

The production dynamics of western films connected with 'the Soviet/Russian topic'

By Alexander Fedorov

Let me trace the dynamics of film production concerning films about the USSR/Russia made in leading western countries – the United States, the United Kingdom, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, etc. – from 1946 to 2010. During this period about 900 feature films connected with Russia were created in the West. I refer here to major feature films (see Tables 1 and 2 in the Appendix); one could add to the list hundreds of documentary films and television programs.

In their monograph *Friend or Foe?* (1997), M. J. Strada and H. R. Troper state that between 1946 and 1962 Russia was on the list of topics which Hollywood preferred to avoid. According to Strada and Troper, during this period only sixteen films on this topic were shot, i.e. one movie a year at the average (Strada and Troper 1997: 76).

My research (see Table 1 in the Appendix) has shown that this figure is strongly underestimated: actually, Hollywood appealed to the Russian topic at least 89 times during the period, i.e. they shot, on average, five films about the USSR/Russia, and with Russian characters, per year. For instance, in 1952 alone the Russian topic was somehow touched upon in sixteen films. And the ratio between western films about the USSR/Russia and Soviet films about the West in 1946–91 (see Appendix for details) is the following: 574 western films (among them, 242 American movies and 122 British films) per 128 Soviet films.

Table 1 gives detailed figures (per each year) on western feature films devoted to the Soviet/Russian topic. It gives a good opportunity to trace the peaks of western interest in the USSR/Russia, which are mainly connected with key world political events important for the development of Russian-western relations.

In other words, this simple diagram shows that the United States dominated in the number of movies about Russia from 1946 to 2010 (and that is in-line with the total US contribution to world film production).

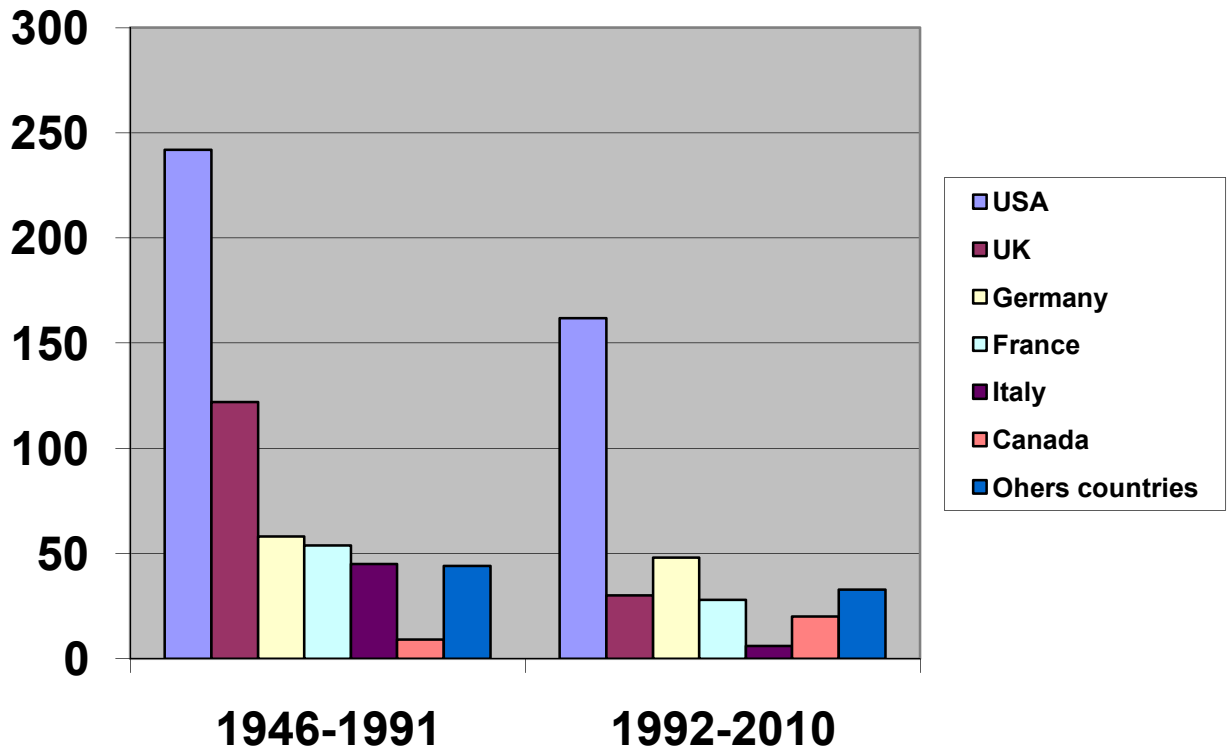
Also it should be noted that unlike in the United States, anti-Soviet and anti-communist films were practically not shot in Italy and France, on account of the strong influence of national communist parties in the first post-war decade. For similar reasons the distribution of American anti-communist films was extremely restricted. Moreover, even if such films chanced to be shown in France (e.g. *Diplomatic Courier* [1952]) they were dubbed into French so that no one could guess the nationality or country of the enemies/spies (Lacourbe 1985: 20–21).

