Paper Soldiers: Building Soviet-U.S. Musical Ties During the Second World War

MATTHEW HONEGGER

Abstract

In 1925, in a bid to shield itself from armed invasion and capitalist intervention, the Soviet Union began to pursue what is now called cultural diplomacy. For most historians, the story of Soviet cultural diplomacy from its inception in the mid-1920s until its restructuring in the late 1950s was one of diminishing participation on the part of amateur diplomats and increasing concentration of cultural diplomatic work in the hands of professionals. This essay questions the smooth teleology of this narrative by looking toward VOKS's musical work during the Second World War. It focuses, in particular, on correspondence. In the service of wartime propaganda, Soviet cultural diplomacy mobilized musical society to an extent not seen since the early 1930s. At the same time, this mobilization had its limits, and the bulk of cultural diplomatic tasks remained in the hands of the professionals. The essay closes by considering the postwar fate of this professional/amateur distinction.

In 1925, in a bid to shield itself from armed invasion and capitalist intervention, the Soviet Union began to pursue cultural diplomacy.¹ Cultural achievements, Soviet functionaries surmised, could be weaponized to secure a vulnerable state from the ill-intentions of an overwhelmingly hostile world. Acting alongside the conventional diplomacy of the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs (NKID) and the revolutionary diplomacy of the Comintern, this "third dimension" would use ideological tourism and material exchanges to disseminate feats of socialist construction and turn foreign intellectuals and public figures into pro-Soviet advocates.² Friends of the Soviet Union would, in turn, leverage their already-existing social prominence to pressure their governments to leave the Soviet Union alone, buying the state time to build socialism in peace. This was the Stalinist mode of building soft power, a task delegated to an organization called the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (*Vsesoyuznoe obshchestvo kul'turnoy svyazi s zagranitsey*), or VOKS.

¹ For an overview of the structure of interwar Soviet cultural diplomacy and VOKS's position within that structure, see Ludmila Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920–40: From Red Square to the Left Bank* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203008140>. For a study of the role that participation in cultural diplomacy played in the self-fashioning of "cosmopolitan self-patriots" and for how cultural diplomacy related to a larger project of appropriation of world culture, see Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674062894>. For an in-depth look at cultural diplomacy's showcasing function, with particular attention to tourism and the domestic implications of model sites, see Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199794577.001.0001>. For music's position within Soviet foreign policy, see Caroline Brooke, "Soviet Music in the International Arena, 1932–41," *European History Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2001): 231–64, <https://doi.org/10.1177/026569140103100203>. The characterization of Soviet cultural diplomacy given in this paragraph is synthesized from these sources.

² Jean-Francois Fayet, "VOKS: The Third Dimension of Soviet Foreign Policy," in *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy*, edited by Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht and Mark C. Donfried (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 34. The turn of phrase comes from British diplomat and historian E. H. Carr.

For most historians, the story of Soviet cultural diplomacy from its inception in the mid-1920s until its restructuring in the late 1950s was one of diminishing participation on the behalf of “amateur diplomats.”³ In the first years of its existence, VOKS had been made up of a number of cultural sections populated by elected members of the intelligentsia. These sections, however, gradually withered away during the 1930s, a process that accelerated as the country descended into political terror. Cultural elites ceded their prerogatives to professional cultural diplomats, who gathered cultural intelligence on a country-by-country basis.⁴ In the creative unions, similar figures managed correspondence with foreigners.⁵ VOKS, in other words, decisively lost its character as a “society;” at the same time, its efficacy waned. The Soviet Union would enter the Cold War with an increasingly inflexible and discredited cultural diplomatic apparatus. Only after the death of Stalin, the story goes, would cultural diplomacy undergo substantial change, culminating in the 1957–58 transformation of VOKS into the more open Union of Soviet Societies for Friendship and Cultural Ties with Foreign Countries (*Soyuz sovetsskikh obshchestv druzhbi i kul’turnikh svyazey s zarubezhnymi stranami*, or SSOD).⁶

This essay questions the smooth teleology of this narrative by looking toward VOKS’s musical work over the four-year duration of what the Soviets called the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945). Most accounts of Soviet cultural diplomacy focus on writers and either end before the war’s beginning or begin after its end. But the war should not be ignored, for, against all odds, it was a boom period for VOKS and a boom period for musical exchange with the United States. VOKS would facilitate the transfer of hundreds of scores, publish dozens of pamphlets and several books, make pro-Soviet advocates out of musicians like Serge Koussevitzky, and lay the groundwork for the postwar American-Soviet Music Society that placed musicians like Aaron Copland in the crosshairs of McCarthyism.⁷ Through cultural diplomacy, music would serve the war, and the war, in facilitating the international circulation of music and building ties, would serve music.

This essay sheds light on this wider mobilization by focusing on one aspect of wartime exchange: correspondence. Wartime constraints on travel meant that ideological tourism, the primary mode of cultural diplomacy employed by VOKS during the first half of its existence, became nearly impossible.

³ The phrase “amateur diplomats” comes from Danielle Fosler-Lussier, *Music in America’s Cold War Diplomacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 13–16, <https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520284135.001.0001>.

⁴ See David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 42.

⁵ On this point, see Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union*, 175–201.

⁶ The argument for VOKS’s increasing woodenness is most forcefully made in Patryk Babiracki, *Soviet Soft Power in Poland: Culture and the Making of Stalin’s New Empire, 1943–1957* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.5149/northcarolina/9781469620893.001.0001>. Also see Kiril Tomoff, *Virtuosi Abroad: Soviet Music and Imperial Competition in the Early Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9780801453120.001.0001>, which argues that the inefficiency of organizations like VOKS led to gradual demise of a Soviet alternative cultural sphere and gradual Soviet integration into capitalist-dominated structures. The characterization of SSOD as a more democratic organization is given in Eleonory Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die: The Soviet Lives of Western Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), particularly 36–42, <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674989771>.

