Ilya Ehrenburg—Between East and West

Joshua Rubenstein

During the early years of the Cold War, the writer Ilya Ehrenburg was one of the few Soviet citizens permitted to travel to Western Europe and the United States. Josif Stalin trusted Ehrenburg's loyalty and judgment and believed that the writer, who had lived for decades in France earlier in his life, could handle himself before a skeptical or hostile audience. Stalin was not disappointed.

In the spring and summer of 1950 Ehrenburg traveled to Sweden, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, and England to represent the Soviet Union at rallies and conferences associated with the “Partisans of Peace,” a Soviet-sponsored movement that sought to mobilize world opinion against the development of nuclear weapons. On international issues of this sort, Ehrenburg encountered no real obstacles.

Inside the Soviet Union, however, Stalin had embarked on a systematic assault on the country’s Jewish minority, targeting Yiddish writers and poets in particular, many of whom were arrested in the years 1948–1950. In July 1950 Ehrenburg came to London where he addressed a large “peace” rally in Trafalgar Square. Then, to his surprise, he found himself being ushered into a crowded press conference. By 1950 too much was starting to be known—or feared to be true—about events inside the Soviet Union. In his memoirs Ehrenburg acknowledged that “the room was packed with journalists and they behaved in such a provocative manner that it made me sweat.”  

in half-truths and veiled ambiguities, but plainly trying not to tell outright
lies.” 2 One question proved impossible to dodge artfully. Ehrenburg was
asked about the fate of David Bergelson and Itzik Fefer, two Yiddish writers
who were thought to have been arrested. Ehrenburg reported that he had not
seen either of them for two years and that he had only rarely seen them before
that, since they were not close friends. This response was more or less factually
true. But then Ehrenburg added a clever lie that Goldberg understood “was
deliberately decked out to sound like the truth.” “If anything unpleasant had
happened to them,” Ehrenburg asserted in French, “I would have known
about it.”3 Ehrenburg of course knew they had been arrested. Unless he was
prepared to seek political asylum in England, he had no alternative but to
help cover up the repression and deflate suspicions about life and death in the
Soviet Union.

Belonging to two worlds—Ehrenburg regarded France as his second
homeland—he was doubly abused by the regime, not only inside the country
where, like everyone else, he was expected to contribute to domestic propa-
ganda, but also outside the country, where he proved to be an adept spokes-
man for the Kremlin. No artist or writer was immune from high-level pres-
sure to conform, and few were able to survive a treacherous quarter-century
under Stalin and successfully retain a measure of personal and artistic integ-
rity. Ilya Ehrenburg was one of the few.

The Interwar Years and World War II

Throughout his career as a writer and public figure, Ehrenburg served as a
bridge between Soviet and Western culture, a role that came naturally to him.
Born in 1891, he had fled Tsarist Russia in December 1908 to avoid persecu-
tion as a young Bolshevik activist and did not return to his homeland until
the summer of 1917, after the tsar’s abdication. During this extended stay in
Paris, Ehrenburg became disillusioned with politics and left the Bolshevik
party. He then befriended a host of young artistic and intellectual figures,
many of them exiles like himself, including Pablo Picasso, Marc Chagall,
Fernand Léger, Diego Rivera, Amedeo Modigliani, Guillaume Apollinaire,
and Chaim Soutine. He also began to write poetry and during World War I
covered the western front for Russian newspapers. This was the start of his re-
markable career as a journalist.

2. Anatol Goldberg, Ilya Ehrenburg: Revolutionary, Novelist, Poet, War Correspondent, Propagandist
3. Ibid., p. 240.
Once back in Russia, Ehrenburg witnessed the Bolshevik takeover and spent nearly four more years in the country, experiencing the dislocations and terror of civil war until he was able to secure a passport in the spring of 1921. For the next two decades, he lived in Western Europe, with occasional visits to Moscow. He was an anomalous figure, a Soviet writer living in Paris and managing to publish his books, often with some difficulty, on both sides of Europe's political divide.

In the 1920s Ehrenburg edited the journal *Veshch'* (Thing), which explored avant-garde cultural developments in the Soviet Union and Western Europe. In 1926 he was applauded for bringing clips of Western films to Moscow where he showed them to enthusiastic audiences. In Paris, Ehrenburg was among the famous group of writers and intellectuals who inhabited the cafés of Montparnasse. He continued this practice even after he became an *Izvestiya* correspondent in 1932. By taking the job, he relinquished his independence as a writer and became part of Stalin's machinery in the West. Throughout the 1930s, particularly after the Nazi takeover in Germany in 1933, Ehrenburg played a leading role in organizing left-wing intellectuals to denounce the threat of fascism in Europe. His lifelong friendships from his days as a young bohemian in Paris made this role easy for him to assume, and he carried it off with great effectiveness.

Ehrenburg returned to Moscow in the summer of 1940 after the German occupation of his beloved Paris. He was nearly fifty years old at that point and had spent almost his entire adult life in Western Europe. On top of that, he was a Jew, an intellectual, an ex-Bolshevik, and a childhood friend of the disgraced Nikolai Bukharin, a principal victim of the purge trials, who was executed in March 1938. Ehrenburg may well have been the last person publicly connected to Bukharin to remain at liberty.

Nonetheless, Ehrenburg's usefulness to the regime soon became apparent. Following the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Ehrenburg was offered the opportunity to write a column for *Krasnaya Zvezda* (Red Star), the main army newspaper. He quickly became the most widely read journalist in the country. Through the rest of the war, Ehrenburg wrote more than two thousand articles for the Soviet press. He believed that the Soviet people were not ready for the war and that they assumed they were facing the same civilized Germans they had fought in World War I. Ehrenburg knew firsthand what the Nazis were like, and he was convinced that the Red Army would have to hate them in order to defeat them. Ehrenburg's articles were so effective that they were read to the troops before battle. There was even a Nazi decree that anyone caught in occupied territory with an article by Ehrenburg was to be summarily shot. His prestige during the war cannot be overstated. The Nazis blamed Ehrenburg for reverses on the Eastern front. Molotov said
he was worth a division. Hitler swore he would hang Ehrenburg in Red Square.

