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### Welcome, or Entry Permitted to Outsiders: Emotional and Everyday Aspects of the Lives of American Trainees in the USSR in the 1960s


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**Abstract.** This article examines the experiences of American trainees in the Soviet Union in the 1960s, within the framework of the Soviet-American academic exchange program implemented under the 1958 Lacy — Zarubin Agreement. The study is based on the analysis of ego-documents (memoirs and interviews of program participants), enabling an examination of the emotional and everyday aspects of American students' stay in the USSR. The paper provides a detailed analysis of the trainees' perceptions of Soviet daily life, including living conditions in dormitories, meal arrangements, shopping practices, and their overall impressions of Moscow's urban environment. Particular attention is paid to interactions with Soviet students, who, contrary to the initial expectations of the American participants, showed little interest in ideological discussions but displayed an active curiosity about the everyday life of Americans. The study also addresses the challenges faced by American researchers when working in Soviet archives and libraries, including bureaucratic hurdles and limited access to materials. The article highlights the asymmetry in the exchange policies: while the American side predominantly sent humanities scholars, the Soviet participants were primarily representatives of the natural sciences. The study identifies a continuity with the model of the 1930s, when Soviet engineers absorbed American technological expertise. Methodologically, the research is grounded in approaches from the history of everyday life and the history of emotions, interpreting the subjectivity of the participants' perceptions not as a limitation but as a valuable resource for understanding intercultural interaction during the Cold War. Despite the significant number of initiatives conducted under the USSR — USA Agreement on Exchanges in Science, Technology, Education, Culture, and other areas, including academic exchanges, the program failed to achieve its primary goal of rapprochement between the two regimes. However, the program contributed to the formation of a new generation of American Sovietologists who, like Sheila Filzpatrick, made significant contributions to the revision of traditional approaches to the study of Soviet history.

**Key words:** Soviet-American relations, academic exchanges, Cold War, history of everyday life, history of emotions, ego-documents, Sovietology, cultural diplomacy, Lacy — Zarubin Agreement, student mobility

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## Добро пожаловать, или Посторонним вход разрешен: эмоциональные и бытовые аспекты жизни американских стажеров в СССР 1960-х гг.

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**Аннотация.** Проанализирован опыт американских стажеров в Советском Союзе 1960-х гг. в контексте реализации программы советско-американских академических обменов, осуществлявшихся согласно Соглашению Лэйси — Зарубина 1958 г. Исследование основано на изучении эго-документов (мемуаров и интервью участников программы), что позволяет рассмотреть эмоциональные и бытовые аспекты пребывания американских студентов в СССР. Детально описано восприятие американскими стажерами советской повседневности, включая условия проживания в общежитиях, организацию питания, специфику совершения покупок в магазинах, а также их общую оценку городского пространства Москвы. Существенное внимание уделено характеру взаимодействия с советскими студентами, которые, вопреки предварительным ожиданиям американских участников, демонстрировали незначительный интерес к идеологическим вопросам, но проявляли активное любопытство к бытовым аспектам американской жизни. Рассмотрены трудности, с которыми сталкивались американские исследователи при работе в советских архивах и библиотеках, включая бюрократические препятствия и ограничения доступа к материалам. Отдельно проанализированы диспропорции в политике обмена: если американская сторона направляла преимущественно специалистов-гуманитариев, то советские участники были в основном представителями естественных наук. Прослеживается преемственность с моделью 1930-х гг., когда советские инженеры перенимали американский технологический опыт. Методологически исследование базируется на подходах истории повседневности и истории эмоций, что позволяет интерпретировать субъективность восприятия участников научного обмена не как ограничение, а как значимый источник для понимания межкультурного взаимодействия в период холодной войны. Несмотря на значительное количество мероприятий, осуществленных в рамках Соглашения между СССР и США об обменах в области науки, техники, образования, культуры и других областях, в том числе и в сфере академического обмена, инициатива не достигла своей главной цели по сближению двух режимов. Однако программа способствовала формированию нового поколения американских советологов, которые, подобно Шейле Фицпатрик, внесли существенный вклад в пересмотр традиционных подходов к изучению советской истории.

**Ключевые слова:** советско-американские отношения, академические обмены, холодная война, история повседневности, история эмоций, эго-документы, советология, культурная дипломатия, Соглашение Лэйси — Зарубина, студенческая мобильность

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## Introduction

“After ten days at sea and another three on trains, we were finally greeted with relief by energetic Russian students, arriving in a minibus and a plain open-bed truck covered with a canvas tarp to transport us and our luggage to the dormitory.”<sup>1</sup> This passage, which might resemble the opening of an early work by Vladimir Aksenov, is, in fact, an excerpt from the recollections of an American graduate student describing their first encounter with Soviet reality upon arrival for academic study in the USSR. More significant than the details of Soviet daily life — such as the minibus and the canvas-covered truck — are the emotional reactions of individuals who were among the first to voluntarily cross the “Iron Curtain” as participants in what may be termed “scientific diplomacy.”