⁷ For an overview of musical exchange during the era of “Allied internationalism,” see Pauline Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses: Shaping Soviet Musical Identity under Lenin and Stalin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 177–82, <https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300217193.001.0001>, as well as Pauline Fairclough, “Detente to Cold War: Anglo-Soviet Musical Exchanges in the Late Stalin Period,” in *Twentieth-Century Music and Politics: Essays in Memory of Neil Edmunds* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2013), 37–56. On the hubbub surrounding the transfer of Shostakovich’s Seventh Symphony, probably the most important and well-known musical event of the war, see Terry Wait Klefsad, “The Reception in America of Dmitri Shostakovich, 1928–1946” (PhD dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2003), 189–231. On Aaron Copland’s involvement with the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship and its postwar spin-off, the American-Soviet Music Society, see Howard Pollack, *Aaron Copland: The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), 281–5.

Person-to-person diplomacy remained important but would need to be carried out at a distance. The scale of wartime demand, at the same time, forced a limited reversal of this trend of diminishing participation—the work could not be carried out by professional cultural diplomats alone. VOKS gave new life to its withered cultural sections, and cultural diplomatic work was recast from a risky business entrusted to a select few to a patriotic duty expected of a less select few, placed on par with writing marches and touring the front lines.⁸

Thanks to wartime letter-writing campaigns, musicians could discuss their work with foreign colleagues and reconnect with old friends. This personal touch could, in turn, contribute to a larger goal of overcoming American “isolationism,” as letters could make otherwise abstract Soviet suffering concrete and perhaps goad the United States into opening up a second European front, VOKS’s overriding mission during the first half of the war.⁹ At the same time, this broadening of participation was not without limits, nor was it equivalent to the de-Stalinized cultural diplomacy of the late 1950s. Even as VOKS revived its music section, its archive contains little evidence of its regular functioning or of senior musicians carrying out day-to-day work.¹⁰ Instead, the mobilization of elite musicians seemed driven more by bureaucratic accounting practices—a quantitative push to establish contact—than by a desire to nurture and sustain contact. Rather, as before the war, the bulk of exchange work continued to be handled by professional cultural diplomats—VOKS’s own employees. Given the many about-faces taken by Stalinism toward the outside world, their foreign ties could prove more stable, more tenacious, and indeed richer than those of career musicians, at least under the conditions imposed by Stalinism.¹¹

To illustrate this difference between amateur and professional, the second half of this essay moves toward the correspondence of Grigoriy Shneyerson, secretary of VOKS’s music section and a senior analyst in VOKS’s cultural department (*starshiy referent otdela kul’turi*).¹² A career cultural diplomat, critic, and professional pen pal, Shneyerson served until the end of his life as Soviet music’s window on the West and the West’s window on Soviet music. Although “amateur diplomats” often garner the bulk of attention when it comes to exchange activity, professionals such as Shneyerson were important and interesting figures in their own right, as Pauline Fairclough and Louise Wiggins have shown in their

⁸ On the mobilization of composers for the war effort, see Kiril Tomoff, *Creative Union: The Professional Organization of Soviet Composers, 1939–1953* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 63–94, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501730023>.

⁹ On this objective, see State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) fond (f.) 5283, opis’ (op.) 2a, delo (d.) 50, listi (ll.) 1–4. Also see M. T. Anderson, “The Flight of the Seventh: The Voyage of Dmitri Shostakovich’s ‘Leningrad’ Symphony to the West,” *The Musical Quarterly* 102, no. 2-3 (2019): 200–255, <https://doi.org/10.1093/musqtl/gdz014>.

¹⁰ VOKS’s music section was re-created in 1939 under Prokofiev’s leadership. See G. Shneyerson, *Stat’i o sovremennoy zarubezhnoy muziki, ocherki, vospominaniya* [Articles about contemporary foreign music, essays, memoirs] (Moscow: Sovetskiy kompozitor, 1974): 336. A new board was elected on August 20, 1943. Myaskovsky became president; his vice-presidents were Prokofiev and Shostakovich, with Shneyerson as organizational secretary. Other members included Anatoliy Aleksandrov, Boris Asafyev, Viktor Bel’yi, Igor Bel’za, Gliere, Oistrakh, Surin, Chemberdzhi, and Khachaturian. See Shneyerson to Baz’kin, September 20, 1943, GARF f. 5283, op. 14, d. 173, ll. 39–40, at 39. While there is little archival evidence that the section was very active, there is some memoir evidence that they met at least occasionally and that musicians valued the section for its score and record library. See Shneyerson, *Stat’i o sovremennoy zarubezhnoy muziki*, 316–7 and 333–47.

¹¹ As seen in Louise Wiggins, “‘Story of a Friendship’: Alan Bush, Grigori Shneyerson and Cultural Diplomacy Before and During the Cold War,” *Russian Journal of Communication* 8, no. 3 (2016): 256–272, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19409419.2016.1216236>.

¹² For a brief biography of Shneyerson, see Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses*, 237.

work on Shneyerson's long friendship with British composer Alan Bush.¹³ This essay, then, makes two contributions: first, it contextualizes correspondence between Soviet musicians and their US-based colleagues within a broader Soviet cultural diplomatic strategy; and second, it draws a finer distinction between two types of participants in Soviet cultural diplomacy.

I end by suggesting that a tension between musicians and cultural diplomats, the amateurs and professionals, helps explain an important organizational shift that happened at the start of the Cold War: Shneyerson, who by that point controlled not just VOKS's music section but also its music publishing operation, was ousted from VOKS in 1948, and, while rehabilitated by the end of the 1950s, never regained a similar measure of control.¹⁴ Instead, the mobilization of composers that had seemed extraordinary in 1942 became a permanent feature of Soviet music diplomacy, and Shneyerson became just one voice among many, submerged in service of collective leadership.

