-related materials, known as the “Soviet Red Archives” (HU OSA 300-80) include collections related to many fields of knowledge, such as medicine, astronomy, biology, psychology, physics, and some others, as well as a separate collection on Society Znanie—an organization that was the centerpiece of the Soviet scientific literacy campaign. As I indicated in my application for the Vysegrad fellowship, I was interested in coming to OSA to fill certain gaps in my primary sources for several chapters, most importantly, the chapter on the public communication of medical knowledge and new biopolitics of late socialism. Two collections within the “Soviet Red Archives” turned out to be particularly useful in terms of primary sources for this chapter: “Medical sciences” (HU OSA 300-80-1:530/1-4) and Psychology (HU OSA 300-80-1:760/1). I additionally found relevant primary sources for another chapter on the relationship between the public infrastructure for knowledge communication and alternative forms of knowledge in the collection “Astronomy” (HU OSA 300-80-1:54/3), and materials in the collection “Society Znanie” (HU OSA 300-80-1:185/1) might prove useful for some other parts of the manuscript.

After I started working with these collections, I realized that they are useful not only as repositories of primary sources, but also holistically, as an insight into the practices of transnational epistemic arbitrage, of which the Soviet mass scientific literacy campaign was an object. The RFE/RL Research Institute never claimed strictly scientific expertise in any of the scientific disciplines that they gathered information on. Its collections on medicine or biology do not comprise articles from scholarly journals or monographs, nor do they provide peer-reviewed critique of concepts and theories emerging in the Eastern bloc. Instead, its staff gathered Soviet newspapers articles and radio broadcasts as well as English, German, and French materials discussing the state of knowledge in these areas in the USSR. These materials were then processed into research notes that the staff of RFE/RL could use in their broadcasts. As a result

of this curatorial work, I realized that the materials of RFE/RL provide profound insights into the social character of knowledge in the Soviet Union. Since RFE/RL pursued the agenda of providing an informed critique of state socialist politics and societies, its staff operated on the assumption that scientific knowledge and practices in the USSR were ideologically and socially constructed. This positionality was a product of their own ideological stance, but in the context of my research, it is important to note that, thanks to this positionality, they were well aware that science and society were mutually constitutive and shaped each other long before Sheila Jasanoff encapsulated this idea in the concept of the co-production of science and social order. That is what makes the “Soviet Red Archives” such a fascinating source to understand the public communication of knowledge in the USSR.

By extending its expertise into the area of knowledge production and communication in the USSR, the RFE/RL Research Institute assumed the functions of epistemic arbitrage between Soviet and Western knowledge producers and communicators. As a concept of social analysis, arbitrage has its roots in ethnographic observations of financial markets where arbitrage describes a form of profit-making based on a simultaneous involvement of traders in two or more markets, where they can assess the values of certain assets traded in those markets vis-à-vis each other and benefit from it by simultaneously buying the same assets in one market and selling them in another. Arbitrage is based on the identification and exploitation of differences—in the case of knowledge communication, the differences in epistemic claims and positions. The RFE/RL Research Institute was not simply gathering information on different fields of knowledge in the USSR; rather, it was simultaneously assessing its credibility vis-à-vis similar claims produced in Western academia as well as within the socialist bloc, hence a particular attention its staff paid to the situations when Soviet scholars criticized each other, such as the final stages of the struggle between Lysenkoists and Soviet geneticists in the mid-1960s (Soviet biology, 1956–1965, HU OSA 300-80-1:99/2). The profit—that is, identified epistemic differences that helped classify knowledge into different categories, such as true or false, original or imitative—provided material for the critique of state socialism and, what is more important in the context of my book project, represented a transnational challenge to the efforts of the Soviet political and academic establishment to exert full control over the circulation of knowledge in Soviet society. After all, as scholars of arbitrage have noted, the exploitation of difference does not leave unchanged either system of value, between which arbitrageurs navigate; instead, both must adjust.

To summarize, thinking of the RFE/RL Research Institute as an agent of epistemic arbitrage explains something important about the Soviet knowledge popularization campaign. The Soviet Union had full political sovereignty within its borders, and the Communist Party had a seemingly full control over the top-down forms of information dissemination and could therefore enforce a regime of total ignorance of opinions and views coming from the West, especially since the dominant Marxist-Leninist ideology postulated a superiority of socialist knowledge over Western (capitalist) knowledge. Yet throughout the history of the Soviet knowledge communication campaign during the Cold War, one observes a persistent feeling of epistemic insecurity among the organizers and rank-and-file members of the Soviet knowledge communication campaign. This insecurity manifested itself in never-ending references to how the West reacted to Soviet scientific developments, which simultaneously constructed the West as a homogenous actor and ascribed it the power to assess the progress of Soviet science and technology, even if such

assessments (when they were negative) were immediately refuted. As a preliminary conclusion, I suggest that the RFE/RL Research Institute was only one of the many agents of epistemic arbitrage that kept this feeling of epistemic insecurity strong by constantly assessing Soviet knowledge, catching inconsistencies and fallacies in its production and communication, and capitalizing on them.