Be on the Lookout! Soviet Conspiracy Drama of the 1920s and 1930s

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When we consider spies as fictional figures, we can readily agree that the most suitable place for them is in detective narratives, in adventure literature, or perhaps, in parodies. In fact, they initially also appeared in early Soviet art as characters in action-focused, plot-driven novels and films, sometimes involving fantastic or grotesque elements and slapstick comedy. One could mention Mariėtta Shaginian's *Mess-Mend, ili Ianki v Petrograde* (*Mess-Mend, or Yankees in Petrograd*, 1924–1925), together with its screen adaptation *Miss Mend* (1926) by Boris Barnet and Fedor Otsep, Aleksei Tolstoi's *Giperboloid inzhenera Garina* (*The Hyperboloid of Engineer Garin*, 1925–1926), Viktor Shklovskii's and Vsevolod Ivanov's *Iprit* (*Mustard Gas*, 1925) and Lev Rubus' *Zapakh limona* (*The Smell of Lemon*, 1928). These novels are good examples of so-called "pinkertonovshchina," a fiction written in the manner of Pinkerton's detective stories which, however, did not persist for long in the USSR.

By the end of the 1920s, adventure fiction and cinema had been ousted from the center of the public sphere on the grounds that they were bourgeois and, consequently, harmful. They were replaced by "serious," "realistic" narratives about

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spies and saboteurs, which now moved into the limelight. The flexible and relatively inexpensive theater system[1] played a significant role in the development of this area of mass culture. Both dramatists, whose names were soon forgotten, and prominent writers who held their high positions in the Soviet literary pantheon until the collapse of the USSR were involved in such "spy hunting." These sorts of plays were intended for professional theaters and amateur troupes alike. Their authors focused primarily on the current situation and often expressly indicated the exact time of the play's action, which was either immediately contemporaneous or else pre-dated the audience's present by a few years, at most.

Diverse theater productions of the 1920s and 1930s, all connected by their exaggerated interest in spies and saboteurs, can be considered as a separate genre named *conspiracy drama*.[2]

Conspiracy drama occupied a specific place in the Soviet official culture, responding to the authorities' political demands and influencing public opinion in its own rather unique way.[3] Despite the fact that this genre had its functional equivalents in prose, cinema and posters (not to mention official public discourse),[4] it managed to preserve its individual character.[5]

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1 In his speech, entitled "Zadachi sovetskogo teatra" ("The Aims of the Soviet Theater") at the first All-Union Conference of Theater Directors in 1939, Stalin's Prosecutor-General, Andrei Vyshinskii, corrected Lenin by expanding his famous phrase, "Concerning the struggle against all kinds of vestiges of private ownership, individualistic psychology, ... the most powerful of the arts is—besides the cinema—the theater." – Vyshinskii 1939: 4. And he was probably right. According to Soviet statistics, "by 1 January 1940, in the RSFSR there were 387 theaters, including 95 for collective farms and 36 for children." In 1939, for the USSR as a whole, more than 86 million people visited 825 theaters; see Zograf 1960: 8–9.

2 The attempt to define this sort of play as a genre does not, of course, exclude treating them, in more general terms, as a form of conspiracy theory discourse or as "a powerful cultural narrative;" see Arnold 2008: VIII.

3 Critics certainly realized the integrity of drama focused on spies (none, of course, used the term "conspiracy drama"). For example, in 1939, Boris Emel'ianov, a theater observer, made the following diagnosis: "We have sufficient evidence to state the fact of the existence of a remarkable trend in our drama which has accumulated all the peculiarities of the detective genre, although, to all appearances, it has been burnished with the intention of increasing vigilance and nurture patriotism." – Emel'ianov 1939: 119.

4 In this chapter, in order not to drown in details and comparisons, I will exclude from considering representations of the theme of "enemy within" in all of the other arts, confining myself only to mentioning the fact that "conspiracy genres" could be found

The origin of conspiracy drama can be ascribed less to aesthetic reasons than to the paranoid character of state politics[6] in the late 1920s and 1930s, although we should be aware that the inclination to search for "hidden enemies" characterized Soviet art from its inception. Dramatists who dabbled in this genre were stimulated by major political events (the series of public show trials, for examples) which provoked an escalation or a certain shift in the genre's evolution and, as a result, its re-evaluation by literary critics.

However, the "conspiracy dramatists" were guided by the political impulses of the party and government, unofficially licensed to hunt imaginary foes, and were permanently vulnerable to critical attacks. They were blamed for a wide range of sins—from aesthetic defects in their writing to much more serious ideological mistakes. But when we remember that any artistic practitioner was by definition at risk of persecution, under Stalin, the use of the stick instead of the carrot should not come as a surprise. Uneasy relations with the authorities could not prevent the genre from remaining in demand until the 1950s,[7] although by 1938 or 1939 the redundancy of spies on stage already provided a ready target for the genre's opponents. What the experts did not like, according to the press reports, was popular success.

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everywhere and were similar in many respects. By the same token, I will not discuss plays intended for children, although there are many significant examples among them: Leonid Makariev's *Timoshkin Rudnik* (*The Mine of a Boy Timoshka*, 1926), Daniil Del's *U lukomor'ia* (*By the Curved Seashore*, 1938), Aleksandr Kron's *Nashe oruzhie* (*Our Weapons*, 1937), Georgii Gaidovskii's *Iasno vizhu* (*I See Clearly*, 1937), etc.

5 Of course, the Soviet "conspiracy drama" cannot unreservedly be treated as a unique phenomenon. Narratives prevalent in the Third Reich or in Hollywood's anti-communist films produced between 1947 and 1954, due to "recasting the familiar gangster genre to fit the Communist conspiracy" (Goldberg 2001: 32), represented similar responses to more or less similar political factors, determined by the general strategies of the central authorities.

6 Gábor Rittersporn in his article "The Soviet World as a Conspiracy" discussed the "conspiracy" nature of the Soviet order under Stalin in detail; see Rittersporn 2001: 103–24. Even earlier, Popper, describing the Nazi project, pointed out the possibility for conspiracy theorists to win political competition; see Popper 1962: 123. Pipes also wrote about the period between two World Wars when adherents of conspiracy theories came to power in Germany and the USSR; see Pipes 1997: 11.

7 Aleksandr Shtein's *Zakon chesti* (*The Law of Honor*, 1947), Konstantin Simonov's *Chuzhaia ten'* (*Alien's Shadow*, 1949), etc.