Amateur Friends

The Great Patriotic War began early in the morning of June 22, 1941. It arrived as a shock, and the situation quickly deteriorated. The Germans encircled vast swaths of territory and captured hundreds of thousands of soldiers, and by the autumn, as cities to the west fell, it became clear that Moscow might be lost. In response, the government began to evacuate the capital.¹⁵ VOKS received its order to decamp in mid-October and, leaving behind a rump organization in Moscow, moved to Kuybyshev, the city on the Volga chosen to act as a Moscow-in-exile.¹⁶ It was a moment when the need for foreign friends was at its greatest, but the evacuation left VOKS half-staffed and poorly provisioned. Cultural elites, meanwhile, were flung far across Soviet space.¹⁷ With talent no longer concentrated in Moscow and Leningrad, the centralization upon which VOKS depended could no longer be counted on.¹⁸

Work restarted in earnest only once VOKS returned to Moscow the following spring.¹⁹ Problems caused by dislocation, however, persisted for some time. At the end of September 1942, VOKS's board met to discuss their organization's under-fulfillment of a plan for letters. The target had been four thousand letters, though only just under five hundred had been sent. The main problem was locating people. One speaker suggested "reviving" VOKS's sections to organize letters. Another suggested using

¹³ See Wiggins, "Story of a Friendship," and Fairclough and Wiggins, "Friendship of the Musicians," in *Music, Art, and Diplomacy: East-West Cultural Interactions and the Cold War*, edited by Simo Mikkonen and Pekka Suutari (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2016), 30–8. Shneyerson's friendship with Bush bore similarities to his friendship with American Elie Siegmeister, which is described below. This article also builds on and provides greater institutional context for the letter exchange described in Pauline Fairclough, "Brothers in Musical Arms: The Wartime Correspondence of Dmitrii Shostakovich and Henry Wood," *Russian Journal of Communication* 8, no. 3 (2016): 273–287, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19409419.2016.1213219>, and expands on a distinction that Fairclough makes in passing between the wartime friendships of Soviet musical elites and those of "an arts bureaucrat like Shneerson." Ibid., 281.

¹⁴ On Shneyerson's work at VOKS's publishing arm, see Viktoria Zora, "New Directions in Soviet music Publishing: Preslit, Am-Rus Music Agency and Anglo-Soviet Music Press Between 1944–48," in *Entangled East and West: Cultural Diplomacy and Artistic Interaction During the Cold War*, edited by Simo Mikkonen, Giles Scott-Smith, Jari Parkkinen (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2019), 217–40, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110573169-010>.

¹⁵ For an overview of the evacuation, see Rebecca Manley, *To the Tashkent Station: Evacuation and Survival in the Soviet Union at War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

¹⁶ See GARF f. 5283, op. 27, d. 1, l. 9 (its handwritten version is *ibid.*, ll. 4–8).

¹⁷ On the evacuation of composers, see Tomoff, *Creative Union*, 65–73.

¹⁸ The problems resulting from the "decentralization of cultural organs" was discussed at a meeting held by VOKS's board on November 25, 1941. See GARF f. 5283, op. 1, d. 394, l. 4.

¹⁹ See GARF f. 5283, op. 27, d. 1, l. 48.

those VOKS employees still located in Kuybyshev, since that was where the intelligentsia was.²⁰ VOKS, in other words, needed more people than it had on hand. Those recruited to help, though, would need guidance. As Vladimir Kemenov, the head of VOKS argued, letter-writers should be given themes to write on; letters should be as short as possible, a few lines at most; and the people organizing letters would need to be verified and trustworthy.²¹ A few months earlier, VOKS had called upon the Composers' Union to help with unspecified "difficulties" that came about "in relation to the evacuation and dispersion of musical life."²² In the fall, that help would take the form of organizing correspondence.

To wit, on a single day in November, Reinhold Gliere, chairman of the Composers' Union, wrote letters addressed to Joseph Szigeti, John Alden Carpenter, Elie Siegmeister, Vladimir Horowitz, Paul Hindemith, Darius Milhaud, and Henry Cowell, all musicians residing in the United States.²³ Though the connection is ultimately speculative, the push was likely in support of VOKS's larger letter-writing campaign. The letters were nearly identical in structure and tone; they were short, as Kemenov had suggested, consisting of only several lines. Each took care to briefly recall some prior association with the Soviet Union or Russia: Cowell's 1929 visit; Carpenter's work with Serge Diaghilev on the ballet *Skyscrapers*; Siegmeister's dispatches that had appeared in Soviet publications during the 1930s; Szigeti's interwar tour; Horowitz's concerts on behalf of the aid organization Russian War Relief. And each called for further exchange. Composers were asked to send their recent works, which could then be made available for study; performers were sent Soviet works to add to their repertoire. All responses were to be sent to VOKS for forwarding. The composers, in other words, would help VOKS meet its seemingly impossible, yet, as Kemenov admonished his subordinates, unmovable production target.

Gliere's letters tended toward the impersonal and stiffly formal, and as chairman of the Composers' Union, he spoke for Soviet musical officialdom. Like the impressive state receptions and massive print runs arranged for visiting writers during the 1930s, such a move implicitly assured addressees that not only was their work known in the Soviet Union but also appreciated at the highest level. As an example, we might take Gliere's exchange with Cowell:

Soviet musicians, fondly remembering your visit to the Soviet Union, follow your many-faceted activities as a composer and musicologist with interest. We are acquainted with some of your compositions, and also with your book *American Composers on American Music*. We would like to get to know your new compositions and musicological works and receive from you information about your recent activities.²⁴

Cowell had indeed been well-known in the Soviet Union before the war. In 1929, he had completed a tour of the Soviet Union, his writings appeared in translation in various publications, and when the composer had gone to prison on what the homophobic discourse of the day described as a "morals charge" (Cowell was arrested and imprisoned for four years at San Quentin for engaging in oral sex with

²⁰ GARF f. 5283, op. 1, d. 395, l. 24.

²¹ Ibid., l. 24ob.

²² GARF f. 5283, op. 14, d. 99, l. 128ob.

²³ For Milhaud, see GARF f. 5283, op. 14, d. 100, l. 40; Szigeti—ibid., l. 41; Cowell—ibid., l. 42; Carpenter—ibid., l. 43; Siegmeister—ibid., l. 44; Horowitz—ibid., l. 46; and Hindemith—ibid., 47.