This article focuses on how Soviet and American graduate students described their experiences of interacting with another country and system. The primary sources for this study include ego-documents from participants in the exchange program, namely the memoirs of Sheila Filzpatrick<sup>2</sup> and an extensive interview with Naomi Collins,<sup>3</sup> the wife of exchange participant J. Collins. These materials are further supplemented by various administrative

documents which reflect the bureaucratic dimensions of the exchange program’s implementation at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s.

In the contemporary historiography of Soviet-American relations, the academic exchange between the two countries remains an underexplored topic. This exchange took place under the Agreement between the USSR and the United States on Exchanges in Science, Technology, Education, Culture, and Other Fields, commonly referred to as the Lacy — Zarubin Agreement, which was signed in 1958. The agreement encompassed a broad range of activities, extending from theater tours to the establishment of direct air links between the two countries.<sup>4</sup> The historiography of Cold War cultural exchanges covers a variety of aspects, including music (Tomoff, 2015), dance (Croft, 2015), television (Roth-Ey, 2011), literature (Barnhisel, 2015), cultural diplomacy (Richmond, 1987), and international exhibitions (Wulf, 2015). However, this study focuses specifically on the exchange of young scholars between the Soviet Union and the United States, as science — alongside sports — was perceived as a crucial arena for both cooperation and competition between the two systems. Participants in these exchange programs were not only young researchers but also, in a sense, informal diplomats who were expected to both observe the foreign academic and cultural environment and represent their own country in an international setting.

<sup>1</sup> Collins N. F. *Through Dark Days and White Nights : Four Decades Observing a Changing Russia*. Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Filzpatrick S. A Student in Moscow, 1966 // *The Wilson Quarterly*. 1982. Vol. 6, no. 3. P.132–141.

<sup>3</sup> Collins N. Interview. ADST, 2013. URL: <https://adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Collins-Naomi.pdf> (accessed: 12.09.2023).

<sup>4</sup> Text of Lacy — Zarubin Agreement // *New York Times*. 1958. January 28.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that the history of student exchanges is an entirely unexamined topic; however, relatively few scholars have explored it in depth. In 2013, a collection of documents<sup>5</sup> was published, focusing on the education of foreign students in the Soviet Union between 1956 and 1965. Notably, this collection does not include materials on American students; however, it provides a broader context for understanding the experience of foreign students in the USSR, highlighting both the advantages and the challenges they faced.

Student exchange programs have also been analyzed within the framework of cultural diplomacy studies. In Russian historiography, this topic has been addressed in a collective monograph edited by Oksana Nagornaya (2018). Although the volume does not specifically examine American trainees, it provides valuable insights into the mechanisms and strategic goals of Soviet exchange programs in other countries.

A similar approach is evident in Maria Beklenischeva's (2021) research on student exchanges at the regional level. Particularly noteworthy are the studies by Natalia Tsvetkova (2006; 2007; Tsvetkova & Tsvetkov, 2020), which examine student exchanges as a tool of soft power in the foreign policies of both the USSR and the United States during the Cold War. Her work places these exchanges within the broader practices implemented in Soviet bloc countries as well as in regions where the geopolitical interests of the two superpowers intersected.

Other important contributions to this field include the work of Sergei Zhuk (2017) on the role of the State Security Committee (KGB) in Soviet American studies, including its influence on exchange participants. Yale Richmond (2003) also provides an analysis of the cultural encounters between the two Cold War

adversaries, addressing the implementation and impact of the Lacy — Zarubin Agreement. Furthermore, a 1976 monograph by Robert Byrnes (1976) offers firsthand insights from the American organizers of the exchange program, shedding light on the program's structure, objectives, and challenges.

## Methodology

Historians have increasingly turned to diaries and other ego-documents as valuable sources for historical research. A major contribution to the methodological framework for the study of ego-documents was made by Gabriel Jancke (2002), who demonstrated, using early modern materials, that self-narration constitutes a social practice. As such, ego-documents are embedded in broader social contexts rather than serving as purely individual or subjective accounts.

For the study of the Soviet period, a landmark work in this field is *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* by Jochen Hellbeck (2006). Drawing upon Michel Foucault's conceptual framework, Hellbeck reconstructs the process of Soviet subjectivity formation, emphasizing that subjectivity is not merely an individual trait, but rather a capacity for thought and action shaped by a comprehensive self-concept.