In the United Kingdom, that followed the lead of the American policy, the situation was certainly different but even here some film-makers may have abandoned the stormy anti-communist attack for political reasons. The anti-Soviet consensus was hampered by a number of factors including the sympathy towards the Soviet views concerning the safe western border, American unreliability, and some left-wing politicians' belief in the potential compatibility of communism and social democracy (Shaw 2006: 27).

The data in Table 1 shows that the peaks of the western interest in the Soviet/Russian theme on the screen come in 1952 (seventeen films), 1955–58 (sixteen films per year on average), and 1984–90 (sixteen films per year on average). And since 1996 this interest has become steadily high (nineteen films per year on average). However, the comparison between the 45-year-long period from 1946 to 1991 and the 18-year-long period from 1992 to 2010 shows a distinct tendency of an *average* increase in the number of western films about Russia and with Russian characters. From 1946 to 1991 on average twelve films of this sort were released per year, while for the years 1992 to 2010 the figure is seventeen films a year.

The data from Table 1 can be represented in national terms as in Diagram 1:

Diagram 1: The number of western feature films connected with the Soviet/Russian theme by country.



There is no doubt that film production differs significantly from the press, radio, TV, and especially Internet media text production in efficiency for reflecting current world events; the process of film-making, from an idea to final distribution, generally takes years. Apparently, film production failed to promptly (within several days, weeks or months) react either to Winston Churchill's Fulton speech (1946) or to the Russian military invasion into Afghanistan (1979). That is why the maximum number of confrontational films were released not during the intense war years in Afghanistan (1979–83) but in 1985, when after the consecutive deaths of three aged Soviet leaders (Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko) a new, comparatively young leader came to power in the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev, whose ideas about perestroika (as well as the man himself) soon became so popular in the West.

Nevertheless, a comparative analysis of the data from Table 1: Western feature films on the Russian subject (1946–2010); and key dates and political events in the world which were important for the development of Russian-western relations (1946–2010), show a reduction of *film confrontations* after the conclusion of treaties, positive contacts, exchange, and collaboration between the USSR and the United States: the peak of the Cold War on screen in 1973–74 (between thirteen and sixteen films a year) changed in 1975–78 into a decline in interest in Russia (six to nine films per year).

Conversely, the heightened interest of the West in Russia from 1962 to 1970 was apparently caused by some of the key political events of those years – the arms race and the Cuban crisis (*Red Nightmare* [1962]; *Dr. Strangelove* [1964]; *Fail-Safe* [1964]; *Seven Days in May* [1964]; *The Russians Are Coming! The Russians Are Coming!* [1966], etc.), space programs (*The Mouse on the Moon* [1963], and others), the building of the Berlin Wall (*Escape from East Berlin* [1962]; *Stop Train 349* [*Le train de Berlin est arrêté*, 1964]; *Spy in Your Eye* [*Berlino*,

Appuntamento per le spie, 1966]; *Funeral in Berlin* [1966], etc.), the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia (a number of documentary films and TV programs) and so on, and in 1984–90 – by the Afghanistan war and perestroika in the USSR.

It should be noted that there were always fewer positive Russian portraits than negative ones created in Hollywood. For instance, Strada and Troper calculated that a negative or 'mixed/ambivalent' Russian image could be traced totally in 71 per cent of American feature films from 1946 to 1991 (Strada and Troper 1997).