These dramatists' aspirations to produce plays about spies and saboteurs with "realistic" plots,[8] apparently rooted in everyday life, show once again that "conspiracy drama" belongs among the many other discursive manifestations of general conspiracy theory which, in the case of the USSR, was advocated and propagandized by the authorities.[9] Although they were fictional statements about hidden enemies, these plays genuinely assumed the role of factual discourse. The rhetoric upon which they were based aimed to persuade the audience that the imaginary, on-stage spies had real-life analogues, who were both numerous and tangibly close. Like the show trials of the so-called "enemies of the people" mounted by the government, these plays were an attempt to render fiction as reality via aesthetic conceptualization.

What were the topics that the conspiracy drama tackled? What were the boundaries of this near-forgotten genre? What were its ethical and ideological agendas? What was conspiracy drama teaching, persuading, and imposing upon audiences? In which forms, in conspiracy drama, did the project of mass art exist that later succeeded it?[10] These are the questions addressed in this chapter.

8 Peter Knight, who includes literature, cinema and other variations of entertainment culture in his analysis of the circulation of conspiracy theories in the U.S. points to the difference between "culture of conspiracy" and "culture *about* conspiracy;" – see Knight 2000: 3. In practice, it is not often easy to draw the boundary between the first category and the second, but I believe that Soviet "conspiracy dramatists," like Soviet politicians, wanted their fictional constructions to be accepted as reality (the politicians) or as more or less "realistic" (the dramatists). In any case, this was a "commodified" form of knowledge; see Birchall 2006: 39.

9 The idea that the government apparatus is the main center of the conspiracy theory influence does not contradict a more general premise about the naivety of the belief that morbid attention to the "enemy within" arises from propaganda and manipulation of public opinion (see, for example, Gudkov 2004: 558). I would like to stress that, in the USSR, the media which expressed these social anxieties and hopes enjoyed unprecedented support from the state. This support was much more substantial than what the experts dealing with conspiracy theories in the U.S. and Europe describe.

10 Of course, some of the plays I will mention have been analysed by other scholars, more than once. A considerable amount of literature on several of them has already been published in the USSR—mainly on Maksim Gorky's and Leonid Leonov's plays, although not from the perspective of conspiracy specifically. After the collapse of the USSR, narratives of this type immediately attracted attention as a subject for revision. In 1993, Evgeny Dobrenko considered them in the context of "defensive-patriotic" art; see Dobrenko 1993: 189–96. Violetta Gudkova in her monograph *Rozh-*

Boundaries

At the end of the 1920s, Pavel Ial'tsev (1904–1941), one of many authors who joined the hunt for fictional spies, published a play with the not terribly original title of *Na granitse* (*On the Border*,1928), which used a typical plot formula about a failed attempt by masked enemies to enter Soviet territory. An attractive Polish girl, Marina Zbrozhek, persuades a Soviet border guard, Vasilii, who has fallen in love with her, to allow her relatives, including a former White army officer, to cross the Soviet border under cover of night. She claims that her relatives, after much suffering abroad, long to return to Russia in order to start an honest life under a new identity. The naturally kind Vasilii reluctantly agrees to assist them, but a random accident disrupts their plans. Vasilii's brother, a staunch Communist, replaces him on patrol and is killed as a result. Regretting his deviance from the rules, Vasilii helps to expose the nest of spies: without compunction, he shoots his fiancée as she attempts to escape.[11]

It is clear that the interest in spies taken by border guards or counter-intelligence officers at the state border, however genuine, does not necessarily imply any efflorescence of conspiracy theory or even transient spy-mania in the public sphere. "Conspiracy culture" derived from the strong suspicions intensively cultivated in society when the "rhetoric of distrust" extends beyond the limited "frontier" zones into other territories and spheres of everyday life. Soviet art successfully displayed this expansion.

In the new Soviet "conspiracy" landscape, spies were attracted to remote collective farms in the borderlands, and dramatists took full advantage of this circumstance. For example, the plot of Ėduard Samuilenok's (1907–1939) popular play *Gibel' Volka* (*The Death of Wolf*, 1939) revolved around the life of one such spy. The play was written in Belarussian, first performed at Belarussian Drama Theater and immediately translated into Russian. Apart from the language of composition, the author's nationality did not impinge upon the narrative's reception. However, Samuilenok's case is intriguing precisely because it does not differ from the prevailing Soviet formula of the time.

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denie sovetskikh siuzhetov (*The Origin of Soviet Storylines*), an indispensable commentary on Soviet pre-war drama, devoted quite a few pages to saboteurs and to other enemies as well; see Gudkova 2008. But "spy drama" was not yet debated as a complete and comprehensive whole, nor was it examined in sufficient detail.

11 Ten years later, another "conspiracy dramatist" Vladimir Bill'-Belotserkovskii was inspired by the same idea and wrote his own piece with an almost identical plot. His play had the title *Pogranichniki* (*Border Guards*, 1938).

Samuilenok's characters, Soviet peasants, are faced with gradually increasing problems: a haystack starts to burn, grazing lands flood, barley fails to grow, etc. These misfortunes make them suspect that an enemy has infiltrated their community with his accomplices. One character reflects, "The man seems like an ordinary fellow: a bright face, a cheery grin, a voice like a nightingale, but the soul of a wolf."[12] Soon their suspicions are justified. A "spy-saboteur," the ex-landowner Shabinskii, who yearns "to re-install himself as the lawful master on the backs… of his former slaves"[13] has illegally crossed the border. Helped by a forester disguised as a loyal citizen and by a few other criminals, he plans to poison horses intended for the Red Army and then to totally incinerate the collective farm. However, border guards and local Komsomol members keep the whole area under such strict control that he is reduced to hiding in a damp dugout at the edge of the forest. Even a high-ranking official (also a secret saboteur) who arrives from the local district capital is unable to help him. Both (as well as all other baddies) are ultimately arrested.

Apart from this official from the local authorities, another "big man" from Moscow, to whom the spy Shabinskii has tried to forward coded messages from abroad, is mentioned in *Gibel' Volka*. From this point, independently of the author's volition and irrespective of the "big man's" ultimate unmasking, the narrative begins to subvert the ideology that it serves. The point is that the play risks persuading its audience that, despite solid barriers, the USSR remains vulnerable to hidden enemies not only on the frontiers, but even in the heart of the state. Meanwhile the author ignores the paradox that borders remain permeable despite the officially impenetrable level of border protection; in fact, Soviet drama in the 1930s typically ignored this paradox.[14]

12 «Кажется – человек, как человек: обличье светлое, усмешка веселая, голос – точно у соловья, а душа волчья…». – Samuilenok 1939: 9.

