

**"WESTERN PILGRIMS" IN THE CULTURAL DIPLOMACY
OF THE SOVIET UNION IN THE 1930S–1950S:
A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW**

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ABSTRACT

The article presents a historiographical review of the phenomenon of "Western pilgrims" – Western intellectuals, writers, journalists, and public figures who visited the Soviet Union in the 1930s–1950s as part of the cultural diplomacy of the Stalinist regime. Based on historiographical analysis, the study traces the evolution of research approaches to this phenomenon: from ideologized assessments in the spirit of the Cold War to comprehensive institutional and cultural analysis, made possible by the "archival revolution" of the 1990s–2000s. Special attention is paid to the historiographical re-evaluation of key Western figures, whose published diaries and archival materials have radically changed our understanding of the motivations and perceptions of Soviet reality by Western intellectuals. The conclusion highlights promising directions for further research.

Keywords: cultural diplomacy, "Western pilgrims," political pilgrimage, USSR, historiography, Stalinism, Cold War

1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of the "Western pilgrims," i.e., Western scholars, writers, journalists, and public figures who came to the USSR between the 1930s and 1950s and sought to personally evaluate this "great experiment," has never failed to attract researchers' attention. Hundreds of thousands of Western tourists visited the "country of Soviets": some saw it as a utopia, while others thought of it as a totalitarian state, and yet there were people who adopted positions in between. Visits of Western tourists were not just an expression of hospitality but also a part of the cultural and diplomatic policy of the Soviet state aiming at legitimizing its regime in the international arena (Golubev, 2004, pp. 7–12; David-Fox, 2012, pp. 5–10; Shabasova, 2023, pp. 236–237).

However, while there is no shortage of studies dedicated to the individual visitor and his/her perception process, a systematic historiographical analysis that would consider the development of views on this issue in connection with the changing political circumstances, archival accessibility, and the evolving methodology in the humanities is still absent. This paper provides such an analysis, focusing on "western pilgrims" as one of the main features of Stalinist cultural diplomacy.

Nevertheless, although there have been many attempts to explore the topic in terms of the visitor and his/her perception, a historiographical analysis of the evolution of such perceptions within the context of the political situation, archival availability, and methodology of the humanities has not yet appeared. This paper is devoted to such an analysis, specifically to "western pilgrims" as one of the main characteristics of Stalinist cultural diplomacy.

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2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach to the research is defined by the use of complementary methods that include historiographical analysis as a main methodology, the concept of the theory of political pilgrimage, and the concept of cultural diplomacy.

Historiographical analysis represents a methodology for conducting research. In practice, it means that historiographical analysis cannot be reduced to just listing available studies; it implies a critical review of the development of methodologies used in the research, their advantages and disadvantages, and also the transformation of interpretations caused by either the emergence of new materials or changes in the historical and ideological context.

The theory of “political pilgrimage,” formulated by P. Hollander, highlights the psychological and ideological features of Western intellectuals’ understanding of Soviet reality. The concept of “political pilgrimage” was introduced by Hollander in order to characterize Western intellectuals’ trips to other countries with alternative political systems in which, instead of searching for facts, they were trying to confirm their ideological preconceptions.

The notion of cultural diplomacy, suggested by M. David-Fox, plays a key role in analyzing how the Soviet state made use of its cultural contacts with the Western world in order to gain legitimization and construct a positive image of the “new civilization.” According to David-Fox, the central metaphor of cultural diplomacy is the “showcase” – a planned space where all the elements of the program of Soviet foreign guests’ trip were carefully organized and subjected to the propaganda tasks. Nevertheless, as the author stresses, cultural diplomacy does not imply merely one-sided propaganda; on the contrary, it is a system of communications in which the interests of the state, the intelligentsia, and the Western intellectuals intertwine, and the process of cultural exchange is bidirectional.

Therefore, the combination of historiography, the theory of political pilgrimage, and the notion of cultural diplomacy will help us develop a multi-level methodology for a comprehensive and analytical study of the phenomenon of “Western pilgrims.”

