

---

From Iron Curtain to Velvet  
Curtain? Peter Brook's *Hamlet*  
and the Origins of  
British–Soviet Cultural  
Relations during the Cold War

---

SARAH DAVIES

*The article assesses the significance of the Moscow tour of Peter Brook's Hamlet. It considers how far the tour succeeded in overcoming the symbolic iron curtain by examining what Hamlet meant for contemporaries on both sides of the political divide. It argues that the Hamlet tour served at once to perpetuate and undermine the divisions between East and West, confirming Iriye's observation that on one level the Cold War intensified antagonism between states, while on another it helped to foster the growth of internationalist sentiment.*

In November 1955 the innovative young director Peter Brook brought his new production of *Hamlet* to Moscow. This was an historic occasion: the first visit to the Soviet Union by a British theatre company. The *Hamlet* tour seemed to represent a thawing of East–West relations, a perfect illustration of the power of the performing arts to transcend the iron curtain. The metaphor of the iron curtain, like so much of the terminology of the Cold War, derived from theatre: iron safety curtains were designed to prevent the spread of fires from stage to auditorium.<sup>1</sup> Playing on this, the front cover of the Soviet satirical magazine, *Krokodil*, summed up the British visit with the words ‘we see no “iron curtain”, only a velvet one’.<sup>2</sup> But to what extent did *Hamlet* succeed in overcoming the barriers between Eastern and Western Europe symbolised by the iron curtain? To understand the broader significance of this visit, and of cold war cultural diplomacy more generally, we need to ascertain what *Hamlet* meant for contemporaries on *both* sides of the political divide.

Department of History, Durham University, 43 North Bailey, Durham, DH1 3EX;  
[s.r.davies@durham.ac.uk](mailto:s.r.davies@durham.ac.uk)

<sup>1</sup> Patrick Wright, *Iron Curtain: From Stage to Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> *Krokodil*, Dec. 1955.

The story of *Hamlet* forms part of a wider story about the evolution of East–West cultural diplomacy and the growing importance of state-sponsored performing arts tours during the cold war. Cultural diplomacy, defined here as government-directed international cultural relations activity aimed at advancing national interests,<sup>3</sup> has attracted considerable attention in recent years as scholars increasingly acknowledge the importance of the Cold War as a contest of ideologies and cultures, the ‘pursuit of war by other means’.<sup>4</sup> We now know more about the USSR’s (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) so-called ‘cultural offensive’ in the West, with its heavy emphasis on dance and music tours designed to showcase the supremacy of the Soviet system.<sup>5</sup> We are also learning more about the corresponding Western ‘counter-offensive’ in the Soviet Bloc, much of it targeted at the USSR itself. Not surprisingly, given the tendency of the two camps consciously or unconsciously to mirror each other’s practices, the West also attached considerable importance to tours of artists enlisted for the task of performing the nation/system.<sup>6</sup>

As the most highly visible manifestation of Western cultural diplomacy in the USSR, performing arts tours have not been ignored by scholars. However, like so much of the literature on the Cold War, studies of the cultural diplomacy of ‘the West’ in the USSR generally concentrate on US initiatives, such as the well-known tours of ‘jazz ambassadors’ in the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> Much less clearly understood are the distinctive contributions of Western European states, particularly during the 1950s, the formative period of East–West cultural relations. Barghoorn’s 1960 study, while still a mine of information, is in many ways dated, a product of the Cold War climate in which it was produced.<sup>8</sup> Caute’s excellent survey offers some tantalising glimpses of European performing arts tours of the USSR, including the *Hamlet* tour. Yet Caute’s primary focus remains superpower competition, the struggle between ‘*pax americana*’ and ‘*pax sovietica*’ as he puts it.<sup>9</sup> We still know too little about Western European theatre, dance and music tours in this period. What were their objectives, what forms did they assume and what was the nature of their influence? How were they shaped by both national and regional political imperatives and traditions of cultural diplomacy?

<sup>3</sup> Richard Arndt, *The First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century* (Washington D.C.: Potomac Books, 2005), xviii; J. M. Mitchell, *International Cultural Relations* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986), 1–7; Jessica Gielow-Hecht and Mark Donfried, ‘The Model of Cultural Diplomacy: Power, Distance and the Promise of Civil Society’, in Jessica Gielow-Hecht and Mark Donfried, eds., *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> David Caute, *The Dancer Defects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 6.

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Barghoorn, *The Soviet Cultural Offensive* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960); Nigel Gould Davies, ‘The Logic of Soviet Cultural Diplomacy’, *Diplomatic History*, 27, 2 (2003); Kirill Tomoff, *Virtuosi Abroad* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); Christina Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), 137–68.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Naima Prevots, *Dance for Export* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press). On mirroring, see Rana Mitter and Patrick Major, eds., *Across the Blocs* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 7–8.

<sup>7</sup> Lisa Davenport, *Jazz Diplomacy* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009); Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Caute, *The Dancer Defects*.

<sup>8</sup> Barghoorn, *The Soviet Cultural Offensive*.

<sup>9</sup> Caute, *The Dancer Defects*. The (inaccurate) reference to *Hamlet* is on page 79.

How important was it that participants on both sides of the curtain shared a common 'European' culture? This study goes a small way to addressing such questions by presenting a close analysis of one of Western Europe's earliest and arguably most important exercises in cultural diplomacy in the post-Stalin USSR, Britain's *Hamlet* tour.

It appears that, after some initial hesitation, Britain came to accept that it must play a leading role on the cultural front. Although not as quick off the blocks as France, which had a long tradition of cultural diplomacy and sponsored a landmark visit of the Comédie Française to the Soviet Union in 1954, Britain was initially more enthusiastic than its closest ally, the United States.<sup>10</sup> The Khrushchev–Bulganin visit to Britain in 1956 is often heralded as a breakthrough in the development of cultural links between the two states; however momentum was clearly building up long before this.<sup>11</sup> In 1955 the Conservative government took the controversial step of establishing a new body charged with responsibility for developing cultural ties with the USSR: the Soviet Relations Committee of the British Council (SRC). This committee merits closer attention since it played a critical role in the promotion of Soviet–British cultural relations in the 1950s: *Hamlet* was just one of the many performing arts tours and other visits it sponsored until it was disbanded in 1959.<sup>12</sup>

What prompted Britain to take such a leading role? As J. M. Lee points out, the government's attitude towards cultural diplomacy was generally lukewarm in this period.<sup>13</sup> However, cultural diplomacy assumed a higher priority when it could be harnessed to the cause of anti-communism on both a domestic and an international level. One of the SRC's central aims was to counteract the influence of the pro-Soviet so-called 'front' organisations in Britain which had monopolised cultural relations with the USSR. Its other main goal was to stimulate political change in the Soviet Union: it was thought that by exposing the educated elite to the culture of Western Europe, Britain could help to bring about the peaceful evolution of the Soviet system. For a European nation facing the decline of its hard power, this 'softer' approach to the East–West conflict seemed more viable than the confrontational and ambitious strategies still favoured by some in the United States. Unlike the Foreign Office, the State Department remained reluctant to commit wholeheartedly to cultural relations with the USSR at this stage. To give just one example: Everyman Opera Company had to overcome great resistance before it was permitted to take *Porgy and Bess* to the USSR in December 1955, and the State Department refused to pay for the visit,

<sup>10</sup> On the Comédie Française, see Cauté, *The Dancer Defects*, 78–9.

<sup>11</sup> On the significance of 1956 see John Morison, 'Anglo-Soviet Cultural Contacts since 1975', in Alex Pravda and Peter Duncan, eds., *Soviet-British Relations since the 1970s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 168; Mark Smith, 'Peaceful Coexistence at all Costs: Cold War Exchanges between Britain and the Soviet Union in 1956', *Cold War History*, 12, 3 (2012). Smith briefly discusses the *Hamlet* tour.

<sup>12</sup> One of the few works to consider the SRC in any detail is Lorraine Nicholas, 'Fellow Travellers: Dance and British Cold War Politics in the Early 1950s', *Dance Research*, 19, 2 (2001).

<sup>13</sup> J. M. Lee, 'British Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War: 1946–61', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 9, 1 (1998).

despite having funded other legs of the company's world tour.<sup>14</sup> The contrast with the SRC's active sponsorship of *Hamlet* could hardly be clearer.

Why was a tour of *Hamlet* seen as an ideal way to launch the SRC's operations in the Soviet Union? As Caute points out, like a sporting contest, the Cold War 'Cultural Olympics' required an agreed field of play.<sup>15</sup> With his transnational appeal and malleability, Shakespeare frequently served as the terrain for Cold War cultural battles.<sup>16</sup> Shakespeare provided a particularly valuable focus for Britain's contest with the USSR since he was regarded as both a British national icon and a key symbol of European 'civilisation'. Deploying Shakespeare allowed Britain to assert its European identity and 'culturedness' at a time when the Soviet Union was highlighting the common cultural values which distinguished Europeans from the allegedly uncultured 'brash Americans.'<sup>17</sup> It also offered Britain an opportunity to impress Soviet audiences with the superiority of its Shakespearean tradition and refute claims that only under socialism could the bard truly thrive. *Hamlet* was a particularly propitious choice, since it was perhaps the most 'universal' of Shakespeare's plays, and one which was hugely popular in the USSR during the cultural 'Thaw' following Stalin's death. British officials understood that Peter Brook's *Hamlet* would be compared directly with Soviet productions of *Hamlet*, and they expected it to win this competition.

