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Nikolai Shpanov and the Evolution of the Soviet Spy Thriller

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Abstract

It is a common opinion that Stalinist literature knew no explicitly popular genres, and that, consequently, its whole body can be regarded as popular culture. The case of Nikolai Shpanov is one of the most evident arguments against such an interpretation.

From the late Thirties to the early Fifties, Shpanov's works, centered around the fight with fiendish spies, had huge print runs and conspicuous success among the readers; yet, Soviet critics nearly ignored them. The publishing channels were not those of the officially endorsed "classics" of Socialist Realism, but rather what can be regarded as a Soviet equivalent of a separated mass publishing.

Shpanov's books are, thus, the living proof of the existence of a Soviet mass literature; an analysis of the author's rich output shows a distinctly discernible evolution, from a playful style, rich with science-fiction elements, derived from the "red Pinkertons" of the Twenties, to seriousness and a tendency to use mass literature as a tool to unveil the evil deeds of Western governments.

Keywords: Nikolai Shpanov; Soviet Literature; mass culture; Spy-Thriller

There are two reasons why the books we are about to discuss are not supposed to exist. The first is obvious: the *damnatio memoriae* that has fallen upon the author of these hardcore Stalinist books since destalinization. The second is more subtle; according to an interpretation which has now become universally accepted, there existed no separate mass literature in Stalin's Soviet Union.¹ To be more precise, during the Twenties, the Soviet authorities

¹ The argument has been thoroughly developed by Evgenii Dobrenko in *Metafora vlasti: Literatura stalinskoi epochi v istoricheskom osveshchenii*. München: Sagner, 1993, p. 1-30, and 'The Disaster of Middlebrow Taste, or, Who 'Invented' Socialist Realism?' In: *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 94/3 (1995), p. 773-806; *The Making of the State Writer: Social and Aesthetic Origins of Soviet Literary Culture*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001. See also: Andreas Guski: 'Der sowjetische Roman als Massenlektüre: Thesen zur Rolle des Trivialen in der Prosa des sozialistischen Realismus'. In: E. Reissner (ed.): *Literatur- und Sprachentwicklung in Osteuropa im 20. Jh. (Beiträge zum 2. Weltkongress für sowjetische und Osteuropastudien)*, Berlin: Berlin-Verlag, 1982, p. 70-78. Leonid Heller: 'La letteratura di massa in Unione Sovietica.' In: E. Etkind, G. Nivat, I. Serman, V. Strada (eds.): *Storia della letteratura russa. III Il Novecento 3. Dal realismo socialista ai nostri giorni*, Torino: Einaudi, 1991, p. 698-703. Richard Stites: *Russian popular culture: Entertainment and society since 1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 4-5. Thomas Lahusen, 'Kak zhizn' chitaet knigu: Massovaia kul'tura i diskurs chitatelja v pozdnem soerealizme. In: Ch. Gjunter, E. Dobrenko (eds.): *Socrealisticheskij*

noticed that the mass reader was not willing to soak up the ideologically correct literature with which he was provided, and kept on returning to the pre-revolutionary detective dime-novels (known under the collective label of “Pinkertons”), and so they promoted the production of the so-called “Red Pinkertons,” i.e. approved Communist adventure fiction.² In spite of its favorable reception by the general public, the “Red Pinkerton” as such did not survive the changes that Soviet literature underwent at the end of the 1920s. From that moment on, according to current opinion, Soviet literature as a whole was to be regarded as middlebrow (at the same time as the death throes of the avant-garde were being stifled) and, as one scholar pointed out, “... in the Soviet Union formula literature was incorporated into the official canon.”³

The case of Nikolai Shpanov can scarcely be interpreted in accordance with a similar framework; it is, in fact, one of the not-so-rare cases capable of seriously challenging this framework.

Born in 1896, Shpanov was a pilot, initially in the Russian air-force and then in the Soviet. In the early Twenties, he took part in a number of sporting activities, such as polar expeditions, long road-trips and hot-air balloon flights, subsequently writing accounts of his exploits; from the second half of the decade he started publishing literary works on these subjects, which proved extremely popular at the time.⁴

His first mass success was *The First Blow: A Tale about the Future War*. This novella about a war against Germany, easily won by the Soviet Union thanks to the technological superiority of its air force (what’s more, steam-powered), was published in 1939 in the journal *Znamia* and, in the same year, came out in four editions, including one of 275,000 copies in the *Roman-gazeta* series. It is clearly inspired (directly or not) by William Le Queux’s *The Great*

kanon. Sankt-Peterbug: Akademicheskii proekt, 2000, p. 622.