Western countries shot on average approximately fourteen films per year (six of them made in America) connected with Russia from 1946 to 2010 (by the way, there were 4.5 times fewer Soviet films about America or western countries than western films about Russia). Nevertheless, if we exclude numerous western screen adaptations of Russian classical literature and compare the number of American and Soviet films with obviously confrontational plots, we shall see that there was approximately the same quantity. During some periods either Soviet/Russian anti-western films or western anti-Soviet films dominated; but for the rest of the time there was a sort of ideological parity.

Since 1992 the parity situation has changed abruptly: the West was highly interested in Russia as before (327 films from 1992 to 2010, 162 of them made in America) while the Russian cinema generally concentrated on domestic problems which, by the way, were not few. To tell the truth, these days

a deep-rooted superiority complex prevents Americans from having an unbiased image of Russia as before. [...] The mass media are expected to give a negative image of Russia, besides they are interested primarily in elections, the president's health [it is appropriate to mention here a grotesque 2003 comedy, *Spinning Boris*, directed by Roger Spottiswoode about how American PR people helped Boris Yeltsin win the presidential elections in 1996 when he was sick and had lost touch with reality], struggle for power, the possibility of a communist restoration, the war on the outskirts of Russia or the Russian mafia. (Moseyko 2009: 29)

Returning to the analysis of Diagram 1 one can notice that during the period from 1992 to 2010 West Germany/Germany captured the second place in film-making about Russia thus leaving the United Kingdom behind, the nation that used to hold the incontestable second position in 1946–91.

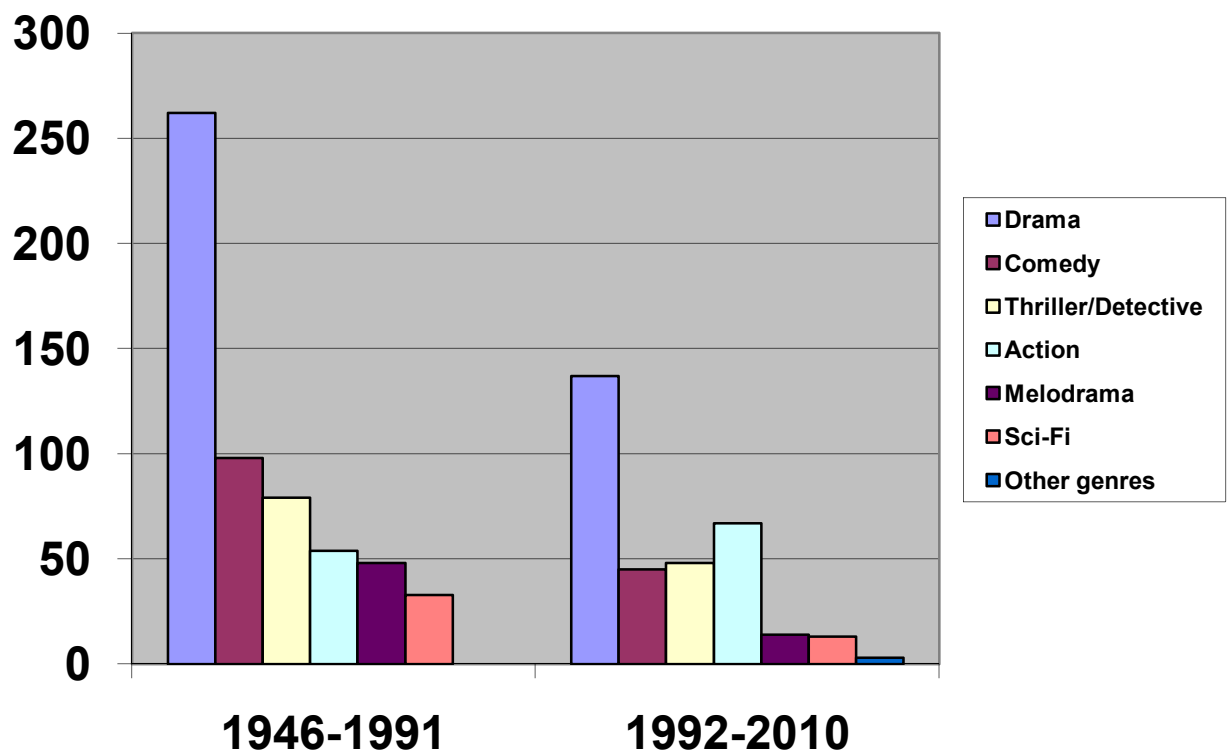
It seems that such interest of German film-makers in Russia is caused not only by the German reunification and the dramatic past of Russian-Germany national relations, but also by the fact that in the 1990s and at the beginning of the twenty-first century there were many Russian immigrants at Berlin and Munich film studios who were interested in film-making about Russia. It is also interesting to trace the difference in the number of western feature films about the USSR/Russia in the genre context.