Once the Nazis were defeated, however, the wartime alliance between the Western democracies and the Soviet Union broke down, leaving the Soviet people increasingly isolated and subject to unrelenting propaganda against Western culture and society. Ehrenburg had to join in. He had demonstrated his loyalty to the regime when Hitler was the enemy, and he would now have to prove his loyalty when the West, particularly the United States, was about to become Stalin's principal antagonist.

Ehrenburg once described the postwar years as “perhaps the most painful in my whole life.”4 His country was isolated, yet he was permitted to travel throughout the world. Leading Jewish figures were destined for torture and execution, while he was singled out for medals and awards. Publicly Ehrenburg thrived, but privately he was in anguish. He wanted to help his friends and fellow Jews, but he also wanted to survive and live well. All of this required being useful to Stalin.

The Early Cold War Years

Stalin's intentions in Eastern Europe were not immediately apparent at the end of the war. In December 1945 the British and Americans, still hoping to see genuinely free elections take place in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania, sent their foreign ministers to Moscow to negotiate with Soviet leaders. On the night of 23 December, Secretary of State James Byrnes visited Moscow to speak personally with Stalin. Byrnes was upset with the intransigence of the Soviet Foreign Ministry and tried to impress Stalin with American resolve, in part by threatening to publish a report on political developments in the Balkans by Mark Ethridge, the editor of the Louisville Courier-Journal. President Harry Truman had sent Ethridge to Romania and Bulgaria in October–November 1945 as his personal representative. Ethridge’s report, it was assumed, would discourage U.S. recognition of either regime “under existing conditions.”5 But Secretary of State Byrnes decided to withhold Ethridge’s report until he had a chance to discuss its conclusions with Soviet officials.

Stalin listened to Byrnes but was unimpressed with his arguments. He responded that if Byrnes published the Ethridge report, then “he would ask . . .

Ilya Ehrenburg, who was just as impartial, to publish his views.”6 Ehrenburg had already traveled to Eastern Europe, Germany, and the Balkans, and his articles about the region were ready to appear, as Stalin must have known. Byrnes, in the end, withheld Ethridge’s findings altogether, claiming that he “utilized the Ethridge report to obtain some improvements in the Balkan regimes.”7 But Ehrenburg still published his series of essays.

Traveling throughout the region in the summer and fall of 1945, Ehrenburg witnessed the onset of a great catastrophe—the imposition of Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe—and his reports helped to camouflage the nature of the new governments. In Albania Ehrenburg claimed to find “a really new way of life, meaning schools, roads, and above all, faith in human nature and respect for the dignity of the individual.”8 He was no more prescient or truthful when he visited Romania. Bucharest, he wrote, was “better off than any other city in liberated Europe. People live better here than in Budapest, Rome, or Paris.” Ehrenburg praised Communist leaders like Josip Broz Tito of Yugoslavia, Enver Hoxha of Albania, and Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej of Romania, while he predictably dismissed their opponents as “adventurers” or “speculators” inspired by “foreign troublemakers.”9 Ehrenburg could not acknowledge that any of the opposition parties were genuinely democratic and had genuine misgivings about Communist rule.

Ehrenburg’s essays suited Stalin’s purposes. Published in English under the title European Crossroad, the essays were harshly criticized by commentators in the United States. The Saturday Review of Literature, in a typical case, dismissed the book as “superficial, inaccurate, maudlin, and unenlightening.” As for Ehrenburg, he was now proclaimed the “Soviet Union’s leading propagandist,” someone Stalin could rely on when he needed worldly demagoguery.10

The growing East-West tension was underscored in March 1946 by Winston Churchill in a speech at Westminster College, a small, liberal arts school in Fulton, Missouri. President Truman himself introduced Churchill on the afternoon of 2 March for a speech in which Churchill defined the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe in memorable phrases:

9. Ibid., pp. 6, 75.
From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of central and eastern Europe, and all are subject . . . to a very high and in some cases increasing measure of control from Moscow.\footnote{“The Sinews of Peace,” \textit{The New York Times}, 3 March 1946, p. 1.}

Reaction to Churchill’s speech was immediate, especially to his suggestion that the United States and Great Britain form a new military alliance. His remarks shocked many in the U.S. Congress. Eleanor Roosevelt criticized him. In a radio interview, Stalin compared Churchill to Hitler and claimed that Britain was seeking a war with the Soviet Union.

A month later, in the immediate aftermath of Churchill’s speech, Ehrenburg made his only visit to the United States as part of the first cultural exchange with the Soviet Union. Three editors had visited Moscow the previous year “to present American free-press views to Russian officials and editors.”\footnote{“U.S. Editors to Remain in Moscow for a Week,” \textit{The New York Herald Tribune}, 11 March 1945, Sect. I, p. 9.} Now, at the invitation of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the Soviet Foreign Ministry dispatched three journalists to the United States. Ehrenburg represented \textit{Izvestiya}, the poet, novelist, and playwright Konstantin Simonov represented \textit{Krasnaya Zvezda}, and General Mikhail Galaktionov, the military commentator for \textit{Pravda}, completed the delegation.

Ehrenburg and his colleagues landed in New York on 19 April 1946 and were quickly shepherded to a train bound for Washington, where they met with American editors. While they were still in Washington, the three Soviet journalists were approached by Assistant Secretary of State William Benton and offered the opportunity to see the country. Ehrenburg, to the consternation of his hosts, asked for a tour of the South.

It is hard to imagine any other official visitor to the United States having the kind of trip that Ehrenburg enjoyed. In May 1946 Daniel Gilmore, a left-wing New York publisher, drove him around several Southern states in a large Buick convertible. The official translator was William Nelson, a State Department official who was the first editor of the Russian-language journal \textit{Amerika}, which the U.S. embassy distributed in Moscow. Ten days into their trip, Samuel Grafton, a prominent columnist for \textit{The New York Post}, joined them in Birmingham, Alabama, and filed stories for a full week.