3. THE EVOLUTION OF RESEARCH APPROACHES: FROM SOVIETOLOGY TO CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

The evolution of research approaches to the phenomenon of “Western pilgrims” directly reflects the general shifts in the development of historical scholarship in the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, from the ideological frameworks of the Cold War to interdisciplinary and institutional research. The first stage of historiographical understanding of this phenomenon developed within the framework of Western Sovietology and was closely linked to the political context of the confrontation between the two systems. It was then that the fundamental concepts and typologies were established that would long-term shape the study of Western visitors to the USSR.

Phenomenon of the 1930s. An important place in early historiography is occupied by the works of W. Chamberlin, a correspondent for The Christian Science Monitor, who in his book *Russia's Iron Age* (1934) presented one of the first sober views of Soviet reality, anticipating many of the conclusions of later critics (Chamberlin, 1934). Unlike the apologists, Chamberlin recorded repressions, famines, and restrictions on freedom, and in a later work, *Collectivism: A False Utopia* (1937), he expressed complete disillusionment with the Soviet experiment (Chamberlin, 1937). Among other writers from the West who came to the USSR during the 1920s and 1930s, it would be worth mentioning Theodore Dreiser (*A Russian Diary*, 1928) (Dreiser, 2018) and Stefan Zweig; his stay in the USSR in 1928 was studied by K.M. Azadovsky (Azadovsky, 2011). However, these visits were not given such extensive coverage as the visits of Rolland or Gide, which can be explained by the lower political involvement of the authors themselves as well as by the lower propaganda activity of the Soviet regime. (Kulikova, 2013, pp. 78–85).

Within the field of Western Sovietology and in particular within the American school of research, the phenomenon of "Western pilgrims" was understood as a significant threat to the West as an "attack on the Western world (offensive)" (Belyakova, 2019, p. 168). Among the concepts that emerged in the 1950s and which gained popularity due to the research conducted by D. Cauté (Cauté, 1988), there is the concept of "fellow travelers." The author defines fellow travelers as the representatives of the Western intellectual elite who were not officially part of the communist parties but supported the Soviet government and justified the repression carried out by it, participating actively in propaganda campaigns. The monograph "The Fellow Travelers: Intellectual Friends of Communism" (1988) describes the development of this phenomenon from the 1920s to the 1950s, demonstrating how gradually fellow travelers started to lose their faith in the Soviet experience (Cauté, 1988, pp. 15–30). Nevertheless, Cauté's study is based only on the publications and does not consider any archival sources.

Together with Cauté there worked P. Hollander whose book "Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba, 1928–1978" (1981) became an absolute classic of the genre. Hollander used the notion "political pilgrimage" and made an attempt to outline the typology of attitudes to the reality of the USSR expressed by Western intellectuals. There were several types of "pilgrims": "apologists" (believing in the "new civilization"), "critics" (getting disillusioned and breaking up with communism publicly), "pragmatists" (regarding the trip as a professional necessity) and "useful idiots" (consciously or not ignoring the repressive aspects of the regime) (Hollander, 1981, pp. 45–67). It is noteworthy that Hollander became the first one to formulate the issue of the psychology of the "pilgrimage", wondering why so many Western intellectuals, people with a high level of education and critical approach, became the victims of self-deception (Hollander, 1981, pp. 120–135).

The studies conducted by Barghoorn from the beginning of the 1960s gave the institution of analysis a framework. According to *The Soviet Cultural Offensive* (1960) and *Soviet Foreign Propaganda* (1964), authored by Barghoorn, the cultural diplomacy of the USSR was not just an accidental occurrence but rather a systematic process of external legitimization of Soviet power (Barghoorn, 1960; Barghoorn, 1964). One of the first scholars who paid attention to the role of VOKS (All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries) and other institutions in the organization of the tours, Barghoorn relied solely on published literature and Western intelligence sources (Barghoorn, 1960, pp. 15–30).

One notable contribution to historiography is represented by works by P. Filene (Filene, 1967) and S. Margulies (Margulies, 1968) concerning visits of Americans to the USSR. Filene studied the formation of the image of the Soviet state in the years 1917–1933 by American intellectuals and politicians, proving that it was highly ideological and connected with American politics (Filene, 1967, pp. 10–20). Margulies analyzed institutions; he looked into the organization of reception of foreigners in the USSR, and changes occurred in the years 1924–1937. Margulies, 1968, pp. 45–60).