² On the “Red Pinkerton” see: Robert Russell: Red Pinkertonism: An Aspect of Soviet Literature of the 1920s. In: *Slavic and East European Review*, 60 (1982), p. 390-412. A. F. Britikov: ‘Detektivnaia povest’ v kontekste prikluchencheskikh zhanrov’. In: V.A. Kovalev (ed.): *Russkaia sovetskaia povest’ 20-30-ch godov*. Leningrad: Nauka, 1976, p. 408-453. Andrea Lena Corritore: *Il “Pinkerton rosso”*: Letteratura di svago e propaganda politica all’epoca della NEP in Russia (1921-1928), Ph.D. diss., Università “Cà Foscari”, Venezia, 2005.

³ Birgit Menzel: ‘Some Reflections on High and Popular Literature in Late Soviet Russia’. In: P. Pesonen, J. Heinonen (eds.): *Perelomnye periody v russkoi literature i kul’ture. Studia Russica Helsingiensia et Tartuensia VIII*. Helsinki: Department of Slavonic and Baltic Languages, 2000. Birgit Menzel: Chto takoe ‘Populiarnaia literatura’. In: *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie* 40 (2000), p. 397.

⁴ The most accurate source thus far on Shpanov’s life is M. Lepechin’s article in: N. Skatov (ed.): *Russkaia literatura XX veka: Prozaiki, poety, dramaturgi: Biobibliograficheskii slovar’*. Moskva: OLMA-PRESS invest, 2005, vol. III, p. 752-755. See also Vasili Tokarev: Sovetskaia voennaia utopiia kanuna vtoroi mirovoi. In: *Evropa: Zhurnal Pol’skogo instituta mezhdunarodnykh del* 5/1 (18) (2006), p. 97-161.

War in England in 1897,⁵ with the notable difference that the latter was intended as a warning against Britain's unpreparedness for a possible war,⁶ while Shpanov's work was part of the wave of Soviet propaganda insisting on the great power and technical strength of the Red Army⁷; surprisingly enough (if we consider the author's further career) it lacks the spy plot of the prototype.

The Secret of Professor Burago appeared between 1943 and 1944; renamed *The War of the "Invisibles"* in late instalments, and mixing a spy plot with science-fictional elements, it is the chaotic tale of a Soviet scientist, working on the secret of invisibility, who gets abducted by the Germans. Two of his young friends find traces of him on an occupied Norwegian island (where they arrive after a series of adventures); the island has been overrun by the British army, but, during hostilities, a laboratory working on bacteriological warfare is destroyed, deadly viruses break free, and all the inhabitants sail away from what is now a desert land. There are pursuits and skirmishes between the heroes and their German foe, surprises in the North Sea, then in a prison camp on the Norwegian mainland, and the plot seems likely to go on forever; in fact, it never came to a conclusion until a single-volume edition appeared in 1961. This work clearly demonstrates Shpanov's strong and weak sides; although he was, of course, no great writer, and probably not even a good craftsman (his plots often lack consistency), he did possess the happy talent of endlessly contriving astonishing new plot-turns and keeping the reader entertained.⁸

In 1945-46, Shpanov started a series about Nil Kruchinin, a Sherlock-Holmes-like detective, who was to make one last appearance in the 1956 novel *The Sorcerer's Pupil*. These works were, it appears, a hit with the public; Shpanov's career breakthrough, however, came with the novel *The Arsonists*, which came out in at least eleven editions between 1949 and 1954, and the subsequent *The Plotters* (seven editions 1951-1954). After Stalin's death his star faded quickly; although he published one last novel in 1961, the year of his death – *The Hurricane*, a mix of "aeronautic" science-fiction with a political thriller about NATO's plots for a nuclear war – it achieved little success.

The Arsonists-The Plotters sequence can be described as the story of a mad millionaire

⁵ On the genre of the future war novel, at the time very popular not only in Soviet Russia, see Tokarev, 'Sovetskaia voennaia utopiia'.

⁶ See the 'Preface to the First edition' in William Le Queux: *The Great War in England in 1897*, 11th edition. London: Tower Publishing Company, 1895, p. 4-9.

⁷ See Sheila Fitzpatrick: *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 71.