13 «На спинах… бывших рабов восстановить свое право законного господина». – Samuilenok 1939: 26.

14 Though sometimes this paradox of permeable borders did inspire conscious doubt. Thus, when in 1937, Evgenii Shvarts wrote his play *Nashe gostepriimstvo* (*Our Hospitality*) about representatives of the Soviet young generation who suddenly met saboteurs who landed by plane in the Russian steppes, the critic L. Maliugin from the journal *Teatr* accused Shvarts's work of appearing unnatural; see Maliugin 1938: 96.

Expansion

Areas vulnerable to espionage were not limited to frontiers or to special military enterprises and army structures, or even to the capital which could easily be imagined as an appealing place for enemy agents. In the Soviet "fictional reality," the interests of foreign aliens could affect the remotest, obscurest towns and villages; it could even affect people in the most peaceful professions.

In Semen Semenov-Polonskii's[15] play *Na otshibe* (*A Remote House*, 1939),[16] a stranger comes to a lonely woman who lives in a house at a distance from a collective farm village. At first she takes him on as a poultry-farming instructor, but quickly identifies him as a masked foe; she locks him in the cellar.

Similarly, Ial'tsev's *Afrodita* (*Aphrodite*, 1938)[17] describes the everyday life of an upcountry estate museum that is managed by an elderly intellectual. In this conspiracy play, a young art expert from Moscow—a female character, appearing unexpectedly but opportunely—immediately uncovers a plot between a foreigner named Frost, who is visiting the museum to study a canvas called *Aphrodite*, and the young director's wife. Frost and the director's wife have replaced that valuable picture with a copy in order to sell the original abroad illegally.

The history of Soviet drama owes much to Nikolai Virta (1906–1976), whose *Zagovor* (*Conspiracy*, 1939), is an outstanding example of "conspiracy theory expansion" in the field of theater. The plot of Virta's play covers 1936 and 1937, set at one of numerous land offices in central Russia, headed by a certain Ol'ga Petrovna Popova who courageously battles bureaucracy and so-called "wreckers" (*vrediteli*). Everything is turned upside down when an important official from Moscow, Balandin, arrives in order to assist Popova in her struggle. As their conversation reveals, both Popova and Balandin are members of a clandestine group planning a coup d'état in the USSR. With this aim in mind, the conspirators poison cattle, impose backbreaking grain taxes on peasants, compelling the latter to hide their harvest from the authorities, and imprison hundreds of loyal individuals while sending secret orders to shoot honest citizens. The plotters are revealed to include the supporters and associates of real-life individuals such as Nikolai Bukharin, Leon Trotsky, Mikhail Tukhachevskii (who

15 According to Viacheslav Ogryzko, two authors, who were under close surveillance by Soviet secret police since 1938, wrote under the pseudonyms "Semen Zakharovich" and "Semenov-Polonskii." They were Klavdiia Aleksandrovna Novikova (1913–1984) and Leonid Vladimirovich Sobolevskii (1912–1942); cf. Ogryzko 2005: 20.

16 Semenov-Polonskii 1940.

17 Ial'tsev 1938b.

has undertaken to seize the Kremlin shortly), as well as ordinary, lower-profile spies.

Unsurprisingly, at the last moment and with Stalin's moral support, these internal enemies' plans are frustrated. Once again the spectator encounters an unresolved paradox: he or she sees on stage only a few thoroughly respectable party members and representatives of the state. By constructing his universe of infinite conspiracy, Virta managed to populate his fictional USSR almost exclusively with conspirators, leaving few roles for loyal citizens.

But espionage discourse spread beyond these purely territorial and pure thematic aspects. Ultimately, its expansion led to the corrosion and deformation of the genre structure, even in traditionally "peaceful" forms of narration, such as melodrama, family drama, domestic drama, and comedy.

The Corrosion of the Genre

The 1917 Revolution and the Civil War almost immediately gave birth to a new (for Russian culture at least) narrative variation, focusing on the relations between spouses or pairs of lovers belonging to opposing political camps. Konstantin Trenev's play *Liubov' Iarovaia* (1926) and Boris Lavrenev's story *Sorok pervyi* (*The Forty First*, 1926) are the best examples of such literature. Meanwhile, the political and military context also influenced traditional genres in which love affairs and various aspects of family life traditionally constituted and, with some exceptions, exhausted the content of narration. A new espionage/saboteur discourse began filtering through them as well.

Mikhail Zoshchenko's play *Opasnye sviazi* (*Dangerous Liaisons*, 1939)[18] exemplifies this new formula.

A married, high-ranking official, Bessonov, has a young mistress for whom he is looking for a room to rent. Once the place of refuge has been found, the protagonist acquires yet another love interest. She is the daughter of the owners of the rented room, and her parents enthusiastically encourage Bessonov to win her favor. They want him to leave his wife and to marry their daughter. The plot thickens, but instead of ending with a denunciation of immorality and bourgeois ideological legacy (as would have been typical for Zoshchenko's writings of the 1920s), the play closes with the unexpected and unconvincingly motivated escape and arrest of the protagonist, who turns out to be a former *agent provocateur* of the tsarist secret police, now acting on behalf of members of the opposi-

18 Zoshchenko 1940.

tion. The metamorphosis of a morally wicked person into a political enemy, thereby shifting a romantic plot into the "conspiracy genre," is so surprising that one might well wonder if it was added to the plot exclusively in order to please the authorities and critics.

Something similar happens in Leonid Leonov's *Volk* (*The Wolf*, 1938).[19] On one level, the play tells the story of an individual trying to hide from the NKVD; on another level, Leonov pays excessive attention to romantic and familial relations between his characters. Spectators spend most of their time following the development of tension within a family. The author touches on all of the other subjects only in passing until the end of the second act (the play has three acts), when a certain Luka Sandukov appears. Luka Sandukov is, additionally, a relative who pretends to be a brave polar explorer who has just returned from an expedition. But in fact he is a "wolf" in the guise of a "hero" ("wolf as enemy" was a popular metaphor), and this "beast" is now in a hopeless situation: he is trying to flee both the police and his fellow conspirators.