It is crucial to note that contemporary approaches to the analysis of diaries and ego-documents have moved away from earlier interpretations that positioned them as a metaphorical 'keyhole' into the author's consciousness. Historically, scholars contrasted 'deceptive' official texts, which distorted reality, with 'sincere' ego-documents that were presumed to reflect the author's true thoughts. However, modern research increasingly considers diaries and other ego-documents through the lens of stable narrative strategies. Even when an individual writes a diary for personal use rather than for publication, they still engage in structured social practices of self-representation. Thus, ego-documents serve not

<sup>5</sup> "Returning Home as Friends of the USSR...": Education of Foreigners in the Soviet Union, 1956–1965 / ed. by T. Yu. Krasovitskaya. Moscow : MFD publ., 2013. (In Russian).

only as reflections of historical reality, but also as valuable sources for analyzing social practices and subjectivity.

A crucial methodological framework for this study is the history of emotions. The study of emotions in history encompasses a broad spectrum of approaches, each offering unique insights into the complex interplay between emotions and human experience over time (Plamper, 2015; Boddice, 2018; Rosenwein, 2018). A key methodological tool in this field is the examination of ego-documents, including diaries, letters, and memoirs, which provide access to personal emotional experiences and subjective perceptions. By analyzing these primary sources, researchers can trace changes in emotional expression and the formation of identity over time (Slabáková, 2018; Magnússon, 2022; Almendral, 2020).

By documenting the personal experiences and emotional reactions of foreigners who visited the USSR, diaries preserve a unique dimension of history that might otherwise be overlooked. However, it is essential to acknowledge that these sources do not provide an unfiltered representation of Soviet reality; rather, they construct an image of the Soviet Union that is mediated through multiple layers of social and cultural perception.

### Background of the Exchange Program

The initiative for an academic exchange program between the Soviet Union and the United States was driven primarily by the American side. It emerged in response to both the post-World War II thaw in relations and to the evolving international role of the USSR. However, early attempts to establish such exchanges were met with resistance from the Soviet leadership. Proposals put forward by the US government in 1945 and again in 1953 were rejected, with Soviet officials expressing concerns that foreign scholars would act as agents of ideological subversion, potentially destabilizing Soviet society (Tsvetkova, 2006, pp. 120–123). This deep-rooted skepticism was

reflected in the recollections of Nikita Khrushchev, who later noted that Soviet authorities had long viewed foreign visitors with suspicion, assuming they had covert intentions to recruit Soviet citizens for espionage or political dissent.<sup>6</sup>

By the late 1950s, the Soviet government had begun to reassess its stance. Increased engagement in scientific and technological cooperation, along with a broader effort to project Soviet achievements on the world stage, contributed to a more favorable view of academic exchanges. By this time, the USSR had already established a robust system of educational exchanges, primarily within the socialist bloc. These programs were designed to integrate Soviet educational models into the academic systems of allied nations and to promote socialist ideology among foreign students. However, the 1958 Lacy — Zarubin Agreement represented a fundamental shift: rather than reinforcing ideological homogeneity, this initiative created a framework for academic engagement between two geopolitical rivals. It was not merely an extension of existing exchange programs but rather a bold experiment in cultural diplomacy, one that would expose both American and Soviet students to an unfamiliar social and political reality.

### Moscow Through the Eyes of Foreigners

An analysis of the ego-documents produced by American exchange students in the USSR, alongside subsequent research based on these sources, suggests that student dormitories served as the focal point of daily life for visiting scholars in the Soviet Union. However, beyond this immediate environment, Naomi Collins and Sheila Filzpatrick, two participants in the exchange program, depicted mid-1960s Moscow in strikingly similar terms. Both authors construct an image of the city as bleak, outdated, and monotonously grey. Yet, the remarkable

<sup>6</sup> Khrushchev N. S. *Time. People. Power. (Memoirs). Book III. Moscow* : IIK “Moskovskiy novosti” publ., 1999. P. 366. (In Russian).

convergence in their descriptions raises questions about the extent to which these accounts reflect the material reality of the time, or whether they were shaped by preconceptions and prevailing Cold War narratives. Despite experiencing Moscow separately and at different times, both authors discerned two distinct architectural landscapes. Filzpatrick's portrayal is particularly evocative, employing metaphorical language to contrast the grandeur of Stalinist skyscrapers — likened to “wedding cakes” — with the unassuming, two-story wooden houses that dotted parts of the city.<sup>7</sup> Collins, by contrast, adopts a more utilitarian classification, distinguishing between “shoddy buildings” and “luxury housing,” the latter of which is reserved for the Communist Party elite. However, she is quick to qualify that even these so-called luxury apartments would, by American standards, have been considered comparable only to Brooklyn tenements of the 1930s. Collins' overall impression of Moscow is encapsulated in her description of a profound time warp, a temporal displacement of more than three decades, which she interprets as emblematic of the city's stagnation. Her response oscillates between frustration and disillusionment, though she carefully frames this reaction not as a purely personal sentiment, but as one that she attributes to Western observers more broadly. In doing so, she invokes what she describes as the constructed image of the Soviet Union, suggesting that her experience confirmed, rather than challenged, pre-existing perceptions of the Soviet state.<sup>8</sup>