⁸ See Dmitrii Bykov: 'Svezhest': Nikolai Shpanov i ego vera. In: *Russkaia zhizn'*, 22 April 2009.

named John Vandenheim III who plots (which at this point should come as no surprise) to conquer the world, no less; Vandenheim's main agent, however, is John Foster Dulles. In the words of Drew Pearson, who described the novel in 1952 for the Bell Syndicate newspapers:

Dulles and Vandenheim are given credit for burning the Reichstag, the murder of King Alexander of Yugoslavia, arranging the Anschluss between Hitler and Austria, and some parts of the Spanish civil war. The novel also has Vandenheim putting Dulles in touch with Herman Goering...⁹

In these novels, the Night of the Long Knives, the Leipzig trial, the Chinese civil war, the Munich agreement, and the German aggression against Poland are also depicted, through the loose juxtaposition of a number of different plot lines mixing both fictional and historical characters.¹⁰ The above-mentioned work does possess marked political pathos, its main aim being undoubtedly to show the connections between Nazi and Japanese aggressors and American capitalism. "Arsonists of War" was, in Soviet postwar propaganda, the epithet constantly given to Western leaders, and the novel reflects a reinterpretation of the past war in light of the new situation, the cold war.¹¹ This strategy is carried out via the spy thriller. According to Pearson, *The Arsonists* was the "Best-selling book behind the Iron Curtain." Pearson states, "It has been translated into Hungarian, Czech and Rumanian and is required reading for Communist workers in the satellite countries - perhaps to prepare them for Dulles' assumption of his new post."¹² The catalog of the Russian State Library holds data for a Czech, a Slovak and two Rumanian editions, but no Hungarian. This hardly alters the picture, the real problem being that, though indeed popular (print runs, for the Soviet period, can hardly be used as proof of this; abundant testimony, however, is available) and sponsored by the regime, these novels were not mandatory reading; they were never, in fact, treated as high literature. The custom for books officially sanctioned as important was for them to be published by the central "fat" journals; however, this was not the case with *The Arsonists*, which hardly drew a glance from the critics. On the other hand, as we shall demonstrate, they may be considered as perfect specimens of Soviet mass literature.

⁹ Drew Pearson: Vicious Soviet Book on Dulles Is Best Seller. In: *Sunday Herald*, 23 November 1952.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that *The Arsonists* has been recently republished in four separated books, with no indication as to their chronological order.

¹¹ The shift in international relations is reflected in the new 1955 edition of the early Kruchinin tales, where all ex-German agents turn out to be working for America. In the 1945 edition of the first story, for instance, the director of the Central European power station, which was supposed to be blown up (the conspiracy is at the core of the plot), is "a man known for his loyalty to his masters – the company owning the station. The Germans were at the head of the company," from: Nikolai Shpanov: *Pochozhdenia Kruchinina*. In: *Krasnoarmec* 11-12 (1945), p. 29. In the new version, the company was "nominally national, but in reality it was a barely masked subsidiary of an American monopoly which long before the war had set foot in the country's energy industry" (Nikolai Shpanov: *Pochozhdenia Nila Kruchinina*. Moskva: Voenizdat, 1955, http://publ.lib.ru/ARCHIVES/SH/SHPANOV_Nikolay_Nikolaevich/Shpanov_N.N..html#26).

¹² Pearson, Vicious Soviet Book.

We cannot here discuss the theoretical approach which associates mass literature with certain formal attributes in the texts, often identified as their “formulaic” quality; it is enough to say that, if we compare Shpanov’s novels to the paramount texts of “high” Soviet culture from the same years (e.g. Fadeev’s *Young Guard*, Pavlenko’s *Happiness* or Azhaev’s *Far From Moscow*), we will indeed find many common elements, but certainly no common plot pattern. In any case, our argument will be based on Yuri Lotman’s interpretation of mass literature as a “sociological concept” concerning “not so much the structure of a given text, as its social functioning inside the text system constituting a given culture.”¹³ To put it another way, in Stuart Hall’s opinion: “The meaning of a cultural form and its place or position in the cultural field is *not* inscribed inside its form.”¹⁴

According to this approach, what distinguishes mass literature from its “high” counterpart is, above all, their different production and distribution channels. Official Soviet culture would not, in fact, admit the existence of such differences in the country. As Bogumil Rainov, a member of the Bulgarian academy, states in his work on mass culture, translated into Russian in 1979: “The fact that we are speaking about a characteristic phenomenon of the capitalist world is not mentioned in the title of this book, because the term ‘mass culture’ itself is bourgeois in its essence and indicates a characteristic phenomenon of bourgeois society.”¹⁵ This difference can only exist in a class society:

The fact that in a Socialist society such a polarity is unthinkable needs no demonstration, it is absurd to speak about a “mass culture” here, because our culture – the whole of it – is not “mass culture”, but a culture aimed for the masses.¹⁶

Hence the reading mentioned above, still current in present-day scholarship; by putting the official discourse to the test of reality, however, unexpected results may be obtained. The case of Shpanov is, once again, illuminating. We mentioned the fact that his works were not published by the so-called “fat” literary journals; he was, instead, a habitu  of such periodicals as *Smena*, the Young Communist League fortnightly, and *Vokrug sveta* (“Around the World”), another youth journal. *The First Blow* first came out in *Znamia*, which, at the time, was still a military journal. It was later published in book form by the Children’s, the Military’s, and then the State’s publishing houses in the large-scale-circulation “Newspaper-

¹³ Iurii Lotman: ‘Massovaia literatura kak istoriko-kul’turnaia problema’. In: *O russkoi literature: Stat’i i issledovaniia (1958-1993)*. Sankt-Peterburg: Iskusstvo-SPb, 1997, p. 819.

