Modern Italy

ISSN: 1353-2944 (Print) 1469-9877 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cmit20

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To cite this article: Joanne Lee (2015) Political utopia or Potemkin village? Italian travellers to the Soviet Union in the early Cold War, Modern Italy, 20:4, 379-393, DOI: 10.1080/13532944.2015.1086735

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2015.1086735

Modern Italy, 2015
Vol. 20, No. 4, 379–393, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2015.1086735

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Political utopia or Potemkin village? Italian travellers to the Soviet Union in the early Cold War

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(*Received 18 September 2014; accepted 2 July 2015*)

Situated on the border between the capitalist West and Communist East, and with the largest Communist party in Western Europe, Italy found itself at the centre of global ideological struggles in the early Cold War years. A number of Italian writers and intellectuals who had joined the PCI (*Partito Comunista Italiano*) during the Resistance had hoped that the party would play a central role in the post-war reconstruction of Italy and were attracted to the Soviet Union as an example of Communism in action. This article centres on accounts of journeys to the USSR by Sibilla Aleramo, Renata Viganò and Italo Calvino. It will argue that although their writings portray a largely positive vision of the USSR, they should not be dismissed as naive, or worse, disingenuous travellers whose willingness to embrace Soviet-style Communism was based on a wholescale rejection of Western society and its values (see P. Hollander's 1998 [1981] work, *Political Pilgrims: Western Intellectuals in Search of the Good Society*). Rather, the article shows how their accounts of the USSR shed light on the writers' relationship with the PCI and argues that the views expressed in the travelogues emerge from the writers' personal experiences of war and resistance, a fervent desire to position themselves as anti-Fascist intellectuals, and their concerns regarding the direction that Italian politics was taking at a pivotal moment in the nation's history.

Keywords: travel writing; Soviet Union; Italian Communist Party; Calvino; Viganò; Aleramo

At the end of the Second World War, Italy found itself at the centre of a new global tug-of-war, torn between the material allure of the American dream and the political utopia of the Soviet experiment. The political fractures of the country, the legacy of Fascist dictatorship, war and a bitter resistance struggle were in many ways a microcosm of the wider ideological polarities and tensions which were to dominate international relations for the next 40 years. Fearing a resurgence of Fascism, many Italian intellectuals on the left had hoped that the Italian Communist Party (PCI) would play a central role in reshaping Italy in the post-war period. Yet, by the end of the decade, the PCI had become increasingly politically marginalised and its members' hopes of renewal turned to disillusionment (see Ginsborg 1990, 110–120). Instead they looked outside Italy for models of an ideal society and the Soviet Union in particular was held up as the anti-Fascist site par excellence.[1]

It was in these early Cold War years that a considerable number of Italian writers and intellectuals travelled to the Soviet Union to report on the workings of the

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Communist system. Sibilla Aleramo, Italo Calvino, Carlo Levi, Curzio Malaparte, Alberto Moravia, Anna Maria Ortese and Renata Viganò are just some of the writers who visited the Soviet Union during the late 1940s and 1950s.[2] Although the travellers claimed to provide an objective and truthful account of their experiences in the USSR, their desire for renewal in Italy and eagerness for social justice often resulted in myopic representations of their object of study. As Christopher Duggan observes, 'it was an enthusiasm that for many was akin to religious faith or to love; and, as so often when passion is involved, the true character of the object of affection was (in part wilfully) obscured' (1995, 17). At the heart of Cold War tensions lay an ideological conflict between two competing visions of human society. Projecting a positive and progressive image of one's society to outsiders became central to the mission of spreading and reinforcing notions of the inherent superiority of each system (Hanhimäki and Westad 2003, 412). In the Soviet Union, this was the responsibility of the VOKS (All-Union Society for Cultural Contacts with Foreign Countries) or its rival *Intourist*, agencies which tightly coordinated the itineraries of foreign visitors, making them feel like privileged guests, providing guides and translators, staging their experiences and manipulating their reactions (David-Fox 2012; Stern 2007).

Italian writers who visited the Soviet Union often journeyed as part of a delegation sponsored by the Italian Communist Party or on behalf of left-wing newspapers and periodicals. Many Italian intellectuals were attracted to the PCI during the war or in the early post-war period as it seemed to offer a vision of Italian national identity and renewal based on anti-Fascist values. For its part, the PCI cultivated relationships with intellectuals in its attempt to achieve cultural hegemony and viewed its association with prominent intellectual figures as a way of gaining prestige and reaching out to a wider public.[3] According to Marcello Flores (1990b, 12, 118), the positive and acritical representations of the USSR by Communist intellectuals and travellers played a decisive role in the promotion and dissemination of the utopian myth of the Soviet Union. Enthusiastic reports certainly bolstered the PCI's propaganda campaigns, helping create 'the image of a paradise filled with earthly symbols' (Andreucci 2005, 135).[4] There was, of course, very little room for manoeuvre; even a slight criticism of Soviet society would have been interpreted as a betrayal of Communist ideals (Flores 1997, 112). It is therefore inevitable that writings by Italian intellectuals on the Soviet Union reflect not only the aforementioned showcasing techniques of their Soviet hosts but also the constraints of their political sponsors and editors in their adherence to the Soviet myth.