Military cultural diplomacy and "people's diplomacy". Traditionally, the history of the "Western pilgrims" paid little attention to the war years; the historiography was dominated by the 1930s. Nevertheless, according to M. Honegger (Honegger, 2020), during the war, VOKS unexpectedly gained great popularity: its cultural and diplomatic activities were perceived as a "patriotic duty" of the cultural elite, similar to entertainment activities at the front (Honegger, 2020, pp. 10–15).

"Public diplomacy" became especially important during the war; it included non-state cultural exchange channels. In particular, according to the results of S. I. Kogan's research titled *Public Diplomacy as a Form of Cultural Cooperation between the USSR and Great Britain during the Second World War and in the Postwar Period* (2024), a number of committees and funds for helping the USSR appeared in Great Britain. Among these organizations, the most remarkable one was the British Red Cross Russian Aid Fund headed by Winston Churchill's wife, Clementine Churchill. The total amount of donations in the first three months exceeded one million pounds (Kogan, 2024, pp. 8–10). The British Society for Cultural Relations between the British Commonwealth and the USSR provided moral support, collected funds, and conducted exhibitions and concerts of Russian and Soviet music (Kogan, 2024, pp. 12–14).

Specific cultural figures played an important role, becoming informal ambassadors of the USSR to the West. In October 1943, the renowned Soviet theater director and actor Sergei Mikhoels and the poet Igor Feffer visited Manchester. They were received by the Lord Mayor of Manchester and the conductor of the famous Hallé Orchestra, John Barbirolli (Kogan, 2024, pp. 18–20). However, as Kogan notes, despite the common goals in the fight against Nazism, cultural ties remained a field of ideological confrontation. Stalin remained suspicious of the Allies, and the deepening ideological chasm between the Soviet regime and Western democracies hindered the expansion of cultural contacts (Kogan, 2024, pp. 22–25).

The post-war years: from visits to isolation. The post-war years (1945–1953) turned into years of Cold War and cultural isolation. The “Iron Curtain” deprived Western intellectuals of visiting the USSR. According to M. David-Fox, cultural diplomacy reached a new stage – propaganda without person-to-person contacts (David-Fox, 2012, pp. 85–95). When Western writers and journalists made their visit, it was carried out in the framework of carefully organized delegations within “closed” programs with no chance of independent research. (Golubev, 2004, pp. 120–130).

John Steinbeck's visit in 1947, which is discussed in his book *A Russian Journal* (1948) (Steinbeck, 1948; Steinbeck, 2017), is a rare example. Steinbeck and a photographer, Robert Capa, visited Moscow, Kyiv, and Stalingrad, but the itinerary was strictly controlled by the Soviet administration. Almost no political criticism is mentioned in Steinbeck's diary; on the contrary, he mentions many daily things rather than the political reality (Steinbeck, 1948, pp. 45–60). *A Russian Journal* got controversial feedback; it was either considered “objective” or “too soft” due to the developing confrontation between countries (Tolts, 2006, pp. 3–5). V. Tolts, who analyzed Steinbeck's diary fifty years after the events, concluded that *A Russian Journal* is unique evidence of its epoch – not about the USSR, but about the Western intellectuals' perception of the Soviet reality at the very beginning of the Cold War. (Tolts, 2006, pp. 6–8).

The Thaw and the Revival of Pilgrimage. With the passing away of Stalin (1953), the phenomenon of “pilgrimage” took another shape. Analysis of the post-Stalin period indicates that beginning in the mid-1950s, the USSR started developing new ways of communication with Western intellectuals. An article dedicated to the contacts between Jean-Paul Sartre and the USSR in 1953–1956 proves that the schedule for each of Sartre's three visits was elaborated and approved at the highest level (Tsyganov D.M., 2025, p. 3–5). The approach to the problem of communication with Sartre demonstrated by the Soviet government was pragmatic; the French philosopher was used as an intermediary to increase the influence of the USSR among the European “left” intelligentsia (Tsyganov D.M., 2025, p. 8–10). The researcher claims that “specific practices of ‘thaw’ cultural diplomacy” appeared in this period and served as a base for the future policy of communication with Western intellectuals (Tsyganov D.M., 2025, p. 12–13). This finding is critical for the analysis of continuity and discontinuity of the Stalinist and post-Stalinist policies of cultural diplomacy. From 1953, the control did not disappear but became more flexible