The depiction of Soviet dormitory life in the accounts of American exchange students continues the broader theme of modesty and austerity in Soviet daily existence. Naomi Collins describes the accommodation she and her husband were provided with as “luxurious by Moscow standards of the time,” emphasizing two

key aspects: the residence was private, and it featured an en-suite bathroom — amenities that were by no means universal in Soviet student housing.<sup>9</sup> A similarly tempered yet positive assessment appears in a *Times* magazine report from November 1962, which characterizes the trainees' lodgings as “comfortable two-room accommodations” and notes that married couples were housed together. It also highlights a fundamental aspect of Soviet domestic culture, namely that meals were prepared communally, either in shared kitchens or on single-burner electric stoves within the dormitory rooms.<sup>10</sup> The electric hot plate (*plitka*), an unremarkable yet essential feature of Soviet domestic life, is notably emphasized in the *Times* article's subheading — “Herring & Hot Plates” — which frames the detail as both an exotic curiosity and a shorthand for perceived Soviet hardship. Such linguistic choices reinforce a broader Cold War-era Western tendency to cast Soviet everyday life in a light of deprivation and alienation, often emphasizing those aspects that deviated from Western norms.

Yet, the living conditions of American students varied considerably depending on their university placement. Those assigned to Leningrad State University, which was perceived by Western observers as closer to the Soviet provincial experience, described their accommodations as “far seedier dormitories” than those provided at Moscow State University. This assessment was largely based on differences in the number of students per room and the expectation of communal resource-sharing. While Moscow-based exchange students enjoyed relatively private quarters, those in Leningrad often shared their space with two or three roommates and adhered to a system in which almost everything — food, clothing, and books — was shared, with the notable exception of personal hygiene items such as toothpaste. This communal ethos struck American students

<sup>7</sup> Filzpatrick S. A Student in Moscow, 1966 // *The Wilson Quarterly*. 1982. Vol. 6, no. 3. P. 133.

<sup>8</sup> Collins N. Interview. ADST, 2013. P. 44–45. URL: <https://adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Collins-Naomi.pdf> (accessed: 12.09.2023).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. P. 44.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Students in Russia // *Time*. 1962. November 30. P. 66.

as emblematic of what one report termed “the Russian passion” — a cultural inclination to share everything with one’s neighbor, a concept that stood in stark contrast to the American emphasis on individual ownership and personal space. The Western perception of this practice oscillated between fascination and discomfort, ultimately reinforcing a broader image of Soviet collectivism as alien, if not entirely incomprehensible. The subheading *Share & Share Alike*, used in some Western accounts of the exchange experience, presents an intriguing linguistic ambiguity: while it can be read in the spirit of mutual generosity, it also evokes the phrase divide and conquer, a well-worn Cold War trope used to portray Soviet society as rigidly hierarchical and state-controlled. Such rhetorical strategies, while ostensibly neutral, subtly reinforce prevailing Western stereotypes of the USSR as an authoritarian state in which individual agency was subsumed by enforced collectivism.

### **Soviet Students Through the Eyes of Americans**

If Soviet students’ curiosity was a key driver of interaction, what was its nature? From the perspective of American trainees, one of the most surprising aspects of their encounters was the apparent lack of ideological engagement among their Soviet peers. Contrary to prevailing expectations, Soviet students did not decorate their rooms with portraits of Marxist theorists or Soviet leaders, nor did they show much interest in the geopolitical dynamics of the Cold War<sup>11</sup>. Naomi Collins, in her reflections, describes them as “skeptics of the Soviet system” as early as the 1960s, remarking that the only true Marxists one could reliably meet in Moscow were those working for the KGB. Even state-sponsored ideological rituals — parades, celebrations, and government-controlled broadcasts — elicited little enthusiasm from students, further reinforcing the impression that ideological fervor

was largely absent from their daily lives.<sup>12</sup> These conclusions were based on direct interactions between the two groups, which took place not only in shared spaces such as dormitory corridors and communal kitchens but also in more intimate settings. Soviet and American students frequently visited each other’s rooms, drank tea, and engaged in long discussions. Notably, it was the Soviet students who took the lead in these conversations, posing an endless stream of questions, while the Americans largely found themselves in the role of respondents.