²⁴ GARF f. 5283, op. 14, d. 100, l. 42.

a man), Soviet musicians had been left puzzled by his disappearance.²⁵ The text simultaneously remembered the past and looked toward the future of exchange. Cowell responded at several months' remove, saying that he was happy to be in contact and promising to send issues of his *New Music Edition*.²⁶

Not all letters sent by Soviet musicians were as brief and formulaic as this wave of official correspondence. In some cases, VOKS helped old acquaintances find one another. For example, when the Bolshoi Theater Orchestra performed Koussevitzky's Concerto for Bass in March of the following year, VOKS forwarded a letter from the ensemble's conductor, V. V. Nebol'sin, to the composer. "[The concerto] reminded me of my youth when I played in your marvelous orchestra and heard it as performed by its composer," wrote Nebol'sin. "And I decided to send you a greeting and to say that I remember you and value your art highly."²⁷ Koussevitzky thanked VOKS's representative in the United States for forwarding the letter, which contained an account of Nebol'sin's life since they had parted: it had "deeply touched" him.²⁸

In other cases, the wartime opening created new possibilities for contact and even seemed to promise a bright future for scholarly exchange. The musicologist Konstantin Kuznetsov took the war as an opportunity to write to the German musicologist Alfred Einstein, someone he had apparently admired since the 1920s.²⁹ Kuznetsov's letter, written on the same day that VOKS's board met to discuss its letter-writing problem, quickly dispensed with describing his patriotic work—articles about Rachmaninov, Prokofiev, and the "world significance of the Russian musical school"—and moved instead to a lengthy summary of his ongoing "scholarly work."³⁰ Midway through his discussion, he intimated that "a young school of brilliant analysts" interested in "pure musical analysis" had formed at the Moscow Conservatory, a remark that most likely refers to Leo Mazel and Viktor Tsukkerman and their first steps toward the method that would later be called "holistic analysis."³¹ "It would be highly gratifying if our foreign friends could acquaint themselves with their numerous researches," Kuznetsov suggested.³² But Einstein, responding in February, betrayed little interest in the news. Instead, he passed it along to Minna Lederman, editor of *Modern Music*. "It would be a great gift for us if you could give us

²⁵ On the publication of Cowell's writings in the Soviet Union, see Ol'ga Manulkina, "Amerikanskaya muzika v sovetskoy kritike 1920-kh i 1930-kh" [American music in Soviet criticism of the 1920s and 1930s], *Opera Musicologica* 3, no. 13 (2012): 43–65. For his visit and attempts to get American music performed in the Soviet Union, see Joel Sachs, *Henry Cowell: A Man Made of Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 163–72, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780195108958.001.0001>; for a passing mention of his wartime correspondence with Gliere, see *ibid.*, 410, and for a discussion of the "morals charge," see *ibid.*, 275–93. For a letter to Cowell from Shneyerson, which the former could not answer, see Russian State Archive of Art and Literature (RGALI) f. 2077, op. 1, d. 2, l. 3. Elie Siegmeister explained what happened in a letter to Shneyerson—see Russian National Museum of Music (RNMM) f. 375, ed. khr. 1245.

²⁶ Cowell to Gliere, April 6, 1943, GARF f. 5283, op. 1, d. 100, l. 90.

²⁷ Nebol'sin to Koussevitzky, n.d., GARF f. 5283, op. 14, d. 91, l. 15–16, at l. 15. In Russian.

²⁸ Koussevitzky to Bazikin, July 14, 1943, GARF f. 5283, op. 14, d. 91, l. 10. In Russian.

²⁹ For Kuznetsov's biography, see I. M. Iampol'skiy, "Kuznetsov Konstantin Alekseevich," in *Muzykal'naya Entsiklopedii*, edited by Yu. V. Keldysh (Moscow: Sovetskiy Kompozitor, 1973), 90.

³⁰ Konstantin Kuznetsov to Alfred Einstein, September 30, 1942, GARF f. 5283, op. 14, d. 100, l. 21. This is in Russian. For the English translation, dated October 27, 1942, see *ibid.*, 23.

³¹ For an overview of Mazel's thought, see Ellon D. Carpenter, "The Contributions of Tanev, Catoire, Conus, Garbuzov, Mazel, and Tiulin," in *Russian Theoretical Thought in Music*, edited by Gordon D. McQuere (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), 329–34 and Daniil Zavlunov, "'The 'Tselostnyi Analiz' (Holistic Analysis) of Zuckerman and Mazel,'" *Music Theory Online* 20, no. 3 (September 2014), <https://doi.org/10.30535/mt0.20.3.10>.

³² Konstantin Kuznetsov to Alfred Einstein, October 27, 1942, GARF f. 5283, op. 14, d. 100, l. 23.

a comprehensive picture of the musicological events and publications in Russia during the last three or four years,” offered Einstein.³³ But no such article appeared.³⁴

For musicians, the letters could be a welcome window to the outside world. For VOKS, though, they served more pragmatic purposes. For one, they had good propaganda value: they pushed leading musicians to make statements in support of the war effort and, more importantly, to assert that the Soviets were bearing the brunt of it all. Einstein closed his letter bombastically, looking forward to “the defeat of Herr Schickelgruber and Signor Bombardone; a defeat to which your glorious people has contributed the major part so far.”³⁵ To the young musicologist Boris Yarustovsky, who wrote wanting to strike up a conversation about musical dramaturgy, Ernst Krenek admitted that he was “much impressed by the fact that you are abiding by your studies with such determination, in spite of the trying circumstances which you have to live through.”³⁶ Koussevitzky, speaking at Tanglewood, told the audience that “we . . . must be grateful to this great nation, which carries the cross and through the supreme suffering of her people leads us to the hope and light of resurrection.”³⁷