As Grafton made clear in his articles, Ehrenburg insisted on meeting a broad range of people, from small-town mayors to black newspaper editors and tenant farmers. Ehrenburg was astonished by the workers’ relative prosperity. Driving along a country road in Alabama, Ehrenburg and his companions came upon a factory with hundreds of cars in a nearby parking lot.
Ehrenburg mistakenly thought it was an automobile plant. His friends assured him that it was a textile factory and that all the cars belonged to the workers inside. Ehrenburg did not believe them and suggested they all wait in the Buick. The factory whistle sounded at 5:00 p.m., and the workers, black and white, headed for their cars and drove home. Ehrenburg was left almost speechless.¹³

By the time Ehrenburg reached Detroit, he was adapting better to his capitalist surroundings. Both he and Simonov badgered their American hosts for help in buying a car. The automobile industry was only beginning to revive full-scale production after wartime demands, and “the manufacturers were not keen about depriving American customers to favor a couple of Russians.”¹⁴ But Ehrenburg pestered a State Department official until the arrangements were finally made. He was able to send home a Buick, a refrigerator, and a washing machine, while Simonov, who had insisted on a large Chrysler, had to settle for a Cadillac.

Following their visit to Detroit and another week in New York, where an enormous rally was held in their honor at Madison Square Garden, Ehrenburg and his colleagues spent six days in Canada. Cold War feelings there were far more acute, because an extensive Soviet espionage ring had just been exposed. The high point of the visit came in Toronto, when all three journalists addressed a crowd of five thousand people at Maple Leaf Gardens. Ehrenburg was the principal attraction, and he used his opportunity to wonder aloud about the hard feelings he was encountering. “Why are Canadians especially being ‘sicced’ on Russia,” Ehrenburg asked. “There are some newspapers that frighten their readers with Russia in the same way that children are frightened with the bogeyman.” Ehrenburg had been asked about Soviet tanks in Iran, and he dismissed the issue by insisting that “Russian factories were making baby carriages.”¹⁵ This kind of demagoguery elicited a sharp rebuke from the Toronto Globe and Mail. In an editorial entitled “Pram Prattle,” the newspaper took Ehrenburg to task: “But just what [baby carriages have] to do with the Iranian problem, certainly a just cause for suspicion among the unenlightened Powers, was one of the many things the Russians didn’t bother to explain.”¹⁶

---

15. “Russian Writers Aver ‘Slanderers’ Foes of Peace,” The Globe and Mail, 15 June 1946, p. 5. At the end of the war, Stalin had occupied a portion of northern Iran. Soviet troops were still there in the spring of 1946, sparking concern that they intended to remain.
Ehrenburg summarized his visit in a column that appeared widely on 26 June, the day that he and the two other journalists embarked from Boston on the liner Ile de France. Ehrenburg expressed gratitude for the chance to visit the United States. “One cannot understand the world and humanity without having seen America,” he readily acknowledged. He was also happy to praise American literature and music, “the fairy-like sight of New York, and the factories of Detroit, and the powerful Tennessee works, and the splendid highways, and the high material standard of life.”17 (When he returned to Moscow later that year, Ehrenburg confided to his granddaughter that “Europe is two hundred years behind the United States.”) But there was one criticism Ehrenburg insisted on raising. Sam Grafton had noted “the hungry polemical quality of [Ehrenburg’s] mind,”18 a talent that Ehrenburg employed to good advantage when he described American racial attitudes.

I remember how the American newspapers were roused to indignation at the fact that, in the elections in Yugoslavia, people who had compromised themselves by collaboration with the occupants were deprived of their right to vote. I have been in the state of Mississippi, where half of the population were deprived of their right to vote. What is better: To deprive of the right to vote a man who has a black conscience or one who has a black complexion?19

Less than a month later, Ehrenburg expanded on these themes in a series of six articles in Izvestiya. Although the Cold War was intensifying, Ehrenburg managed to avoid the temptation to indulge in grandstanding and the scoring of political points. He was still trying to see America with fresh eyes. Writing in Paris, he praised everything from the Tennessee Valley Authority to coin-operated luggage lockers, the Marx brothers, even Walt Disney animations. Surprisingly, even for the Soviet press, Ehrenburg did not write about race relations in America with either bitterness or cynicism. Having traveled in the Deep South, he could not help but dwell on this grave example of American injustice. But he included a sense of hopefulness, acknowledging the existence of numerous civil rights organizations and the education afforded to black college students at Fiske University, which he visited in Nashville. “The South is on the threshold of decisive events,” Ehrenburg wrote in 1946. “Either the slave-owners will yield or the negroes, yesterday’s front-line soldiers, will begin a fight for equality.”20 This kind of substantial information about the United States rarely appeared in the Soviet press. But it was typical

of Ehrenburg’s approach, even in pieces of propaganda, to include useful facts that otherwise would never reach the Soviet public. In his final article, however, Ehrenburg did invoke a frequent Soviet lie. He blamed the American media for fabricating an “iron curtain” that “prevents the average American from seeing what is going on in [the Soviet Union],” as if the growing political and cultural isolation of Eastern Europe symbolized by the phrase “iron curtain” did not have an independent reality.21

Ehrenburg Amid the Cultural Crackdown

Ehrenburg returned to Moscow in October 1946, having been outside the country for almost six months. To his dismay, the cultural atmosphere had changed for the worse. In August 1946, while Ehrenburg was still in France, Andrei Zhdanov, a senior Secretary of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) who oversaw ideology, had denounced the poet Anna Akhmatova and the writer Mikhail Zoshchenko, initiating their expulsion from the Writers’ Union. His remarks about Akhmatova were especially vulgar and crude:

The range of her poetry is so limited as to seem poverty-stricken. It is the portrait of a frantic little fine lady flitting between the boudoir and the chapel. . . . Half nun, half harlot, or rather a harlot-nun whose sin is mixed with prayer.22

Zhdanov’s attack was an opening salvo against Soviet culture. The campaign, known as the “Zhdanovshchina,” came to be marked by rigid censorship and ferocious Russian chauvinism. Following the relatively relaxed cultural atmosphere of the war years, Zhdanov’s crackdown came as a heavy blow to writers and artists inside the Soviet Union.