¹⁴ Stuart Hall: ‘Notes on Deconstructing the ‘Popular’’. In: Raphael Samuel (ed.): *People’s History and Socialist Theory*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, p. 235.

¹⁵ Bogomil Rajnov: *Masovata kultura*. Sofija: Nauka i izskustvo, 1974; Russian translation: *Massovaja kul’tura*. Moskva: Progress, 1979, p. 24.

¹⁶ Ibid.

novel,” itself a popular series of sorts.

The publication history of *Professor Burago's Secret* is a striking case; the first chapters were serialized in the Army's journals *The Red Soldier* and *The Red Sailor*, and the last ones (under the new title *The War of the "Invisibles"*) in the illustrated weekly *Ogonyok*. Between, chapters of the novel appeared in periodical booklets, which resembled the old Nat Pinkerton dime novels.¹⁷ This form of publication, probably unique in Stalin's time, was justified by and, in all likelihood, originated in a *Pravda* editorial from 1940:

The old detective literature about Nat Pinkerton and Sherlock Holmes is still alive and it finds its readership. This is an alarming sign and we ought to think about it seriously. We repudiated old detective literature, but we created nothing in its place. (...) Together with the usual “fundamental” editions we need cheap adventure literature, aimed at the mass reader. Small booklets of seventy-to-one hundred pages, with a print run of 100 – 200,000 copies may be a solution.¹⁸

The argument sounds strikingly reminiscent of the “Red Pinkerton” discourse from the 1920s. Soviet cultural authorities, it appears, kept hovering between the desirable and the real, between their own program of removing level differences and the fear of losing the propaganda potential of mass literature. Yet it seems that some kind of separate mass literature existed throughout the Stalinist period (with a possible pause in the mid-thirties – a period requiring further investigation¹⁹). Shpanov's oeuvre, however, presents us with an evolution that we could for the time being assume (several hints point in that direction) to be a model of the general development of the genre.

Though separated only by a few years, *Professor Burago's Secret* and *The Arsonists* show remarkable differences that can be summarized by referring to a growing degree of seriousness, or a dwindling playfulness. Geographical detailing can advantageously epitomize this difference. A significant plot turn in the first novel occurs in the city of Antwerdam:

Antwerdam was a city of the sea and a seaman's city in the full sense of the word, ranging from the best docking for ships, the best hotels for captains, the wildest taverns for crewmen, to the best sea-museum in the world, with a wonderful library, the end-product of centuries of careful collecting of every single book about the sea. The pride of Antwerdam was this small, outwardly unpretentious building, with an old, darkened brass plate on the door bearing the inscription: sea institute. It would be hard to overestimate the scope and accuracy of its research

¹⁷ Nikolai Shpanov: *Taina professora Burago*. In: *Krasnoarmeec* 20, 21, 22, 23 (1942). Nikolai Shpanov: *Proishestvie na "Klarisse"*. In: *Krasnoarmeec* 4, 5/6, 7, 8 (1943). Nikolai Shpanov: *Plenniki ostrova tumanov*. In: *Krasnoflotec* 13/14, 15 (1943). Nikolai Shpanov: *Taina professora Burago*, vyp. 1-3. Moskva: Molodaia gvardiia, 1943. Nikolai Shpanov: *Taina professora Burago*, vyp. 4-6. Moskva, Molodaia gvardiia, 1944. Publishing data are available thanks to the work of Maksim Bezkodov for www.publ.lib.ru.

¹⁸ M. Pavlov: *O prikluchencheskoi literature*. In: *Pravda*, 8/12/1940.

¹⁹ See Duccio Colombo: *Agente 007: Oltre la cortina di ferro: Note per una storia del racconto di spionaggio sovietico*. In: *Europa Orientalis* 32 (2013), p. 99-121.

or the importance of the expeditions it organized. Nowhere in the world was there an institution that could be compared to this one, which grew out of the peculiar "navigators' cabinet of curiosities", founded four hundred years previously by Erik Kund senior.