As is clear from Diagram 2 the following genres dominated western films about Russia from 1946 to 2010: dramas (399), comedies (143), thrillers and detective stories (127), action films (121) and melodramas (62). The last position but one is occupied by science fiction films (46), though in some periods – during the nuclear confrontation period of the early 1950s and the beginning of the space era (1957–63) – sci-fi films occupied a significant place in the cinema repertoire. Table 2 gives more detailed data about the genre distribution of western films about Russia.

That drama is the dominant genre is quite explainable – not only confrontational plots, but also numerous screen versions of Russian classics are included in the drama genre. Looking at the data of Tables 2 and 3 one can see that there were more comedies about Russia in the time of relative political relaxation (1964–67), meanwhile the screen versions of Russian classics of the period from 1958 to 1975 were distributed more or less equally throughout these years (from five to nine screen versions annually, though we did not consider the screen versions in which the action was relocated from Russia to the United States or Western Europe).

A decrease in the number of western screen versions of Russian classics (at the average two or three films annually) became noticeable in the new twist of the military confrontation in the first half of the 1980s, and then during the perestroika epoch when the western film *Rossica* attempted to be extremely topical in representing events which took place in Russia.

Diagram 2: The number of western feature films about the Russian/Soviet topic in a genre context.



Anton Chekhov's works still take the first place among western screen adaptations – his literary works became the basis for film and television versions around 200 times. Foreign filmmakers willingly referred to Fyodor Dostoyevsky's and Leo Tolstoy's prose – their works were adapted more than 100 times each. There are also screen versions of Alexander Pushkin's, Nikolai Gogol's and Ivan Turgenev's works (over 50 films each).

Predictably, for Chekhov his plays dominate when it comes to adaptations; for Dostoyevsky it is the novels *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Demons*; for Tolstoy his novels *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace*; for Gogol the plays *The Inspector General* and *Marriage*. Pushkin's creative heritage is represented on the western screen generally in the form of adaptations of the operas based on *Eugene Onegin* and *The Queen of Spades* (*Pique Dame*).

In total from 1946 to 2010 no fewer than 200 screen versions of Russian classics were made in the West, a fourth of the total number of films about Russia and with Russian characters. This is not accidental, as Moseyko writes,

since the end of the 19th century N. Gogol's, F. Dostoyevsky's, L. Tolstoy's, A. Chekhov's works have firmly entered the spiritual culture of the West and the Western mentality of the 20th century. Their characters became symbols, emblems of the Russian national character, the Russian soul; in many respects they marked the image of Russia. Western (and later Eastern) national cultures found ideas, images, cultural issues in the Russian novel and in the Russian culture in general conforming to the time, the definite circumstances and needs of these cultures. [...] The lack of spirituality, the world's desacralization, the human alienation and anonymity in the modern world became especially acute. Western culture discovered deep spiritual meanings, a search for absolute values, and the tragic depths of the human personality in Russian culture, and unlocked the wealth of Russian-Eastern traditions for its own use. (Moseyko 2009: 24)

The scope of our study does not include the image of Russia in the motion picture arts of

Eastern European countries and the Baltic countries. However, it should be noted that since the 1990s the cinemas of these countries tend to refer to the Russian topic more often. As a rule, these are dramatic stories about the most unpleasant and tragic pages of our common past (the most vivid example is perhaps Andrzej Wajda's *Katyn* [2007]). One should not be surprised: having escaped the Soviet camp captivity these Eastern European countries took the opportunity to openly criticize Russian policy, both in a historical and a modern context. This could not but affect the cinema images of the former Big Brother.

