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Stalinist Regime from the British Perspective: English Parliamentarians' Reflections on the Visit to the USSR in 1945

Стаття присвячена одному з аспектів історії радянсько-британських громадських зв'язків у роки Другої світової війни – візиту до СРСР британської парламентської делегації у 1945 р. Автор підкреслює високий рівень ідеологізації та політизації радянського суспільства в умовах сталінського тоталітарного режиму, що деформувало розвиток "народної дипломатії". Спираючись на архівні матеріали британського парламентського візиту, автор доходить висновку про посилення на завершальній стадії війни тенденції до перетворення громадського співробітництва на канал радянської "війни ідей" проти Заходу.

Ключові слова: громадські зв'язки, тоталітаризм, ідеологічна експансія.

Статья посвящена одному из аспектов истории советско-британских общественных связей в годы Второй мировой войны – визиту в СССР британской парламентской делегации в 1945 г. Автор подчёркивает высокий уровень идеологизации и политизации советского общества в условиях сталинского тоталитарного режима, деформировавших развитие "народной дипломатии". Опираясь на архивные материалы британского парламентского визита, автор приходит к выводу об усилении на завершающей стадии войны тенденции к превращению общественного сотрудничества в канал советской "войны идей" против Запада.

Ключевые слова: общественные связи, тоталитаризм, идеологическая экспансия.

The paper deals with one of the aspects of history of the Soviet-British public relations in the Second World War – visit of the British parliamentary delegation to the USSR in 1945. The author emphasizes high level of ideologisation and politization of the Soviet society under the totalitarian Stalinist rule, which caused the deformation of the development of "public diplomacy". Based on the archive materials of the British parliamentary visit, the author draws a conclusion about the intensification of the tendency toward transformation of that cooperation into the channel of the Soviet "ideas war" against the West in the final stage of war.

Key words: Public relations, totalitarianism, ideological expansion.

The common struggle of the USSR and Great Britain against Nazism within the framework of the Anti-Hitler Coalition provided them with the unique opportunity for the development of different forms of public relations. However, the cooperation between the totalitarian Stalinist regime and one of the most developed Western democracies proved to be complicated and conflicting. That was an area of antagonism of two trends: objective necessity of expansion of public contacts within the framework of military-political alliance of the USSR and Great Britain, on one hand, and authoritarian practices of Soviet governmental bodies and negative reaction of British authorities, which impeded that process, on the other hand.

Though the study of the Soviet-British public relations within the framework of the Anti-Hitler alliance history studies was started in 1960th already, it has not been completed yet; only some aspects of history of the "public diplomacy" in the Second World War has been analyzed. As a result there are two diametrically opposite historiographical trends now: one part of scholars supposes, that international public contacts in the war period were interrupted, other one emphasizes their intensification. From the middle of 1980th, especially in connection with the celebration of the 40th and 50th anniversaries of the Victory over Nazism, studies of public cooperation within the framework of Anti-Hitler coalition were intensified significantly; the circle of sources for scientific analysis was extended. V. A. Nevezhin and L. M. Mytsyk in their PhD dissertations disproved the traditional claim of the Soviet historiography about great impact of the Soviet society on "democratic and progressive circles of the West". They argued the conclusion about high level of ideologisation and politization of the Soviet society under the totalitarian Stalinist rule, which caused the deformation of the development of international public contacts [1].

This paper is presenting one of the key events of the Soviet-British public contacts in war period – visit of the British parliamentary delegation to the USSR in 1945. That visit seems to be a perfect illustration of the tendency toward transformation of the international public contacts into the channel of the Soviet 'ideas war' against the West in the final stage of existence of the Anti-Hitler coalition.

In fact, till the end of 1944 no English public figure has visited the USSR that was an evidence of conservatism, despite the existence of the Soviet-British military-political alliance, of the ideological intolerance and autarkic tendencies, which Stalinist regime artificially cultivated in the area of international relations at

the end of 1930th – at the beginning of 1940th. However, the official directive at strengthening ideological expansion to the West forced Soviet state bodies to implement some contacts with the British citizens. In the letter to Kemenov¹, L. Kislova in principle spoke for invitation of English public figures to visit the USSR "with the information purpose", but emphasized that "it's more expedient to invite those people, whom we need, than receive those, who are sent by official circles" [2]. Obviously, the criterion of "a need" was the pro-Soviet political orientation of expected foreign visitors, their loyalty to Stalinist regime i. e. that was a reason to consider them as potential propagandists of "achievements of the Soviet socialist system" in their native countries.