A footnote specifies:

Erik Kund senior, also known as Red Erik. Some scholars call him Salted Erik. The legend goes that, when Erik was defeated in battle by pirates, his body was salted in a barrel and thrown into the sea by the victors, at the mouth of the Alda, to be carried away by the waves. But as soon as the barrel touched the water surface, the current changed direction, the waters turned and carried the barrel back to Antwerdam harbor.²⁰

Against this imaginary geographical backdrop, *The Arsonists* is laden with scrupulously exact topographical details of Western cities. The reader is guided through Berlin, the Canary Islands, London, where

Monty dismissed the taxi near the Home-Office building and ran under King Charles Street arch in order to take the shortest way to the place where he hoped to meet Fleming. He knew that Fleming always walked alongside the railings of St. James Park.²¹

A few pages before, the scene was set in Lugano:

Godard shoved the piece of paper into his pocket and went to Canova Street. He took the telegram to the post-office and started his slow walk back to the hotel.

In the starlight of the moonless night, the lake was dark below the hill. Somewhere far off, near the curve of Monte Boglio, a steamer's lights flickered like a handful of fireflies thrown into the water. Godard stopped and followed its movements up to the moment when the steamer disappeared beyond the mountain.

From the quay came the muted sound of a string orchestra. On the right, over the Pardiso, high up in the sky, the restaurant lights on top of the San Salvador mountain twinkled like a hot-air balloon with lamps dangling all over it. The thin chain of lights flanking the cable railway seemed to keep it from flying away into the dark abyss of the sky.²²

"... the prose of the tourist guide inflects much of these novels, often lending them their interest and a certain degree of verisimilitude":²³ Michael Denning's appraisal of Ian Fleming's James Bond novels might appropriately apply to Shpanov's late work. Regardless, again in Denning's words, if the British spy thriller can be read as "a compensatory myth of the crisis of imperialism,"²⁴ Shpanov's post-war novels could be interpreted as a way of managing the *expansion* of the Soviet empire (which brought with it, in its turn, a heavy

²⁰ Nikolai Shpanov: *Taina professora Burago*, vyp. 2. Moskva: Molodaia gvardiia, 1943, p. 7-8.

²¹ Nikolai Shpanov: *Podzhigateli: No pasaran!* Moskva: Veche, 2012, p. 309.

²² Shpanov: *Podzhigateli: "No pasaran!"*, p. 21-22.

²³ Michael Denning: *Cover Stories: Narrative and Ideology in the British Spy Thriller*. London: Routledge, 1987, p. 103.

²⁴ Denning: *Cover Stories*, p. 39. See also: Allan Hepburn: *Intrigue: Espionage and Culture*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005, p. 11; Paul Stock: 'Dial 'M' for metonym: Universal Exports, M's office space and empire'. In: C. Lindner (ed.): *The James Bond Phenomenon: A Critical Reader*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009, p. 250-267.

burden of anxieties). The first of the Nil Kruchinin stories is set in Hungary, the second in Norway, and the novel *The Sorcerer's Pupil* in Latvia, where CIA-sponsored Latvian emigrés are sending spies and terrorists. In the first story, the hero sends his Dr. Watson-like friend to ask for the help of the local Workers' militia:

- But, - I said anyway, - ... I just don't know how to introduce myself to the commander.
 - I am afraid that five more years of being friends with me won't be of any help to you, just like the last five, - uttered Kruchinin, dissatisfied. - Tell him that you're Russian. Russian, do you understand! Then it's all on Vachek's worker conscience.²⁵

“Russian” is the code word that can accord these foreigners (who “happened to be here for a reason that had nothing to do with the events pictured in this story”²⁶) the immediate assistance of Eastern Europe's local authorities. Evidently, the characters are working for SMERSh, the Soviet military secret service, which suggests a completely different reason for the locals' willingness to cooperate.

In the first edition, published in 1945, the theater is an indeterminate East European country which has just been liberated (a hint regarding a mountain resort in the south might possibly help identify it as Poland); only in the 1955 version does the setting become Hungary, via this additional passage:

In olden times this country was one of the main regions of a double-headed kingdom. His Apostolic Majesty inscribed the name of this proud little country in his pompous title, and the feudal lords – the progeny of the ancient conquerors – joined the King/Emperor's court and happily mixed there with other hereditary slave-holders of German descent.²⁷

Once again, the passing of time seems to demand an increasing amount of geographical and historical detail, an increasing degree of concreteness. These details do indeed hold intrinsic interest, but their function was, above all, to add “a certain degree of verisimilitude.” This is what Kingsley Amis called the “Fleming Effect”:

This might be called the imaginative use of information, whereby the pervading fantastic nature of Bond's world, as well as the temporary, local, fantastic elements in the story, are bolted down to some sort of reality, or at least counterbalanced. In addition, it provides motives and explanations for action; and the information itself is valuable, not simply *as* information, but in the relish and physical quality it lends to the narrative. A gunboat in a well-written boys' book can't just be a gunboat, it must be (say) of the *Zulu* class with five 4.7s arranged in two pairs for'ard and aft and a single one amidships – not, again, just to be believable or because we need to understand about the guns for later or because we like guns, but also so that the gunboat shall be fully *there*. To mention boys' books doesn't denigrate this interest; it merely helps to define it.²⁸

²⁵ Nikolai Shpanov: Pokhozheniia Kruchinina. In: *Krasnoarmeets* 15-16 (1945), p. 30.