Thus, in the eyes of the British officials involved in the tour, *Hamlet* was primarily an adjunct to foreign policy, a propaganda weapon designed to showcase the ascendancy of Britain and the West. Likewise, some representatives of the Soviet state regarded the visit through the limited framework of political warfare, seeing it as an opportunity to bolster the status of the USSR in various ways. But how was it understood by the non-state 'actors' involved? Akira Iriye has argued that on one level the Cold War intensified antagonism between nations, while on another it helped to stimulate the growth of more cooperative, internationalist sentiment.<sup>18</sup> The *Hamlet* tour certainly seems to exemplify these apparently contradictory tendencies. Officials may have regarded the tour as an extension of warfare, but sources generated by individuals rather than government departments suggest that British visitors and members of the Soviet public interpreted the tour in a more genuinely internationalist spirit. What was, for most, their first direct encounter with the 'other' encouraged them to question the stereotypes of the Cold War, to realise that they had much in common with one another and to seek to learn from and cooperate with their counterparts on the other side of Europe. The *Hamlet* tour is thus an intriguing example of the often ambiguous nature of Cold War cultural diplomacy and of how

<sup>14</sup> Walter Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945–1961* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 102–8; Charlotte Canning, *On the Performance Front: US Theatre and Internationalism* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 193–206.

<sup>15</sup> Caute, *The Dancer Defects*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Hattaway, Boika Sokolova and Derek Roper, eds., *Shakespeare in the New Europe* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> Caute, *The Dancer Defects*, 8; Eleanory Gilburd, 'To See Paris and Die: Western Culture in the Soviet Union, 1950s and 1960s' (PhD thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Akira Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997); *Global Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

Shakespeare had the power at once to undermine and perpetuate divisions between Eastern and Western Europe.

### Cultural Relations as a ‘Cold War Operation’

From the British government perspective, *Hamlet* was part of a wider political operation. It was the first major mission of the Soviet Relations Committee, a body established as a somewhat belated response to the cultural offensive launched by the Soviet Union after Stalin’s death. Following several years of relative isolationism, the new reform-minded Soviet leadership seemed eager to promote cultural relations with the West, especially Western Europe, to send their performing artists abroad and receive Western artists under the banner of international peace and understanding. Behind this public rhetoric lay a number of impulses, not least a desire to demonstrate the superiority of Soviet socialism by exploiting the prestige of Soviet high culture at a time when American culture was perceived by many European intellectuals to be materialistic and shallow.<sup>19</sup>

Initially the British government was unsure how to respond to its adversary’s new onslaught. Foreign Office officials were reluctant to abet what they regarded as just another variety of communist propaganda designed to encourage pro-Soviet sentiment in Britain. For example, in autumn 1953 one of the earliest proposals for developing British–Soviet cultural relations – that the Bolshoi Ballet might be invited to Britain – sparked concern in the Foreign Office that such a visit would be exploited not only by the Communist Party but also by pro-Soviet organisations such as the British–Soviet Friendship Society (BSFS) and the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR (SCR).<sup>20</sup> The latter societies, described somewhat dismissively by the government as ‘fronts’, were a particular source of concern, despite their relatively small size: in 1954 the BSFS and SCR had memberships of about 12,000 and 2,000 respectively. The smaller and less overtly political SCR was regarded in some ways as the most threatening since it had ‘a more respectable façade’ than the BSFS, which had been proscribed by the Labour Party and enjoyed the support of some influential non-communist intellectuals and cultural figures.<sup>21</sup>

However, it is clear that by boycotting cultural relations with the USSR, the British government simply played into the hands of the ‘fronts’, since the Soviet Union chose to rely on the latter as intermediaries when sending its performing artists to Britain. Increasing numbers of high-profile Soviet performers started to

<sup>19</sup> Barghoorn, *The Soviet Cultural Offensive*, 226; Gould Davies, ‘The Logic of Soviet Cultural Diplomacy’.

<sup>20</sup> The National Archives, London (henceforth TNA) FO 371/106591 Hohler to CRD and IRD, 19 Oct. 1953; Mason to Hayter, 2 Nov. 1953; Hayter to Mason, 20 Nov. 1953; Peck minute 24 Dec. 1953.

<sup>21</sup> TNA FO 371/111700 ‘The Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR’ September 1954 and Rennie minute, 6 Dec. 1954; Emily Lygo, ‘Promoting Soviet Culture in Britain: The History of the Society for Cultural Relations between the Peoples of the British Commonwealth and the USSR, 1924–1945’, *The Modern Language Review*, 108, 2 (2013); Sonja Grossmann, ‘Dealing with “Friends”: Soviet Friendship Societies in Western Europe as a Challenge for Western Diplomacy’, in Simo Mikkonen and Pia Koivunen, eds., *Beyond the Divide* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2015).

descend on Britain for the annual 'British-Soviet Friendship Months' held under the auspices of the BSFS and SCR.<sup>22</sup> In 1953 a delegation of twenty arrived (compared with only seven in 1952), including the violinist Igor Oistrakh and the director of the Moscow State Puppet Theatre, Sergei Obraztsev. The group toured the country, performing in front of substantial audiences at a variety of prestigious venues such as the Royal Albert Hall. The performances received attention in the press and, for the first time, from the BBC.<sup>23</sup> The 1954 'Month' was even more ambitious: at the direct instigation of the Soviet Presidium, the size of the delegation was increased to twenty-seven and prominent figures such as David Oistrakh and several Bolshoi Theatre artists were included.<sup>24</sup> Outside the framework of the Friendship Months, the BSFS and SCR also facilitated tours arranged by commercial impresarios: in 1954, with their support, the impresario Peter Daubney organised successful visits of the Berezka folk dance ensemble and the Moscow State Puppet Theatre.<sup>25</sup>

The Foreign Office was at once impressed and alarmed by this new-style Soviet show of strength. Following the 1953 Friendship Month, the Northern Department's Harry Hohler reported that Soviet artists had enjoyed 'a well deserved success.' Noting the absence of overt Soviet propaganda at the events, he concluded that 'there must be many intelligent people who have been persuaded, as likely as not unconsciously, to lend a more sympathetic ear to Soviet claims and pretensions'.<sup>26</sup> Over the course of 1954 anxiety mounted about the wisdom of allowing the 'fronts' to act as mediators of Soviet culture in Britain (and of British culture in the USSR).<sup>27</sup> In theory, the government could have denied visas to the Soviet visitors, but brandishing the visa weapon was regarded as politically inflammatory. Instead, government officials were instructed to decline Soviet Embassy invitations to all Friendship Month events.<sup>28</sup> By this stage, many in the Foreign Office had reached the conclusion that the only effective way to marginalise the Soviet 'stooges' would be for the government to channel British-Soviet cultural relations through a more politically suitable agency. They based this idea on the assumption that 'the Soviets are always very ready to discard local communists when they become more nuisance than use'.<sup>29</sup>

As it happened, the 'fronts' were indeed starting to be regarded as a nuisance in Moscow. Concerns were developing within the Central Committee's Department of Culture about their ability to cope with the increasing volume of Soviet visitors to Britain. Ironically, whereas British officials had been struck by the success of the 1954

<sup>22</sup> Nicholas, 'Fellow Travellers', 87.

<sup>23</sup> Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (henceforth RGALI) 2329/8/102/157-9; TNA FO 371/106582 Note of Visit of Soviet Cultural Delegation to U.K., Nov., 1953. On Obraztsev's visits to Britain, see Eleonory Gilburd, 'Books and Borders: Sergei Obraztsev and Soviet Travels to London in the 1950s', in Anne Gorsuch and Diane Koenker, eds., *Turizm: The Russian and East European Tourist under Capitalism and Socialism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (henceforth RGANI) 3/35/39/58-63.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Daubney, *My World of Theatre* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), 149-51.

<sup>26</sup> TNA FO 371/106582 Hohler to Hayter, 7 Dec. 1953.

<sup>27</sup> TNA FO 371/106591 Hohler minute, 30 Mar. 1954 and. Rennie minute, 9 Apr. 1954.

<sup>28</sup> TNA FO 371/111700 Kirkpatrick circular, 2 Nov. 1954.

<sup>29</sup> TNA FO 371/111700 Rennie minute, 6 Dec. 1954 and Ward to Hohler, 3 Dec. 1954.

Friendship Month, the Soviet authorities were unhappy with the BSFS's management of the proceedings. According to Soviet reports, the concert halls were half-empty and apart from David Oistrakh's very successful event, no other solo concerts had been arranged. The whole episode convinced Soviet officials that the USSR should consider establishing direct contacts with impresarios and other relevant agencies, rather than simply relying on the friendship societies. Such arrangements would have obvious financial advantages, but more importantly, they would allow Soviet artists to get a proper showing: 'the chance . . . to compete on a level playing field with the best musicians and singers from capitalist countries, the chance to demonstrate more fully and convincingly the advantages of Soviet art'.<sup>30</sup>

So, it transpired that both Britain and USSR shared a common interest in bypassing the friendship societies. But squeezing out the 'fronts' was not the sole argument in favour of the government embracing cultural relations. By the mid-1950s it was becoming increasingly clear that it was not in Britain's interest to be perceived to be erecting 'its own, rather ineffective, Iron Curtain' by boycotting cultural links with the Soviet Union.<sup>31</sup> There was also a growing sense that a policy of 'cultural infiltration', as Hixson calls it, was likely to have a desirable political effect on the USSR. Influenced, no doubt, by modernisation theory, British officials argued that exposing Soviet citizens to 'Western' culture and ideas, from which they had been cut off under Stalin, could stimulate a process of evolutionary change within the USSR, which might, over the longer term, help to bring about the end of the Cold War.<sup>32</sup> The educated Soviet elite was assumed to be the natural 'target' for this variety of political warfare. British overseas propaganda, unlike that of the United States, had always been oriented exclusively towards elites, the so-called 'opinion-formers', and Foreign Office officials spoke explicitly about the 'new Soviet bourgeoisie', the 'new class' and the 'intelligentsia' as the 'primary "target" in terms of political warfare' over the long term.<sup>33</sup> Educated professionals and white-collar workers, commonly referred to in the USSR as the 'intelligentsia', made up an increasing proportion of the USSR's population by the mid-1950s.<sup>34</sup> It was suggested that this element was more likely to be dissatisfied with the status quo and in a position to exert some political pressure on the leadership. This 'class' was also thought to be especially susceptible to an injection of European high culture: officials spoke about exploiting

<sup>30</sup> RGALI 2329/8/51/1-11; RGANI 5/17/545/13-19; TNA FO 371/111784 Hayter to Hohler, 22 Nov. 1954. For more on the Soviet perspective, see Tomoff, *Virtuosi Abroad*, 172-4.