But the letters served a more bureaucratic purpose, as well, a fact that can be inferred from how VOKS reported the results of its letter-writing campaigns. In 1943, for example, VOKS claimed in an end-of-year report [*otchet*] that Dmitri Shostakovich, Sergei Prokofiev, Nikolai Myaskovsky, Reinhold Gliere, Aram Khachaturian, Vano Muradeli, Lev Knipper, Tikhon Khrennikov and others had written to Arturo Toscanini, Vladimir Horowitz, Serge Koussevitzky, Artur Rodzinski, Leopold Stokowski, Aleksandr Grechaninov, Dimitri Mitropoulos, Grigor Piatigorsky, Aaron Copland, Paul Hindemith, Henry Cowell, Nicolas Slonimsky, Pierre Monteux, Igor Stravinsky, and others.³⁸ No effort was made to evaluate contact in terms of theme, longevity, or substance. It was just a list and, one might suppose, proof of an all-out effort to meet production targets, such as the one discussed at the meeting with which we opened. Stalinism was a system of plans and quotas. Like other state organizations, VOKS was ruled more by quantitative than qualitative methods of institutional accounting. This predilection resulted in a front-loaded investment that skewed toward opening contacts, but not necessarily toward sustaining them.³⁹ Sustaining ties, a delicate and sometimes dangerous task that required prolonged contact with the outside world, was still better left to professionals.

Professional Friends

On August 14, 1942, as Shostakovich’s Seventh Symphony triumphed across the United States and shortly before VOKS and the Composers’ Union would undertake their letter-writing campaign, Grigoriy Shneyerson returned from the Red Army to, as he put it, “the bosom of VOKS.”⁴⁰ Shneyerson had worked

³³ Alfred Einstein to Konstantin Kunzetsov, February 16, 1943, GARF f. 5283, op. 14, d. 100, l. 70. In English.

³⁴ Interestingly, though, several articles by Soviet musicologists were said to have been sent by telegraph to *Modern Music*, including one by Boris Asafyev on Prokofiev, Shostakovich, and Khachaturian; one by Kuznetsov on the “creative paths of Soviet music;” and one by Grigoriy Shneyerson on musicologists. See Grigoriy Shneyerson to Vladimir Bazikin, September 20, 1943, GARF f. 5283, op. 14, d. 173, l. 34ob. Articles on these topics by these authors did not appear in *Modern Music*.

³⁵ Einstein to Kunzetsov, February 16, 1943, GARF f. 5283, op. 14, d. 100, l. 70.

³⁶ Krenek to Yarustovskiy, January 27, 1943, GARF f. 5283, op. 14, d. 100, l. 53. In English.

³⁷ “Dr. Koussevitzky’s message to the Manifestation,” Box 283, Folder 1, Serge Koussevitzky archive, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

³⁸ “Otchet o rabote amerikanskogo otdela VOKS za 1942–1943 gg,” GARF f. 5283, op. 2a, d. 50, l. 36.

³⁹ See David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 46–57.

⁴⁰ Shneyerson to Kheyfets, January 30, 1943, GARF f. 5283, op. 14, d. 123, l. 36. For the order hiring Shneyerson for this position, see GARF f. 5283, op. 28, d. 1452, l. 1.

in cultural diplomacy for a long time. In 1932, he left behind his career as a theater pianist to become the secretary of the Comintern's International Music Bureau. Being a fluent English speaker, he became a Soviet liaison for left-leaning, proletarianist composers in the United States and the United Kingdom.⁴¹ After the demise of the IMB in 1936, Shneyerson moved to the Foreign Commission of the Composers' Union and then, in 1940, became a musical consultant for VOKS. In 1942, he was rehired and promoted, now becoming a senior analyst in VOKS's cultural department (*starshiy referent otdela kul'turi*), as well as resuming his post as secretary of VOKS's music section.⁴² By managing informational flows and weaponizing friendship, Shneyerson seeded American criticism with Soviet-authored tropes and made pro-Soviet partisans out of loyal friends.

Part of Shneyerson's job was passing information along diplomatic channels, keeping embassy and consular attaches, such as Vladimir Bazikin, based at the Soviet embassy in Washington, DC, informed about developments at home and well-equipped to answer inquiries from musicians like Koussevitzky, who relied on Bazikin for insider information about new music.⁴³ News for Bazikin, and hence Koussevitzky, came largely from Shneyerson. "Knowing your great interest in music and aware that in the course of your duties that you have to meet with people interested in the musical life of the USSR," wrote Shneyerson in one letter, "I would like to tell you about new compositions by our composers." Shneyerson recounted new operas, new symphonies by Shostakovich, Myaskovsky, Khrennikov, and other works.⁴⁴ As a preface to this resume, Shneyerson gave Bazikin a dramatic paragraph to describe Soviet musical output:

1942 is coming to an end. A year and a half of war. 18 months of intense creative labor in a state of total war, in often heavy conditions of evacuation and deprivation. And look, in taking stock of the creative achievements in music during this period, you will be convinced that these difficult months were unusually productive for our composers. . . . An explanation for this should be sought in an extraordinary resurgence of spirit, an unprecedented concentration of all creative forces, in an outstanding burst of patriotism that has engulfed all Soviet people.⁴⁵

No doubt such rhetoric proved valuable as Bazikin made his rounds through musical society.

Shneyerson's pitch to Bazikin echoed the boosterism that he practiced as a critic for *The Moscow News*, an English-language newspaper produced twice a week by the Soviet Information Bureau. Shneyerson's write-ups could range from vaguely-cast hype to evocative blow-by-blow descriptions of scores yet unavailable to Americans.⁴⁶ Though the American circulation of the paper was never more than negligible, what readership it had was hardcore. One American, the wife of composer Elie Siegmeister, told Shneyerson about how eagerly she read his writing. "In the afternoon, the postman comes," she wrote. "If he's brought a bundle of Moscow News, I eagerly open them to look for friend Grisha's name over an article. Also I love the stories of how the liberated areas are being restored—how much work is

⁴¹ For an *anketa* filled out by Shneyerson in 1932 upon his hiring by the IMB, see Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) f. 540, op. 1, d. 121, ll. 30–31.