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Appendix

Table 1: Western feature films on the Russian subject (1946–2010).
Compiled by the author.

Soviet Period								
Year of film release	Total number of feature films associated with the Russian subject	Distribution of films by country						
		USA	UK	Germany	France	Italy	Canada	Other countries
1946	2				1	1		
1947	2					2		
1948	6	5	1					
1949	8	7	1					
1950	7	5	1					1
1951	7	6	1					
1952	17	16	1					
1953	8	6	1	1				
1954	8	4			1	2	1	
1955	13	6	3	2	1			1
1956	8	3	2	1	2			
1957	11	9	2					
1958	13	5		3	2	2		1
1959	9	4	2	2		1		
1960	11	5	3	2	1			
1961	10	3	5		1			1
1962	14	5	3	3	2	1		

1963	19	3	7	1	1	4	1	2
1964	19	6	5	4	1	2		1
1965	21	4	4	2	3	5	1	2
1966	24	8	7	2	2	4		1
1967	23	1	6	11	2	1		2
1968	16	4	7	1	1		1	2
1969	15	4	4	2	2	2		1
1970	13	2	4	3	2			2
1971	11	3	3	2	1	1		1
1972	11	3			1	3		4
1973	13	4	2		2	2		3
1974	16	6	2	2	2	2		2
1975	8	2	1		2		1	2
1976	7	1	1	2		1		2
1977	9	3	2	1		2		1
1978	6	4	1			1		
1979	11	2	7		1			1
1980	11	7			2		2	
1981	11	2	5	1	2		1	
1982	9	4	1	2	2			
1983	9	4	3		1	1		
1984	14	5	3	3	1	1		1
1985	29	19	7		2			1
1986	13	5	4	1	2		1	
1987	21	14	2	2	1	1		1
1988	20	14	1	1	1			3
1989	11	8	1		1			1
1990	20	8	4	1	3	3		1
1991	10	3	1	1	2			3
Total (Soviet period)	575	242	122	59	54	45	9	44
Russian period								
Year of film release	Total number of feature films associated with the Russian subject	Distribution of films by country						
		USA	UK	Germany	France	Italy	Canada	Other countries
1992	11	7			3			1
1993	13	3	1	5	3			1
1994	11	5	2	1	1		1	1
1995	9	5	1	2			1	
1996	15	9	2	2				2
1997	16	9		1	1		2	3
1998	10	7		2	1			
1999	16	5	3	2	2		2	2
2000	22	11	3	2		1	3	2
2001	24	12	4	3	2	1	1	1

2002	19	11	4		1	1		2
2003	13	4	2	4	1			2
2004	15	6		3	2	1	1	2
2005	18	7	1	4	3		2	1
2006	18	5	2	6	1		1	3
2007	19	11	2	2	1	1	1	1
2008	26	16	2	2	2	1	1	2
2009	27	14		2	3		3	5
2010	25	15	1	5	1		1	2
Total (Russian period)	327	162	30	48	28	6	20	33
Total (All periods)	901	404	152	107	82	51	29	77

**Table 2: Genres of western feature films on the Russian subject (1946–2010).
Compiled by the author.**

Soviet period								
Year of film release	Total number of feature films associated with the Russian subject	Distribution of films by genres						
		Drama	Comedy	Thriller/De tective	Action	Melodrama	Science fiction	Horror
1946	2	2						
1947	2	2						
1948	6	4	1	1				
1949	8	5	1		2			
1950	7	4	1	1			1	
1951	7	2		1	1		3	
1952	17	7	1	5		2	2	
1953	8	2		2	2	2		
1954	8	2	1	2	1	1	1	
1955	13	6	3	1	2	1		
1956	8	1	1	1		3	2	
1957	11	4	2	2		2	1	
1958	13	9	1	1		1	1	
1959	9	3	4	1			1	
1960	11	5	3		1	2		
1961	10	3	5			1	1	
1962	14	10	3	1				
1963	19	8	4	3	1	2	1	
1964	19	5	7	2	1	4		
1965	21	8	2	6	2	3		
1966	24	8	9	4	2	1		