Justifiably, another Leonov play *Polovchanskie sady* (*The Gardens of Polovchansk*, 1938)[20] can also be considered an example of generic ambivalence. The same bias distinguishes one of the most prominent Soviet writers, Maksim Gorky, in his conspiracy play *Somov i drugie* (*Somov and Others*, 1931),[21] which was (with perhaps a few exceptions) the only literary work in which the founder of Soviet literature depicted life in the USSR. Curiously enough, Gorky did not risk publishing it himself.

Semantic Transgression

The genre hybridization, which was intrinsic to "conspiracy drama," corresponded to the rhetoric and even perhaps to the pure linguistic fusion, which was peculiar to Soviet public space under Stalin. Without introducing new elements, it embodied the "logic of rhetoric" that was obvious in official discourse of the 1930s and which, on the one hand, related merely to terminology but, on the other, fruitfully participated in constructing the social phenomena that the terminol-

19 Leonov 1940.

20 Leonov 1938.

21 Gorky 1941.

ogy addressed. Thanks to this logic any individual in the USSR, except for the dictator, could be declared a spy.[22]

As observed previously, there were two major trends in Soviet art, motivated by the aim of exposing spies and "conspiracy." For example, the show trials held in the 1920s and 1930s, accompanied by wide media campaigns, provided scrupulously detailed information about the networks of spies and saboteurs which they revealed. It is not surprising that fiction, cinema, and theater often followed the same formula, exhaustively presenting proofs of their characters' criminal activity: they described when, where, and who committed an offense or treason in detail.

At the same time, the explicit "conspiracy" narration competed with a drastically different, obscurer way of presenting the topic. Maksim Gorky's aforementioned *Somov i drugie* belongs to dramatic literature of this second kind. In his play, Gorky preferred to focus rather on the indirect manner of undermining a character than on an extended description of his illegal activity. So, the central character Somov, an engineer and fascist agent, indirectly unmasked himself before the theater audience through his sexual habits: he seduces his wife in a lighted room, and thus after arousing brute animal instincts in the unfortunate woman, he inflicts severe psychological and moral suffering upon her. The sex itself was, of course, not shown. In other words, thanks to an *ad hominem* argument, a character needed do nothing, at least before the spectators' eyes, in order to be exposed as a spy. Ethical deviations, together with hints about his double life more than compensated for the absence of explicit demonstration and discussion of character demolition. Zoshchenko's *Opasnye sviazi* and Leonov's *Volk* resemble Gorky's play in this respect, although Leonov's case is not so obvious. The invention of "passive espionage" fitted well with the image of Soviet "witch hunting."

But in advancing the idea of conspiracy, Soviet dramatists, of course, did not always choose such sophisticated ways of writing. More often, the national context helped them to produce a similar effect. The terms "wrecker," "saboteur," "spy," etc., immediately became interchangeable after they were adopted by the Soviet public discourse. Moreover, the set of lexical items denoting a "hidden enemy" permanently expanded. The theater subordinated this more general process and at the same time took part in "stoking" it.

22 The nationality of a character did not play a significant role in Soviet conspiracy drama. As Violetta Gudkova wrote, "The Jewish question, openly discussed in the earlier Soviet drama, was later put out of sight and did not manifest itself in censored dramatic writings." – Gudkova 2008: 300.

The identity between the political opposition and hostile intelligence services was presented as self-evident. Thus, in Leonid Karasev's play *Ogni maiaka* (*Lighthouse Signals*, 1937),[23] which inspired its audience by showing how Soviet individuals heroically fought Japanese secret agents on an island in the Pacific Ocean, an unmasked saboteur confesses to being recruited straight away for this work by a *Trotskyist* called Petrov.

Two more demonstrative texts utilize considerably different devices to produce essentially the same result. In Vladimir Bill'-Belotserkovskii's (1885–1970) play *Golos nedr* (*The Voice of the Core*, 1929), which depicts the reconstruction of a derelict mine, only those enthusiasts ready to work selflessly and unpaid for up to two years are recognized as loyal citizens. All the other workers are portrayed either as unwitting saboteurs or as obvious spies' accomplices.

However, in spite of the potentially unlimited set of synonyms referring to the notion of "inner enemies," one strong distinction between them and other law breakers was established. Leonov stressed this particularity in his "*quasi*-conspiracy" play *Metel'* (*Snowstorm*, 1939). I refer to *Metel'* as a "*quasi*-conspiracy" because it only superficially corresponds with the pattern of the "spy/saboteur" plot. In fact, the author evidently plays with the audience's expectations, provoking spectators or readers to view it from the conspiracy perspective in order to frustrate them at the end. Finally, it becomes clear that the key villain in Leonov's play, a factory director suspected of espionage and sabotage, is only guilty of "accepting bribes from foreign companies when he offered them contracts."[24] A remark by his wife Catherine, an honest Soviet woman who (like the audience) expected much more severe misdeeds from her husband, is notable: "I thought he was an enemy, but he turned out to be a mere thief."[25]

Following this logic, we can conclude that, with minor exaggeration, only a person who committed a common crime could avoid the accusation of espionage.

Although it does not perfectly fulfil the requirements of the "conspiracy" genre, *Metel'* certainly belongs within it. Even after standing the conspiracy plot

23 Karasev's play was permanently under critics' attacks for its relatively, by the Soviet standards, adventure bias, for the reason that "Karasev builds the intrigue of his play specifically on the base of the audience's unhealthy curiosity" («Карасев интригу своей пьесы строит именно на разжигании нездорового любопытства зрителя».); cf. Mlodik 1938: 151.

24 «…брал комиссионные от фирм, когда распределял советские заказы». – Leonov 1940: 72.

25 Катерина: «Я думала, он враг, а он просто вор…». – Leonov 1940: 72.

on its head, it retains the pathos of the genre, its concern with revealing hidden evil. In his play, Leonov has simply replaced spies and saboteurs with conspirators and slanderers.

I doubt whether Aleksei Faiko's (1893–1978) play *Chelovek s portfelem* (*A Man with a Briefcase*, 1928) can be numbered as conspiracy drama without reservation. Instead, it marks the limitations of the genre when relocated beyond its traditional territory. Faiko tells the story of a prominent academic at the so-called State Institute for Culture and Revolution in Moscow who is trying to conceal his participation in an anti-Soviet group named "Russia and Freedom"[26] which was uncovered by the NKVD several years previously. This protagonist is incontrovertibly alien to Soviet society; moreover, he is a genuine murderer. But now his motives have gone beyond espionage and sabotage. His main aim is to survive his dangerous situation and to build a career as a respectable Soviet academic. He is teaching his son survival skills, following this agenda, "You will live among wild animals and you must become the best of them."[27] In this play, the audience encounters neither scenes of sabotage nor signs of espionage. In addition, the protagonist's extreme individualism in Faiko's work resists the construction of a story about conspiracy.