⁴² For his 1942 *anketa*, see GARF f. 5283, op. 28, d. 1452, ll. 2–3 and for his "autobiography" from the same year, see GARF f. 5283, op. 28, d. 1452, l. 4. His career was also summed up in 1948 by Vladimir Kemenov upon Shneyerson's dismissal. See GARF f. 5283, op. 28, d. 1452, l. 14. Also see Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses*, 237.

⁴³ See, for example, Koussevitzky to Bazikin, July 14, 1943, GARF f. 5283, op. 14, d. 91, l. 10.

⁴⁴ Shneyerson to Bazikin, January 30, 1943, GARF f. 5283, op. 14, d. 123, l. 13.

⁴⁵ Shneyerson to Bazikin, January 30, 1943, GARF f. 5283, op. 14, d. 123, l. 12.

⁴⁶ See, for example, G. Shneyerson, "This Week in Music," *The Moscow News*, September 16, 1942, 4, and G. Shneyerson, "Shostakovich's Eighth Shows Radiant Future," *The Moscow News*, November 10, 1943, 4.

accomplished. It's colossal! Such destruction and yet such courage to rebuild!"⁴⁷ Propaganda could be amplified, it turned out, by warm feelings of friendship.

For almost the entire preceding decade, Shneyerson had been a professional pen pal, and so it should be unsurprising that he, too, revived his foreign contacts in the fall of 1942. Among those he contacted was Elie Siegmeister. They had known each other since 1933 (the two met in Moscow, introduced by Alex North), and Siegmeister was one of Shneyerson's informants on the squabbles of leftist groups like the Composers Collective and Workers Music League, which Shneyerson was responsible for monitoring at the IMB. Like Bazikin and Kheyfets, Siegmeister helped Shneyerson find his bearings in an otherwise far-off and inaccessible music scene. But whereas their conversations previously revolved around the political activities of various composerly camps, now the conversation would revolve around the war effort.⁴⁸

Like those musicians who responded to the letters in the first half of this essay, Shneyerson's letters triggered thoughts of inadequacy before Soviet hardship. In seeking his friend's approval, Siegmeister was bluntly honest that the United States was not doing enough. "Our American composers," he wrote in his first letter, "are busy and active, altho [sic] not many of them have yet realised the necessity of working for the war thru music." In his second letter, he explained that he had gathered a shipment of sixty-four war songs.⁴⁹ Though twelve of the pieces were by Siegmeister and six by their mutual friend Alex North, the shipment was to be, by Siegmeister's estimation, representative, ranging from "high-brow" to "commercial." His judgment of the latter, however, came with some qualification. "Our composers," he offered,

have been slow to respond to the need for war music. But that is not entirely their fault, as the musical life here in general is to a certain extent "escapist": i.e. many people still use music as a means of forgetting that there is such a thing as war. The large radio stations and music publishers are not too anxious to perform music dealing with the war, and our composers are not as "socially conscious" as yours are; the government offers little reward for music in the war effort.⁵⁰

Though Siegmeister seemed to absolve composers of responsibility for this escapism, the structural thrust of the argument revealed some lingering Popular Front hang-ups, namely that the cultural industry was incapable of doing the socially responsible thing. Siegmeister had made this argument in relation to aestheticism (or art for art's sake) in his 1938 tract *Music and Society* and here that argument was repurposed for new times.⁵¹ American composers would need to mobilize themselves and overcome the inertia of big publishers.

Shneyerson, as fate would have it, was working on a similar critique himself, which he would lay out first in the Soviet press and then in a private letter to Siegmeister. In December 1942, as Siegmeister was gathering his songs to send, Shneyerson reviewed a batch of American songs already received by VOKS and found them wanting.

The majority of the songs are snappily rhythmic and dynamic marches, the melodies in them

⁴⁷ Hannah Siegmeister to Shneyerson, March 23, 1944, RNMM f. 375, ed. khr. 1263.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Siegmeister to Shneyerson, February 13, 1936, RNMM, f. 375, ed. khr. 1242. Shneyerson's personal archive at the Russian National Museum of Music contains over 110 letters from Siegmeister. The first letter from Siegmeister was dated January 12, 1934; the last on September 16, 1979. Thirteen date from the war period.

⁴⁹ For a list of the music received, see GARF f. 5283, op. 14, d. 152, l. 6-60b. The document does not specify that the music was from Siegmeister, but given the number of his own pieces and the date, it seems likely that this was his shipment.

⁵⁰ Elie Siegmeister to Grigoriy Shneyerson, December 26, 1942, RNMM, f. 375, ed. khr. 1256.

⁵¹ Elie Siegmeister, *Music and Society* (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1974).

well-shaped and clear. The songs praise the American army and navy, they speak of the valor of the American soldier, of his love for his homeland, of his readiness to defend democratic freedom. However, the fearsome breath of war raging over the world—this is almost not felt. The songs carry, perhaps, a certain parade character. These are good war songs, but they are still those of peacetime.⁵²

While at first glance, one might think that Shneyerson was in total agreement with Siegmeister, his argument took a different turn. Instead of blaming the music industry or organized press campaigns aimed at sabotaging the Soviet Union, he instead blamed American distance from the war.

Because all music reflects the spirit of its time and place, Shneyerson held, the Americans were incapable of writing music that did not belong to peacetime, since, by Soviet standards, the country was not yet at war (fighting in the Pacific did not count). Shneyerson wanted music that exhibited what he called “a spirit of hatred toward the enemy,” which Soviet propagandists worked hard to create at home and which cultural diplomats were to create abroad.⁵³ Concluded Shneyerson, “there is no doubt that the beginning of active fighting . . . against Hitlerism will give a new push to American songsters, bringing into their songs a fighting impulse, a spirit of hatred toward the enemy [*dukh nenavisti k vragu*] that, in turn, will prompt new stylistic traits.”⁵⁴ The following spring, the review subsequently appeared in *Modern Music* for all to see, republished in English translation under a new, more provocative title: “As They See Us in Russia.”⁵⁵ Here was a critical voice infused with the spirit of wartime cultural diplomacy: friendly, with a bit of shaming.