<sup>31</sup> TNA FO 371/106591 Hohler to CRD and IRD, 19 Oct. 1953 and Hohler minute, 30 Mar. 1954; Nick Rutter, 'The Western Wall: The Iron Curtain Recast in Midsummer 1951', in Patryk Babiracki and Kenyon Zimmer, eds., *Cold War Crossings: International Travel and Exchange across the Soviet Bloc, 1940s-1960s* (College Station: Texas A and M Press, 2014).

<sup>32</sup> Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*; TNA FO 371/111784 Hohler to Ward, 17 July 1954 and Hayter to Eden, 25 Oct. 1954.

<sup>33</sup> Philip Taylor, *The Projection of Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 3; Reinhold Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994) 53-4; TNA FO 371/111784 Hohler to Mason, 4 May 1954 and Jellicoe minute, 15 June 1954; TNA FO 371/116816 Turton to Brooke, 29 Jan. 1955.

<sup>34</sup> Benjamin Tromly, *Making the Soviet Intelligentsia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3.

‘the nostalgia which educated Russians undoubtedly feel for the culture of Western Europe from which Stalinism has practically excluded them’, observing that the Comédie Française’s path-breaking visit had given the ‘intelligentsia’ a chance to express ‘these pent-up feelings’.<sup>35</sup>

From a British perspective, this gradualist version of political warfare seemed a better option than the more militant strategies hitherto favoured by the United States, which continued to harbour hopes of ‘liberating’ the peoples behind the iron curtain and to rely on methods such as broadcasting stridently anti-communist messages on Radio Free Europe. While some members of the Eisenhower administration were starting to recognise the advantages of a ‘cultural infiltration’ approach, at this stage there was still considerable resistance in the United States to the idea of any form of cooperation with the Soviet Union.<sup>36</sup> It is worth emphasising here that the Churchill and Eden governments had always been more interested in finding diplomatic solutions to the East–West conflict in the early 1950s.<sup>37</sup> Britain was understandably averse to methods likely to provoke conflict on the continent of Europe and keen to exploit the opportunities presented by geographical proximity and a shared European culture and history. It was also becoming ever more apparent that Britain would have to rely on soft power, including cultural diplomacy, if it was to maintain its influence on the world stage at a time of declining military and economic power.<sup>38</sup>

Although there were strong arguments in favour of Britain engaging in cultural relations with the Soviet Union, there were some equally strong objections to the notion of cooperating with what was perceived by many to be a hostile, ‘totalitarian’ regime. Fears were expressed that such a policy would serve to legitimise the Soviet Union, to make it appear ‘a normal and reasonable country’. There was also anxiety about the political risks of exposing Britain to yet more Soviet influence. It was suggested that the policy might have a disarming effect and that Britons might come to believe that ‘because the Russians are displaying the arts of peace, they are neglecting the arts of war’. The international repercussions could also be considerable, with the possible US reaction to British–Soviet ‘cultural flirtation’ a particular cause for concern. Even if these risks were perceived to be outweighed by the potential benefits, there was also the question of cost: could the expense really be justified at a time when the budgets of the Information Services were under considerable strain?<sup>39</sup>

In the end, after some prevarication, the case for British involvement prevailed, in part thanks to a campaign led by the Labour MP, Christopher Mayhew, a fervent

<sup>35</sup> TNA FO 371/111784 Hohler to Mason, 4 May 1954.

<sup>36</sup> Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*, 87–119; Lowell Schwartz, *Political Warfare against the Kremlin* (London: Palgrave, 2009), 181–208.

<sup>37</sup> Antonio Varsoi ‘Britain as a Bridge between East and West’, in W. Loth, ed., *Europe, Cold War and Coexistence 1953–1965* (London: Frank Cass, 2004).

<sup>38</sup> On ‘soft power’ see Joseph S. Nye, ‘Soft Power’, *Foreign Policy*, 80 (1990), 153–71.

<sup>39</sup> TNA FO 371/116816 Turton to Brooke, 29 Jan. 1955; Turton to Kirkpatrick, 17 Dec. 1954; Hohler to Grey, 23 Dec. 1954; TNA FO 371/111784 Jellicoe minute, 15 June 1954.



proponent of measures to counter Soviet propaganda.<sup>40</sup> In early 1955 the government agreed to set up a Soviet Relations Committee (SRC) under the auspices of the British Council. Chaired by Mayhew, it included a Conservative MP, the Chair of the TUC, a Foreign Office representative and the Director General of the British Council.<sup>41</sup> This association between the British Council and the SRC always had the potential to be problematic. Whereas the Council was supposed to refrain from overtly 'political' activity and operate at arm's length from government, the SRC was an undisguisedly political body which was expected to work closely with the Foreign Office.<sup>42</sup> As the Foreign Office's Robin Turton explained to the Treasury, this was not a normal British Council programme, so could not be financed out of existing Council funds. Instead it was 'a cold war operation designed to frustrate the activities of the Dean of Canterbury and suchlike persons' (a reference to the chairman of the BSFS): the British Council was simply serving as an umbrella.<sup>43</sup> At the first meeting of the SRC in April 1955, it was initially suggested that the committee's objective should be 'to spread a knowledge of Britain inside the Soviet Union primarily by encouraging visits to this country under proper auspices and discouraging visits under communist auspices.' Presumably this overtly anti-communist slant and the emphasis on one-way communication rather than dialogue were regarded as too contentious for activity nominally under British Council auspices, for it was decided that the 'formal definition' of the SRC's objectives should be less obviously political: 'to encourage on a reciprocal basis mutual understanding between the two countries, primarily by sponsoring under approved auspices visits in both directions of groups concerned with a variety of professional and similar subjects'.<sup>44</sup> Rhetoric about 'mutual understanding' notwithstanding, it is clear that, from the very start, the SRC was viewed primarily as a weapon in the battle against communism both at home and abroad. *Hamlet* was an essential first step in this 'Cold War operation'.

### **The Importance of Playing Shakespeare: Theatre and National Prestige**

Why was *Hamlet* chosen as the SRC's first major mission in the USSR? The committee had identified three priorities: first, to bring 'influential Russians' to Britain; second, to send 'sensible representatives of Britain' to the Soviet Union; third, 'to promote, on a reciprocal basis, artistic and cultural manifestations'.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Mayhew had been responsible for establishing the government's clandestine anti-communist propaganda unit, the IRD. Christopher Mayhew, *A War of Words: A Cold War Witness* (London: Tauris, 1998).

<sup>41</sup> TNA BW 2/540 British Council Executive Committee, draft minutes, 5 Apr. 1955.

<sup>42</sup> Frances Donaldson, *The British Council: The First Fifty Years* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984).

<sup>43</sup> TNA FO 371/116816 Hohler, minutes of meeting of 23 Feb. 1955, 'Setting up a special committee of the British Council'.

<sup>44</sup> TNA FO 371/116816 British Council Executive Committee: Sub-Committee on Cultural Relations with the USSR, agenda, 21 Apr. 1955; British Council Soviet Relations Committee, draft minutes, 21 Apr. 1955.

<sup>45</sup> TNA FO 371/116816 British Council Soviet Relations Committee, draft minutes, 21 Apr. 1955.

'Manifestations' – performing arts tours, art exhibitions and so on – were relegated to third place not only because of the expense involved but also because of the perception that this was the area in which the Soviet Union had the most to gain. As Mayhew put it, manifestations 'give the maximum impression of free contact, and create the maximum goodwill for the Soviet Union, while necessitating the minimum real breach in the Iron Curtain'.<sup>46</sup>

Although manifestations were not the top priority, it was agreed that if the SRC was to succeed it must kick off with a highly visible cultural event. From the outset, Foreign Office officials exerted a remarkable degree of influence over the selection of this manifestation. Their prime consideration was that it should be of the highest quality and guaranteed to enhance British prestige in the USSR. They were particularly concerned that there should be no repeat of a recent blow to prestige – Dinamo's 5–0 victory over Arsenal in a 'friendly' football match in Moscow. Sport, like culture, was an important Cold War battleground (and one where it was more than usually obvious who the winners and losers were.) Arsenal was the first British club to play in the USSR and the match coincided with a British Parliamentary Delegation visit to Moscow. The humiliating defeat was thus the source of much angst, with officials complaining that the match had done 'nothing to enhance British prestige in the field of sport or to improve Anglo-Soviet relations . . . its main effect was to minister to Russian self-satisfaction and to their conviction of their complete superiority over us even in fields in which we are traditionally expert'.<sup>47</sup> Ambassador Sir William Hayter wrote to the foreign secretary Sir Anthony Eden stressing that lessons must be learned: whatever cultural manifestation Britain chose to send to the Soviet Union should be of the 'highest quality' and matters of this importance should not be left to 'politically irresponsible' bodies such as the Football Association.<sup>48</sup>

It appeared to go without saying that a manifestation of British 'high' culture was required for the latest round of British-Soviet competition. Like a football match, a cultural contest needed a common terrain,<sup>49</sup> and it was assumed that Britain would respond to the predominantly high cultural offensive of the USSR with an offering designed to underline its own commitment to high culture and guaranteed to appeal to its political target, the educated Soviet elite, with its strong interest in European high culture. A tour by a suitable British theatre company seemed the most logical choice. Theatre occupied a privileged position in Soviet cultural life and the Soviet authorities had been signalling their interest in a theatre visit since 1953.<sup>50</sup> More importantly, literature and theatre were widely recognised as Britain's greatest

<sup>46</sup> TNA BW 2/531 British Council Soviet Relations Committee, draft minutes 13 Sept. 1955; TNA FO 371/135375 Mayhew 'The Soviet Relations Committee', 1957.