Vsevolod Rokk's[28] play *Inzhener Sergeev* (*Engineer Sergeev*, 1942),[29] about spies who infiltrate a new Soviet electric power plant, represents a borderline example of the opposite type. Its storyline fits the genre's standards propagandizing vigilance against masked enemies, and the enemies it visualizes are typical of this milieu. The only moment that violates the general scheme of conspiracy drama is the time of action, set in the second part of 1941 when Germany had already begun attacking the USSR. Thus the reality of wartime has displaced imaginary espionage activity in the storyline.

But despite certain exceptions, it should be apparent that all these "transitional" or "*quasi*-conspiracy" plays owe their existence to the pivotal corpus of definitely "conspiracy" drama texts. They were written either with the intention to fit perfectly within this canon or to depart from the most obvious specimens of the genre.

26 «Русь и Воля»

27 «Ты будешь жить среди зверей и ты должен стремиться стать лучшим зверем». – Faiko 1929: 61.

28 Vsevolod Rokk was a pen name of Vsevolod Merkulov (1895–1953), a high-ranking GPU officer, and a close associate of Lavrenty Beria.

29 Rokk 1942.

Irrationality and Logic

A well-known approach to conspiracy theories, which involves treating them as "a specific kind of irrationality associated with a stubborn, highly rational, and highly operational logic,"[30] is easily applicable to the case of "spy theater" in the USSR. Despite a diversity of dramatic realizations, Soviet plays about hidden enemies generally suggested a rather coherent vision of reality.

If we consider the key ideas and notions that underpin this fictional construction, but which lack any direct connection with the *topos* of espionage, then Soviet "conspiracy dramatists" did not present anything new to their audience that might have contrasted with the authorities' official, factual discourse. Many plays fixated on the conflicted questions of factory or collective farm labor; therefore, the heroic enthusiasm of the masses naturally became one of their most prominent themes for many of them. This effusion of enthusiasm was characteristically expressed by chief engineer Nikolaev, a character from Iakov Rubinshtein's (1891–1930)[31] play *Na raznykh putiakh* (*Upon Different Ways*, 1930), who warns his colleagues: "If we don't finish by the first of February, I'll shoot myself."[32]

The idea of the militarization of labor was vital for conspiracy drama. Implicitly, the conspiracy dramatists inculcated the slogan "labor is war" as zealously as any other Soviet writers and artists; but in Rubinshtein's play another character, the chief engineer's wife, explicitly expresses the same message. She states: "We could not feel more enthusiasm if the war were about to start."[33]

The slogan "Vigilance!" (*bditel'nost'*) also appears both natural and proper in this atmosphere of "almost-war." In the words of an aged and very experienced member of the Communist Party, a female character from Aleksandr Afinogenov's (1904–1941) play *Strakh* (*Fear*, 1930): "If class enemies still dare to make bureaucratic delays, burn collective farms, poison canned food and speak

30 Groh 1987: 4.

31 Iakov L'vovich Rubinshtein was an influential manager in the fisheries industry as well as a dramatist. He was shot in 1930, according to the information received from Tat'iana Kukushkina (The Institute of Russian Literature of the Russian Academy of Science/Pushkin House).

32 «Если мы не закончим к первому февраля, я застрелюсь». – Rubinshtein 1930: 13.

33 «Энтузиазм прямо как перед войной». – Rubinshtein 1930: 15.

from this lectern, it means that they are not scared enough. It means that we must redouble our vigilance."[34]

In turn, this politics of vigilance, which purported the destruction of a hidden enemy, linked to a revised notion of "humanism," in a manner of speaking, to the "merciless humanism" finds expression in, for example, Boris Voitekhov's (1911–1975) and Leonid Lench's (1905–1991) play *Pavel Grekov* (*The Communist Pavel Grekov*, 1939). Immediately before the curtain falls, one character claims, "Don't allow the enemy to strike you, strike him yourselves. … Be merciless towards enemies. This is true humanism!"[35]

The citations provided above are exceptionally bald and straightforward, but "conspiracy drama" impressed the identical message on their audiences by every available, sometimes very sophisticated and theatrical means.

The word "vigilance" (*bditel'nost'*) normally carries positive connotations; at the same time it relates semantically to a wide set of lexemes referring to the field of sensory experience which, in contrast to "vigilance," imply negative behaviors by the actor: "suspiciousness" (*podozritel'nost'*), "distrustfulness" (*mnitel'nost'*), etc. But the "conspiracy" dramatists, like Soviet writers in general, rarely fell into this trap of synonymy. They preferred to use an alternative term popular in the 1920s and 1930s: "scent" (*chut'e*).

Dramatists, like other Soviet public figures, regularly refer to *chut'e* in order to stress that rational reasoning was insufficient to reveal an enemy. Here is only one example to show how this mechanism worked in conspiracy drama.

In Ial'tsev's play *Katastrofa* (*A Railway Catastrophe*, 1937), one of the positive characters, Engineer Novikov, doubts whether or not a railroad accident which took place was really accidental; perhaps conspirators were responsible. Novikov discusses his suspicions with a colleague, and the following exchange of cues ensues:

34 «Когда классовый враг ещё осмеливается разводить волокиту, поджигать колхозы, отравлять консервы и говорить с этой кафедры, – значит он недостаточно боится. Значить надо удесятерить бдительность». – Afinogenov 1931: 69.

35 «Не допускайте, чтобы враг бил Вас. Бейте его сами. … Будьте беспощадны к врагам, в этом подлинный гуманизм!» – Voitekhov/Lench 1939: 123.

Barsov: But evidence! Where is the evidence?
Novikov: I don't have direct evidence yet. But I scent something. Something stinks here, Nikolai Vasil'evich.[36]

It would seem that, while Soviet epistemology never dismissed the significance of intuition, the fictional narratives vastly inflated its utility.