Archival revolution and new sources. A qualitative breakthrough in the study of “Western pilgrims” occurred in the post-Soviet period, when the discovery of previously inaccessible archives and the introduction of these materials into scholarly circulation allowed for a shift from studying the ideological attitudes of the “pilgrims” to an analysis of the institutional mechanisms that the Soviet state built to organize and control cultural contacts with the West. This new approach was most consistently implemented in the works of M. David-Fox. As E. Dobrenko notes in a review of M. David-Fox's monograph, this author's book offers “the first comprehensive analysis of Soviet cultural diplomacy in the interwar period since the discovery of previously inaccessible Soviet archives” (Dobrenko, 2013, p. 3).

The central event of this period was the publication of previously unknown diaries and memoirs. In 1989, Romain Rolland's *Moscow Diary* (Rolland, 1989) was published, radically changing perceptions of the writer: it turned out that Rolland had witnessed repression and restrictions on freedom but had consciously chosen to remain silent, justifying himself with “historical necessity” (David-Fox, 2005, pp. 20–25). In 2012, Walter Benjamin's *Moscow Diary* (Benjamin, 2012) was published, testifying to the aesthetic perception of Moscow by the German philosopher, who was not politically committed but

captured the atmosphere of the time. In 1990, a translation of André Gide's *Return from the USSR* (Gide, 1990), which had previously been banned in the USSR, was published.

The most important published archival document was the collection *The Great Censorship: Writers and Journalists in the Land of the Soviets, 1917–1956* (2005), which for the first time published correspondence between Soviet officials, transcripts of conversations with Stalin, and documents on the authorities' response to criticism (The Great Censorship, 2005). Among them is the transcript of Stalin's conversation with Feuchtwanger (January 8, 1937) (The Great Censorship, 2005, pp. 444–460), which was kept in the Kremlin archive until the late 1990s and became key evidence of how the Kremlin used Western intellectuals to justify the Great Terror.

A key figure in modern historiography was M. David-Fox, whose monograph *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941* (2011; Russian translation 2015) became “the first comprehensive analysis of Soviet cultural diplomacy in the interwar period” (David-Fox, 2015, p. 7). David Fox attempted to see cultural diplomacy not as a mere addendum to propaganda, but rather as a complicated communication system in which the interests of the state, the intelligentsia, and Western intellectuals coincided.

In his metaphorical analysis, David Fox introduced the term “showcase”, since the Soviet state created various “showcases” to demonstrate its successes, but at the same time, those “showcases” were “a script”, a performance where each step of the visit had its own symbolic meaning (David Fox, 2012, pp. 15–20). In his analysis, David Fox showed that the Soviet government did not just “show” everything it wished to show its guests, but also influenced their perceptions, using guide interpreters, rehearsed meetings with “ordinary Soviet people”, and controlled paths (David-Fox, 2012, pp. 45–60).

Fox was interested in the “amateur diplomats,” people who belonged to the cultural sphere and, although not being diplomats, took an active part in communication with the West. Thus, he proved that while in the 1920s cultural units of VOKS had relative independence, in the 1930s this independence became minimal (David Fox, 2012, pp. 65–80). Fitzpatrick, in her article “Foreigners Observed: Moscow Visitors in the 1930s under the Gaze of Their Soviet Guides” (2008), developed the idea put forward by David Fox and proved that guide-interpreters, in addition to being in control of their guests, were in control themselves, since reports made about them by guide-interpreters were analyzed by the NKVD. (Fitzpatrick, 2008, pp. 220–230).

The archival revolution provides an opportunity to reconsider such “pilgrims” in a new way. The figure of Romain Rolland, known for a long time as the “apostle” of Soviet culture, is revealed, in view of his published diary is revealed as a highly inconsistent personality. M. David Fox, in his article “The ‘Heroic Life’ of a Friend of Stalin’s: Romain Rolland and Soviet Culture” (2005), revealed the fact that Rolland had seen the repressions and limitations of freedoms but chose to keep silent about this situation, using the reasons of “historical necessity” and belief in a “bright future” (David Fox, 2005, pp. 20–25). M. A. Arias Vigil, in her article “‘Such Is the Logic of Power’: Some Aspects of the Question of Repression in the USSR in Romain Rolland’s ‘Moscow Diary’” (2013), proved these conclusions, revealing the fact that Rolland recorded repressions but did not allow himself to criticize them publicly (Arias Vigil, 2013, pp. 5–8).