Official anti-Semitism was also becoming more pronounced. By 1948 the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, a group that Stalin created during the war to drum up support in the West for the wartime alliance, was closed down, and many of its leading members were arrested. The head of the committee, Solomon Mikhoels, who had an international reputation as a Yiddish actor and theater director, was murdered on Stalin’s personal orders. The crime was disguised as a traffic accident.

Ehrenburg had to adapt to the harsher atmosphere. He quickly understood the new political line and helped to convey official attitudes. He was the first to denounce the Voice of America after it began broadcasting Russian-language programs in February 1947. Attacking American journalism, Ehrenburg employed the bombastic rhetoric that characterized Soviet commentary on Western society for many years. “The Voice of America has to advertise the most unmarketable goods—American reactionary politics,” he wrote in his article “A False Voice.” He claimed that the Voice of America’s reporting on events in Moscow was hardly different from that of the Nazis. “Goering and Goebbels killed themselves. Rosenberg and Ribbentrop were hanged. In this way,” Ehrenburg went on to say, “they were deprived of demanding their authors’ rights from the New York radio station.”

The American response was immediate. The State Department took heart, understanding that Ehrenburg’s piece indicated that “the Russian people are listening to the Voice of America.” The U.S. ambassador in Moscow, General Walter Bedell Smith, cabled Washington: “That a top-flight commentator like Ehrenburg should be assigned the job of lambasting our broadcasts is the most encouraging reaction we have seen. It shows that the program is on the right track.” The embassy’s only regret was that “Ehrenburg had not seen fit to include the wave lengths for the program.”

Ehrenburg continued to write about his trip to the United States. With each article and book, his portraits grew more grim and one-sided. In a small volume entitled *In America*, Ehrenburg put greater emphasis on the country’s racial problems and barely mentioned his previous admiration for American technology. In one extreme piece, “Deutschland-America,” which was also the basis for a radio broadcast, Ehrenburg contrived parallels between Nazi Germany’s policies and U.S. plans for Europe. His play *The Lion in the Square* was a shameful attack on the behavior of Americans in postwar Europe. It ran briefly in Moscow in 1948 and aroused comment in Western Europe for the viciousness of its portrayal.

27. Transcript of radio address, 12 August 1949, in Tsentral’nyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Literatury i Iskusstva (TsGALI), Fond (F.) 1204, Catalog (C.) 2, Item (I.) 279.
28. See cable of 30 March 1948 from the American consulate in Marseille to the Department of State, 700.001/1-73, Department of State, National Archives, Washington, DC. It is also possible that part of Ehrenburg’s motivation for writing this play was to help Alexander Tairov and Robert Falk. Tairov staged the production, and Falk designed and painted the sets. Ehrenburg’s play gave them an opportunity to be associated with an ideologically acceptable work.
In 1949 Ehrenburg prepared a manuscript of well over a hundred pages about the United States for the journal Znamya (The Banner). Entitled Nights of America, its bitterness far exceeded his earlier accounts. At the outset Ehrenburg claimed that he had “held himself back before” but would not restrain himself this time. Three years after his visit, he insisted, everything he had seen in America disturbed him, from culture to politics, from personal relations to foreign policy. He recalled his impressions with tired caricatures, claiming that all Americans dress alike, live in similar houses, wear similar clothes, and drink nothing but Coca-Cola. As for the war, it had been little more than a strenuous vacation, a chance for American soldiers “to rest up from their wives, . . . land in good masculine company, and enjoy the embraces of English, French, Italian, and German women.” For Ehrenburg, because the United States had hardly any direct experience of the fighting, it seemed easy and natural for war hysteria to flourish in the United States. The nuclear bomb was advertised “in the same way they advertise fifty-seven sauces of Heinz.” Biological weapons were being prepared to kill “millions of reds.” Ehrenburg even claimed that the U.S. Secretary of Defense James Forrestal had committed suicide because he believed the “reds” were attacking Washington, DC."

Nights of America was never published. Whether Ehrenburg decided to withdraw it or other Soviet officials blocked its appearance is not known. The book was consistent with Soviet propaganda and could easily have been printed. But as Nights of America demonstrated, there were few if any limits to what Ilya Ehrenburg was prepared to say about the United States.

Moscow and the “Partisans of Peace”

Ehrenburg’s usefulness to Stalin was even greater outside the Soviet Union, where he was recognized as an adept Soviet spokesman. Following the end of World War II, the Soviet regime found itself at a strategic disadvantage vis-à-vis the United States, which emerged not only with its enormous industrial capacity intact, but also with sole possession of nuclear weapons. To redress this imbalance, Stalin ensured that the country’s finest physicists—among them Igor Tamm, Igor Kurchatov, and the young Andrei Sakharov—were working furiously to break the West’s nuclear monopoly. In the meantime, Stalin turned his country’s weakness into a kind of moral advantage, sponsoring an international peace movement that played on the gen-

uine anxieties of many people that a new war could break out. Reinforcing such fear, Stalin mobilized international opinion against further development of nuclear weapons in the West. It was in this political atmosphere—as Stalin consolidated control of Eastern Europe, reintensified the oppression inside the Soviet Union, and hurried to develop Soviet nuclear weapons—that the Soviet leader sponsored the “Partisans of Peace” movement.