Normally a protagonist has an unerring ability to "scent" trouble and trusts this feeling completely. If the character fails to trust his intuition, retribution is inevitable. Thus, in Mikhail Shimkevich's (1885–1942) drama *V'iuga* (*Snowstorm*, 1931) depicting the construction of an hydroelectric power plant on a river, a selfless, almost ideal communist named Voronov generously orders the release of a suspicious monk who had been detained near the dam of the power plant at night, as there is no direct evidence against him. "Of course, he isn't one of us," Voronov explains, "but what more can we do? We cannot catch an empty cassock."[37] Voronov resists the emotional arguments of his more perspicacious comrade-in-arms, a female character, who immediately identifies the monk as a typical anti-Soviet White Guard sympathizer. As a result, a year later, the "pseudo-monk" kills Voronov's comrade. On the one hand, her death is regarded as the severest moral punishment of the protagonist; on the other, she becomes, inevitably, a sacrifice to the cult of vigilance. The last act of the play closes with a symbolic scene in which workers standing on different banks of the river call out to each other, "Be on the lookout! Be on the lookout! Be on the lookout!"[38]

Rational reasoning retained its importance for the investigation of conspiracies: not, however, as a tool for revealing the truth (which was already known through intuition) but rather as an element of rhetorical arguments without which no criminal could be denounced and punished.

From the perspective of the "sociology of the total conspiracy," which was suggested to Soviet audiences, ideas about kinship and family relationships lost their traditional meaning. Or, to be more precise, conspiracy drama (and other genres, too) implied that the natural human affection and trust for one's relatives had to be disregarded in a socialist society.

36 Барсов: «Но доказательства! Где доказательства!» – Новиков: «Прямых доказательств у меня пока нет. Но я чую. Здесь дурно пахнет, Николай Васильевич» – Ial'tsev: 1938a: 16.

37 «Конечно, он не наш … Ну, а дальше что? Схватить и взять пустую рясу?» – Shimkevich 1931: 77.

38 «Будь на-чеку! Будь на-чеку! Будь на-чеку!» – Shimkevich 1931: 124.

This substitution of older concepts of kinship and family relationships with the idea of a single social organism perhaps came to a head in Georgii Mdivani's (1905–1981) play *Chest'* (*Honor*, 1937) about the aged hunter Iagor. During an action sequence, one of his sons, a border guard, is killed by spies. Another son, revealed as an enemy agent, was killed by Iagor himself. As soon becomes clear, a bosom friend of Iagor guides saboteurs across the border; Iagor exposes him in public. Prior to this revelation other people, including Iagor's border guard son, had suspected Iagor himself. Finally, Iagor's former friend's daughter, who is the widow of Iagor's honest son, repudiates her father.

The demolition of kinship and family relationships is topped off with a dialog between Iagor's son, the border guard, and this son's platoon leader, which contains the following statement:

> Platoon leader: Aren't you ashamed to hide your thoughts from me, Nadir? You have never done anything like that before. (*He is drawing nearer to Nadir, embracing him.*) The two of us were like a single man, like a single heart...[39]

After an attempt by Nadir to separate from the "collective body," his death is predetermined.[40]

The politics of vigilance, based on the identification of a peaceful life with military action, also directly influenced more intimate (sexual) relations between characters. Consequently, such relations were also considered criminal: let us remember here Pavel Ial'tsev's *Na granice* (*On the Border*, 1929) or Gorky's *Somov i drugie*.

If we focus on feelings and emotions in general, Afinogenov's play *Strakh* can serve as the best illustration of how an ideal positive character succeeds in controlling his basic instincts and emotions. Afinogenov's play persuades the audience that "eternal unconditioned stimuli, such as love, hunger, rage, and

39 «Как тебе не стыдно, Надир, скрывать от меня свои мысли? Разве это когда-нибудь раньше бывало? (*Подходит к Надиру, обнимает его за плечи.*) Оба мы были как один человек, как одно сердце…». – Mdivani 1938: 28.

40 At the same time we should note that, in the beginning, family relationships occasionally contained the opposite meaning. For example, in Anatolii Lunacharskii's (1875–1933) play *Iad* (*Poison*, 1925) it is affection for his close relative which awakes a sense of responsibility in the 18-year-old son of a prominent member of the Soviet government and which prevents this son from poisoning his father on the instructions of a prostitute in the pay of foreign agents; cf. Lunacharskii 1926.

fear"[41] have been replaced in the Soviet individual with "collectivism, enthusiasm and the joy of life."[42] In other words, Afinogenov clearly puts social life and politics in opposition to basic human instincts, keeping the leading role for the former.

Adapting the almost paramilitary enthusiasm attributed to the New Soviet Man, Soviet writers ("engineers of souls") transform the *meaning of the instinct of self-preservation* in a particular way. This is not to say that their characters consciously control this instinct. Simply put, their instinct of self-preservation turns off in certain situations which always coincides with a climactic narrative event. If Soviet art normally cultivated the virtue of self-sacrifice, then conspiracy drama produced its own extreme form of this virtue.

In the simplest cases, which pre-date the plays of "conspiracy dramatists," a captured Soviet soldier prefers suicide to captivity. Conversely, spies choose life. Let me mention in this connection Bill'-Belotserkovskii's play *Pogranichniki* (*Border Guards*, 1938). A negative character in Ial'tsev's play *Na granitse* states: "Any man clings to life, Mr. Stenshinskii... ."[43]

Another, less widespread, more sophisticated and therefore more interesting from a rhetorical perspective, representation of the idea of heroic self-sacrifice is based on legal terminology and expresses itself in terms of the logic of "preemptive justice." Under these terms, a character who has failed to be vigilant blames himself in advance and demands the death penalty.

In Ial'tsev's play *Na granitse,* a guilty border guard first executes his fiancée (a secret agent) and, still agonized by his mistake, insists on justice for himself too:

Okunev: Comrade Strepetov! This is an illegal trial...

Vasilii: Yes, it is. This is an illegal trial. Take me away. I let this gang through... I allowed them to cross the border... I did not stand firm. I let everyone down… There is no place here for men like me![44]

In the same manner, a character in Ial'tsev's *Afrodita,* a museum director, sen-

41 «Вечные безусловные стимулы: любовь, голод, гнев и страх». – Afinogenov 1931: 7.

42 «Коллективность, энтузиазм, радость жизни» – Afinogenov 1931: 21.

43 «Всякий человек цепляется за жизнь, пан Стеншинский...». – Ial'tsev 1929: 49.