<sup>47</sup> Stephen Wagg and David L. Andrews, eds., *East Plays West: Sport and the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Peter Beck, 'Britain and the Cold War's 'Cultural Olympics': Responding to the Political Drive of Soviet Sport, 1945–58', *Contemporary British History*, 19, 2 (2005), 177–8.

<sup>48</sup> TNA FO 371/111784 Hayter to Eden, 25 Oct. 1954.

<sup>49</sup> Caute, *The Dancer Defects*.

<sup>50</sup> Anatoly Smeliansky, *The Russian Theatre after Stalin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), xx–xxi; TNA FO 371/111784 passim.

cultural strengths. As Lord Silkin subsequently acknowledged during a parliamentary debate on the arts, Britain had not produced any truly great composers or painters but ‘Shakespeare and Dickens are as familiar in the Soviet Union and in other countries behind the Iron Curtain as they are in this country and in Germany’. He described this as ‘a wonderful cultural inheritance which has been handed to us . . . a great bond between nations’.<sup>51</sup> Literature and theatre had traditionally played a prominent role in Britain’s cultural relations with other countries: Jessica Gienow-Hecht observes that whereas Germany tended to stress music and France art when cultivating ties with the United States before the First World War, Britain relied on its literature and theatre.<sup>52</sup> In the aftermath of the Second World War, British theatre diplomacy assumed particular importance: an Old Vic tour of war-ravaged Europe in the summer of 1945 was followed by a succession of international theatre tours, including a remarkable British Council-sponsored seven-month tour of Australasia by the Old Vic in 1948.<sup>53</sup>

In the context of Cold War cultural competition, theatre was one sphere in which Britain had some chance of demonstrating its superiority vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. At this stage it was considered too risky to try to compete in any of the obvious Soviet areas of strengths, such as ballet. For example, the SRC expressed concerns that Sadler’s Wells ‘might not be of a sufficiently high technical standard to be favourably received in the Soviet Union’.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, in 1956 the Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs advised against Khrushchev and Bulganin attending an opera or ballet at Covent Garden during their visit to Britain ‘because we cannot match the Russian performances’. It was suggested that the Soviet leaders could see a Shakespearean production at the Old Vic instead.<sup>55</sup>

Shakespeare, one of Britain’s most valuable cultural assets, was the obvious candidate for the SRC to take to the USSR. According to what Dennis Kennedy calls the ‘myth of cultural ownership’, Shakespeare is often deemed to ‘belong’ to England by virtue of having been born in Stratford and writing in English.<sup>56</sup> He has been defined as ‘our Shakespeare’, ‘the National Poet’ or, as Silkin put it in his aforementioned speech, ‘a wonderful cultural inheritance which has been handed to us’. Yet, as Silkin’s speech also implied, Shakespeare has been valuable for Britain precisely because of his status as a transnational as well as a national icon, a figure whose appeal transcends geographical borders. This appeal has meant that Shakespeare has often served to create common bonds across cultures, for example in his role as a ‘European’ writer.<sup>57</sup> However, he has also been the focus of national and ideological conflict. During periods of international tension, rival nations have sometimes vied

<sup>51</sup> Hansard, Parliamentary Debates, 5th Series, 204, House of Lords Debates, cols. 989–90.

<sup>52</sup> Jessica Gienow-Hecht, *Sound Diplomacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 20–7.

<sup>53</sup> Tony Howard, ‘1948/2012: Building Nations’, in Paul Prescott and Erin Sullivan, eds., *Shakespeare on the Global Stage* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 260–4.

<sup>54</sup> TNA BW 2/540 British Council Soviet Relations Committee, minutes, 28 July 1955.

<sup>55</sup> TNA FO 371/122813 Lowe minute, 18 Feb. 1956.

<sup>56</sup> Dennis Kennedy, ed., *Foreign Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993), 16.

<sup>57</sup> Hattaway et al, *Shakespeare*, 19.

over ownership of Shakespeare. Britain has not been alone in claiming Shakespeare as its 'National Poet': in nineteenth-century Germany, he was adopted by romantic nationalists as '*unser Shakespeare*', and at times of heightened British–German rivalry, arguments flared over who actually owned him. For example, in the midst of the First World War, the German dramatist Hauptmann proclaimed: 'there is no people, not even the English, which can with more justification claim Shakespeare as their own as the German people . . . And even if it was in England that he was born and lies buried, Germany is the country where he truly lives'.<sup>58</sup>

The nineteenth century also witnessed growing Russian infatuation with the bard, particularly amongst writers. Turgenev was notably enamoured: in a speech to mark the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare's birthday he too claimed ownership of Shakespeare, declaring that he had become 'our flesh and blood'.<sup>59</sup> Shakespeare continued to be revered in the Soviet Union, where the Communist Party's civilising mission included the selective but energetic promotion of European classical realist culture to the masses in the name of what Yurchak calls 'good internationalism'.<sup>60</sup> While the ambivalence of the writer's work meant that he 'could, and usually did, simultaneously serve and subvert the official ideology', it was the state's harnessing of Shakespeare to the cause of Soviet socialism that was perhaps more immediately striking than his appropriation for subversive purposes.<sup>61</sup> This was especially true of the Stalin years, when an elaborate official cult of Shakespeare developed based on his role as the 'founding father' of socialist realism. Shakespeare was 'Sovietised' to the extent that in 1939 the director Sergei Radlov could assert: 'In twenty-five years, in the anniversary year of Shakespeare's 400<sup>th</sup> birthday, bewildered Western scholars will have to certify that Shakespeare has changed his place of birth, and [instead] of the countries which speak his native English tongue, he now prefers the variety of dialects and languages of the great family of nations which populate our Union'.<sup>62</sup> Soviet Shakespeare veneration continued after Stalin's death, along with official claims that only in the USSR was the 'people's writer' truly understood and appreciated.

This Soviet cult of Shakespeare presented Britain with certain opportunities. The predominantly non-verbal, less overtly ideological, arts of music and dance are the mainstay of much cultural diplomacy. Theatre does not always translate between cultures so readily, but Shakespeare's popularity in the Soviet Union meant that his plays had the potential to serve as a *lingua franca*. Shakespeare's *Europeanness* was also an asset. By deploying Shakespeare Britain could deliver an important message about the two countries' common European identity, which was useful at a time when the

<sup>58</sup> Manfred Pfister, 'Hamlets Made in Germany, East and West', in Hattaway et al, *Shakespeare*, 79.

<sup>59</sup> Eleanor Rowe, *Hamlet: A Window on Russia* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 65.

<sup>60</sup> Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More. The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 162–3. See also Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>61</sup> Irena Makaryk and Joseph Price, eds., *Shakespeare in the Worlds of Communism and Socialism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 5.

<sup>62</sup> Arkady Ostrovsky, 'Shakespeare as a Founding Father of Socialist Realism: The Soviet Affair with Shakespeare', in Makaryk and Price, *Shakespeare*, 56–83.

USSR was, for its own reasons, choosing to emphasise the cultural unity of Europe and recalling the connections between Russian/Soviet artists and their counterparts across the rest of the continent.<sup>63</sup> It would also allow Britain to distinguish itself subtly from the United States, with which it had often been associated in Soviet propaganda about ‘Anglo-American warmongers’. Finally, a top-quality British production might challenge Soviet assumptions about the inherent superiority of ‘their’ Shakespeare: as Hayter commented when a tour was first mooted, ‘Soviet propaganda suggests that capitalist England has commercialised Shakespeare and discarded its poetic birthright and it would do a certain amount of good if even a small selected company of students could see that British theatrical and Shakespearean tradition are still high’. Rejecting a suggestion that Soviet actors could be used for the crowd scenes, he argued that ‘Russian productions of Shakespeare are stereotyped and half the point of bringing a British company over to Russia would be lost if we could not present the best of our production as a whole’.<sup>64</sup> The Northern Department’s George Jellicoe also supported sending a Shakespearean company, partly because of Soviet familiarity with the plays, but also because ‘we can act Shakespeare better than the Russians can’.<sup>65</sup>

The political advantages of presenting Shakespeare were thus abundantly clear. Only one other serious suggestion was floated – that Britain should send a production of Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler*. Although this production was highly-rated, the playwright’s nationality created problems. Hayter expressed strong reservations: ‘it seems to me slightly absurd that the first English company to come here should present a foreign play in translation; it creates the impression that there are no English plays’. The Deputy Under-Secretary Sir Harold Caccia was adamant that the government would not pay for a play by a Norwegian author. Although there was some discussion about whether such a ‘nationalist line’ was justified, the project was in any case killed by the Cultural Counsellor at the Soviet Embassy who declared *Hedda Gabler* ‘too gloomy’ and expressed a strong preference for a British play.<sup>66</sup>

For the purposes of prestige it was vital that Shakespeare be performed by a company of the highest quality – as Hayter put it, ‘no second team would do’. From the Foreign Office’s typically conservative perspective the two safest options were the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre (SMT) and the Old Vic, although concerns were expressed about the quality of both these.<sup>67</sup> In an explicit comparison with the recent football fiasco, the British Council’s Kenneth Johnstone commented that sending the Old Vic would be like ‘sending Arsenal to represent British football’. Johnstone’s preference was for the SMT, but others felt that its standards had fallen recently because of its policy of ‘favouring the young and unknown’ and ‘the regrettable

<sup>63</sup> Barghoorn, *The Soviet Cultural Offensive*, 232–5.