The main topic of interest, as Collins identified it, was what she termed “American propaganda.” However, a closer examination of the questions posed reveals that these discussions seldom touched upon overtly political matters. Instead, Soviet students fixated on details of everyday American life, particularly aspects that were visually accessible through imported magazines and photographs. Rather than analyzing the content of Western publications, they scrutinized the images, asking about the number of people living in suburban homes, whether the cars pictured were privately owned, and whether the average household possessed modern appliances such as washing machines and televisions.

The line of inquiry revolved around material culture, encompassing items and conveniences that were either absent from Soviet daily life or functioned in a different way. Collins interprets this inquisitiveness as a manifestation of a deep-seated distrust of Soviet media. Just as they viewed Soviet state publications with skepticism, Soviet students applied the same critical approach to American magazines, suspecting that these glossy images selectively presented only the most favorable aspects of life in the West. She notes that the American magazine she provided largely confirmed this suspicion, as it showcased an idealized vision of the United States, carefully omitting any reference to poverty or social struggle. A particularly glaring

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Students in Russia // *Time*. 1962. November 30. P. 66.

<sup>12</sup> Collins N. Interview. ADST, 2013. P. 45. URL: <https://adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Collins-Naomi.pdf> (accessed: 12.09.2023).

omission, she observes, was the exclusion of material on racial inequality; discussions of African American life in the U.S. were framed in an aspirational manner, avoiding mention of systemic economic hardships. Such omissions, she suggests, would naturally have raised doubts among Soviet students, reinforcing their instinctive wariness of curated narratives. The irony, of course, is that Western visitors often perceived Soviet citizens as inherently constrained by state control, conditioned to be fearful and hesitant in their interactions with foreigners. Yet Collins' account presents a more nuanced reality: Soviet students were not passive recipients of ideology, but active participants in an ongoing dialogue, applying their own critical reasoning to both domestic and foreign sources of information. Their curiosity was not merely a product of ignorance but a reflection of their attempt to reconcile two competing visions of the world — one presented by the Soviet authorities, the other glimpsed through fragmented images of the West. In concluding her discussion of these exchanges, Naomi Collins asserts that she and her husband were frank in their interactions with the Soviet students, making no effort to embellish or romanticize the United States.<sup>13</sup> This, she claims, fostered a level of trust between the American trainees and their Soviet counterparts. However, a closer examination of her own narrative suggests a more ambiguous reality. The very notion of transparency in such dialogues is complicated by the inherently selective nature of the information exchanged — both on the part of both the American visitors and their Soviet interlocutors.

Scholarly research on Soviet student culture in the 1960s confirms the presence of dissenting or skeptical attitudes among segments of the student body. G.A. Budnik describes this phenomenon as a disillusionment with the values of socialism and the authority of the state (Budnik, 2011, pp. 94–98), a diagnosis that aligns closely with the observations made by the

American trainees. However, Budnik also emphasizes that this crisis of political consciousness was not primarily driven by external geopolitical factors; rather, it was an organic process of ideological reassessment that gained momentum following the de-Stalinization campaigns of the late 1950s. For Soviet students, the exposure to alternative perspectives — whether through foreign visitors, Western literature, or radio broadcasts — did not necessarily translate into wholesale rejection of the Soviet system. Instead, it was part of a broader intellectual and cultural re-evaluation, one that involved seeking answers to fundamental questions about their society and its future direction. In this context, the fascination with foreign influences extended beyond politics to encompass lifestyle, fashion, and youth identity. A notable example of this is the *stilyagi* movement, which, while often mischaracterized as a form of political dissent, was primarily the assertion of an alternative youth subculture that appropriated Western cultural symbols without overt ideological connotations.

Moreover, while the West undeniably held a certain allure for segments of the Soviet student population, it was not the sole reference point in their ideological and cultural explorations. Some students sought to reinterpret the founding principles of the Soviet state, engaging in a process of critical reflection that they did not necessarily perceive as anti-Soviet (Pyzhikov, 2002, pp. 218–219). The search for ideological alternatives was therefore not a simple case of embracing Western ideals; but rather reflected the broader instability of Soviet ideological and moral paradigms in the post-Stalinist era. Within this framework, it becomes evident that Soviet students' understanding of the United States was, in many ways, superficial and fragmented. Lacking systematic knowledge of American society, they approached it as an unfamiliar and largely uncharted subject. This epistemic gap, coupled with the broader uncertainties of their own political and cultural environment, explains the genuine curiosity that many Soviet

<sup>13</sup> Collins N. Interview. ADST, 2013. P. 46–47. URL: <https://adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Collins-Naomi.pdf> (accessed: 12.09.2023).



students exhibited toward their American counterparts. This interest cannot be attributed solely to Cold War intrigue, but rather represents a broader intellectual and cultural instability that characterized the Soviet Union during this period.