Another person who attracted the attention of N. Yu. Kharitonova, who, in a series of articles (Kharitonova, 2016; Kharitonova, 2017), examined the history of the book’s publication and the Kremlin’s reaction. Kharitonova showed that Gide was not received by Stalin (unlike most of the “pilgrims”), and this predetermined his critical position (Kharitonova, 2016, pp. 185–188). V. Z. Paperny, in his article “Faith and Truth: André Gide and Lion Feuchtwanger in Moscow” (2003), conducted a comparative analysis of the two “pilgrims,” demonstrating that their different perceptions of Soviet reality were connected not only with their personal qualities but also with the Kremlin’s different strategies (Paperny, 2003, pp. 3–5).

January 1937, which became the Kremlin’s attempt to justify the Great Terror, was examined in detail by L. Maksimenkov in his series of articles, *Essays on the Nomenklatura History of Soviet Literature*.

Western Pilgrims at Stalin's Throne (2004). Maksimenkov showed that Feuchtwanger, a renowned humanist, faced a difficult choice: he could not believe in "conspiracies" and "espionage," but as an anti-fascist, he was afraid of weakening the USSR's position in the face of the Nazi threat (Maksimenkov, 2004, no. 2, pp. 242–250). The transcript of his conversation with Stalin, published in *The Great Censorship*, shows how the leader convinced the writer of the "necessity" of the trials (The Great Censorship, 2005, pp. 444–460). Feuchtwanger, despite his own inner reservations, described the repressions carried out in his novel *Moscow 1937* as a "hard but necessary measure" (Feuchtwanger, 1937). In his article "They Praised Stalin (Lion Feuchtwanger and others)" (2008), A.S. Vorontsov went into more detail about this analysis, demonstrating that Feuchtwanger's justification was one of several ways to develop Stalin's image in the West. (Vorontsov, 2008, pp. 220–230).

Institutions of Cultural Diplomacy. The next stage in historiography is associated with a closer look at specific institutions of cultural diplomacy. Researchers turned to the study of VOKS, created in 1925 and existing until 1958 (Golubev, 2004, pp. 45–60; David-Fox, 2012, pp. 25–40). It is noteworthy that the first head of this "public" organization was Olga Davydovna Kameneva (widow of L. B. Kamenev), who from the very beginning understood the fictitious nature of VOKS's "public" status. In a letter to D. B. Ryazanov from 1924, she wrote: "Do you consider it expedient to create a 'public organization'?"—characteristically, according to M. David-Fox, putting the word "public" in quotation marks (David-Fox, 2015, p. 56). And in a letter to V. V. Kuibyshev, she explained: "These scientific, literary and other sections give the work an outwardly social character" (David-Fox, 2015, p. 57), which made it possible to involve leading specialists in the work of VOKS and give the initiatives more credibility in the West.

In Russian historiography, the institutional approach was developed by A. V. Golubev, who in his monograph *A Look at the Promised Land: From the History of Soviet Cultural Diplomacy in the 1920s–1930s* (2004) showed that cultural diplomacy was a systemic policy implemented through many agencies: VOKS, the United Information Bureau under the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee (OBI), Mezhrabpom, the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, the foreign department of the GPU, and the agitprop of the Comintern (Golubev, 2004, pp. 45–50). In collaboration with V. A. Nevezhin, in the monograph *Formation of the Image of Soviet Russia in the World Around Us by Means of Cultural Diplomacy* (2016), the authors expanded the chronological framework to the first half of the 1940s and introduced new archival materials into circulation, showing the evolution of the institutional mechanisms of cultural diplomacy (Golubev, Nevezhin, 2016, pp. 10–20).

In a series of articles, G. B. Kulikova (Kulikova, 2003; Kulikova, 2013) focused on the mechanisms for selecting guests, organizing "demonstration" visits, and monitoring programs for foreigners' stays in the USSR. She demonstrated that VOKS not only organized visits but also performed censorship functions, filtering information that could reach the West (Kulikova, 2003, pp. 43–59). It is significant that already in the VOKS work plan for 1929–1930, the need for a monopoly on external cultural relations was motivated by an analogy with the monopoly on foreign trade: "The All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries should serve as a prism reflecting abroad those areas of the cultural life of the peoples of the Union that are useful for us to show from the perspective of our political objectives" (GARF, f. 5283, op. 1, d. 112, l. 3–5).