<sup>64</sup> TNA FO 371/106582 Hohler to Hayter, 7 Dec. 1953; TNA 371/111784 Hayter to Hohler, 31 Dec. 1953.

<sup>65</sup> TNA FO 371/111784 Jellicoe minute, 15 June 1954.

<sup>66</sup> TNA FO 371/111784 Jellicoe minute, 4 Oct. 1954; Ward minute, 9 Oct. 1954; Hohler minute, 12 Oct. 1954; TNA FO 371/116816 Hohler to Ward, 26 Jan. 1955; TNA FO 371/116814 Hayter to Hohler, 20 Jan. 1955.

<sup>67</sup> TNA 371/111784 Hayter to Hohler, 31 Dec. 1953; Hayter to Hohler, 20 May 1954.

experiments of Anthony Quayle'. However, the fact that Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh were due to return to the company in 1955 was cause for optimism. The couple were well-known in the USSR thanks to their film roles, the Soviet authorities had explicitly mentioned that they wanted them to come and Olivier was apparently eager to have the distinction of being the first major British actor to perform in the USSR.<sup>68</sup>

In the end, however, it proved impossible to secure the services of either company within the necessary timeframe.<sup>69</sup> By August 1955, as Soviet–British relations entered their post-Geneva summit 'honeymoon' phase, the pressure on Britain to offer a demonstration of its commitment grew increasingly urgent.<sup>70</sup> At the last minute a new option presented itself in the form of Tennent Productions' *Hamlet*, directed by Peter Brook and starring Paul Scofield. Although not as obviously prestigious as an Old Vic or SMT production, there were strong indications that it would of suitable quality to take to Moscow.<sup>71</sup> H. M. Tennent Ltd had dominated the West End for years under the guidance of the influential Binkie Beaumont, who could count Sir Anthony Eden amongst his personal friends.<sup>72</sup> Beaumont was in a position to attract the finest actors and directors, including the young Peter Brook, who by the mid-1950s had already established his reputation as an innovative Shakespearean director.<sup>73</sup> Brook had a long history of successful collaboration with Paul Scofield, regarded as one of the outstanding actors of his generation.<sup>74</sup> Expectations for the Brook–Scofield *Hamlet* were thus justifiably high.

The choice of *Hamlet* proved to be particularly serendipitous. Of all Shakespeare's plays, it undoubtedly enjoys the greatest international renown, in part because of its capacity to address such broad socio-political and philosophical questions.<sup>75</sup> As the Polish critic Jan Kott famously put it, 'Hamlet is like a sponge. Unless produced in stylized or antiquarian fashion, it immediately absorbs all the problems of our time'.<sup>76</sup> *Hamlet* had always provided a rich medium for nations such as Germany and Russia to engage in self-analysis. In Kott's communist Poland *Hamlet's* status as an officially-sanctioned Shakespearean 'classic' meant that it could be used to explore the experience of dictatorship without unduly provoking the authorities. It served a similar Aesopian function of veiled critique in other Soviet Bloc countries, including the USSR itself.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>68</sup> TNA FO 371/116814 Johnstone to Grey, 23 Dec. 1954 and Parrott to Hohler, 19 Apr. 1954; TNA FO 371/111784 Nicholls minute, 29 Apr. 1954 and Grant minute, 30 July 1954; TNA BW 2/540 Paper B, SRC, 28 July 1955.

<sup>69</sup> TNA FO 371/116814 Hohler minute, 26 Aug. 1955 and Jellicoe minute, 30 Aug. 1955.

<sup>70</sup> Sir William Hayter, *The Kremlin and the Embassy* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1966), 134.

<sup>71</sup> TNA FO 371/116814 Loch to Jellicoe, 27 Aug. 1955.

<sup>72</sup> John Elsom, *Cold War Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1992), 25–36.

<sup>73</sup> Elsom, *Cold War*, 35.

<sup>74</sup> Gary O'Conner, *Paul Scofield: The Biography* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 2002); J. C. Trewin, *Paul Scofield* (London: Rockcliff, 1956).

<sup>75</sup> Hattaway et al, *Shakespeare*, 20.

<sup>76</sup> Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (London: Methuen, 1964).

<sup>77</sup> Alexander Shurbanov and Boika Sokolova, *Painting Shakespeare Red* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001); Hattaway et al, *Shakespeare*; Zdenek Stribrny, *Shakespeare and Eastern Europe* (Oxford:

In the USSR *Hamlet* had experienced a predictably chequered fate. Prior to the revolution, the most significant production had been the Moscow Art Theatre's modernist 1911–12 version co-directed by Stanislavsky and Britain's Gordon Craig (it was fortunate that this earlier example of Anglo-Russian *Hamlet* collaboration was still warmly remembered in the Soviet Union of the 1950s.) The interwar period saw two major Soviet productions – Mikhail Chekhov's of 1924–5 and Nikolai Akimov's of 1932 – both of which attracted criticism from the authorities. Stalin reportedly loathed *Hamlet*, with its vacillating intellectual protagonist, and no important productions of the play appear to have been staged during or after the war.<sup>78</sup> Only after Stalin's death did *Hamlet* return to the Soviet stage with a vengeance: 'Hamlet fever' broke out almost immediately as the play came to be identified with the reformist spirit of the Thaw.<sup>79</sup> At the end of 1953 Grigorii Kozintsev's production based on Pasternak's translation opened in Leningrad, while a year later the erstwhile 'formalist' Nikolai Okhlopkov mounted his more well-known version at Moscow's Mayakovsky Theatre. Radical for its time, it featured a spectacular set dominated by a pair of huge metal gates designed to emphasise the theme of Denmark as prison. For Soviet citizens beginning to grapple with the legacies of Stalin-era terror and dictatorship, the contemporary resonances were all too evident. In the West, it became known as the 'Iron Curtain *Hamlet*'. Okhlopkov's production was followed by a whole crop of Soviet *Hamlets*: the play was staged more often than any other Shakespearean tragedy in the period 1954–62. The *Hamlet* fever of the Thaw culminated with Grigorii Kozintsev's internationally acclaimed film version of 1964.<sup>80</sup>

It clearly made sense for Britain to capitalise on this *Hamlet* fever. Violet Conolly, the well-informed head of the Soviet Section of the Foreign Office Research Department, emphasised that a British production would be warmly received thanks to 'the lively and intelligent interest in Shakespeare in Russia' stimulated by Pasternak's translations of *Hamlet* and other Shakespeare plays.<sup>81</sup> Others in the Foreign Office were concerned not only that a British *Hamlet* should be received well, but also, given the highly competitive nature of these cold war operations, that it should be perceived as *superior* to Soviet versions, particularly the Okhlopkov production. In the eyes of some British officials, this duel of the two *Hamlets* was to be a contest not unlike a football match.

Precautions were taken to ensure that there would be no recurrence of Arsenal's defeat. Once the Soviet authorities had finally agreed to the tour, the Foreign Office went to some lengths to guarantee that the quality of Brook's *Hamlet* was beyond

Oxford University Press, 2000), 96–135; Marta Gibinska and Jerzy Limon, eds., *Hamlet East–West* (Gdansk: Theatrum Gedanense Foundation, 1998).

<sup>78</sup> Stribny, *Shakespeare*, 77–85; Makaryk 'Wartime Hamlets', in Makaryk and Price, *Shakespeare*.

<sup>79</sup> The staging of Shakespearean tragedies was officially endorsed in *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, 26 Dec. 1953.

<sup>80</sup> Makaryk and Price, *Shakespeare*, 7, 120; Rowe, *Hamlet*, 134; Stribny, *Shakespeare*, 99; Mark Sokolyansky, 'Hamlet in the Russian Culture of the Period of the Thaw, 1954–1964', in Gibinska and Limon, *Hamlet*, 118; Laurence Senelick, "'Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all': New Documentation on the Okhlopkov *Hamlet*", in Makaryk and Price, *Shakespeare*; Smeliansky, *The Russian Theatre*, 6–7.

<sup>81</sup> TNA FO 371/11784 Conolly minute, 25 Aug. 1954.

reproach. It is now generally acknowledged that although this was not one of Brook's masterpieces, it had several strengths, notably its striking simplicity.<sup>82</sup> The amateur critics of the Foreign Office shared this view: Jellicoe reported that his colleague Mark Russell had vetted it during its provincial run and deemed it 'pretty good'. Russell thought that, 'without attempting anything spectacular', the production was 'thoroughly convincing, with many clever touches'. The costumes were 'simple, but colourful'. Russell commended the generally high standard of acting, singling out Alec Clunes (the King), Ernest Thesiger (Polonius) and Mary Ure (Ophelia) for particular praise. Although, in his opinion, Scofield spoke too quickly and was weak at the start, he improved as he went on, especially in his scenes with Ophelia which he acted 'with a restraint, which made them most moving'. Importantly, he 'avoided any temptation to try to out-Olivier Olivier.' Jellicoe seemed satisfied that the production would showcase the strengths of the contemporary British approach to Shakespeare and offer a suitably sharp contrast to the more elaborate, melodramatic Soviet style. Using the typical British language of ownership, he mentioned that Russell thought it deserved to be shown in the USSR 'as an example of our own school of Shakespearean acting and an interpretation of one of our own classics'.<sup>83</sup>

The Foreign Office made several interventions designed to maximise the likelihood that the play would be well received and seen by the largest possible audiences. For example, Jellicoe asked the British Council to convey to the company the importance of speaking slowly. Officials were especially keen to take advantage of the opportunity to make *Hamlet* accessible to potentially millions of TV watchers. Television was just starting to take off in the Soviet Union in the mid-1950s and the Minister at the British Embassy observed that when a Comédie Française performance had been televised, people had gathered in groups in each other's homes to watch it. Aware that this might create problems with the actors' union, Equity, as it was not the Soviet custom to pay for TV rights, he urged that appropriate pressure be applied to ensure that *Hamlet* could be televised without hindrance.<sup>84</sup>

### Interpreting the *Hamlet* Performance

Following these extensive preparations, the company set off on their mission, arriving in Moscow on 21 November 1955. Between then and their departure on 3 December they not only gave thirteen performances of *Hamlet* (a veritable endurance test), they also 'performed' in various other ways, including attending numerous official receptions, appearing on Soviet TV and giving interviews. What was the impact of the British 'performance' in its widest sense? Did it function as an effective advertisement

<sup>82</sup> Richard Helfer and Glenn Loney, eds., *Peter Brook: Oxford to Orghast* (London: Routledge, 1998), 75–6.