While this article will show that the image of the Soviet Union which emerges from Italian travel accounts of the early Cold War period is a largely positive one for the reasons mentioned above, it will argue that these travellers differ from the naive 'political pilgrims' that Paul Hollander (1998) condemns in his study of the writings of Western visitors to Communist countries. Hollander's analysis which, by his own admission, does not refer to any Italian writers, posits that Western travellers' sympathy towards the Soviet Union stemmed from a form of anti-Americanism, a sense of estrangement from their own country and disillusionment with secular society which led to a quest for meaning elsewhere.[5] Critical works on Italian travel writing have pointed to the specificity of the Italian case so it is not surprising that this body of writing does not fit easily into paradigms developed outside the Italian context.[6] Attention must be paid to the historical, political and cultural context: Italy had experienced a long period of Fascist rule; it had the largest Communist party in the Western world, which dominated the cultural and intellectual sphere; images of Russia reached the height of popularity in the early post-war period at a time when in other countries, such as France, the myth

was already in crisis (Flores 1997, 113; Pischedda 1995, 166). Rather than simply being duped by Soviet techniques of hospitality or motivated by anti-Western sentiments, the readiness of these travellers to subscribe to the Soviet myth needs to be understood in terms of the relationship between intellectuals and the PCI, in the context of the cultural environment of the time that was dominated by Marxist aesthetics, and in relation to the writers' sense of self, forged through their experiences of war and anti-Fascist resistance.

These post-war travelogues present a response both to previous accounts of the USSR written during the Fascist period and to Western stereotypes of the Communist state that circulated during the Cold War. Charles Burdett (2007, 215–247) shows how Italian travel writing of the inter-war period had become a vehicle for scrutinising alternative models of humanity and had presented a largely critical, dystopian vision of the Soviet Union. This position is illustrated by Corrado Alvaro and Carlo Scarfoglio whose accounts present the USSR as an oppressive society which, in its relentless pursuit of modernity, had neglected the ethical and spiritual dimension of human life and had rendered the individual subordinate to the needs of the state (Burdett 2007, 237).[7] Moving on to the post-war period, the images of Russians promoted by opponents of Communism were often contradictory. As Donald Sassoon (1995, 193) observes, on one hand they were portrayed as cold, dehumanised automatons and on the other, they were hot-blooded, barbaric, non-European others. These negative images of Communism were influential in the crucial 1948 election victory of *Democrazia Cristiana* (DC) and for the consolidation of the party's power in the decades to come. Images of Soviet Communism promoted by those on the Communist and Socialist left aimed at counteracting this negative propaganda. Indeed, Bruno Pischedda (1995, 166) claims that the defeat of the Popular Front triggered an intensification of the Soviet myth on the left. Left-wing portrayals of the Soviet Union tended to focus on Moscow as the ultra-modern metropolis and highlighted opportunities for social mobility, mass participation in culture and female emancipation (Pischedda 1995, 171–175). Reports of Russian women workers were often tempered by descriptions of them wearing lipstick and jewellery, caring for children or carrying out domestic chores in order to offset anxieties, particularly those of potential Catholic voters, regarding the consequences of shifting gender roles in Soviet society (Willson 2010, 132; Pojmann 2013, 54–60). What is of interest in these early post-war accounts of the USSR is not so much the truth status of the reports, but how the writer situates herself or himself within these competing discourses and ideologies of the Cold War, the hopes and anxieties their writings reveal, the reflections they prompt on the direction in which Italian society was heading, and how they point to the lack of a viable alternative political positioning for intellectuals of the time.

For the purpose of my analysis, this article will focus on three accounts of the Soviet Union from the early 1950s: Sibilla Aleramo's *Russia alto paese* (Russia, The Great Country) (1953), Renata Viganò's collection of articles which appeared on the cultural pages of *L'Unità* in spring 1950 and Italo Calvino's 'Taccuino di viaggio nell'Unione Sovietica' (Diary of a Journey to the USSR) ([1952] 1995). I have selected these accounts as they illustrate the various positions on the USSR adopted by Italian intellectuals, ranging from the adulatory tones of Aleramo to the ironic ambivalence of Calvino, yet they are all positively disposed towards their object of study. In previous critical studies, the writings of Aleramo and Viganò are mentioned only briefly, while Calvino's account has been dismissed for its naivety and unreserved veneration of the

https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2015.1086735 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Soviet Union (Flores 1990a, 347; Pischedda 1995). This article will show how the texts shed light on the nature of the writers' relationships with the PCI and, in the case of Calvino, will suggest that his account contains hints that the writer was not entirely persuaded by his encounter with Soviet society. The willingness of these travellers to write positive accounts of the Soviet Union is, I will argue, a result of a political and moral positioning as anti-Fascist intellectuals at a watershed moment in Italian history, as the country sought to rebuild and redefine itself at the end of the Second World War.