44 Окунев: «Товарищ Стрепетов! Это самосуд!» – Василий: «Да, самосуд… Берите и меня. Я открыл этой шайке дорогу… Я пропустил их сюда… Не крепко стоял… Проскользнулся… Такому здесь не место!» – Ial'tsev 1929: 52.

tences himself to be shot after he allowed criminals to replace an original painting with a copy. "No! Put me up against the wall, me!," the museum director insists, "I was trusted to keep this painting safe. A brilliant creation, our pride… Dear God!!"[45] We find similar scenes in plays mentioned previously, such as Bill'-Belotserkovskii's *Golos nedr*; or, for example, in Afinogenov's *Malinovoe varen'e* (*Raspberry Jam*, 1926),[46] Boris Romashov's (1895–1958) *Konets Krivoryl'ska* (*The End of The Town of Krivoryl'sk*, 1925–26).[47] The list goes on.

Thus, the meaning of the notion of *bditel'nost'* influenced the "deepest psychology" of the Soviet "*homo conspiratus*" both metaphorically and actually, acting on his basic needs and motives, sometimes simply refuting them. In so doing, conspiracy drama mostly followed the mainstream of Soviet art. But, as I have shown, it was also distinguished as a genre by specific variations, peculiar premises, and certain poetic devices.

"Thematic Contraband"

In spite of their widely ranging fantasy, Soviet dramatists had to show the audience a reality which at least partly resembled everyday life in the USSR. One of the tasks which conspiracy drama sought to tackle was to draw the audience's attention away from various routine problems and dangerous themes or to give the latter a more attractive appearance. Nevertheless, undesirable "thematic contraband" all too often entered these plays. Trips abroad, foreign life, and foreigners as subjects of desire were the most popular "illegal" topics that the conspiracy drama dealt with. For example, in Iakov Rubinshtein's play *Na raznykh putiakh*, Soviet girls are fascinated by an American engineer, knowing that his mother wishes to see him get married in Russia. Thanks to this trick, the spy gains the confidence of one of his vulnerable victims. The same motif appears in Zoshchenko's play *Opasnye sviazi*, Ial'tsev's play *Nenavist'* (*Hate*, 1928),[48] etc.

Another sort of implicit undesired content characteristic of this genre might be called "a negative discourse of everyday Soviet reality." Often, authors do not direct particular attention to this content. It is incidental in the sense that authors

45 Директор: «Нет, это меня надо к стенке, меня! Ведь мне же доверили эту картину. Величайшее произведение, наша гордость… Боже мой!». – Ial'tsev 1938: 240.

46 Afinogenov 1935.

47 Romashov 1935.

48 Ial'tsev 1929.

are helpless before its power, in spite of their aspirations to paint a cheerful, rose-colored life. Let us look at one example among many. Miners from Bill'-Belotserkovskii's *Golos nedr* complain to the chief engineer about the barracks built for them: "We moved in only three months ago. And already the plaster has come off, the walls have cracked, the window frames have sagged. ... In the barracks bedbugs and fleas bite."[49]

Helplessness before the everyday reality with which one is faced is typical not only of the "conspiracy" genre, although the paranoid thinking which distinguishes it makes depictions of daily life even more absurd. The representations of total state terror in conspiracy dramas are more specific. Afinogenov in his *Strach* provides a lot of frightening images but the most disturbing of these plays is perhaps Virta's comedy *Kleveta* (*Slander*, 1939).

Virta's play tells the story of a respectable Moscow official, Anton Ivanovich Proskurovskii, about whom a rumor circulates that he is under suspicion and will be soon arrested. After Proskurovskii's wife Mar'ia Petrovna tries to reach her son by telephone, who lives elsewhere, she is informed that her son never resided at the address she knows to have been his, she does not doubt what has happened to him. "Now it's clear: my son Petia's been arrested!," she concludes.[50]

When her husband reasonably remarks, "Mashen'ka, you are going crazy from fear,"[51] Mar'ia Petrovna replies: "It is too easy to go crazy from what is going on around!… Say a word, and you will be jailed straight away!"[52] Moreover, her paranoia is justified on every count. Before long, many of the neighbors stop talking to Proskurovskii while others begin surreptitiously to sympathize with his predicament. Suddenly, a young man who rents a room in their apartment and is courting their daughter moves to another flat. Then, Proskurovskii's housekeeper asks him for money to buy some bread in order to put it in the oven and make dried rusks for him to take to prison. After that, Proskurovskii (who was about to make a business trip abroad as a trusted official) is fired without notice, and his wife becomes disappointed in the fact that she is married to him. Finally, a new person appears in the apartment intending to replace Proskurov-

49 «Только три месяца как пожили, а уж штукатурка отвалилась; стены потрескались, рамы скосились. … В казармах клопы едят, блохи грызут». – Bill'-Belotserkovskii 1930: 61.

50 «Так, ясно: Петку посадили!» – Virta 1939b: 97.

51 «Машенька, ты просто сошла с ума от страха». – ibid.

52 «Сойдёшь с ума, ежели кругом такое… Ты что-нибудь скажешь, а тебя как цапнут!» – ibid.

skii, who has apparently been "arrested"; and as a result the rearrangement of the apartments begins. In other words, intentionally or unintentionally Virta presents a detailed picture of the typical situation of an individual denounced as a saboteur. The comic effect of the plot, according to Virta, is based on the fact that the *peripeteia* the character undergoes arises not from "real" conspiracy, but from a slander which is soon exposed.

If Virta's play *Conspiracy*, the action of which took place in 1936 or 1937, was over-saturated with spies and saboteurs, soon after, when Nikolai Ezhov was denounced (which implied the end, or at least the suspension, of the Great Purges), spies and saboteurs were replaced by slanderers and "paranoiacs." In terms of the "rhetoric of genre," Virta suggested a very simple way of solving the problem of the sudden shift in Stalin's politics. He suggested transforming the "spy discourse" into comedy.

Detective Genre

Although the discourse of total terror infiltrated the conspiracy drama in one way or another, one subject related to this theme was placed under strict taboo. This unspoken prohibition probably played a noticeable role in shaping the new form of the fictional narratives about "enemies within" which appeared before World War II but developed into a "genre factory" from isolated cases only after Stalin's death. The genre that I have in mind embraces various detective narratives in their Soviet adaptations—within fiction, cinema, and drama. By taboo subjects I mean representations of the common practice of intimidation and torture of defendants and suspects.

The link between the prohibition on discussing tortures and the interest in deduction is easily explained. In this respect, art resembles real life: if violence is not allowed, one should rely upon intellect instead. But some nuances that arise here should be examined.