The “Partisans of Peace” was set up in August 1948, when the World Congress of Intellectuals gathered in Wroclaw, Poland. Organized by French and Polish Communists, the meeting was an attempt to revive a strategy associated with the Paris Congress in Defense of Culture thirteen years earlier. Only this time the target was not fascism; the target was the West and the threat of a nuclear war in Europe. Ehrenburg and Aleksandr Fadeev, the head of the Union of Soviet Writers, were the two most prominent members of the Soviet delegation at Wroclaw. Their speeches exemplified the crude anti-American tone of the proceedings. “The culture of various European nations is threatened by a dangerous barbarian invasion,” Ehrenburg claimed.

Now we have bourgeois barbarianism. This barbarianism can teem with refrigerators and adult romances, automobiles and stereofilms, laboratories and psychological novels, but all of it remains barbarianism... They are screaming as if they are afraid of our tanks. But in fact they are afraid of our tractors, our saucepans, our future.30

These observations aside, Ehrenburg tried to preserve a measure of integrity when it came to matters of culture. The British Communist writer Ivor Montagu first met Ehrenburg in Wroclaw. Years later, he remembered how Ehrenburg made a speech passionately denying that European life and culture, “growing and influencing itself as one for centuries, could possibly be divided into East-West compartments.”31

On this last point Ehrenburg was consistently outspoken. In 1947 he took issue with the growing official campaign against Western culture. No less a figure than the Soviet foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, in a speech in November 1947 on the thirtieth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, had condemned all forms of subservience to the West. Ehrenburg soon voiced disagreement. Writing in the journal Novoe Vremya (New Times), he rejected the idea that to admire Western culture meant bowing down to the West: “It is

---

30. Proceedings of the Wroclaw meeting, August 1947, in TsGALI, F. 1204, C. 2, I. 278. It is unlikely that anyone in the audience knew that Ehrenburg had sent home a Buick and a refrigerator from America two years earlier.


---
impossible to fawn upon Shakespeare or Rembrandt, because prostration before them cannot humiliate the worshipper.”

Much like the antifascist movement in the decade preceding World War II, the “Partisans of Peace” was able to enlist hundreds of prestigious artists, writers, intellectuals, and political figures, including many non-Communists, to lend an aura of respectability to what was unquestionably a vehicle for Soviet propaganda. Although the “Partisans of Peace” boasted that it accepted individuals of all nationalities and political convictions, its control by the Soviet government was increasingly obvious. (After Tito’s break with Stalin in 1948, delegations from Yugoslavia were banned from the movement.) Most members of its executive bureau were publicly proclaimed Communists, including Aleksandr Fadeev and Frédéric Joliot-Curie, who had shared the Nobel prize in chemistry in 1935 with his wife Irène (the daughter of Pierre and Marie Curie, the discoverers of radium). Ehrenburg was part of this movement from the beginning. He attended conferences in Paris, Vienna, London, Berlin, and Helsinki. He was elected to leadership positions and helped to draft the movement’s major statements, notably the Stockholm Appeal of 1950, which called for a halt to nuclear weapons research and generated signatures from tens of millions of people.

Several factors contributed to Ehrenburg’s passionate efforts in the “Partisans for Peace.” First, he had seen how wealthy and strong the United States remained after the Second World War, and he resented this prosperity. He also believed there was a genuine chance of war between the United States and the Soviet Union, a war that would devastate Europe and his homeland with nuclear weapons. Anything he could do to restore military and political balance seemed worthwhile. Many others felt the same way, including Andrei Sakharov, who in those same years devoted himself to the Soviet nuclear weapons program. Sakharov later attested that he and his colleagues had been “possessed by a true war psychology”; they were determined to give the Soviet Union strategic parity and a nuclear deterrent. Sakharov’s job was to help Stalin catch up to the United States, while propagandists like Ehrenburg tried to advance the principal aim of Soviet foreign policy: to restrain further Western deployments of nuclear weapons.

Political logic aside, Ehrenburg had compelling reasons of his own. By the end of the Second World War, he had become an integral part of Soviet propaganda efforts and could not turn back or refuse the kind of assignments he was ordered to assume. With the founding of the peace movement,


Ehrenburg re-created the role he had fashioned for himself in the 1930s, becoming a unique and, he hoped, irreplaceable spokesman for Soviet interests among European intellectuals. Ehrenburg, in fact, was not a modest cog in the machine. He was the most widely recognized figure in any Soviet delegation abroad. His ability to handle himself, in different languages and among a wide variety of people, enhanced his image and his standing within the Soviet elite.

**The Final Years of Stalinism**

Although Ehrenburg continued to enjoy privileges and prestige—in 1949 he became one of the few Jewish deputies in the Soviet Congress of Nationalities, a house of the Soviet parliament—he sustained a degree of moral independence. His major writings of the postwar period reflected the preoccupations and prejudices of Soviet policy. His novel *The Storm* (1947) was a heartfelt account of the war and the enormous efforts of the Red Army to defeat Nazi Germany. A second novel, *The Ninth Wave* (1951), was among the crudest books of his career and the only one he ever explicitly disavowed. It was almost a parody of Soviet Cold War attitudes, conveying the message that the Soviet Union represented the best hope for world peace, while craven American politicians, generals, and journalists pursued fantastic plots to undermine Communist achievements.

In other cases, however, Ehrenburg’s novels promoted views that no other Soviet writer dared to express. *The Storm* was heavily criticized in the official press because the French characters seemed more human and sympathetic than the Soviet characters. The fact that a visiting Russian in the novel fell in love with a French actress broke a serious taboo of Soviet society. Soviet law soon forbade such marriages.34 Other unusual episodes also caught the attention of Soviet readers. A left-wing French anthropologist invoked Galileo’s case in a conversation, insisting on the responsibility of scientists to speak for truth even if it led to imprisonment. A Soviet character reminded his comrades that the Germans used to be called “our mortal friends,” an oblique but unmistakable jibe at the Hitler-Stalin Pact. In several chapters Ehrenburg described the massacres of Jews at Babi Yar and the transfer of French Jews to Auschwitz, conveying in plain, vivid language the terror and magnitude of the Nazi onslaught against the Jews. Episodes like these made clear that

---

Ehrenburg wanted to preserve some truth in a world of power politics, that there were certain aspects of Soviet policy he did not admire, and that the fate of the Jews had to be part of any account of the war. Few if any other Soviet writers tried to advance these ideas while Stalin was still alive.