### Daily Life of American Trainees: Navigating Soviet Consumer Culture

One of the more immediate and tangible challenges faced by American trainees in the Soviet Union was adapting to the realities of food procurement and daily sustenance. As one participant in the 1962 exchange program remarked, “Even buying a can of herring is an education.”<sup>14</sup> This statement encapsulates the dissonance between American and Soviet consumer cultures, highlighting not merely the logistical difficulties of grocery shopping, but also the broader process of acculturation that the trainees underwent.

The most immediate frustration stemmed from the sheer inefficiency of the Soviet retail system. As Naomi Collins describes, what should have been a simple transaction could take an inordinate amount of time, as purchasing even the most basic foodstuffs required navigating a cumbersome sequence of queues. Shoppers first selected their items and queued for a clerk to issue a receipt, then stood in a separate line to make payment, before finally queuing once again to collect their goods upon presenting proof of purchase.<sup>15</sup>

This multi-stage process was exacerbated by frequent shortages, meaning that securing basic provisions often demanded both persistence and adaptability. However, difficulties did not end with the purchase itself. The absence of household refrigerators meant that food had to be acquired and consumed in a far shorter timeframe than American students were

accustomed to. In winter, trainees adopted a common Soviet practice — storing perishables on the windowsill outside, a makeshift solution that, while functional, underscored the stark contrast between Soviet and Western domestic conveniences.<sup>16</sup>

While the procedural aspects of food shopping were largely standardized, the composition of American students’ diets varied significantly based on location and financial circumstances. Two main factors influenced these differences. First, American trainees received a stipend that, in comparison to their Soviet counterparts, was relatively generous. This enabled them the ability to purchase higher-quality goods, especially meat. However, access to such items was contingent upon local availability, which led to the second major determinant: university placement. At Moscow State University, students could reliably obtain *bifstek* (a Russianized version of beefsteak), an increasingly scarce commodity following Nikita Khrushchev’s agricultural reforms, which had led to widespread food supply issues. Unlike most Soviet students, the American trainees had access to a designated grocery store on the university campus, referred to in transliterated form as *gastronomie*<sup>17</sup>. This allowed them to maintain a diet that, while still limited, was significantly more protein-rich than that of the average Soviet citizen. In an example of cross-cultural linguistic play, British exchange students at Moscow State University coined the term *beef Magoo* to describe their staple meal — an improvised dish consisting of *bifstek*, potatoes, and onions. The term, with its humorous anglicization of a Russian borrowing, soon gained currency among foreign students, reflecting not only their culinary adaptation but also the way in which humor was used as a coping mechanism in what was for many a fundamentally alien environment.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Students in Russia // *Time*. 1962. November 30. P. 66.

<sup>15</sup> Collins N. Interview. ADST, 2013. P. 46–47. URL: <https://adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Collins-Naomi.pdf> (accessed: 12.09.2023).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. P. 47.

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Students in Russia // *Time*. 1962. November 30. P. 66.

## Academic Research in the Soviet Union: Challenges and Constraints

The undertaking of academic research in the Soviet Union presented considerable challenges for American trainees, particularly concerning access to primary sources. The specific academic disciplines represented among the visiting researchers largely determined their experiences and the obstacles they faced. While American exchange programs with Western European countries typically focused on the transfer of technological and industrial expertise, exchanges with the USSR were primarily oriented toward the humanities. In the first three years of the program, eight specialists in Russian language and literature, along with a significant number of historians, participated in the exchange. Philosophers and scholars in related disciplines joined the program much later.

This distribution underscores a fundamental asymmetry between American and Soviet exchange policies. While the United States primarily sent scholars whose research centered on Russian or Soviet history, language, and culture, Soviet participants in the program were predominantly from the natural sciences. Their visits to the United States were largely framed as opportunities to acquire technical expertise — an arrangement reminiscent of the 1930s, when Soviet engineers were dispatched to study American industrial innovations with the goal of later implementing these techniques within the Soviet system. This contrast highlights the broader ideological divide between the two superpowers: while the Soviet Union sought practical technological advancements from its exchanges, the United States treated the program as an opportunity for cultural and intellectual engagement.