Such "humanity," that is passing over in silence the matter of violence during investigations, did not tacitly mean the victory of logic which, in conspiracy drama as we have already observed, was opposed by "intuition." It is not to say that "torture" was substituted by the capacity of "scent" (*chut'e*), but this "scent" definitely ousted the professional detective as a character from the center of the dramatic narrative. It is not surprising, therefore, that in most cases the investigation itself did not attract a lot of authors' attention in conspiracy drama.

Conspiracy drama contains some elements of poetics of the detective genre but only isolated elements. More often than not, party officials, collective farm

chairpersons, and ordinary vigilant citizens (but not GPU or police/militia) are involved in the sort of spy hunting depicted by conspiracy dramatists. As a rule, professionals appear only at the end and often only in order to escort a suspect to jail. They sporadically act in Voitekhov's and Lench's *Kommunist Pavel Grekov*, in Afinogenov's *Volch'ia tropa* (*The Wolf's Path*, 1927) and *Strach*. Their activity is more noticeable than in others in Romashov's play *Konets Krivoryl'ska*. One of the main characters of Virta's play *Zagovor* serves as a district prosecutor, but his investigation is rather slack: it seems that the conspirators are ready to fall into his lap.

However, conspiracy drama directly relates to the development of the Soviet spy detective genre, a genre which was consolidated only after Stalin's death. It was the environment into which one of the first and most important examples of the latter type emerged. I am referring here to the Brothers Tur's[53] and Lev Sheinin's (1906–1967)[54] play *Ochnaia stavka* (*Confrontation*, 1936), which was not fully typical of this class of play.

This is not an attempt to explain the fact that the Brothers Tur and Sheinin made the central character of their play an investigator only for aesthetic reasons. But it is evident that they hoped to profit from the *defamiliarization* of genre standards. Before the beginning of the main action, they make the following remark:

> Lartsev as an investigator is extremely different from the traditional figure of the investigator from other plays, in which characters of this kind played a minor role.[55]

In this play, the Brothers Tur and Sheinin successfully combined the propaganda of labor enthusiasm and hysteria about the "internal enemy," on the one hand, with a full-fledged detective plot on the other. The investigator Lartsev is a desperate workaholic, and at the same time, according to the authors he "is far from being a person with gloomy searching eyes, looking mistrustfully from under the

53 The pen name of Leonid Davidovich Tubel'skii (1905–1961) and Petr L'vovich Ryzhei (1908–1978).

54 As is well-known, Lev Sheinin worked as an investigator in the 1920s and 1930s. He was then imprisoned but was released soon thereafter; in 1945 Sheinin participated in the Nuremberg trials, then he was repressed again.

55 «Следователь Ларцев разительно не похож на традиционный тип следователя из пьес, где, правда, ему отводилось обычно второстепенное место». – Tur/Sheinin 1938: 15.

brows and speaking with a metallic voice."[56] To a certain degree, one can treat Lartsev as a sort of "incarnation" of Lenin, as the latter was presented in the Soviet iconography. As the Brothers Tur and Sheinin describe him: "He is an ordinary cheerful individual with vivid, smiling eyes."[57] The victory of detective genre conventions over the formulaic agenda of conspiracy plays is expressed clearly in the following advice by Lartsev:

Don't believe human eyes too much, Lavrenko... Although, of course, try to see every detail... Again and again *knock together facts and facts, evidence and hypotheses, intuition and reality*. Set them, like dogs, on each other. Knock their foreheads together! (emphasis added).[58]

In this respect, the Brothers Tur's and Sheinin's protagonist behaves not like a character from a typical "conspiracy" play, but like a character from a detective story: he teaches his assistant to be skeptical with regard to first impressions and to bring together intuition and real facts. There is nothing similar here to other plays from the 1930s, even those explicitly about spies and saboteurs.[59]

By any consideration, *Ochnaia stavka* is still a conspiracy play. In some respects it is a striking example of the genre. For instance, Lartsev explains the failure of the spy mission he has exposed by the fact that "170,000,000 'non-secret' agents" (that is the whole population of the USSR) serve the GPU. Moreover, the "conspiracy theater" continued to work successfully after the triumph of both the play itself and its screen adaptation *Oshibka inzhenera Kochina* (*Engineer Kochin's Mistake*, 1939), directed by Aleksandr Macheret. On the whole, however, what these experiments in the detective genre did was to mark out one of the blurred boundaries of totalitarian art.

56 «Это отнюдь не кислый хмурый человек с мрачными испытывающими глазами, подозрительным взглядом исподлобья и металлическим голосом». – ibid.

57 «Это обыкновенный жизнерадостный человек с живыми, смеющимися глазами». – ibid.

58 «*А глазам человеческим всё-таки не очень верь, Лавренко*… Хотя, конечно, старайся замечать всё… И снова и снова *сталкивай факты и факты, улики и гипотезы, интуицию и реальность*. Стравливай их, стравливай, Лавренко. Сшибай их лбами!» – Tur/Sheinin: 23–24.

59 Critics did not like plays by the Brothers Tur or Sheinin, but they were greatly popular with audiences.

Conclusion

The development of conspiracy drama is directly related to the birth of Soviet detective fiction and cinema, including their sub-genres that focused on espionage. Although, of course, prose fiction (such as Lev Ovalov's and Lev Sheinin's novels and stories) played an important role in pushing forward the process as well. Later, the outdated conspiracy drama detective genre conquered the territory for itself in the sphere of entertaining literature and cinema for a mass audience. The value of this transition from "serious" "conspiracy art" to detective writing can scarcely be overestimated, if one considers detective genres jointly alongside adventure narratives and stories from the erotic and horror genres as significant forms of public discourse which respond to some basic, and not always legitimate, individual needs. I believe that "genre tolerance" and "genre xenophobia" are symptoms that clearly indicate a society's character: finally, the beginning of the era of Soviet detective fiction and cinema coincided with a time of relative social freedom.

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Abstract

This chapter describes how 'spy mania,' which affected both public and private life in the Soviet Union (particularly in the 1930s), intersected with Soviet literature and theater. Diverse theater productions during the 1920s and 1930s, linked by their exaggerated concern with spies and saboteurs, can be considered to be a separate genre, *conspiracy drama*. Conspiracy drama occupied a distinct place in Soviet official culture, responding to shifts in ideology, in Stalin's policy, and influencing public opinion in its own, rather unique way. What were the boundaries of this near-forgotten genre? What was conspiracy drama teaching, persuading, and imposing upon audiences? What was its agenda aesthetic or ideological?