In his article *Fighters on the Ideological Front: Training Guide-Interpreters in the USSR* (2013), I. Orlov examined another important aspect of the institutional system—the training of personnel who accompanied foreign guests. Orlov showed that guide-translators carried out not only linguistic, but also control tasks – they noted down all the statements uttered by guests, evaluated their reactions, and informed about "undesirable" questions. (Orlov, 2013, pp. 85–90).

Biographical Works. In addition to institutional studies, there emerged studies about individual "pilgrims." The first biographical studies, written in the 1980s and 1990s, were about those prominent personalities. S. Taylor, in his book *Stalin's Apologist: Walter Duranty, the New York Times's Man in Moscow* (1990), described the biography of Walter Duranty, who was a correspondent of The New York

Times and consciously concealed the famine in Ukraine and explained repressions. Taylor proved that Duranty was not a “useful idiot,” but a professional journalist who consciously chose to be an apologist (Taylor, 1990, pp. 10–20). His work became a subject of a fierce dispute: some researchers called Duranty a cynical conformist, while others a sincere “fellow traveler” (Tikhiy, 2008, pp. 203–214; Yuzefovich and Ignatyeva, 2015, pp. 260–267).

In the book *The Webbs and Soviet Communism* (2005), K. Morgan described the development of the views of the Webbs, the authors of the book *Soviet Communism—A New Civilization?* (1935). Thus, Morgan demonstrates that the Webbs, famous Fabian socialists, were not “useful idiots,” as they had sincere faith in the Soviet system, which was based on an extensive and deep intellectual analysis, but it did not include the repression of the regime (Morgan, 2005, pp. 45–60). In the book *Angels in Stalin’s Paradise: Western Intellectuals in Soviet Russia, 1917–1937* (1982), J. Crowl pays separate attention to Louis Fischer and Walter Duranty in order to describe the development of their views. Nevertheless, these works cannot provide answers regarding the mechanism of visits to the “pilgrims” because these books were created without access to closed Soviet archives.

4. METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSIONS AND PROSPECTS

Modern historiography is faced with the controversial character of its own conceptual framework. In the words of N. A. Belyakova: “the issue of defining the very concept of culture, of distinguishing propaganda from cultural diplomacy, and cultural diplomacy from public diplomacy.” (Belyakova, 2019, p. 168) Recent literature makes the distinction between propaganda, which “tries to convince people what to think,” and public diplomacy, which “also listens to what people say” (Belyakova, 2019, p. 169).

The term “useful idiots,” which has been widely used in journalistic circles, is a controversial one. It was M. Malia (Malia, 1999) and R. Conquest (Conquest, 2001) who used the term when describing Western intellectuals who either intentionally or unwittingly defended Stalinist terror. Nevertheless, as it is evident from L. Stern’s study (Stern, 2007) their motivations were rather complicated. They encompassed not only ideological, but also professional, career, and psychological aspects of belief in a “bright future.” In her monograph “Western Intellectuals in the Soviet Union, 1920–1940: From Red Square to the Left Bank,” L. Stern suggested a classification of intellectuals into “ideological apologists,” “professional observers,” and “cultural mediators,” which helps not to make oversimplified judgments. (Stern, 2007, pp. 10–20).

The problem of sources: trust and interpretation. Methodological difficulty continues to be dealing with the sources written under severe censorship. One and the same event can be understood quite differently by various researchers, based on their views. One good example is “Moscow Diary” by Romain Rolland (Rolland, 1989). This source, written by the author himself, was not released in the author’s lifetime. It would not have been allowed by the Soviet censorship. Yet the publication of the book in the late 1980s in France and the USSR revealed the true character of Rolland as a writer, a complex personality and internally contradictory individual who had been witnessing oppression and restrictions but remained silent (David Fox, 2005, pp. 20–25). Thus, the books written by the “pilgrims” were just the tip of the iceberg, and other sources like diaries, letters, and other materials not published could alter the interpretations.