The corpus of memoirs and personal accounts left by American trainees reveals that the most persistent difficulties they faced revolved around securing access to archival and bibliographic materials. Albina Krymskaya offers a systematic overview of these challenges, identifying several key barriers to research:

- the status and authority of the assigned academic supervisor,

- the requirement to draft a research plan and bibliography for prior approval,

- the expectation that Communist literature be included as part of any academic bibliography,

- the bureaucratic formalism of university departmental meetings,

- restricted access to libraries and archives (Krymskaya, 2013).

These obstacles were closely interrelated, though not all researchers encountered them to the same degree. Some scholars experienced difficulties at the very outset, struggling to obtain approval for their research topics and access to materials. Others, having successfully navigated these initial hurdles, found themselves frustrated by the rigidity of Soviet academic structures or the logistical shortcomings of archival institutions. The following sections will trace the specific challenges encountered by American trainees in their research endeavors, analyzing them chronologically to better understand the evolving nature of scholarly engagement in the Soviet academic environment.

The first major hurdle for the American trainees was their initial interaction with the university's *Foreign Department*, the administrative body responsible for overseeing international students. Here, academic supervisors were assigned without consultation with either the visiting scholars or the faculty members expected to mentor them. As Albina Krymskaya notes, many Soviet academics were reluctant to engage with foreign researchers, often avoiding meetings altogether or reducing them to formulaic exchanges devoid of substantive discussion (Krymskaya, 2013, pp. 128–129). However, such experiences were not universal. Sheila Filzpatrick, for instance, recalls with gratitude the support of Professor A.I. Ovcharenko at Moscow State University, who expanded the range of sources she could consult, even granting her unexpected access to archival materials.<sup>18</sup> Given the well-documented restrictions on archival research for foreigners, Filzpatrick had not anticipated such an

<sup>18</sup> Filzpatrick S. A Student in Moscow, 1966 // The Wilson Quarterly. 1982. Vol. 6, no. 3. P. 135.

opportunity, underscoring the variability in how different scholars were treated within the Soviet academic bureaucracy.

A second major obstacle was the approval of research topics, a process that began even before the trainees arrived in the Soviet Union. American scholars were advised to select topics based on the availability of primary materials, a pragmatic consideration that often led to rather antiquated research themes.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, upon arrival, many found that their topics were subjected to an additional layer of scrutiny, reflecting the rigid conventions of Soviet academic practice. One of the more striking peculiarities of Soviet historiographical norms was the expectation that the topic of research should align with the researcher's gender. For instance, while the *Revolution of 1905* was deemed an inappropriate subject for a female historian, studies on the role of women in history were considered a more suitable focus. Furthermore, novelty in historical research was often discouraged, with unconventional topics meeting resistance. A case in point is the *Plague Riot of 1771*, which Soviet historians deemed too narrow to warrant a dedicated study (Baron & Frierson, 2015, p. 17). Given these constraints, later cohorts of exchange students were better prepared for the bureaucratic demands of Soviet academia. Many were advised to accept the methodological adjustments and thematic modifications imposed upon them, even when such alterations lacked justification within the frameworks of American historical scholarship. This pragmatic approach was exemplified by Filzpatrick, who adapted without protest when her research focus was revised without her prior consultation.<sup>20</sup> Importantly, once a research topic had been deemed acceptable by the Soviet authorities, foreign scholars were often granted a surprising degree of institutional support, including facilitated access to selected archives and primary sources.

One of the most contentious issues among American trainees was the question of access to archival and library resources. Although the official regulations governing archival research were well documented, the personal recollections of exchange participants reveal strikingly different perceptions of accessibility. Some scholars found Soviet archives to be impenetrable bureaucratic fortresses, while others encountered a degree of institutional flexibility, suggesting that experiences varied significantly depending on the researcher's topic, institutional affiliation, and interpersonal relationships within the Soviet academic community. Among the obstacles mentioned in the documents is that the *1962 Regulations on the Work of State Archives* outlined uniform requirements for all visitors to the reading rooms, stipulating that researchers were restricted to documents directly related to their approved research topic, could request no more than twenty archival files at a time, and were permitted to work with each file for a maximum period of two months — strictly within the designated reading area.<sup>21</sup> Yet gaining access to the archive itself was a complex, multi-stage process. Before conducting her research, Sheila Filzpatrick had to obtain formal approval from the Foreign Department at Moscow State University, followed by further authorization from the Soviet Ministry of Higher Education.<sup>22</sup>

Many trainees regarded these procedures not simply as bureaucratic formalities, but as deliberate obstacles designed to limit their research capacity. Indeed, standard archival regulations — such as restrictions on the number of files that could be consulted and the requirement that all materials align precisely with the researcher's stated topic (Baron & Frierson, 2015, pp. 17–18) — were perceived by foreign scholars as mechanisms of control rather than as neutral administrative policies.