²⁶ Nikolai Shpanov: Pokhozheniia Kruchinina. In: *Krasnoarmeets* 11-12 (1945), p. 28.

²⁷ Nikolai Shpanov: *Pokhozheniia Nila Kruchinina*. Moskva: Voenizdat, 1955, p. 3.

²⁸ Kingsley Amis: *The James Bond Dossier*. New York: The New American Library, 1965, p. 100.

Not very different from what Roland Barthes, with a totally different set of texts in mind, called the “Reality Effect”.

The development of Shpanov’s technique – and the evolution of the Soviet spy thriller in general – advances towards a higher level of seriousness, an increasing separation from the playful irony that was so characteristic of the “Red Pinkerton” (a large part of which was the work of highbrow writers, who enjoyed playing with the conventions of mass literature, and particularly enjoyed overdoing it). Irony – and overstatement – are far from neutral in literature that deals with hard-felt political matter; irony, for instance, has often been used to justify Ian Fleming’s unpleasant messages. In the words of Umberto Eco: “...he tempers his choice with irony, but the irony is completely masked and is revealed only through incredible exaggeration. In *From Russia, With Love*, the Soviet men are so monstrous, so improbably evil that it seems impossible to take them seriously.”²⁹ When the Soviet press commented on James Bond, it had few doubts; playfulness was nothing more than a mask hiding the true political nature of what were understood as propaganda works.³⁰

In Stalinist literature, any uncertainty was out of place, as was any game. In Marietta Shaginian’s 1924 *Mess Mend*, the first and most successful of the “Red Pinkertons,” the *bad guys* suffer from a mysterious sickness: their spines are curving, they are being transformed into animals.

This is a manifest realization of the traditional metaphor regarding the “animal spirits” of capitalism – so manifest that it cannot be taken without irony, although the irony here does not seem aimed at undermining the overall message. In Shpanov’s *The Plotters*, F.D.

Roosevelt’s counselor, Harry Hopkins, tells Vandenheim:

... find a way to persuade one hundred and forty million simple Americans that supreme justice does not mean that you shouldn’t have a golden bathtub, but that these simple Americans should have enameled, or at least zinc-plated bathtubs.³¹

This metaphor is also realized in *The Arsonists*, as Vandenheim is actually shown to own a plain gold bathtub. The tub is found by Goering in a Scottish castle that the millionaire had rebuilt on an island in a Swiss lake, where he has organized a meeting between American industrialists and Nazi leaders:

... a big hall. Its walls were covered with tapestries looking like huge medallions. In the middle of every medallion there hung a shield decorated with a coat of arms. All this might have looked like a heraldic hall, but the center of the floor was occupied by a big bathing pool. The

²⁹ Umberto Eco: ‘Narrative Structures in Fleming’. In: Lindner: *The James Bond Phenomenon*, p. 34.

³⁰ See Colombo: *Agente 007*, p. 113-117.

³¹ Nikolai Shpanov: *Zagovorshchiki*. Moskva: Voenizdat, 1951; I used an internet copy available at http://publ.lib.ru/ARCHIVES/SH/SHPANOV_Nikolay_Nikolaevich/_Shpanov_N.N.html.

soft light coming from the ceiling was reflected in the yellow metal with which the pool was coated, so that the water resembled a huge slab of reddish glass.

Krone saw Goring's eyes staring ecstatically at the pool.

- Look at this, Krone, - Goring's fat and red hands greedily reached for the pool, - it's solid gold!³²

This bathtub comes from a literary prototype: in Nikolai Breshko-Breshkovskii's *Satan's Work*, a 1915 thriller about Austro-German spies in Russia, the bad-guy banker Eisenstadt has a new bathroom built in his mansion, such a sumptuous bathroom, in fact, that he organizes a party for its opening.³³ Many elements of the décor of Vandenheim's bathroom bring to mind that of Eisenstadt, who is probably a model for the Goering character, the latter being shown in the kitschy uniform for the head of the German Forestry Department, while the former buys for himself the title of Consul of Nicaragua and subsequently has an equally kitschy uniform designed.