Another of Ehrenburg’s postwar novels, The Ninth Wave, also contained several startling episodes and conversations. The novel depicted foreign journalists who openly mocked how little they were permitted to see of real life in the Soviet Union, whether in Red Square or in an ordinary nursery school. A French journalist in the novel ridiculed the lack of genuine news reporting in the Soviet press, as if droughts, divorce, and cancer were strictly phenomena of capitalist society. In the novel’s most heartfelt episode, the Jewish character, Major Osip Alpert, returned to Kyiv, where his family had been killed by the Nazis. Alpert had fought all the way to Berlin in The Storm. Now in The Ninth Wave he visited the mass grave of his relatives at Babi Yar and was then abused by an anti-Semitic neighbor. “Why don’t you go to Palestine?” the man told Alpert with disdain. “Now you’ve got a state of your own.” Appearing in 1951, at a moment of terrifying official anti-Semitism, this passage was the only literary depiction of popular anti-Semitism to appear in a Soviet novel.

Significant portions of both The Storm and The Ninth Wave took place in Western Europe—often in the Latin Quarter of Paris—offering a glimpse of something forbidden to Soviet readers. Even when Ehrenburg deliberately lied, exaggerated, or indulged in obvious propaganda about Western political life—his old friend from Berlin, the émigré writer Roman Gul, once observed that Ehrenburg had accepted the role of “lying to the West about Russia, and in Russia of lying to the Soviet people about the West”—his novels, as the writer Vasily Aksyonov has remarked, were windows onto Europe, fascinating readers in a manner that outweighed the works’ literary deficiencies.

The United States embassy followed Ehrenburg’s career closely, filing cables to Washington about his prominent articles and public activity. In December 1950 Ehrenburg spoke in Moscow on the recently concluded Warsaw peace congress. Over a thousand people lined up to obtain tickets. During the question period, someone referred to Ehrenburg’s earlier comment that Pablo Picasso was “one of the greatest artists of modern times” and asked Ehrenburg to describe Picasso’s work to the audience. Ehrenburg replied that it was too difficult to describe great paintings in words. “The best thing, of course,
would be to show them to you,—and hastily turning to his notes he added half in an aside—"but that does not depend on me," the embassy noted.

American officials were well aware of Ehrenburg's dislike for the United States and how he allowed his European arrogance toward American culture to be used by the regime for its own demagogic purposes. Nonetheless, Ehrenburg still represented Western values. That evening in Moscow, "Ehrenburg's appearance, from his spectacles to his shoes, was Western rather than Soviet," the cable reported.

The appeal of his lecture seemed to lie not in what was Soviet in it,—i.e. the political propaganda—but in its Western flavor, its reflection of Ehrenburg's own Western culture, and the personal human stories with which, unlike the ordinary Soviet political propagandist, he spiced his talk. But there were also aspects of Ehrenburg's life that Western officials could not follow. By 1952 Stalin's anti-Semitic campaign had turned murderous. That spring and summer, fifteen Soviet Jews who had been connected with the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were convicted at a secret trial; thirteen were executed on 12 August 1952, among them five famous Yiddish writers and poets. At the same time, the regime began arresting doctors and forcing them under torture to confess to a conspiracy to kill Soviet leaders, including Stalin. The episode reached a climax on 13 January 1953, when the Soviet press announced the existence of the "doctors' plot" and accused Jewish physicians and Solomon Mikhoels, who had been killed five years earlier, of working with Zionist and Western intelligence agencies to attack the leaders of the CPSU.

Ehrenburg did what he could to prevent the "doctors' plot" from engulfing all of Soviet Jewry. In February 1953 he was asked on three occasions to endorse a collective letter—which only Jews were expected to sign—condemning the doctors. Ehrenburg was among a handful of courageous individuals who refused to do so. He took the additional step—an extraordinary step under the circumstances—of attempting to reason with Stalin. In a letter to the dictator, Ehrenburg invoked his experience as an emissary to Western intellectuals and to European Communist parties, ex-

38. “Public Lecture on the Warsaw Congress by Ilya Ehrenburg,” dated 15 January 1951, 700.001/1–1551, pp. 1–2. Department of State, National Archives. The Dutch documentary filmmaker Joris Ivens was in Warsaw for the conference to produce his film Peace Over War. He was told to be sure to include applause for Ehrenburg and Fadeev on the soundtrack (Joris Ivens, interview by author, Paris, 1984). Ehrenburg tried to bring Picasso to the attention of the Soviet public whenever he could. During World War II, he mentioned Picasso twice in his columns; see Ilya Ehrenburg, “November Mists,” Krasnaya zvezda (Moscow), 16 November 1944, p. 4; and Ilya Ehrenburg, “An Hour for Art,” Sovetskoe iskusstvo (Soviet art), 7 November 1944.

plaining how any drastic action against the country’s Jews would undermine the Soviet Union’s prestige and political standing. It is impossible to gauge the effectiveness of Ehrenburg’s appeal. He sent the letter in early February 1953, and Stalin died on 5 March. Within that one-month period, Stalin did not move ahead with his plan to banish Soviet Jews to Central Asia and Birobidzhan, the very action that Ehrenburg was seeking to deter. With this gesture of protest, Ehrenburg had made clear to Stalin and to himself that he had reached the limit of his faithfulness. Ehrenburg could well have been shot for such defiance, but Stalin’s death brought an end to the country’s long nightmare.40

**Activities After Stalin’s Death**

Ehrenburg’s involvement in the peace movement continued throughout the 1950s and 1960s. It gave him an opportunity to travel widely, especially when he was designated to present peace prizes to foreign supporters who were often his friends. In the fall of 1951 he traveled with the renowned Chilean poet Pablo Neruda to China for a full month to present the Stalin Peace Prize to Sun Yat Sen’s widow. In the spring of 1954 he visited Paris for the first time in five years to give the award to his old comrade Pierre Cot. In August 1954 he traveled to Latin America, his only trip to that continent, to present a similar prize to Neruda in Santiago, Chile. In 1956 he visited India, and in 1957 he traveled to Greece and Japan. In 1960 alone, he crossed the Soviet frontier thirteen times on various trips to Scandinavia and Western Europe. Just as he had under Stalin, Ehrenburg made himself useful to the regime as an articulate and urbane representative in the West.