Theoretical Approach. A.M. Etkind presents an explanation of the peculiarities of travel writing in general and of travelogues as a specific genre in his book “Interpretation of Travel: Russia and America in Travelogues and Intertexts” (2001) by discussing how travel writing creates the “Other” and how this “Other” is conditioned by the author’s own cultural background (Etkind, 2001, pp. 45–60). This theoretical framework enables going beyond the opposition “apologist versus critic” and treating the texts of “pilgrims” as a cultural product that combines personal observations, ideology, and literature of travelogues.

5. RESEARCH PROSPECTS

One may claim that the historiography of “Western pilgrims” has made considerable progress, especially in the institutional aspect (Nagornaya (ed.), 2018, pp. 5–10). Still, there are issues that need to be

investigated.

However, at the same time, there are some problems that have not been sufficiently researched. Firstly, it is a comparative study of national models of the perception of the Soviet Union by the representatives of various nations, the significance of non-state types of cultural diplomacy, and the integration of the Soviet experience into the global history of the international intellectual and cultural exchanges of the twentieth century. The issues were raised by L. Stern (Stern, 2007) and D. Cauté (Cauté, 1988), but there is no systematic comparison yet. One can find much research potential in the analysis of the similarities between the Soviet experience in the organization of visits by foreign intellectuals and other countries' cultural diplomacy mechanisms.

The people's diplomacy as another channel of cultural exchange is not sufficiently researched: friendship societies, trade unions, tourism, and the delegation exchanges on the non-governmental level (Kogan, 2024, pp. 3–5).

A methodological problem persists concerning the relationship between “intention” and “perception.” Scholars increasingly note that cultural diplomacy is not only what the Soviet state attempted to do, but also how it was perceived in the West. As M. David-Fox writes, “cultural diplomacy is not one-way propaganda, but a two-way process in which both the sender and the receiver of the message participate” (David-Fox, 2012, p. 5). This requires the study not only of Soviet archives, but also of Western sources — newspapers, journals, diaries, and memoirs of those who encountered Soviet cultural diplomacy (Belyakova, 2019, pp. 175–176).

5. CONCLUSION

The historiography of “Western pilgrims” in the USSR in the 1930s–1950s has undergone a complex journey from ideologically driven Cold War-era assessments to a comprehensive institutional and cultural analysis made possible by the opening of archives and the development of interdisciplinary approaches. Three key stages in the evolution of this research can be identified.

The first stage (1940–1980s) was marked by the dominance of Western Sovietology, which perceived “pilgrims” as “fellow travelers” and “useful idiots” (Cauté, 1988; Hollander, 1981). The focus was on state institutions and their propaganda functions, and the phenomenon itself was studied primarily through the prism of ideological confrontation. Researchers of this period laid the foundations for the study of institutional mechanisms, but their approaches were limited by closed archives and the established political framework.

The second stage (1990–2000) is associated with the “archival revolution,” which made it possible to move on to the study of everyday practices, interdepartmental conflicts, and the role of “amateur diplomats” among cultural figures (David-Fox, 2015; Golubev, 2004; Maksimenkov, 2004). New sources were introduced into circulation — the diaries of Rolland (Rolland, 1989), Benjamin (Benjamin, 2012), and transcripts of conversations with Stalin (Great Censorship, 2005). This made it possible to reconsider established assessments and to see the “pilgrims” as complex, internally contradictory figures, and not simply as “apologists” or “critics.”

The third stage (2010s-present) is defined by the focus on an interdisciplinary approach which considers not only the institutional aspects, but also cultural, social, and global factors. More and more attention is paid to “people's diplomacy” (Kogan, 2024), “sports diplomacy” (Glushich, 2023), and a gender approach (Panov, Panova, 2018). All these factors allow widening the notion of “cultural diplomacy.” The collective monograph by O. Nagornaya (2018), where a systematic analysis of Soviet cultural diplomacy during the Cold War period and the inner logic of the Soviet bureaucratic system (Nagornaya (ed.), 2018) is a significant landmark.

Regardless of the diversity of the approaches in historiography, it should be noted that “the Western Pilgrims” phenomenon was not an episode in the intellectual history, but one of the key factors of cultural

diplomacy of the Stalinist period.

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