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Students in Russia // *Time*. 1962. November 30. P. 66.

<sup>20</sup> Filzpatrick S. A Student in Moscow, 1966 // *The Wilson Quarterly*. 1982. Vol. 6, no. 3. P. 135.

<sup>21</sup> Basic Rules for the Work of State Archives // Main Archival Directorate under the Council of Ministers of the USSR. Moscow, 1962. P. 106–107, 116. (In Russian).

<sup>22</sup> Filzpatrick S. A Student in Moscow, 1966 // *The Wilson Quarterly*. 1982. Vol. 6, no. 3. P. 135.

The exchange experience, therefore, was defined, on the one hand, by bureaucratic resistance but, on the other hand, also by episodes of professional solidarity, demonstrating that intellectual networks — however constrained by Cold War politics — could transcend ideological divides.

### Conclusion

The academic exchange programs between the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War represented a key facet of the era's broader phenomenon of *cultural thawing*. These initiatives not only facilitated scholarly collaboration but also provided a rare opportunity for both nations to reassess and recalibrate their perceptions of one another — perceptions that had been largely constructed in isolation behind the “Iron Curtain.”

For these conceptual images of the “Other” to be meaningfully revised, they had to be subjected to direct and immersive engagement with lived reality. Student exchanges offered precisely this kind of sustained, firsthand exposure. Unlike other cultural initiatives, such as exhibitions or state-sponsored tours, which were often curated to reinforce specific ideological narratives, academic exchanges allowed for a deeper and more organic form of cross-cultural interaction. Trainees were embedded in both the intellectual and everyday fabric of Soviet society, granting them access to perspectives that would otherwise have been inaccessible.

Moreover, these exchange programs remained one of the few sustained channels of direct engagement between the superpowers, particularly in a period when most forms of cultural diplomacy were tightly controlled and highly restricted. In these circumstances academic exchanges — by virtue of their duration and structure — allowed for a level of personal and intellectual engagement that few other initiatives could offer. As such, these programs played a crucial, if often understated, role in shaping a more nuanced understanding of

the Soviet-American relations at both the individual and institutional levels.

American trainees who spent time in the Soviet Union constructed their perception of the *Other* through multiple layers of socio-political discourse. On the one hand, they relied on pre-existing Cold War frameworks that depicted the Soviet Union as an ideological adversary. These narratives had been deeply embedded in Western political and media discourse, shaping the way many Americans understood Soviet society before ever setting foot in the USSR. On the other hand, their direct and prolonged interaction with Soviet realities provided them with an opportunity — albeit filtered through their own cultural and intellectual assumptions — to document and interpret Soviet life with a degree of immediacy. In doing so, they often attempted to reconcile their lived experiences with the broader ideological structures that had framed their expectations.

For many, the image of the Soviet Union remained an extension of Western discourses of superiority, manifesting in descriptions of urban landscapes, public transportation, and daily life that frequently emphasized inefficiency, stagnation, or hardship. These representations, though grounded in genuine observations, were often shaped by selective interpretation and a tendency to contrast Soviet realities with American norms. However, alongside these distortions, their narratives also captured aspects of Soviet life with a level of empirical accuracy that transcended ideological bias. In these moments, the portrayal of the Soviet *Other* was not one of hierarchical opposition, but rather of cultural and systemic difference — an acknowledgment of an alternative mode of existence rather than an outright rejection of it.

Despite the numerous initiatives undertaken within the framework of the *Agreement Between the USSR and the USA on Exchanges in Science, Technology, Education, Culture, and Other Fields*, the exchange program ultimately failed to achieve its primary objective of fostering mutual ideological rapprochement. American trainees

did not return home as converts to communism, nor did their presence in the Soviet Union serve to validate the socialist model in the eyes of the Soviet authorities. The expected ideological impact on both sides remained largely unrealized.

Nevertheless, the program had meaningful academic and intellectual consequences. One of its most prominent participants, Sheila Filzpatrick, emerged as a leading figure in revisionist Soviet historiography — a school of thought that challenged the more rigidly totalitarian interpretations of Soviet history prevalent in the West. Scholars like Filzpatrick, influenced by their firsthand exposure to Soviet life, played a crucial role in reshaping the field of

Soviet studies, bringing nuance and complexity to what had often been a rigidly polarized field of inquiry.

In this sense, the academic exchange program succeeded in producing *good scholars*, if not *good diplomats*. It did not bring the two superpowers ideologically closer, nor did it fundamentally alter the political landscape of the Cold War. However, it contributed to a more sophisticated and multidimensional understanding of the Soviet system, fostering an intellectual engagement that, while far from politically transformative, nevertheless left a lasting impact on the study of Soviet history and culture.

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