In his return letter to Siegmeister, Shneyerson was less down on the music than Siegmeister, confessing a real love of jazzier numbers, like “This is the Army, Mr. Jones.” He preferred, even, the “national American jazz idiom in the American song” more than heroic marches because this idiom “represents the element peculiarly your own which you have introduced into music, the element of which you may and ought to be proud of.”⁵⁶ Yet, Siegmeister, in his responses, would not let go of the idea that the Soviets were doing much more. “The reactionaries here,” Siegmeister wrote in another letter, “will never be able to hide the glorious deeds of your army and people from us anymore. The simple fact is, you have done a thousand times more than anybody else, and even the newspapers have to admit that.” And this idea seemingly triggered a sense of obligation that forced Siegmeister to proudly recount how his friends—their friends, even—were doing all the right things: organizing concerts, working on cultural exchange with Latin America.⁵⁷ But Shneyerson had them all beat, since he could say that he had spent a year in the army. That, at least, was the message sent by Alex North, when he wrote to Shneyerson at Siegmeister’s urging. “Your experiences in the glorious Red Army,” he wrote, “will make exciting stories for your child and for musicians throughout the world.”⁵⁸ By dint of his military service and amplified by the warm feeling of friendship, the “you” of “you have done a thousand times more” transformed the abstract suffering of a country into the concrete trials and tribulation of an old friend. As a professional

⁵² G. Mikhaylov, “Amerikanskii patrioticheskie pesni,” *Literatura i iskusstvo*, December 19, 1942, 4. This was a pseudonym often used by Shneyerson and derived from his patronymic Mikhaylovich.

⁵³ On the theme of hatred in Soviet wartime propaganda, see Karel C. Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger: Soviet Propaganda During World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 167–201, <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674064829>.

⁵⁴ G. Mikhaylov, “Amerikanskii patrioticheskie pesni,” *Literatura i iskusstvo*, December 19, 1942, 4.

⁵⁵ G. Michailov [sic], “As They See Us in Russia,” *Modern Music* 20, no. 4 (May–June 1943): 268–70.

⁵⁶ Shneyerson to Siegmeister, July 27, 1943, GARF f. 5283, op. 14, d. 100, l. 153.

⁵⁷ Elie Siegmeister to Shneyerson, October 13, 1942, RNMM f. 375, ed. khr. 1255.

⁵⁸ North to Shneyerson, GARF f. 5283, op. 14, d. 152, l. 36.

cultural diplomat, it was Shneyerson's job to transform this sense of intimacy and trust into something diplomatically useful.⁵⁹ For musicians like Gliere and Kuznetsov, cultivating foreign friendships was a part-time obligation, a diversion, and a privilege; for Shneyerson, it was a full-time job. The war changed much, but much remained *status quo ante bellum*.

Shneyerson Ousted

Musicians continued to write to one another until after the war ended, but, as the Cold War dawned, there was to be a great break, coinciding with broader anti-formalist, anti-Semitic, and anti-Western purges generally referred to as the *Zhdanovshchina*. In music diplomacy, this break was marked most clearly by the purging of Shneyerson from VOKS. Shneyerson's nationality (Jewish) and profession (authority on contemporary Western music) would seem to make his downfall a foregone conclusion, as Pauline Fairclough has argued, but the route there was circuitous.⁶⁰ It began with a deficiency of Stalin portraits. In April 1947, VOKS's senior staff appeared before a subcommittee of the Central Committee. VOKS was accused of political errors in its work, among which was a decision to hang portraits of Churchill and Roosevelt in an exhibition with no portrait of Stalin in sight.⁶¹ In the course of the interrogation, Kemenov decided to shine a light on his organization's publishing arm, Litmuzagentstvo, pointing to its ongoing problems with the Soviet book exporter, Mezhdunarodnaya Kniga, with which it was almost entirely redundant. Kemenov asked that the Central Committee resolve the problem.⁶² Shortly thereafter, the Ministry of State Control began an audit of VOKS and found that the organization had wasted a massive amount of money on publishing unnecessary and ultimately unused material. The largest misuse of money, however, came about through nepotism. VOKS, according to the audit, "widely made use of the services of private persons and intermediaries, illegally paying them large sums of money."⁶³ This was the scandal that touched Shneyerson, who, in directing VOKS's music publishing operation, had hired an accountant named Viktor Lempert to oversee VOKS's copyists. Lempert, "the hustler Lempert," as the audit called him, used his position, the audit claimed, to embezzle a large sum of money.⁶⁴

The errors went beyond the financial. "The directors of VOKS not only wastefully threw away big money on the publishing of scores," asserted the audit report, "but also allowed a number of crude errors, printing for use abroad a large number of low-quality and bad compositions, as well as those unknown to Soviet musical society."⁶⁵ They also sent abroad formalist works. "These compositions cannot be in any case admitted to be demonstrative for the characteristic level of Soviet musical culture and the sending of them abroad is a large error of VOKS's musical section, since these compositions should cause a perverse representation of the musical life of the Soviet Union."⁶⁶ Among the offenders was a 1945 shipment of Dzerzhinsky's *Quiet Flows the Don*, which included the "politically harmful" line "Austrians and also

⁵⁹ On this point, see Michael David-Fox, *Crossing Borders: Modernity, Ideology, and Culture in Russia and the Soviet Union* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), 163–84, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt155jp44>.

⁶⁰ Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses*, 200 and 220. For a broader discussion of the Zhdanovshchina's effects in music, see *ibid.*, *Classics for the Masses*, 201–21. Shneyerson's 1932 IMB application identifies him as Jewish. See RGASPI f. 540, op. 1, d. 121, ll. 30–1.

⁶¹ GARF f. 5283, op. 22, d. 72, l. 280.

⁶² GARF f. 5283, op. 22, d. 72, l. 335.

⁶³ RGASPI f. 82, op. 1, d. 1013, l. 25. For an account of the audit and its findings, see Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses*, 200.

⁶⁴ RGASPI f. 82, op. 1, d. 1013, l. 28.