<sup>83</sup> TNA FO 371/116814 Jellicoe to Parrott, 31 Oct. 1955.

<sup>84</sup> TNA BW 64/19 Parrott to Jellicoe, 4 Nov. 1955; TNA FO 371/116815 Jellicoe to Loch, 8 Nov. 1955; Kristin Roth-Ey, 'Finding a Home for Television in the USSR, 1950–1970', *Slavic Review* 66, 2 (2007), 282.



for Britain in the way that officials had hoped? In his despatch to the new Foreign Secretary, Harold Macmillan, Hayter described the tour as 'an unqualified success'. He and others in the Foreign Office were confident it had demonstrated the vitality of Britain and had had a 'profound impact' on the target audience.<sup>85</sup> Naturally their interpretations were coloured by engrained Cold War stereotypes; however other evidence suggests that the tour did indeed make a big and largely positive impression, a fact which proved disconcerting to those Communist Party officials who were determined to resist any challenge to the idea of the hegemony of the Soviet system and its culture. It is also the case that Foreign Office officials may have underestimated the extent to which the tour had a 'profound impact' not only on Soviet citizens but also on the British visitors themselves, some of whom returned from their trip behind the iron curtain with rather favourable impressions of the Soviet Union.

The Soviet authorities always had ambiguous feelings about visits by Western artists: they feared their potentially subversive effects, yet they also wanted them to succeed, not least because a successful visit reflected well on the hosts and made the task of sending their own artists to the West that much easier. They certainly went to considerable lengths to ensure the success of *Hamlet*. Even before the tour had begun it received advance publicity in the Soviet press.<sup>86</sup> When the cast finally arrived at Vnukovo airport they received a rapturous welcome and were 'drowned in bouquets and kisses' by representatives of the theatre establishment, according to Hayter, who made a point of highlighting how the artists' spontaneous enthusiasm for the British guests went beyond the norms of official protocol: 'so uncontrolled were the demonstrations of affection that the formal part of the proceedings of welcome were almost swept aside and the head of the receiving delegation, the Deputy Minister of Culture, was practically trampled on in the stampede'.<sup>87</sup>

The company was allocated the affiliated theatre of the prestigious Moscow Art Theatre, which had the advantage of being able to seat large numbers. Tickets were predictably in great demand, but 16,000 people managed to see the live performances and many more had the opportunity to watch it on television. The first night was attended by senior officials and theatre people including Chekhov's widow, while a subsequent performance was honoured by the presence of Presidium members, including Molotov, Mikoian and Suslov, who hosted a small private dinner with the principals afterwards (Khrushchev and Bulganin were paying a visit to India, where they were busy lambasting British imperialism.) The tour received plenty of coverage in the Soviet press with the major newspapers all providing regular updates.<sup>88</sup> The political significance of the occasion was thus made abundantly clear by the Soviet authorities.

How was the British performance, both onstage and offstage, received? According to Hayter, audience responses to the production itself were largely positive. Language appeared not to present a significant barrier to Soviet spectators so familiar with the

<sup>85</sup> TNA FO 371/116815 Hayter to Macmillan, 8 Dec. 1955.

<sup>86</sup> *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, 19 Nov. 1955.

<sup>87</sup> TNA FO 371/116815 Hayter to Macmillan, 8 Dec. 1955.

<sup>88</sup> TNA FO 371/116815 Hayter to Macmillan, 8 Dec. 1955; *Pravda* covered the tour in its editions of 22 Nov., 23 Nov., 24 Nov., 2 Dec., 3 Dec., 4 Dec.

play – no simultaneous translation was offered as apparently this would have been ‘insulting’ (‘every educated person here knows “Hamlet”’ wrote the Shakespeare scholar Aleksandr Anikst in the programme notes.)<sup>89</sup> The ambassador heard a few grumbles at the first night from those who thought they had been ‘fobbed off’ with a second-rate production and that Olivier would have been better in the lead role. There were also some criticisms of the female actors. However, the main roles attracted much favourable comment, with Scofield and Thesiger garnering particular praise.

Most importantly, Hayter believed that the production was regarded as superior to the Okhlopkov version with which it was inevitably compared. This comparison/competition between the two *Hamlets* was actively encouraged by the Soviet hosts: Brook was flown to Baku to see the Okhlopkov production, then the Soviet Hamlet (Evgenii Samoilov) and Ophelia (Galina Anisimova) flew to Moscow and were televised performing scenes from the play alongside Ure and Scofield. Hayter was satisfied that Britain had ‘won’ this latest Cold War competition:

With Okhlopkov’s “Hamlet” fresh in their minds, the audience were in a good position to ‘look upon this picture and on this’ and to contrast the simple realism of Mr. Brook’s production with the over-ornate and melodramatic romanticism of the local version. Indeed our English production of ‘Hamlet’ stood out beside most of the Moscow productions like an old Dutch master would among the pretentious canvasses of the Tretyakov Gallery. . . . There was much else also that the Russians could learn from this production apart from the simplicity – the remarkably high standard of performance which could be attained in a few weeks by actors drawn from many different theatres, the striking speed which Mr. Brook was able to communicate to the play by making the actors deliberately speak fast during the less important episodes and by the remarkable swiftness of the changing of the scenes, and finally the natural way in which Mr. Scofield spoke the great lines, which must have struck the Russian audiences as being true to the teachings of Stanislavsky.

He concluded that Britain had ‘gained a great deal’ from the venture: ‘we pitted our youth against the crowds of old stagers who clutter up the boards of the Arts Theatre. We showed to the Russians that English actors free Shakespeare from all the traditional claptrap of the Moscow stage and make him real and vital.’<sup>90</sup> Hayter’s determination to draw such a sharp distinction between the two *Hamlets* is striking. Deploying binary frameworks characteristic of Cold War thinking (simple realism versus melodramatic romanticism, old Dutch master versus pretentious canvas, youth versus age), he presented the tour quite explicitly in terms of a contest, in which Britain had ‘gained’ a victory and the opponent was reduced to ‘learning’ from Britain.

In the Ambassador’s view, it was not merely the production itself which seemed to have had a profound effect, but, equally importantly, the company’s offstage performance. One of the advantages of a performing arts tour as a form of cultural diplomacy was the opportunity it afforded for valuable ‘people-to-people’ contact.<sup>91</sup> Hayter reported that the company had created a very favourable impression by acting

<sup>89</sup> A knowledge of *Hamlet* seems to have been a pre-requisite for entry into Soviet higher education in this period. Barghoorn, *The Soviet Cultural Offensive*, 172.

<sup>90</sup> TNA FO 371/116815 Hayter to Macmillan, 8 Dec. 1955.

<sup>91</sup> On US interest in ‘People-to-People’ contact, see Kenneth Osgood, *Total Cold War* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2006), 232–52.

as ‘charming and patient guests’. Both Brook and Scofield had pleased their hosts by making speeches in Russian. All members of the cast had graciously attended receptions and concerts nearly every night despite their exhaustion. Hayter seemed particularly delighted that the British ‘team’ had outperformed the French in this respect, citing one Soviet theatre director’s view that the British visitors had enjoyed greater success than the Comédie Française because as well as being great artists ‘they are human’.<sup>92</sup>

Hayter’s assessment of the tour reflected his confident assumptions about the superiority of British culture and values. However, other evidence also indicates that the visit made a positive, if not unequivocally favourable, impression. The play seems to have been appreciated by at least some members of the political elite: it was reported that in private even Mikoian acknowledged the merits of the British *Hamlet*, rejecting Scofield’s suggestion that Okhlopkov’s production make a return visit to Britain on the grounds that it would be perceived as inferior to British Shakespeare productions.<sup>93</sup> The official seal of approval was registered more publicly in the form of press notices which were remarkably complimentary and full. The critics stopped short of suggesting that the British production was superior to their own and were at pains to commend those elements of the play which aligned with official Soviet aesthetic norms, such as its ‘realism’ and the fact that Hamlet was played as a fundamentally strong character in the Russian/Soviet tradition. But they also hinted at ways in which the USSR might learn from Britain. For example, the actor-director Boris Zakhava highlighted the ‘courageous’ simplicity of Brook’s *Hamlet*. He wrote that ‘the play lacks false pathos and actors’ posturing’ and remarked on the simplicity of Georges Wakhevitch’s set. He also alluded to the youth of Scofield and Brook (both in their early thirties.) The implied contrast with the much more grandiose Okhlopkov *Hamlet* and its older cast (Samoilov was forty-four) was surely deliberate.<sup>94</sup> Anikst commented favourably on the almost cinematic quality of the play, its restraint and absence of affectation, the minimalism of the set and the clever use of lighting. Acknowledging Brook’s reliance on formal devices, Anikst observed that these had also been a feature of early Soviet theatre and suggested that it might be time for their own theatre to return to them.<sup>95</sup> Evidently, in the reformist climate of the Thaw, it was considered desirable that Soviet critics and artists take some aesthetic lessons from their Western counterparts as well as drawing on indigenous cultural legacies.