Sibilla Aleramo's vision of utopia

Sibilla Aleramo (pseudonym of Rina Faccio, 1876–1960) was a poet, essayist, journalist and novelist renowned for her ground-breaking proto-feminist novel *Una donna* (A Woman) (1906). Aleramo was also known for her social activism; she campaigned to improve conditions for female factory workers, organised aid for prostitutes, helped victims of the 1908 Sicilian earthquake and promoted education and health care for the seasonal workers of the Agro Romano. Her political trajectory is rather confused: during the 1920s and '30s she was closely associated with the Futurists; she signed Croce's Manifesto of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals in 1925 but then joined the National Fascist Association for Women Artists and Graduates, although her contacts with Fascism were motivated more by financial concerns than ideological ones.[8] Her decision to join the PCI in January 1946, recorded in her diary on the day of Epiphany, caused a few raised eyebrows within journalistic and literary circles (Aleramo 1978, 74–75). As Richard Drake rather scathingly comments, 'Aleramo's sudden conversion to Marxism at the age of sixty-nine, just as Mussolini's regime came crashing down in ruins, can hardly be considered an organic and necessary development of her thought' (1990, 265). In contrast, Aleramo describes the event as 'the crowning achievement of my life as a writer and as a woman' (1978, 74). She claimed that she resolved to join the party after hearing a four-hour speech delivered by Togliatti at a PCI congress in December 1945. She was moved by the sense of solidarity shown towards her at the meeting; being called 'comrade', she writes, 'was like a gentle caress' (1978, 73). She went on to become close friends with Togliatti, and one of her first requests to him was to include her on a PCI-sponsored visit to Russia, which eventually took place in the summer of 1952. An article based on her journey appeared in *L'Unità* on 25 September 1952 while her poem 'Russia alto paese' was also published in *L'Unità*, with Togliatti's approval, on 7 November. The poem, and the text of a conference speech held in Ancona on 23 November 1952 in which Aleramo describes her impressions of the Soviet Union, were published by the *Associazione Italia-USSR*. Aleramo's political activism and association with prominent left-wing intellectuals and PCI leaders continued throughout the 1950s; she collaborated with *L'Unità* and *Noi donne*, wrote a considerable amount of political verse and travelled extensively giving lectures and poetry readings in support of Communist ideology. Aleramo travelled once more to Russia for health reasons in 1957. On her death in 1960, her many letters, diaries and writings were donated to the *Fondazione Istituto Gramsci*.

During her six weeks in the Soviet Union, Aleramo visited Moscow, travelled to Leningrad (now St Petersburg) and spent three weeks at a centre of the Soviet Writers' Union just outside the capital. Like many other Western travellers, she visited museums, libraries and factories, admired the new university and metro system and enjoyed evenings at the theatre and ballet. Her text provides few details of the journey

or the places she visited; instead it reads as a eulogy to the country whose vast expanses and awe-inspiring achievements evoke feelings of the sublime. Aleramo's depiction of Soviet Russia is imbued with an almost spiritual quality, which Pischedda describes as 'a messianic fideism with blatant preconceptions and vitalist assumptions' (1995, 167). Both the poem and speech contain strong religious connotations with references to her Communist faith, the Soviet miracle and Lenin as a modern-day prophet. This country, Aleramo exclaims, is 'greater than any other in the world / leading the assault on the future / first to ascend the right and just path' (1952, 5).

Opening her discourse, Aleramo imagines looking down on Russia from the vantage point of a mountain summit, assuming what Mary Louise Pratt (1992, 213) refers to as the 'the monarch-of-all-I-survey' stance:

> Just like the astonishment and awe when reaching the top of a mountain, the vague sense of wonder that you feel, so too arriving in Russia for the first time today it is difficult at first to believe in the miracle that confronts you. (1952, 13)

The authoritative subject position and totalising gaze that Aleramo adopts leads to a series of quite extraordinary claims about the Soviet Union which fit more with her preconceived ideas of greatness than with the reality before her. Indeed, she admits: 'I had known for years what I would find there' (1952, 13). She positions herself firmly within the competing discourses of the Cold War by comparing the USSR with the USA; while the former has eliminated poverty, illiteracy, prostitution and unemployment the latter is plagued by gangster crime and racial tensions in addition to all the other social ills (ibid., 19–20). In Russia, she claims, crime has been eradicated, there are no train or traffic accidents and state salaries permit a comfortable standard of living (ibid., 23). Aleramo praises the organisation of civil society including the education system, hospitals, and health care provisions. She employs superlatives in her hyperbolic descriptions of modernity: the tower of the new university is 'altissima' (very high), the main street is 'larghissima' (extremely wide) (ibid., 14–15), the metro system is 'sontuosa' (magnificent) (ibid., 17), providing a prime example of the techniques of pro-Soviet propaganda which Andreucci refers to as 'the language of amplification, the rhetoric of hyperbole, the use of flattering adjectives' (2005, 139). Her adulation of the USSR, however, does not involve a rejection of her own country; rather she speaks affectionately of 'my poor, dear Italy' and 'my poor and generous people' (1952, 9), drawing parallels between the two countries that have both been ravaged by war. The USSR is presented as offering a positive vision of the future to which Italy should aspire.