Among those, who seemed to meet that criterion in the eyes of leaders of the Society of Cultural Relations with the USSR and therefore visited the Soviet Union in 1945, there was an English parliamentary delegation.

Talking to the Soviet ambassador Gusev before the departure from London the head of the delegation colonel W. Elliot said that the visit is "a goodwill mission" aimed at gaining "general understanding of the management system and operations of state institutions in the Soviet Union", as well as at familiarizing with its industry and agriculture in order "to satisfy to some extent the British public interest in the USSR" [3]. A wide range of issues that interested British parliamentarians spoke of their desire to obtain a complete and objective picture of the situation in the Soviet and prospects for further contacts with it in various fields. The message sent by the House of Lords of the British Parliament to the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the USSR emphasized that "the development in all the possible ways of the Anglo-Soviet Alliance and the friendly feelings between the two countries not only to ensure the final victory in the war, but also to create lasting basis of global peace in the future, is the firm policy and intention of the Government and the Parliament of the United Kingdom" [4].

From the Soviet side, too, there was no lack of declarations of commitment of state leaders to the idea of preserving friendship and equal and mutually beneficial cooperation with Great Britain. However, in fact, the visit of British parliamentarians to the USSR

¹ The head of the Society of Cultural Relations with the USSR.

has also been considered from the perspective of its possible use for propaganda purposes. Although an ideological orientation of a number of delegates (W. Roberts, J. Parker, St. King-Hall) raised some concern among the Soviet Foreign Affairs Commissariat officials², its composition in general gave reason to hope³ that they will be able to turn the visit into "a tourist trip", avoiding discussion of serious political issues and providing Englishmen' favourable comments about life in the Soviet Union [7]. Therefore, everything possible was done that " the trip should be without a hitch from the beginning to the end" [8]. Besides Moscow, where parliamentarians visited Moscow State University, Library named after Lenin, Academician Burdenko Neurosurgical Institute, Research Institute of Radiology, automobile plant named after Stalin and special military school of communication, the program of visit included short-term trips to Leningrad, Sverdlovsk, Stalingrad, Baku, some cities of Donbas and Middle Asia.

The culmination of the visit was Stalin's reception of the delegation where the Soviet leader announced his intention to visit Great Britain after the war [9], and then expressed his really Jesuit wish: upon their return to the homeland British guests should tell "truth, good and bad" about Russia, because "he knows weaknesses

² In particular, the general secretary of the Fabian Society, Labour MP Parker was an adherent of Federations creation as a counterweight to the Soviet "penetration" to Balkans and Eastern Europe, supported the Polish government in exile, and stated on the upcoming visit to the USSR that "Labour Party Executive Committee sends him to Moscow in order to convince Russian Communists in the need to dissolve the British Communist Party as a first step towards creating the joint International". King-Hall's "hostility" toward the USSR was illustrated by excerpts from his books "Our Own Times" (1935) and "Britain's Third Chance" (1943), where the author negatively assessed Stalinist regime foreign policy, which practical realization was the Soviet-Finnish war, as well as its internal policy during first Five-Year Plans, when, in King-Hall's opinion, "Lenin and Stalin after him did in Russia exactly the same things that Goering did in Germany". The British parliamentarian stressed that the Constitution of 1936 that pointed the way to more liberal regime "has never been implemented" [5].

³ In the note to Stalin the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs reported that "among all delegates only heads of the delegation Elliot (conservative) and King-Hall (independent nationalist) play relatively significant public and political role in England. Other members of the delegation are either businessmen or minor party officials" [6].

of the Soviet Union" [10]. Commenting the latter statement of the Soviet leader King-Hall rightly notes: "One of the nice traits in Russia is that the head of the state is a person, who is powerful enough to make such a remark; one of the bad traits is that the Marshal is almost the only person in Russia who can safely say that in Russia there are bad things as well as good ones" [11]. This alone King-Hall's statement testified that Soviet authorities' expectations of unanimous unity and absolute loyalty of delegation members to the Stalinist regime are unlikely to come true.