1967	23	10	9	2	2			
1968	16	9	1	1	2	2	1	
1969	15	10	4	1				
1970	13	8	2	2		1		
1971	11	6	2	1			2	
1972	11	7	2				2	
1973	13	5	2	5		1		
1974	16	8	4		1	2	1	
1975	8	4	1			3		
1976	7	4		1		1	1	
1977	9	4		1	1	2	1	
1978	6	4	1			1		
1979	11	5		4		1	1	
1980	11	5	3		1	1	1	
1981	11	4	2	3	2			
1982	9	6	1		2			
1983	9	4	1	1	1		2	
1984	14	6	2	1	2	1	2	
1985	29	10	4	5	7	3	1	
1986	13	8	1	2	1	1		
1987	21	10	2	4	2	1	2	
1988	20	5	1	5	9			
1989	11	2	1	3	3	2		
1990	20	11	2	3	2		2	
1991	10	8	1		1			
Total (Soviet period)	574	262	98	79	54	48	33	

Russian period

Year of film release	Total number of feature films associated with the Russian subject	Distribution of films by genres						
		Drama	Comedy	Thriller/De tective	Action	Melodrama	Science fiction	Horror
1992	11	2	3	4	1	1		
1993	13	7	4	1		1		
1994	11	5	2	1	2	1		
1995	9	2	1	3	3			
1996	15	4		7	4			
1997	16	5	1		5	2	2	1
1998	10	6		1	1		2	
1999	16	5	4	2	5			
2000	22	11	2	3	5	1		
2001	24	8	2	4	6	3	1	
2002	19	9	2	1	4	1	2	
2003	13	6	4	2	1			
2004	15	6	3	2	3		1	

2005	18	11	2	3	1		1	
2006	18	8	5	2	1	1		1
2007	19	8	2	1	4	2	1	1
2008	26	12	4	4	5		1	
2009	27	11	1	5	8	1	1	
2010	25	11	3	2	8		1	
Total (Russian period)	327	137	45	48	67	14	13	3
Total (All periods)	901	399	143	127	121	62	46	3

Table 3: Western feature films associated with the Soviet/Russian subject and Soviet films on the western subject (1946–91). Compiled by the author.

Soviet period									
Year of film release	Total number of feature films on these subjects	Distribution of films by countries							
		USSR	USA	UK	Germany	France	Italy	Canada	Other countries
1946	3	1				1	1		
1947	3	1					2		
1948	7	1	5	1					
1949	10	2	7	1					
1950	10	3	5	1					1
1951	8	1	6	1					
1952	17		16	1					
1953	9	1	6	1	1				
1954	11	3	4			1	2	1	
1955	18	5	6	3	2	1			1
1956	9	1	3	2	1	2			
1957	11		9	2					
1958	16	3	5		3	2	2		1
1959	11	2	4	2	2		1		
1960	15	4	5	3	2	1			
1961	15	5	3	5		1			1
1962	18	4	5	3	3	2	1		
1963	21	2	3	7	1	1	4	1	2
1964	22	3	6	5	4	1	2		1
1965	28	7	4	4	2	3	5	1	2
1966	26	2	8	7	2	2	4		1
1967	24	1	1	6	11	2	1		2
1968	19	3	4	7	1	1		1	2
1969	17	2	4	4	2	2	2		1
1970	14	1	2	4	3	2			2

1971	14	3	3	3	2	1	1		1
1972	22	11	3			1	3		4
1973	15	2	4	2		2	2		3
1974	19	3	6	2	2	2	2		2
1975	9	1	2	1		2		1	2
1976	8	1	1	1	2		1		2
1977	12	3	3	2	1		2		1
1978	7	1	4	1			1		
1979	13	2	2	7		1			1
1980	14	3	7			2		2	
1981	15	4	2	5	1	2		1	
1982	13	4	4	1	2	2			
1983	14	5	4	3		1	1		
1984	22	8	5	3	3	1	1		1
1985	33	4	19	7		2			1
1986	23	10	5	4	1	2		1	
1987	22	1	14	2	2	1	1		1
1988	20		14	1	1	1			3
1989	11		8	1		1			1
1990	21	1	8	4	1	3	3		1
1991	13	3	3	1	1	2			3
Total (Soviet period)*	702	128	242	122	58	54	45	9	44

* Correlation between western feature films on the Soviet/Russian subject and Soviet films on the western subject (1946–91): 574 (western) and 128 (Soviet).