As one might expect from a writer associated with feminist concerns, Aleramo dedicates part of her discourse to her perceptions of the role of women in Soviet society. She focuses on the economic independence of women which, given her own financial difficulties following separation from her husband, she finds particularly appealing. She underscores the equal status afforded to women in the workplace and claims that now they are no longer financially dependent on their partners, relationships have improved, infidelity is a thing of the past, and the divorce rate is decreasing (1952, 24–25). Her comments are also aimed at dispelling the fears of those in Italy, particularly Catholics, who associated Communism with the abolition of the family. Russian women are, she insists, 'mothers who are no less enthusiastic than our own [Italian] mothers' (ibid., 21). Her physical descriptions of Soviet women further operate to dispel negative stereotypes of masculinised women: 'The women, the young and the not so young, were all elegantly

dressed and groomed, each one according to personal taste, with jewels on their fingers or around their necks' (ibid., 22).

Like Calvino and Viganò, Aleramo stresses mass participation in culture: everyone reads on the train, the libraries are crowded and there are queues outside the museums in Moscow and the Hermitage Gallery in Leningrad that surpass any of those one might find outside the Uffizi or the Louvre (1952, 29). Perhaps with a nod to her own predicament, while highlighting the importance of intellectuals in Soviet society, she draws attention to the living standards they enjoy, claiming that their income is sufficient to afford their own house and car (ibid., 23). She clearly positions herself within the cultural climate of social realism, commenting on the Soviet admiration for Italian neorealist directors, while condemning forms of 'bourgeois' culture: 'There's no hint of pessimism, existentialism or decadentism among these people' (ibid., 34). Such comments echo those of Togliatti at the sixth Congress of the PCI in which he called for writers to avoid 'the influence of degenerate forms of bourgeois culture' (Lucia 2003, 138). Aleramo's observations on Soviet culture appear to be an attempt to underline her support for the cultural policies of the PCI and its leader, while distancing herself from her former associations with the Futurists and other avant-garde intellectuals.

Clearly, Aleramo's political pilgrimage was not a truth-seeking mission. She even admits that as a poet she was not interested in figures and statistics (1952, 31). Her veneration of Russia with its hyperbolic descriptions and rather preposterous claims reads instead as a forceful demonstration of her new-found faith, aimed at reinforcing her relationship with the PCI and its leader to whom she was indebted for agreeing to finance the journey. Her account represents an attempt to erase any taints of a previous association with Fascist culture and provides a retort to any who doubted her Communist credentials.

Renata Viganò: through the prism of Fascism

Renata Viganò (1900–1976) was an active participant in the Italian anti-Fascist resistance, although her associations with Communism predate the outbreak of the Second World War. She was introduced to Marxist ideas by her husband Antonio Meluschi whom she met in 1935 shortly after he had been released from prison, where he had met Gramsci. Viganò's journalistic output was extensive and she was a regular contributor to *L'Unità*, though she is better known for her literary account of a woman's experiences of partisan resistance in *Agnese va a morire* (Agnes Chooses to Die) (1949) than she is for her journalism or travel reports. She defines herself in her articles as 'a partisan and communist', indicating that the same political convictions and experiences of anti-Fascist struggle which shape her fictional writing are also at the forefront of her reportage (Viganò 1950e). In March 1950 she travelled to Moscow along with 13 other members of a Communist-backed international peace movement, the Partisans of Peace, in order to present a peace plan to the Supreme Soviet. Her reports of this journey appeared on the cultural pages of *L'Unità* between March and May of that year.

Viganò's portrayal of life in the Soviet Union contains many of the features already noted above: she emphasises the efficient organisation of Soviet society, modernity, child welfare and female emancipation. The automobile factory that she visits is described as 'a marvel' and, like Carlo Levi, she claims that what differentiates the factories here from their European counterparts is the serene disposition of the workers and the mutual respect that exists between them (Viganò 1950f).[9] This, she argues, is

https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2015.1086735 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the outcome of living in a society which provides for the workers' basic needs as well as ensuring their participation in cultural activities, offering libraries and cultural houses alongside nurseries and canteens.

Part of Viganò's mission was to report on the Soviet elections of 12 March 1950. Her portrayal of election day in Moscow seeks to counteract Western accusations of intimidation and coercion in the voting process. According to Viganò's article, voters travelled from far afield to reach the polling stations and such was the eagerness of the people to reconfirm their faith in Stalin as their leader that voting was completed by mid-morning (Viganò 1950a). She depicts a relaxed and festive atmosphere in which the people are singing and dancing and where the ballot boxes are guarded by young children rather than military officials.

Yet, it is the spectre of war and Fascism that looms over Viganò's depiction of the USSR. In the opening line of the account of her visit to the Moscow metro system and the Kremlin museum, positive depictions of Russia are preceded by sinister images of military personnel on the streets of Bologna. For Viganò, the sight of the military triggers memories of the Black Brigades and alludes to Fascist undercurrents in post-war Italy:

> In the last few days, in Bologna, while looking around the piazza immersed in a siege-like atmosphere, with Jeeps full of men with dark expressions on their faces, just like those other dark expressions on trucks … that went by the miserable name of 'black brigades' during the Republic of Salò, I thought back to my days in Moscow, to the peaceful air of Moscow. (Viganò 1950c)

These dark, menacing images of Italy contrast with her idyllic depictions of Moscow as she recalls walking through Red Square on her way to visit the Kremlin: the air is calm, the streets are clean and the spring sunshine filters through the misty air, a scene which, for Viganò, represents the very antithesis of Fascism.[10]