What the Soviet authorities did not understand was that these tours enhanced Ehrenburg’s prestige within the cultural bureaucracy, making it easier for him to challenge controls on art and literature. After Stalin’s death, Ehrenburg encouraged the publication of numerous books by European and Soviet writers and then frequently added introductions in which he explained how a play by Jean-Paul Sartre, the verses of Paul Eluard, or the stories of Alberto Moravia belonged in the progressive heritage that Soviet culture claimed to exemplify. Ehrenburg wrote scores of such introductions in the 1950s, a time when his immense prestige as a war hero and an “elected” member of the Supreme Soviet made his support a decisive factor in a book’s publication. He turned the genre of writing introductions into a literary art form,

conveying in a brisk handful of pages the kind of information and opinion that few if any Soviet publications provided. While Soviet leaders had their own cynical reasons for cultivating the support of prominent Western intellectuals, Ehrenburg used his contacts and prestige to broaden the Soviet public’s access to Western culture. The peace movement helped to make all this possible.

In 1956, three years after Stalin’s death, Nikita Khrushchev’s revelations about Stalin’s crimes contributed to unrest in Hungary. The crisis in Budapest broke out with full force in October. The Soviet Union sent in a small contingent of troops and tried to quell the situation, but as the insurrection grew larger and the demands escalated, Khrushchev launched a full-scale invasion. In the first week of November more than 240,000 Soviet troops occupied Hungary, killing tens of thousands of people and installing a new, pro-Soviet regime led by János Kádár. The bloody autumn of 1956 threatened to derail the process of liberalization inside the Soviet Union and the general improvement in political and cultural relations with the rest of the world that was developing after Stalin’s death. Ehrenburg had a complicated, ambiguous response to Khrushchev’s intervention. As a Soviet patriot, Ehrenburg did not want the balance of power to be disrupted in Europe. He knew that a few of the broadcasters at Radio Free Europe had been encouraging revolts in Eastern Europe and promising Western aid if the local populations needed support.

For Ehrenburg, however, the overriding concern was the potential renewal of Soviet cultural isolation in the wake of repression in Central Europe. The first news in the Soviet press about Hungary’s political crisis appeared in Pravda on 25 October, by coincidence the same day that Ehrenburg opened a reception in Moscow to honor an exhibit of Picasso’s work. Although the exhibit remained open only until 12 November, it was widely seen as a breakthrough in Soviet cultural policy, one that Ehrenburg had strenuously worked to organize. If events in Eastern Europe disrupted contacts with the West, either through the Kremlin’s withdrawal of support for such initiatives or through a boycott of the country by Western intellectuals, the result would be a return to the cultural isolation of the Stalin years, something Ehrenburg was determined to avoid.

As a prominent Soviet citizen, Ehrenburg was expected to support the military intervention in Hungary. He soon had several opportunities to help preserve a façade of Soviet prestige. On 18 November 1956, an enlarged session of the World Peace Council opened in Helsinki. By that time, many supporters of the Soviet Union, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, had voiced their opposition to the Soviet military intervention in Hungary. Others, such as a delegation of Italian socialists, came to Helsinki solely to announce their res-
ignation from the peace movement. Ehrenburg strove to forge a compromise statement in Helsinki that would allow critics of the Soviet invasion to feel satisfied and still remain within the movement. After a tempestuous debate, a resolution was unanimously approved that blamed the Cold War and “mistakes of the previous Hungarian government” for the crisis. With Ehrenburg’s help, this tenuous compromise kept the peace movement from collapsing.

Having demonstrated his firm obedience to the CPSU, Ehrenburg now undertook an initiative of his own. Earlier in the year, with the help of the France-USSR Friendship Society, he had arranged with the writer Vercors to bring reproductions of French impressionist masterpieces to Moscow. After joining protests against the Soviet intervention in Hungary, Vercors assumed that the project would have to be cancelled. But Ehrenburg was determined to save it. On 1 December he published a letter in Literaturnaya Gazeta, the main literary outlet, expressing his desire to salvage ties with the West.

It seems to me that it is necessary to know how to differentiate between our friends, who disagree with us on one question or another, and people who are urging a break with the Soviet Union and with Communists. Certain Western circles are trying to revive the climate of the Cold War and separate cultural activists, who are devoted to the business of peace and progress. I believe that it is in our interests, in the interests of peace, to do everything to prevent this.

Vercors responded enthusiastically. Although the French writer did not retract his views on the Soviet invasion, he did not want to see the Soviet Union resume its isolation. In an open letter to Ehrenburg on 18 December, Vercors welcomed the opportunity to bring his reproductions to Moscow, and the exhibit soon took place.

**Defense of Picasso**

Ehrenburg never lost faith in the power of artistic creativity to bridge the boundaries of geography and culture. His greatness as a public figure is best reflected in this consistent faith, the devotion it evoked in millions of people,
and the dislike Ehrenburg invariably provoked among the same political figures who, at different times, found it necessary and proper to honor him.