Memoirs, interviews and private correspondence reinforce the impression that the play left a strong mark on theatre people, particularly when juxtaposed with the Soviet *Hamlets*. Senelick cites the case of a student at Moscow State University who posted a glowing review of the play in a lecture hall under the headline ‘This is Hamlet’, thereby implying that Okhlopkov’s production was deficient. Senelick also

<sup>92</sup> TNA FO 371/116815 Hayter to Macmillan, 8 Dec. 1955.

<sup>93</sup> TNA FO 371/116815 Parrott to Hohler, 9 Dec. 1955.

<sup>94</sup> *Pravda*, 24 Nov. 1955.

<sup>95</sup> *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, 26 Nov. 1955.

points out that Okhlopkov was forced to reconsider his approach in the light of the Brook production, replacing Samoilov with twenty-one year old Mikhail Kozakov.<sup>96</sup> While examples such as these suggest that Brook's production was the unambiguous victor in the battle of the *Hamlets*, the picture is rather more complicated. Kozakov himself stresses that *both Hamlets* were enormously influential in the mid-1950s and that not everyone liked Brook's austere approach, although he does acknowledge that the chorus of praise for Okhlopkov's *Hamlet* started to subside after Brook brought his production. Theatre historian Aleksei Bartoshevich recalls that as a fourteen year old he found Brook's version grey and colourless compared to Okhlopkov's, only appreciating its merits later. Kozintsev, the director of the Leningrad *Hamlet*, was impressed by some, but not all, aspects of Brook's production. He was excited by Scofield's acting and the stylistic novelty of the play but regretted that it had so little to say about 'the contemporary, living relevance of this whole history'. What is certain is that, in part because it was so controversial, Brook's *Hamlet* exerted a lasting influence on Soviet theatre and culture. Anatoly Smeliansky concludes that it 'stunned Moscow's theatre world', making 'an indelible impression on all who were to decide the course of Russian theatre for decades to come'. Bartoshevich made a similar point, observing how it went on to influence the style of the innovative *Sovremennik* theatre, founded in 1956. For Azary Messerer, Scofield's performance was simply 'a breakthrough in the country's cultural history during the Cold War isolation . . . Scofield was the first Western artist who satisfied the hunger that the Moscow public felt for foreign art'.<sup>97</sup>

Just as striking as the interest in the production were the displays of enthusiasm towards the British visitors as individuals. Westerners still had curiosity value in Moscow and Paul Scofield in particular was treated rather like a 'pop star' according to Brook. At a time when US popular culture was becoming more familiar in the USSR, he acquired the nickname 'Johnnie Ray of Moscow' after the young American singer. Members of the public seemed anxious to cultivate a distinctly *personal* relationship with the actor: some of the audience tried to storm the stage to get his autograph and he was 'besieged' by star-struck autograph hunters on the street. He received warm and emotional letters from fans, sometimes accompanied by small gifts. One sent him a penknife and notebook, writing, 'you are a great actor. I have forgotten English language, but I cannot forget your Prince of Denmark by William Shakespeare, your voice, your eyes'. A Moscow University student wrote to 'the most wonderful Hamlet', enclosing photos of herself and her dog.<sup>98</sup> It is worth noting that the whole notion of a celebrity culture was in many ways antithetical

<sup>96</sup> Senelick, "'Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all'", 153–5.

<sup>97</sup> M. M. Kozakov, *Tretii zvonok* (Moscow: Nezavisimaia gazeta, 2004) 102–11; 'Russkii Gamlet' <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2458233> (last visited 1 Mar. 2015); Grigorii Kozintsev, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1986); Smeliansky, *The Russian Theatre*, 7; Azary Messerer, 'Gifts Exchanged with Paul Scofield' <http://www.stosvet.net/12/messerer/> (last visited 10 Sept. 2015).

<sup>98</sup> Peter Brook, *There Are No Secrets* (London: Methuen, 1993), 7; TNA FO 371/116815 Hayter to Macmillan, 8 Dec. 1955; O'Conner, *Paul Scofield*, 128; Trewin, *Paul Scofield*, 78; Victoria and Albert Museum Archives (henceforth V&A) THM/397/2/2/1 and THM/397/2/14/1.

to official Soviet ideological norms which discouraged what was considered to be a superficial preoccupation with actors as individuals. Yet, as Kristen Roth-Ey reminds us, displays of ‘fandom’ were not unusual in the USSR of the 1950s, although they remained largely unreported in the Soviet media.<sup>99</sup> Soviet film and stage actors were on the receiving end of these behaviours just as much as charismatic Western visitors like Scofield, although foreignness probably intensified the phenomenon. A few years later, Van Cliburn, the American winner of the first International Tchaikovsky Competition, would be subjected to similar outpourings of emotion.<sup>100</sup>

Such effusive displays of ‘fandom’ directed at Westerners must have been particularly troubling for Communist Party officials responsible for the nation’s ideological health. Certainly, the enthusiastic reception accorded to both the production and the British guests was a source of tension within the CC (Central Committee) Department of Culture. Although the Soviet government had endorsed the tour, this did not mean that the public was supposed to embrace it in an uncritical fashion. The discourse of late Stalin era ‘anti-cosmopolitanism’ resurfaced in the CC’s internal reports, with the euphoria around *Hamlet* being equated to a lack of ‘Soviet patriotism’. Press notices were accused of being too laudatory and insufficiently critical of the play’s deficiencies.<sup>101</sup> It was reported that Soviet artists had engaged in ‘sycophantic and servile behaviour’ at receptions in honour of the guests. The singer Valeriia Barsova made a toast in which she praised British theatre and stated that Soviet artists had much to learn from it; in the CC’s eyes, this was tantamount to denigrating Soviet theatre. After the final show, the actor Vasilii Toporkov gave an ‘incoherent’ speech during which he summoned one of the British actresses to the front of the stage and complimented her ‘boogie-woogie’. Only after much criticism did he revert to script, paying tribute to the principals and presenting his book *Stanislavsky in Rehearsal* to Brook with the words ‘everything is said there’.<sup>102</sup> The CC department concluded from all this that measures must be taken to educate artists in ‘Soviet patriotism’. Thus, it seems that whereas *Hamlet* did represent a welcome lifting of the iron curtain for many members of the Soviet public, for some Soviet officials, as for their British counterparts, the whole experience simply intensified cold war stereotypes and fears.

But what was the significance of this encounter with the Soviet Union for the British visitors? Studies of the influence of Western cultural initiatives in the USSR tend to be rather one-sided, focusing on their effects on members of the Soviet public.<sup>103</sup> Yet it is clear that the ‘infiltration’ process could work both ways. The Foreign Office had always worried that cultural relations with the USSR might lead to undesirable Soviet influence over Britons and when the question of a theatre visit was first discussed, particular concerns were expressed about the susceptibility of British actors. One official had disapproved of the whole project on the grounds that

<sup>99</sup> Kristen Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 98–106.

<sup>100</sup> Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*, 156.

<sup>101</sup> RGANI 5/36/11/3.

<sup>102</sup> RGANI 5/17/545/228–30.

<sup>103</sup> E.g. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*.

many of the best British actors were communists or fellow-travellers: 'what would they would say in Moscow might be embarrassing and even more so what they might say when they returned', while at the first meeting of SRC it was observed that British actors visiting the USSR might be 'too easily carried away by 'Soviet attentions and propaganda'.<sup>104</sup> In his despatch, Hayter doubted whether members of the company had been 'taken in' by what he called 'the propaganda which ran through the Soviet hospitality' and suggested that they were eager to leave the Soviet Union at the end of the tour.<sup>105</sup> In fact, the attitudes of Brook, Scofield and others accompanying the tour, including theatre critics, were more complex. Whatever Cold War assumptions they may have arrived with were modified by their first encounter with the Soviet Union. For them, the Moscow visit provided an opportunity to get to know fellow Europeans, to find common bonds through a shared love of drama and to learn from Soviet theatre in the spirit of internationalism. Rather than the process of one-way communication envisaged by the Foreign Office, they experienced the visit as a dialogue.

For all British participants, it was an intense and exciting experience: 'we never touched ground', said Brook.<sup>106</sup> For Paul Scofield the tour marked a 'turning point', which made him question Cold War stereotypes. He was overwhelmed by the warmth of the Russians and the sense of 'kinship' which developed between the two communities. He noticed how the audiences embraced *Hamlet* despite the language barrier: 'they followed effortlessly every nuance of our performance, in terms of artistic endeavour and human compatibility they made the great ideological divide between Eastern and Western Europe seem unimportant. It was an experience of kinship. The breaking down of barriers and an awareness that we are none of us as our political leaders proclaim us to be.'<sup>107</sup> Whereas Hayter had cast the Soviet receptions and speeches in terms of 'propaganda', Scofield was impressed by the warmth of the speeches, the 'kindness and openness and generosity' of his hosts. He clearly valued the letters and small gifts he received from fans, retaining them in his personal archive along with other souvenirs of the trip.<sup>108</sup> For Scofield this visit marked the start of long-lasting friendships and professional collaborations with Russians which he would continue to describe in terms of kinship: when he played a Russian spy in Michael Winner's 1973 film *Scorpio*, he commented 'the Russian agent I play is not like any kind of Russian I've ever met. The Russians I know are mostly concerned with the arts and I feel a tremendous sense of kinship with them'.<sup>109</sup>

Like Scofield, Brook was struck by the warmth of his hosts and disinclined to be cynical, writing in his notes: 'I am happy here, everyone is friendly, everyone talks of peace. I am not going to be grudging, pick at the surface, question motives,

<sup>104</sup> TNA FO 371/111784 Ward to Hayter, 9 Aug. 1954 and Jellicoe minute, 15 June 1954; TNA FO 371/116816 British Council Soviet Relations Committee, draft minutes, 21 Apr. 1955.

<sup>105</sup> TNA FO 371/116815 Hayter to Macmillan, 8 Dec. 1955.