In the same article, Viganò is astonished to discover that the director of the Moscow metro system is female and she uses Zinaida Petrovna's experience to illustrate the possibilities for social mobility and the status afforded to women in Soviet society. Here too the description is permeated with Viganò's memories of Fascism and the example of an emancipated Soviet woman is set against negative images of Fascist women:

> She is imposing in stature, but her face is not that of a high-ranking fascist woman, her demeanour does not evoke the brazen exhibitionists who vented their frustrations on us, with their garish military uniforms and hormonal excesses. It is the figure of a mother, a good, dignified mother, capable of running the day to day complexities of the 'metro'. (Viganò 1950c)

Whilst female members of the Fascist Party are portrayed as violent and unnatural, Petrovna's dual role as a working professional and mother is used by Viganò as evidence that Communism does not entail rejection of the maternal role.

Cold war tensions, the ongoing threat of war in Europe and a resurgence of Fascism in Italy are dominant threads in Viganò's articles. Her delegation comes from what she refers to as 'nations who are preparing for war', a reference to Italy's signing of the NATO agreement in 1949 (Viganò 1950b). Western nations are thus portrayed as belligerent while the Soviet Union, as a result of its role in defeating Fascism in Europe, embodies pacifism. It is, she continues, a country where 'peace has been achieved, it is a part of everyday life' (Viganò 1950b). Indeed her very sense of self is grounded in her personal experiences of war which, she believes, qualify her to speak on behalf of the Italian people in front of the Soviet leaders:

> Here is the place where comrade Stalin usually sits. Really I am too insignificant for such things. Yet I am not intimidated. I have earned this right through years and years of sacrifice and years and years of suffering. (Viganò 1950c)

Viganò frequently evokes Italy and Russia's common experiences of war, drawing parallels between Russians who died in the war and Italians lost during the Russian campaigns. Despite the fact that the Soviet Union and Italy fought on opposing sides she portrays both Italian and Russians soldiers as victims. Her emotive comments provide a bitter indictment of Italy's former leaders and once again point to a continuation of Fascist sympathies in post-war Italy:

> I think of the people who sent our soldiers into the deep Russian winter with nothing, just the pitiful flesh of sons who froze to death while their mothers cried in front of a useless hearth. These are the same arrogant and malicious militants who are now asking, with no consideration for the sacred grief of the families, 'Whatever happened to the Italian soldiers in Russia?'. (Viganò 1950d)

A further indictment of the Italian political landscape occurs when Viganò watches a screening of *The Fall of Berlin* in the Italia-URSS institute in Moscow. Viganò claims that this film would be censored in Italy not because it glorifies the role of Stalin in the defeat of Germany but rather because it depicts a Catholic prelate who supported the Nazis. Her accusations that Italy is a 'police state' are directed at the DC politician Mario Scelba who was known for his conservatism and anti-Communist stance (Viganò 1950b). Such fears of government censorship of culture once again contain echoes of life under Fascism, hinting at a continuation rather than a clean break with the former regime.

Viganò's favourable portrayal of the USSR is, I suggest, a result of her political positioning as a pacifist and anti-Fascist and is shaped by her participation in the Italian Resistance. Moreover, it is linked to contemporary events in Italy and Europe: the threat of a resurgence of Fascism in Italy, the consolidation of the power of the Christian Democrat Party, the signing of the NATO agreement, and the threat of censorship. Like her neorealist novel, *Agnese va a morire*, Viganò's accounts of Moscow can be read as a rejection of Western Cold War attitudes, which viewed Fascism and Communism as two sides of the same coin (Johnson and Johnson 2002, 196). Rather, she presents Soviet Communism as the antithesis of Fascism and highlights the role of the Soviet Union in defeating Fascism in Europe. It is therefore within this framework that Russia assumes in her writing the status of a utopian society.

Italo Calvino: a muted resistance?

Italo Calvino's (1923–1985) political ideas also developed as a response to his experiences of anti-Fascist resistance. He officially joined the PCI in 1944 and was a member until 1957 when he resigned his membership following the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. Calvino's views on the relationship between literature and politics and his often tense relationship with the PCI are well documented (Re 1990; Spriano 1992, 11–32). He dismissed notions of a direct and didactic link between literature and politics, believing that the individual voice of the writer could not be constrained by the dictates of political ideology. Even within his more militant journalistic articles on social issues, he was not always willing to toe the party line (Re 1990, 151–152). His friend Paolo Spriano described Calvino as 'convinced of Togliatti's party line, but uncomfortable at the same time' (1992, 14). This section suggests that these underlying frictions can also be detected within his account of the Soviet Union.