⁶⁵ RGASPI f. 82, op. 1, d. 1013, l. 30.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Germans are not enemies to us” and the export of an opera by a certain Turenkov, who had been named an “enemy of the people.”⁶⁷ The auditor concluded that, since Shneyerson knew about Turenkov’s crimes, this “is a fact that should become an object of study by special state organs.”⁶⁸

Driving Shneyerson’s downfall was not just Soviet anti-formalism or postwar anti-Semitism then, but also, it seems, concerns over who controlled VOKS’s music diplomacy. In the course of purging Shneyerson, state auditors managed to wring denunciations from the figureheads of VOKS’s music section—Myaskovsky, Shostakovich, and Khachaturian—who submitted identical notes to the effect that Shneyerson had carried out this supposed conspiracy without their knowledge. The text of their statements read:

Having become acquainted with the documents and materials enclosed in the Main Directorate of Musical Institution’s letter about the propaganda of compositions of Soviet composers abroad by VOKS’s music section, I consider it necessary to claim that I, as former president [vice-president in Shostakovich and Khachaturian’s denunciations], did not give my sanction to send the listed compositions. Many names of composers and compositions located in these lists are unknown to me. The shipment of these compositions abroad was not discussed at meetings of the Section with my participation.⁶⁹

No doubt the composers were pushed to do this most of all out of a sense of personal danger (they all had been themselves publicly denounced a few months prior). But the idea that Shneyerson sent scores by people “unknown to musical society” and that these decisions had been made in secret was tantamount to saying that his errors came about thanks to poor supervision. Such shifting of blame and disavowal was, first and foremost, a survival strategy, but even if motivated by fear and not rooted in fact, such declarations and accusations had real institutional effects: after fifteen years of serving as Soviet music’s foremost public relations person abroad, Shneyerson’s perceived “one-man rule” came to an end.

The following year, as part of a larger restructuring of the Soviet music world, Tikhon Khrennikov became the president of VOKS’s music section. In contrast to earlier years, when the section seems to have either had few meetings and produced little documentation, this music section began to produce documentation effusively, full transcripts of meetings that recorded group discussions of trips taken abroad, debate over various modernisms, question-and-answer periods with visiting musicians, and so on.⁷⁰ This was a far cry from the backroom cultural diplomacy carried out during the war and before. Now professional musicians—amateur diplomats—would be permanently mobilized on the friendship front. In 1959, when SSOD, VOKS’s de-Stalinized successor, reorganized the music section again, Shneyerson, who in the meantime worked mostly as a music critic, was given an official responsibility again. He was to manage correspondence with foreign musicians, described as the “broadening of contacts and ties with foreign musical organizations and individuals.”⁷¹ The next year, he resumed his correspondence with Siegmeyer, which they would continue off and on until 1979.⁷² That same year, he also published a thick book on music in the capitalist world called *On Music, Living and Dead*, remembered among Soviet avant-

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Khachaturian to Goskontrol’, May 31, 1948, GARF f. 8300 op. 26, d. 682, l. 22; Shostakovich to Goskontrol’, May 31, 1948, GARF f. 8300 op. 26, d. 682, l. 21; Myaskovsky to Goskontrol’, May 31, 1948, GARF f. 8300, op. 26, d. 682, l. 20.

⁷⁰ See, for example, the transcript produced for the March 31, 1950, meeting at which Khrennikov discussed the section’s work over the previous year, which he said, without letting on to what had happened, had “begun noticeably later.” See GARF f. 5283, op. 21, d. 140, ll. 2–53, remark at l. 3. Subsequent *dela* contain a large number of such transcripts.

⁷¹ Protokol No. 3 zasedaniya Byuro Muzikal’noy sekti, April 28, 1959, GARF f. 9576, op. 16, d. 60, l. 103.

⁷² See Siegmeyer’s response. Elie Siegmeyer to Grigoriy Shneyerson, September 17, 1960, GTsMMK, f. 375, ed. khr. 1264.

gardists for having been one of very few official sources that actually republished fragments of modernist compositions and hence a valuable, if unintended, study aid for young nonconformists.⁷³ Scholars have yet to unpack the cultural-diplomatic (and indeed Stalinist) origins of Shneyerson's post-Stalin life as a critic and apologist for Western modernism.

The war marked a temporary reversal of the narrowing of exchange work that had occurred during the 1930s. Though still selected on the basis of their prominence, musicians had the opportunity to make new connections abroad while simultaneously supporting the war effort. Collegial ties became, in a time of war, a vehicle for sympathy. And sympathy was useful to the state insofar as it could trigger feelings of obligation. In that way, such ties had value as propaganda. This reversal, however, had its limits, and the bulk of exchange continued to be carried out by a small subset of professional figures like Shneyerson. Unlike his more prominent colleagues, Shneyerson had access to diplomatic channels, but more than that, his work gave him deeper connections to the capitalist West and, in that sense, greater reservoirs of goodwill and friendship. But all the same, Shneyerson's primacy in the cultural diplomacy apparatus came to an end. It would be too crude to argue that the musicians carried out some kind of coup against the professionals. The process was far too overdetermined by institutional shifts, anti-Semitism, anti-Americanism, anti-formalism, and random chance to make that sort of claim. And yet, a real institutional change resulted. VOKS's music section became a permanently functioning entity, rather than something occasionally mobilized as VOKS needed. It would run, more or less, according to principles of shared labor and collective leadership. This was a transformation that would structure the practice of Soviet cultural diplomacy as it turned its attention toward Eastern Europe and as it prepared for a cultural clash with its one-time ally.

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⁷³ See Grigoriy Shneyerson, *O muzike zhivoy i mertvoy* [On Music Living and Dead] (Moscow: Sovetskiy kompozitor, 1960) and the revised and expanded Shneyerson, *O muzike zhivoy i mertvoy* (Moscow: Muzika, 1964). On this usage of Shneyerson's book, see Peter Schmelz, *Such Freedom, If Only Musical: Unofficial Music during the Thaw* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 42, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195341935.001.0001>.

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