Shpanov's Goering, following Vandenheim's example, has a gold bathtub built for himself; what is new is that, in *The Arsonists*, we see him lying in this bathtub in the presence of generals and diplomats, organizing the Anschluss of Austria by phone. Most remarkably, his (almost ten-page long) conversation with Austrian Chancellor Arthur Seyss-Inquart and various Nazi agents is real – it is an almost exact replica of an excerpt from the Nuremberg Trial papers.³⁴ The quotation is doubtlessly there to be recognized; this material was well advertised in the Soviet Union, and the form in which it is exposed (i.e. lines of dialogue introduced, as in dramatic works, by the name of the speaker) is that of the source, a stenographic transcript. Whatever irony remains has no meta-narrative function; it is directed entirely at the character's real-life prototype.

This novel is, as a matter of fact, loaded with documentary material, used, however, in very disparate ways. Sometimes easily available, published information is introduced as a revelation; for instance, take this passage – a dialogue between German generals discussing the relationship between the army and the Nazis:

... French journalist Genéviève Tabouis visited our ambassador in Paris trying to squeeze out of him something useful. Here's the transcription of their conversation, which they don't even know about. - Gauss handed to Schwehrer a stitched-up file with a lead seal. Schwehrer read:
(...)

³² Shpanov: *Podzhigateli*: "No pasaran!", 104.

³³ See Nikolai Breshko-Breshkovskii: *Remeslo satany*. Kaluga: Zolotaia alleia, 1996, p. 315.

³⁴ See: *Procès des grands criminels de guerre devant le tribunal militaire international. Nuremberg. 4 novembre 1945-1er octobre 1946*. Nuremberg, 1948, Texte officiel. Édition française. Tome XXXI. Documents et autre matériel de preuve. Numéro PS-2605 à numéro PS-3054, p. 355-359: "Document PS-2949. Rédaction de conversations téléphoniques de Göring avec Seyss-Inquart, Ribbentrop et autres, et de Hitler avec le comte Philipp de Hesse, entre les 11 et 13 mars 1938, relatives à la démission du gouvernement Schuschnigg et à l'entrée des troupes allemandes en Autriche. (Cote d'audience USA-76)."

Kostner: - A few other killings like this, and Germany will be able to achieve its goals without needing to resort to war in Europe.

Tabouis: - It seems to me, that killing was already no novelty in the Weimar republic.

Kostner: - Yes, but the Nazis expect to achieve their ends through the killings they are organizing in other European countries, not our own. They maintain that Germany will avoid war with the help of a mere six calculated killings.³⁵

This “secret transcript” was in fact published by Tabouis herself. It can be found in the 1960 Russian translation of her 1958 French book.³⁶ I was not able to trace its original place of publication, but it must have appeared in the periodical press – in French, at least – before Shpanov’s novel.

In the same way, Tabouis’ memoir about her last conversation with the French foreign minister, Barthou, before he and the king of Yugoslavia were killed in Marseille, becomes in the novel a conversation secretly recorded by the German secret service. It does, however, vary slightly; here is the ending of Tabouis’ story:

As we were saying goodbye, he asked me:

- After all, why don’t you come with me to Marseille tomorrow to meet Alexander?

And when I answered Barthou, saying that in Marseille there would be reporters from my paper, and I would wait for him in Paris, he said laughingly:

- Yes, sure, I think you really fear the attack!

- But why are you sure there will be an attack? - said I, waving goodbye to Barthou.

With a shrug of his shoulders, he answered vaguely:

- Well, it appears some anarchists were found getting ready for an attack in Marseille.

The door closed. It was the last time I saw Louis Barthou.³⁷

In the novel, only Barthou’s last line differs significantly from the source material: “It appears, a conspiracy was uncovered in Marseille...”³⁸ The anarchists have disappeared; the killing of Barthou and Alexander of Yugoslavia is the work of the German and Italian secret services, while the right-wing leaders of French intelligence deliberately let it happen.

These are only a few examples of the multiple usage of documentary sources in the novel. Real documents are introduced as such, and some of these are there to be recognized by the reader; others are concealed behind the text to function as sources; still others are clear inventions, but their role in the text seems to suggest that they are to be taken as real. For example, the documentary proof in *The Plotters* revealing that Marshal Tito is on the CIA payroll fits into this last set.

This complex game with documents, this way of dealing with the main political events of the

³⁵ Shpanov: *Podzhigateli*: “No pasaran!”, p. 63-64.

³⁶ Geneviève Tabouis: *Vingt ans de “suspense” diplomatique*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1958; Russian translation: *Dvadcat’ let diplomaticheskoi bor’by*. Moskva: Izdatel’stvo inostrannoi literatury, 1960, p. 190.