Calvino travelled to the USSR in October and November 1951 as part of a Communist Youth delegation and published a series of articles based on his journey in *L'Unità* in spring 1952 which were subsequently republished as 'Taccuino di viaggio nell'Unione Sovietica' (Diary of a Journey to the USSR). The journal is divided into 22 roughly chronological chapters, which relate the writer's experiences in Moscow, Leningrad and Azerbaijan. Like other foreign visitors to the Soviet Union of the time, Calvino was subject to a tightly organised itinerary which included requisite visits to collective farms, Soviet cultural institutions, publishing houses and young pioneer homes. He is presented with shining examples of modernity, from 3D cinema to the Moscow metro system; sporting prowess is on display at football and gymnastics finals; his hosts are eager to showcase their country's industrial strength at the Moskvitch car factory in Moscow and oil refinery in Baku; there are frequent outings to museums, exhibitions and art galleries, while his evenings are spent at the theatre, ballet and circus. Calvino relates his experiences mainly in the present tense, which lends a sense of authenticity and immediacy to the account. There are echoes of Calvino's other writing here too: his close attention to detail, the 'dailiness' of life, the folkloristic tone of the nostalgic descriptions of traditional Russia and the avoidance of direct political commentary are all techniques familiar to readers of *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (The Path to the Spiders' Nests) (1947), his fictional account of the Italian resistance.

Calvino's travelogue has been criticised for its myopic portrayal of Stalinist Russia. Loreto Di Nucci (1988, 636–637) claims that its many blind spots and misunderstandings indicate the extent to which Calvino fell prey to Soviet techniques of hospitality during his visit. Flores (1990a, 347) refers to the 'joyful naivety' of Calvino's account, while Catharine Mee (2005) has argued that in comparison to Calvino's writings on the USA his account of the USSR appears one-sided and stifled, reflecting both the writer's political allegiances and the exigencies of writing for a left-wing newspaper. Perhaps the sternest critic in this regard is Calvino himself: in a self-critical essay penned in 1979, 'Was I a Stalinist Too?', he reflects on his earlier writings and links his readiness to dismiss the negative aspects of the Soviet system to the role that Russia played in defeating Fascism in Europe.[11] Any lack of faith in Communism, he maintains, would have meant leaving the organisation, denying the values of the resistance, and abandoning all hope of future renewal. In this public *mea culpa*, Calvino acknowledges his complicity in reinforcing an insidious myth:

> This non-monumental way of presenting the USSR seemed to me the least conformist approach. But in fact the real Stalinist sin I was guilty of was precisely this: in order to defend myself from a reality which I did not know, but which in some way I sensed but did not want to articulate, I collaborated with this unofficial language of mine; it presented to official hypocrisy as a picture of serenity and smiles something that was trauma and tension and torture. (2003a, 198)

Despite his political beliefs at the time, Calvino confesses that while travelling in Communist countries he felt 'profoundly uncomfortable, foreign, hostile' (2003b, 203). My analysis shows that while 'Taccuino' provides an undeniably positive portrayal of the Soviet Union, a closer reading reveals some of the anxieties that Calvino alludes to in this later essay. A certain hesitancy becomes evident through the subject position of the traveller/narrator and the feelings of disorientation that he claims to experience, while one can detect a more sceptical tone through Calvino's use of exaggeration, irony and humour. Within the fantastical depictions of rural scenes there are further hints of unease, a sense that the traveller is not entirely convinced by the glossy portrayal of Soviet life and is conscious of the controlled and staged nature of the tour.

Rather than adopting the subject position of authoritative travel writer, Calvino's narrator begins his journey as a confused outsider, a disorientated sightseer who struggles to interpret his surroundings. On arrival he admits he does not quite understand the USSR: 'I have been in Moscow for twelve hours; as yet I have understood very little' (1995, 2417). His initial impressions of Moscow are contradictory; the city is a complex and incongruous place in which the modern is juxtaposed with the traditional, forming 'a patchwork of old and new, of high-rise and low-rise buildings, of construction zones and demolition zones' (ibid., 2418). The traveller's disquiet becomes evident in the futuristic description of the metro system:

> A long escalator transports us into luminous subterranean abysses. Am I entering the city of the next millennium? Confronted with such diverse and shimmering architecture I could almost be in Nineveh, Babylon or Atlantis. Outside of time, most certainly. Hence it is difficult for me to express an opinion … passing through these different stations, in this display of opulence, of materials and such a variety of styles, I wander around disorientated. (1995, 2420–2421)

While on one hand the allusion to ancient or fictional civilisations elevates the Soviet Union to a mythical status, the fact that these cities are known for their conquest and destruction sounds as a warning to Soviet aspirations. Moreover, the juxtaposition of antiquity with futuristic modernity emphasises the unsettling effect that the surroundings have on the traveller, who feels unable to situate himself in time or place. Later, in the description of the site of the new university the narrator adopts the future tense, projecting an image of future grandeur rather than present reality:

> The tower of the new University *will be* at the centre of a completely new city of one and a half million inhabitants which *will be built* within five years…. The structure *will be* decorated with marble, with granite, ceramics and gold-tinted glass, there *will be* large statues and clock-towers; alabaster columns, granite floors, transparent walls with shimmering mosaics and a large pool reflecting the entire construction. (1995, 2474–2475, emphasis added)

The site of the new university, like the metro system, exudes a sense of unreality and again leaves the traveller feeling disorientated, unable to interpret his surroundings (1995, 2419). The encounter with the modern metropolis is not an entirely positive experience and the traveller's unease seems to reflect Italy's own problematic relationship with modernity. If this unrelenting and all-consuming modernity offered by the Soviet system represents the future, Calvino seems to be saying, it is not one that Italy should adopt without reservation.