Nevertheless, the efforts of the Soviet propaganda machine to create British MPs' favourable impression of Soviet life were not in vain. Most of delegation members upon their return home successfully complied with the Stalin's request to tell British people "good truth" about the Soviet Union. True revelation was Elliot's statement at a press conference of the British Ministry of information that the Soviet people, experiencing pride to the great achievements of industrial revolution in the USSR, consciously agree with a "restriction and deprivation" [12], or Parker's interpretation of the problem of repressed peoples in the USSR, according to which "some nations, for example Crimean Tatars and Kalmyks, have been unfaithful to the Soviet power and exiled as well as Volga Germans who have been resettled, obviously with a view of their assimilation" [13]. Manningham-Buller, whom Beaverbrook characterized as "a man of sound views" [14], gave no less unexpected evaluation of the Soviet legal system. He stated that in the USSR "everything was done to protect the interests of the accused (!)" [15]. Lord Faringdon even expressed a wish that "the USSR had its colony in Africa to be able once and for all to do for Negroes the same one that has been done in the Central Asia" [16].

Today it is difficult to determine real reasons of such conclusions of British parliamentarians. First of all these seem to be tactical considerations aimed at preserving unity of the Big Three till the end of war against Germany as well as against Japan. However, the Soviet propaganda machine has also played an important role, actively using international socio-political contacts as a channel of ideological expansion to the West, including the UK.

Only Stephen King Hall justified fears of Stalinist authorities largely, being the only one among the delegates who critically assessed "the Soviet achievements". King-Hall's conclusions contained many contradictions, which seem to be quite natural, considering inconsistency of the Soviet-British alliance of war time in

general. However, namely the objectivism has been a hallmark of his opinion.

Evaluating the results of his meetings with the Soviet students, King-Hall drew a conclusion that although "there is no doubt in good feelings of thousands of young Russians toward Britain", "similarly there is no doubt in ignorance of tomorrow's leaders of Russia concerning the British way of life" in general and in particular "in matters relating to the scope and quality of military efforts of England" [17]. On British parliamentarian's opinion, this is largely a result of the position of the Soviet authorities which "do not believe that advertising or even disclosure of what the Allies have done, is an act aimed at increasing faith of Russians in Russia and in adeptness and wisdom of its rulers" [18]. The report on the international situation, made by the King-Hall in the House of Commons on June 11, 1945, expressed doubts as to the ability to achieve anything in the relations with the USSR, "if we try to pretend that the social system in Russia [19] is democratic" [20]. The same idea sounds in the article "Our Russian Allies", where answering the question, whether is his picture of modern Russia a picture of democracy, King-Hall emphasized "no" [21]. In his opinion, "steel structure of administration in Russia" is the party, which should not be called communist but rather "Russian national" or "all-Russian national-patriotic party" [22]. Arguing his point of view, the British activist expressed very remarkable suggestion: "If communism means the Third International and the world revolution, then Russia is the least communist country in the world. Communism, in which Trotsky believed (and, as I used to think, Lenin believed in too), not only died and was buried in Russia, but his corpse was dug out and subjected to public insult. This kind of communism is a state treason in Russia" [23].

According to King-Hall, today's Russia is a state-capitalist or state-monopolist society, where "there is no black market because it is a red market", and where "the government exercises very strict control over all sources of information available to a citizen" [24]. "The press, radio, cinema, opera, tireless Party members, distribution of rewards, fear of labour camps, exaltation of national patriotism, mystical religion (it will be) – all the moral and material resources, which are at the disposal of the Kremlin, are concentrated and will be concentrated for the influence on the spirit and body of 200 millions of Russians..." [25], – Stephen King-Hall is writing.

At the same time, attempts to explain the essence of the totalitarian regime and attitude of the Soviet people toward it led the

British parliamentarian to highly controversial conclusions. For example, he stresses that Stalin, "is interested in making it (the Soviet Union – L. M.) the greatest of the great powers, the most prosperous great nation, and his policy is aimed at achieving that goal" [26], that one of Stalin's practical tasks is "improving the living standards of masses of Russian people" [27], as well as that "the Russian government today is a government, which puts Russia's national interests above all other interests" [28]. It's hard to recognize valid King-Hall's suggestion that "... vast majority of Russian people enthusiastically supports marshal, the Red Army, the Party and Russian national idea" [29] and "... is absolutely agree with existing subordination of individual liberty to state needs" [30].