The Picasso exhibit of 1956 exemplified this stubborn strategy. Ehrenburg had to overcome obstacles in the Artists’ Union, whose leader, Aleksandr Gerasimov, tried to suppress anything but the most conventional style of figurative painting. Ehrenburg also had to circumvent the Ministry of Culture, a body in which political considerations continually intruded. On 25 October 1956 a formal reception was held at the Moscow House of Architecture in honor of Picasso’s seventy-fifth birthday; an exhibit of his work was scheduled to open the next day at the Pushkin Museum. Picasso himself was supposed to attend, but the turmoil in Hungary made it impossible for him to come to Moscow. Ehrenburg entered the reception to “a great ovation,” an honor reserved for him “as the most overt and prominent of Picasso’s Soviet admirers.”

That same night, a long line of people gathered outside the Pushkin Museum and remained there until the morning, eager to be the first to enter the gallery. A brief ceremony still had to take place at the entrance. As Ehrenburg was about to cut the ribbon, a restless and impatient crowd pressed forward. Ehrenburg turned to them, hoping to calm their anxiety: “You waited thirty years for this, you can wait another ten minutes.”

Nonetheless, when it came to Picasso’s work, Ehrenburg had to contend with a good deal of stupidity. He enjoyed describing the reaction of an important Soviet editor to a Picasso painting that featured the image of a toad. “At the height of one of the campaigns against formalism,” the British Communist Ivor Montagu recounted,

Ehrenburg noticed his visitor, a distinguished Soviet editor, uncomfortably taking surreptitious looks over his shoulder at this repulsive monstrosity on the wall behind him. “What do you think of it?” inquired Ehrenburg with a poker face.

“A caricature against American imperialism,” [he explained to his guest]. “Wonderful,” exclaimed the visitor, now completely reassured. “Perfect, Ilya Grigorevich, its very essence.”


Ehrenburg liked their idea and offered to write a preface, an offer the editors immediately accepted, hoping it would ensure the book’s appearance. In the preface Ehrenburg introduced Picasso to the Soviet reader, emphasizing Picasso’s boundless energy for work, the clutter of his Paris studios, and, naturally, his allegiance to Communism. But several times in the text, Ehrenburg recalled how Picasso ridiculed Soviet attitudes. He noted that when Aleksandr Fadeev met Picasso at the Wrocław Conference in 1948, Fadeev challenged him in proper Soviet style, asking why he “chose forms that were incomprehensible to people.” In response, Picasso reminded Fadeev that children learn to read by beginning with simple sounds. Fadeev nodded in assent. “Fine,” Picasso concluded, “and how were you taught to understand painting?” At this point Fadeev gave up.47

From the time Ehrenburg first learned about the project, he understood that it would be difficult to publish the book. So he took several steps to help it along. Using a familiar strategy, he contacted the French Communist newspaper *L’Humanité*, in Paris and encouraged them to announce that a book on Picasso would appear for the first time in Moscow. He also solicited the help of Dolores Ibarruri—La Pasionaria, who was living in exile in Moscow—hoping a word from her, as the most famous Spanish Communist, would make a difference.

But just as the book was to appear, someone “at the top” intervened to stop publication. The entire edition—100,000 copies—was “arrested” on order of the Central Committee. Even Golomshok and Sinyavsky were not allowed to receive copies. Learning of this setback, Ehrenburg appealed to the Soviet Politburo’s chief ideologist, Mikhail Suslov, invoking a line of reasoning that bordered on blackmail:

4 June 1961

Dear Mikhail Andreevich!

I am taking the liberty to bother you about a question of minor importance, but a question that would have major significance for the Partisans of Peace. At the beginning of this year, Znanie publishing house printed a brochure about Picasso in an edition of one hundred thousand copies. The publishers asked for my permission to use a fragment about Picasso from my memoirs as an introduction. Being outside the country, in response to journalists’ questions, I mentioned that such a book is coming out, and a month ago, during my stay in Italy, I answered that the book was out. At that time, I had already received author’s copies. I also saw references and articles about this book in a series of West European newspapers.

Recently the publisher let me know that he is supposed to destroy more than two-thirds of the edition. I am not concerned about whether the text or selection of illustrations is successful. I am not writing to you as a man who loves Picasso’s art, but as one of the participants in the Partisans of Peace. This year, the French Communist Party and progressive individuals in France and not only French organizations will commemorate Picasso’s eightieth birthday. It would be very unpleasant if news of the destruction of a large portion of books printed here were to seep out to the West, but now such things usually penetrate there. This is precisely what has compelled me to turn to you with a request, if you find it possible, to intervene in this matter.48

Ehrenburg was making clear, in other words, that he had already alerted Western journalists to the book’s existence and that it would be an easy matter to let them know if it were destroyed by official decree. The regime had to back down. As a result, the book, a modest effort by Western standards, with fifty pages of text and two dozen black-and-white reproductions, including Picasso’s portrait of Ehrenburg and other examples from his private collection, was released for sale to the public.

Ehrenburg continued to push against Khrushchev’s constraints on art, literature, and historical truth. When he died in August 1967, ten thousand people jammed the streets of Moscow to bid him farewell. “There was a great crowd at his funeral,” Nadezhda Mandelstam later recalled,

and I noticed that the faces were decent and human ones. It was an anti-Fascist crowd, and the police spies who had been sent to the funeral in force stood out very conspicuously. It was clear, in other words, that Ehrenburg had done his work well, difficult and thankless though it was.49

A younger generation of writers and activists, among them Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Andrei Sinyavsky, Georgii Vladimov, Vladimir Voinovich, Joseph Brodsky, Andrei Amalrik, and Vasily Aksyonov, who were blossoming alongside the emerging human rights movement, soon altered the contours of Soviet culture. All were compelled to leave the country for defying the regime’s control of artistic expression. Ehrenburg’s life came to an end as this new era was taking shape. He helped to prepare the ground, introducing the work of long-suppressed Soviet writers over a host of bureaucratic and ideological constraints. History will have to judge him within the framework of the years in which he lived and not by the standards that marked the epoch to follow.

48. Archive of the late Irina Ehrenburg.