<sup>106</sup> Trewin, *Paul Scofield*, 83.

<sup>107</sup> O'Conner, *Paul Scofield*, 128–9.

<sup>108</sup> V&A THM/397/2/2/1; THM/397/2/14/1; THM/397/3/1/12.

<sup>109</sup> O'Conner, *Paul Scofield*, 262.

mistrust appearances. There are enough political correspondents around to do that: we are their guests and with their Byzantine conception of doing a job grandly they have seen to it that they've won our hearts.'<sup>110</sup> Brook's experience of kinship was more literal than Scofield's. His Russian-Jewish parents had emigrated from Latvia before the First World War, so for him the visit represented 'a return to the land of my fathers'. While in Moscow he seized the opportunity to see Valentin Pluchek's revival of Mayakovsky's *The Bedbug*, one of the most exciting Soviet productions of the mid-1950s. Hugely impressed, Brook had the strange sense while watching it: 'now, that's exactly how I would have done that scene'. He subsequently discovered that Pluchek was actually his cousin, the son of his father's sister. After this first encounter, the cousins continued to stay in contact and follow each other's work.<sup>111</sup>

*The Bedbug* was just one of many plays Brook saw while in Moscow: over the course of the visit, he managed to take in at least one show every day.<sup>112</sup> With his long-standing interest in European and world theatre, he relished the opportunity to familiarise himself with the culture of the country that had produced Chekhov, Stanislavsky and Meyerhold. Although not uncritical of current Soviet productions, Brook acknowledged the merits of the USSR's theatre art and displayed an interest in learning from it.<sup>113</sup> Confessing to one interviewer that he had come to Moscow armed with stereotypes about the uniformity of Soviet culture, he admitted he had been pleasantly surprised to learn that each theatre had its own style, singling out the Moscow Art Theatre and Pluchek's Theatre of Satire for particular praise.<sup>114</sup> Brook was clearly impressed by the high regard in which Shakespeare was held in the USSR (less possessive than Foreign Office officials, he declared that 'Shakespeare is ours and yours').<sup>115</sup> Even though the style of Soviet Shakespeare was not to his taste – 'it is all Paris-Opera 1850' – he was prepared to recognise its strengths. While critical of Okhlopkov's interpretation of *Hamlet*, he admired its 'masterly' execution and envied the staging, which was far more elaborate than anything he could afford. He also praised its 'realism' and the quality of the acting.<sup>116</sup> More generally, Brook was struck by the consistently high standard of acting and directing in Moscow, which he attributed not only to the Russian theatrical tradition but also to the Soviet system of permanent ensembles. In his view, this was vastly superior to Britain's commercial system of temporary companies, since it allowed a group of actors to get to know each other over a long period, offered them a chance to experiment with a range of roles rather than being typecast and gave them the confidence which comes with job security.<sup>117</sup>

<sup>110</sup> V&A THM/452/12/2/2.

<sup>111</sup> Michael Kustow, *Peter Brook: A Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), 85–9.

<sup>112</sup> *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, 3 Dec. 1955.

<sup>113</sup> V&A THM/452/12/2/2.

<sup>114</sup> *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, 3 Dec. 1955.

<sup>115</sup> *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, 3 Dec. 1955; *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 26 Nov. 1955.

<sup>116</sup> V&A THM/452/12/2/2; *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, 29 Nov. 1955; Kustow, *Peter Brook*, 86–7.

<sup>117</sup> *Sovetskaia kul'tura*, 3 Dec. 1955; 'Russia's Theatre is the Actor's Ideal', *Plays and Players*, Jan. 1956.

Others were similarly impressed by aspects of the Soviet order. Scofield was equally enthusiastic about the permanent ensembles, observing subsequently that these encouraged a standard of acting that ‘English and American companies could not begin to emulate’.<sup>118</sup> The critic Kenneth Tynan found plenty to compliment, including the quality of the older generation of actors ‘the finest I have ever seen’, the system of permanent companies and the choice of plays on offer. He concluded ‘My ideal would be to have a Western theatre organised on Russian lines but without Russian ideology. But I fear that without the driving force of an ideology, such a theatre could never be created.’<sup>119</sup> For Tynan, and for the other visitors, this journey behind the iron curtain thus represented a unique opportunity for critical reflection on the nature of both the Soviet Union and the West.

So, it seems that the *Hamlet* tour had a ‘profound impact’ not only on the Soviet public but also on several of the British visitors, including some of the most influential names in British theatre. Their first-hand encounter with the USSR left them rather sceptical about the rigidities of Cold War thinking and led them to the conclusion that the Soviet Union might have something to offer the West. They particularly admired the Soviet state’s support for theatre and their positive experiences doubtless contributed to the growing pressure for increased state funding for British theatre. By the end of the 1950s this pressure was already beginning to produce concrete results, as Britain, like many other Western states, felt compelled to keep up in the ‘cultural arms race’ which was one of the more productive consequences of the Cold War.<sup>120</sup>

### Conclusion

As the first big British cultural ‘manifestation’ to be held in the Soviet Union under SRC auspices, *Hamlet* was a relatively costly and risky experiment.<sup>121</sup> The Foreign Office regarded it as ‘a resounding success’. Jellicoe concluded that the visit proved that ‘we stand to gain by letting the Russians see something of British culture. The impact on the Soviet intelligentsia, who in the long-term are our main target in the Soviet Union, can be very considerable.’<sup>122</sup> The success of *Hamlet* provided a strong justification for the expansion of Soviet-British cultural relations and for further British theatre tours of the Soviet Union.<sup>123</sup> With the exception of a hiatus following the Soviet intervention in Hungary, government-sponsored cultural relations with the USSR continued to grow at the expense of the ‘fronts’; in the decade after 1955 alone, the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre/Royal Shakespeare Company, the Old Vic

<sup>118</sup> *Sovetskaiia kul'tura*, 3 Dec. 1955; O’Conner, *Paul Scofield*, 145.

<sup>119</sup> Kenneth Tynan, *Theatre Writings* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2008), 83–4.

<sup>120</sup> Dennis Kennedy, *The Spectator and the Spectacle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), ch. 4.

<sup>121</sup> The whole venture cost Britain approximately £5500. BW 2/520 The British Council Soviet Relations Committee Progress Report, 1955.

<sup>122</sup> TNA FO 371/116815 Jellicoe minute, 2 Jan. 1956

<sup>123</sup> TNA FO 371/116815 Jellicoe minute, 2 Jan. 1956



and the National Theatre all brought productions of Shakespeare to the USSR, while the Moscow Art Theatre paid two reciprocal visits to London under SRC/British Council auspices. British musicians and dancers toured the USSR too, of course, but theatre remained a higher priority for many in the Foreign Office throughout the Cold War, not only because of the strong reputation of British theatre but also because it came to be seen by some as a more powerful means of conveying *ideas*.<sup>124</sup>

At a pivotal moment in the mid-1950s Britain played a leading role in Western governments' turn to cultural diplomacy as a mode of dealing with the USSR. This is another example of how Europeans, with their distinct agendas and approaches, helped to shape the pattern of East–West relations. It is clear that the more hesitant United States was keenly observing the British experience and that the success of *Hamlet* helped to convince the Eisenhower administration of the political advantages of 'cultural infiltration'. By the late 1950s the US government was itself actively involved in performing arts exchanges with the USSR. British and US approaches were never homogeneous, however: whereas Britain tended to prioritise theatre, the United States preferred to deploy its classical and jazz musicians and dancers. The first state-sponsored US theatre tour of the Soviet Union only took place in 1973.

When assessing the significance of East–West cultural diplomacy, it is important to explore what initiatives such as *Hamlet* meant to protagonists on both sides and at various levels of the process. While British officials regarded the *Hamlet* 'operation' as an opportunity to exert influence on the Soviet Union, rather than vice versa, their Soviet counterparts seem to have been somewhat more open to learning from British theatre. In the reformist and optimistic climate of the Thaw, it was considered legitimate for the USSR to draw selectively on Western achievements. However, there was always a fine line between *learning from* western culture and *extolling* it at the expense of Soviet culture: the latter continued to be construed as anti-patriotic by some officials. From the perspective of the Soviet leadership, learning from Britain was always a subsidiary aim; the fundamental purpose of the venture was to make political gains by facilitating the export of Soviet culture, exposing influential British visitors to the strengths of Soviet culture, validating the regime's preference for realist art and demonstrating that the USSR enjoyed legitimacy in the eyes of a major Western power.

If Soviet and British officials tended to view *Hamlet* in narrow political terms, as a means of advancing their respective Cold War objectives, it was understood in a rather different, more internationalist vein by others involved, including Soviet and British artists and members of the Soviet public. For them, Brook's interpretation of this Shakespearean classic and the events surrounding the tour provided an opportunity for genuine 'mutual understanding', for getting to know Europeans on the other

<sup>124</sup> G. Bennett and K. Hamilton, eds., *Documents on British Policy Overseas*, Series III, vol. 1 (London: The Stationery Office, 1997), 212, note 3 on Brash's letter. For an example of Britain's theatre diplomacy in Eastern Europe in the 1970s, see Zoltan Imre 'A Midsummer Night's (Different) Dream(s): The Royal Shakespeare Company's 1972 Tour of Eastern Europe', *Theatre Survey*, 56, 3 (2015).

side of the iron curtain and for exploring common cultural interests. In this way, it forced many to confront the stereotypes they held not only about the other side but also about their own society.<sup>125</sup> For all its limitations as a form of influence, the *Hamlet* tour was responsible for transforming perceptions in both halves of Cold War Europe.

<sup>125</sup> For a discussion of how a nation's cultural diplomacy can affect its self-perceptions, see Johannes Paulmann, ed., *Auswärtige Repräsentationen: Deutsche Kulturdiplomatie nach 1945* (Köln: Bohlau Verlag, 2005), 25–32.