As for the prospects of the post-war Soviet-British cooperation, King-Hall considered the only but quite real and substantial obstacle in its path "the Russian policy", meaning that "the Russian government does not wish that the Russian people have free and unlimited access to our ideas, or to any other ideas at all except Russian ones" [31]. Therefore, contrary to the optimistic statements of members of the British parliamentary delegation, King-Hall emphasized that "he would be pleasantly surprised, if during over next decade we will advance far in real understanding of Russian people. For that an extraordinary change in the official policy of Russia should occur" [32]. Meanwhile, forecasts in this respect seem to British MP to be not too encouraging. In King-Hall's opinion, Stalin "will continue his policy of promoting Russian natural patriotism, discouraging any Russian's intention to believe that internationalism should overcome national. He will continue to carry the attentive control over all the information and propaganda by means of the almighty, all-seeing and all-knowing party" [33]. However, ten years later, when the period of post-war reconstruction of the Soviet economy is over, "the privileged and monopolistic nature of the Communist Party will lead to tension between the government and the opposition" [34]. "It well may be that in 1955 we will be witnesses of great crisis in Russia and will know the answer to question whether can people's dictatorship be transformed into people's democracy ", – King-Hall is writing [35].

That forecast was partially realized in the middle of 1950th when Stalin's totalitarianism was replaced by the short-term "thaw", which culmination was the XX Congress of the CPSU. However, the issue of fates of democracy in the post-Soviet states is being solved completely only today. Freeing from ideological dogmas and

prejudices of the past, we gradually return to the world community of civilized nations and take the path of truly equal international cooperation, totally recognizing of Stephen King-Hall's truth, who said more than half of century ago: "I am absolutely convinced that until the Anglo-Russian agreement is transformed from a formal document to a living reality, a genuine mutual understanding that is rooted in minds of both peoples, until it's done, I cannot be confident that the peace is ensured" [36].

At the final stage of the war the nature of the Soviet-British relations has changed significantly. Contrary to the tendency toward expanding socio-political and cultural cooperation, which got strong incentive after opening the second front in Europe, tendency toward transformation of that cooperation into the channel of the Soviet political propaganda to the West has been intensified more clearly. Contacts between the trade unions, youth and other public organizations, science and culture figures of the two countries have ultimately become a tool of the "ideas war" of the Soviet totalitarian state against its British ally. Despite the wishes of peoples of the USSR and the UK equal cooperation between the two countries left in the past. The large-scale ideological expansion of the Stalinist regime against western democracies, encountering with natural opposition from their side, limited the opportunities of international humanitarian contacts and made their postwar perspectives quite weak.

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9. Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons. Parliamentary Debates. Official Report. – Series 5. – London : H. M. Stat. off., 1941–1945. Vol. 411. – Col. 1426.

10. See: АВП РФ, ф. 069, оп. 29, д. 86, папка 98, л. 69.

11. Ibidem, л. 79.

12. Evening Standart. – 1945. – March 14.

13. АВП РФ, ф. 069, оп. 29, д. 86, папка 98, л. 72.

14. Ibidem, ф. 69, оп. 36, д. 31, папка 119, л. 25.

15. Ibidem, ф. 069, оп. 29, д. 86, папка 98, л. 72.

16. Ibidem, ф. 69, оп. 36, д. 31, папка 119, л. 125.

17. Times. – 1945. – March 3. – P. 5.

18. Sunday Times. – 1945. – May 20.

19. It seems to the author, that here and below King-Hall uses the terms "Russia", "Russians" in the meaning of the Soviet state as a whole, the entire Soviet people, but not the only Russian nation.

20. ... Parliamentary Debates. – Vol. 411. – Col. 1428.

21. АВП РФ, ф. 069, оп. 29, д. 86, папка 98, л. 81 (об).

22. Ibidem, л. 80–80 (об).

23. Ibidem, л. 80.

24. Ibidem, л. 79, 80 (об).

25. Ibidem, л. 81.

26. Ibidem, л. 80 (об).

27. Ibidem.

28. Sunday Times. – 1945. – May 20.

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31. АВП РФ, ф. 069, оп. 29, д. 86, папка 98, л. 82.

32. Sunday Times. – 1945. – May 27.

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36. ... Parliamentary Debates. – Vol. 411. – Col. 1425.