The position of an observer who is constantly trying to decipher and interpret the world around him is, however, a hermeneutic position that features in much of Calvino's writing.[12] 2013). It serves to underscore his status as an intellectual who reflects carefully on his subject matter before drawing any conclusions. Indeed, he mocks his travel companions who, as soon as they cross the border, interpret everything they see as a sign of socialism in action: 'My travelling companions who are eager to understand socialism from the train window ("There's a tractor, there's a silo! A house with flags and pictures of Lenin and Stalin!") are too impatient' (1995, 2409). Calvino's attempt to differentiate himself from the others in his group is a reworking of one of the most persistent themes of travel writing, that of the distinction between traveller and tourist. Here Calvino presents himself as a more discerning narrator who bases his interpretation of the country on patient observation rather than preconceived ideas.

The more positive aspects of the account should be read as part of the writer's attempt to engage with existing discourses on Communism and stereotypes of Russians. Calvino

attempts to refute negative stereotypes of Russians as cold, conformist and lacking individuality. His guide, for example, is described as spontaneous and jovial: 'That Italian journalist who wrote that the Russians don't know how to laugh had obviously never met V. Stepanovic' (1995, 2452). He stresses the warmth of people he meets and insists that social equality leads neither to uniformity nor to loss of individuality. Commenting on the young women that greet the delegation at Lviv station he writes: 'there's no such thing as a typical [Soviet] girl' (ibid., 2411). Similarly, the people on the streets of Moscow are 'very different from one another' (ibid., 2416) and at the theatre he notes that the audience is 'made up of a hundred thousand different types' (ibid., 2422). Even the legendary drinking habits of Russians are exposed as myth as Calvino insists that, despite the copious amounts of food at official dinners, Russians are not always drunk: 'Another concern that I had: that Russians drink and get others to drink like there's no tomorrow, turned out to be groundless' (ibid., 2451).

There are, however, several indications that the traveller is not entirely taken in by the image of the country that is being presented to him. While official guides are often invisible figures in travel writing, Calvino's references to his guide and interpreter indicate an awareness of the selective nature of his itinerary. He points out the tightly controlled nature of the visit to Red Square and the Kremlin where tourists are steered by guides whose role is to 'take them for a quick tour around Moscow and bring them back to their train' (1995, 2414–2415). On a tour of the underground there is a suggestion that the group is not really being given access to the full picture: 'We would only see four or five stations of one line because an important match was about to start at the stadium … and the stations would be too crowded for our delegation to take a guided tour' (ibid., 2420). Elements of doubt can also be detected in Calvino's account of the delegation's visit to Azerbaijan. Ostensibly this is a positive account of the dramatic transformation in living standards, which functions as a retort to claims that Russia was exploiting its provinces. Yet, the various claims that life in the region had improved dramatically, running water had been introduced, marshlands had been transformed into fruit orchards, collectivisation had put an end to internecine feuds and there had been a revival in the use of the national language are all tempered with terms such as 'he tells us', 'they tell us' and 'so I hear', indicating the second-hand nature of the reports (ibid., 2469). Similarly, claims regarding the longevity of the inhabitants of the Caucasus prompt an ironic response from the narrator: 'One is 125 years old – so I hear – the other 120. I had already heard about the longevity of the local farmers and I don't want to cast any doubt on this information' (ibid., 2470).

The use of humour and exaggeration also causes the reader to question the reliability of the account. A striking example of this is that, after visiting a collective farm in Azerbaijan, the director gives a crate of apples to each of the delegates. A similar event occurs at the next *kolkhoz* and the group then have to travel all the way back to Moscow surrounded by boxes of fruit. The scene becomes increasingly surreal as more apples appear at dinner and also in the film that they watch that evening, leading Calvino to claim that he's being pursued by apples: 'The apples are following us…. At the reception dinners there are tables spread with bowls of apples and bottles of apple juice. We go to the cinema and what do we see? Apples!' (1995, 2473).

In stark contrast to the aforementioned scenes of abundance and modernity, which leave the traveller feeling disorientated and ill-at-ease, are the depictions of traditional Russia. Calvino confesses that he prefers the traditional wooden houses to the new skyscrapers and even berates himself for acting like a nostalgic tourist who seeks the picturesque wherever he goes (1995, 2420). His rejection of modernity and progress in favour of the primitive

https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2015.1086735 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and traditional is a familiar trope of travel writing and signifies the traveller's quest for authenticity (see Cohen 2004, 103). In Calvino's travelogue his desire for the traditional and authentic seems to be at odds with his political project of depicting a successful, modern and progressive Socialist state and may thus explain some of the tensions of the text. As Di Nucci (1988, 637) comments, attention to rural life was part of the literary aesthetic of the time, and it is within the folkloristic depictions of rural scenes and village life that Calvino's prose becomes more animated. However, these nostalgic passages can also be seen as a source of potential disruption within the travelogue. For example, while travelling by train across the Ukraine, Calvino comments on a lively village scene:

> After the Dnieper, in one of those villages of little houses with kitchen gardens, I see an open-air dance in a paddock crammed full of dark women with red and yellow scarves dancing and skipping around. (1995, 2412–2413)