³⁷ Tabouis: *Dvadcat’ let*, p. 257

³⁸ Shpanov: *Podzhigateli*: “No pasaran!”, p. 135.

era in the context of an adventurous spy novel, this mixing of historical and fictional characters – all has the paradoxical effect of reducing world politics to an endless spy game, an interminable conspiracy. The epigraph to the novel assumes this significance: “We must explain the real situation to the people, show them that war is plotted in the greatest secrecy...”³⁹

Lenin’s words are abstracted from their context (a 1921 article about the undertakings of the Soviet delegation at the Hague Peace Congress, a Bolshevik interpretation of international politics contrasting with humanitarian pacifism) and are placed at the top of the first page. Thus, they help to draw a picture of the world as a place where capitalists are constantly plotting against the USSR, where spies are hidden in every nook and cranny.

This spymania – a major feature of the Stalinist era⁴⁰ – is, of course, another reason why the existence of spy-thrillers in the Soviet Union should come as no surprise. There is one, and only one, review of *The Arsonists* in the central literary press; it appeared in *Novii mir*, and was signed by a “Colonel M. Tolchenov,” in whose opinion reality justifies the genre. An understanding of international politics as a spy game cannot but generate a spy thriller:

The novel *The Arsonists* has a thrilling plot. It is, I think, an organic feature of the genre of the political revelatory novel. The fundamental secret of the imperialists’ subversive activity is their well-developed intelligence. They have at their disposal, for their dirty tasks, hordes of professional killers, terrorists, spies, political renegades and double-dealers in the worlds of literature, art, science. Official diplomacy in capitalist countries serves as a cover for the actual intelligence structure. More than ten years ago comrade Stalin said: “Is it not clear that as long as we are encircled by capitalists, we shall have wreckers, spies, diversionists, and killers sent to our rear by agents from foreign states?”⁴¹

Stalin’s words, repeatedly quoted in the novel, come from a sinister 1937 report to the Plenum of the Central Committee, titled, at the height of the purges, *Defects in Party Work and Measures for Liquidating Trotskyites and Other Double Dealers*.⁴² Shpanov’s middlebrow novel is a perfect literary rendering of the world-picture outlined by official propaganda.

The Arsonists and *The Plotters*, therefore, appear to be a product of Stalinist public politics, and it should come as no surprise that their fortune faded fast, and they were not republished

³⁹ Vladimir Lenin: ‘Notes on the Tasks of our Delegation at The Hague’. In: *Collected Works*. Moscow: Progress, 1965, vol. 33, p. 447.

⁴⁰ See Fitzpatrick: *Everyday Stalinism*, p. 15-24.

⁴¹ Polkovnik M. Tolchenov: *Kniga, razoblachaiushchaia podzhigatelei voiny*. In: *Novyj mir*, 1949: 12, p. 241.

⁴² J. V. Stalin: ‘Defects in Party Work and Measures for Liquidating Trotskyites and Other Double Dealers: Report to the Plenum of the Central Committee of the RKP(b), March 3, 1937’. In: *Works*, vol. 14: 1934-1940. London: Red Star Press, 1978, p. 248.

after destalinization.⁴³ As we mentioned above, however, a new edition of the first novel appeared in four independent volumes, between 2012 and 2013 – a fact perhaps needing some comment.⁴⁴ Today, book publishing has become cheaper, and it is of course possible that these books are intended for a market niche of nostalgic old people from the provinces. After all, they are part of a collection that takes up the name of the old Soviet “war adventures” series. An advertisement in the final pages of one of the books, however, points in another direction. It advertises another book by the same “Veche” publishing house: a collection of historical essays bearing a preface signed by Russia’s present foreign minister. It is titled *The Score of World War Two: Who Started the War and When*,⁴⁵ and its aim seems to be to justify the Molotov-Von Ribbentrop Pact with the Munich agreements – once again, Shpanov’s reading of history has become functional to the ideology of the new Russia.

⁴³ According to the on-line catalogue of the Russian State Library, the last editions are: *Podzhigateli*. Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1955; *Zagovorshchiki*. Novosibirsk: Knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1954.

⁴⁴ Nikolai Shpanov: *Podzhigateli: Noch' dlinnykh nozhei*. Moskva: Veche, 2012; *Podzhigateli: “No pasaran!”* Moskva: Veche, 2012; *Podzhigateli: Miunchenskii sgovor*. Moskva: Veche, 2013; *Podzhigateli: Cep' predatel'stv*. Moskva: Veche, 2013.

⁴⁵ N. Narochnitskaia, V. Falin (eds.): *Partitura vtoroi mirovoi: Kto i kogda nachal voinu?* Moskva: Veche, 2009.