The location recalls the so-called Potemkin villages, a series of decorated façades along the river Dnieper, which, according to legend, were constructed on the orders of Prince Potemkin in an attempt to impress Catherine the Great on her visit to the southern provinces of the Russian Empire. Whether or not these Potemkin villages actually existed is itself a matter of contention. Calvino's idealised portrait of village life here can be read as an awareness that the delegation is being presented with a glossy façade to fit with a myth of the Soviet Union as prosperous and harmonious. A similarly evocative description is given of the traditional houses of Moscow:

> Among them there are also many charming little houses with a front porch and wooden lattice window frames. On the windowsill, between the double windows, in almost every one there are vases of flowers. But now, little by little, images of the old Russia come to my mind, especially in the more rustic and provincial parts of Moscow, evoking Gorky-esque atmospheres. And it is precisely over rooftops like these that the elusive sprites of Chagall take flight. (1995, 2419)

These depictions are pervaded with a sense of unreality, while the reference to Chagall's paintings again draws attention to the surreal and incomprehensible nature of the journey through the Soviet Union. Domenico Scarpa (1990, 22), one of the few critics to detect traces of dissent in Calvino's account, argues that the juxtaposition of the weightiness of Gorky with the aerial qualities of Chagall allows Calvino to combine political duty with a hint of unconscious rebellion and he offers the intriguing suggestion that this mystical sprite (*folletto*) represents Calvino himself. Indeed Calvino's non-conformism as a writer, his expressed desire to view the world from a different perspective and his ideals of lightness all tend to support this interpretation.[13] Despite editorial constraints, the author's political commitment and the demands of the literary aesthetics of the time, Calvino is still able to find textual strategies which enable him to assert his own distinctive voice and, albeit subconsciously, convey his unease when confronted with the Soviet Union's all-encompassing political project. The matter-of-fact depictions and somewhat stilted prose suggest that his admiration for the Soviet Union remained one of theoretical abstraction, while the use of irony, humour, exaggeration and fantasy elements in the text conveys the unsettling and disorientating effect of the actual experience of journeying through the USSR.

Conclusions

The accounts of journeys to the former Soviet Union discussed in this article all, to a greater or lesser degree, extol the virtues of the Soviet system. Yet rather than dismissing

https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2015.1086735 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the texts as naive political propaganda, they need to be understood within the historical and political context of the time as Italy emerged from the grip of Fascist dictatorship and war. Even within this framework, different positions emerge: Aleramo's rhetorical speech is a strong assertion of her new political faith and reflects both the need to repay her PCI sponsors and a desire to distance herself from her former cultural and political associations. Viganò's articles on Moscow are as much about her fears of a re-emergence or continuation of Fascism in Italy as they are about Communism in Russia, while Calvino's enigmatic and contradictory account points to a young writer torn between his affiliation to the PCI and the expectations of his left-wing readership on one hand, and his desire to establish an autonomous voice and his growing sense of unease with the realities of Soviet Communism on the other. The distancing devices that Calvino uses in his account of the USSR reveal signs of early tensions between the writer and the PCI and are indicative of how their relationship, along with that of many other left-wing intellectuals, would eventually rupture following the events of 1956.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Eliana Maestri for her expert help and advice in the translation of the original Italian citations.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. On the legacy of Fascism, the desire for post-war renewal and the myth of the Soviet Union, see Duggan (1995, 1–24).
2. For an overview of Italian writings on the USSR see Di Nucci (1988, 621–677); De Pascale (2001, 134–156); and Pischedda (1995, 161–208).
3. For a comprehensive discussion of the cultural politics of the PCI and its relationship with Italian intellectuals see Gundle (2000); also Ajello (1979).
4. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.
5. In the preface to the Italian translation of *Political Pilgrims*, Hollander admits that his original study neglected the writings of Italian travellers and did not address national and cultural variations (1988, 15). For a critique of Hollander, see David-Fox (2012). Rather than focusing on the uncritical traveller, David-Fox points to Soviet techniques of hospitality and the use of model institutions which were designed to showcase only a selective part of the USSR to the foreign traveller.
6. Polezzi (2014, 203) points to the 'ex-centric' position of much of Italian travel writing, which she attributes to Italy's late unification as a nation-state, its limited colonial period and the country's problematic relationship with modernity. On the specific nature of Italian travel writing on Russia during Fascism, see De Pascale (2001, 135).
7. See also Ben Ghiat (2004, 38–39).
8. For a detailed biography of Aleramo see Conti and Morino (1981).
9. Carlo Levi's comments when visiting a textile factory are remarkably similar (1964, 128–129).
10. Andreucci (2005, 213) notes how the juxtaposition of the colours red and black in Viganò's descriptions is used to symbolise opposing value systems.
11. 'Was I a Stalinist Too?' was first published in *La Repubblica* on December 16, 1979 in a special insert to mark the centenary of Stalin's birth, then assumed to be December 1879. The citations in this article refer to McLaughlin's translation in the collection *Hermit in Paris* (2003).

12. See, for example, Calvino's essay on Japan, 'The Old Woman in the Purple Kimono' (Calvino 2013).
13. On this latter point, see 'Lightness' (Calvino 1988).

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