Transactions of the Royal Historical Society (2025), 1–22
doi:10.1017/S0080440125100431

ARTICLE

The UK–USSR Film Weeks of 1959: Examining Political, Cultural and Industrial Motivations in Cultural Exchange Activity

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(Received 29 March 2025; accepted 1 September 2025)

Abstract

This article presents a case study of the 1959 UK–USSR film weeks to investigate the political, cultural and industrial motivations shaping Cold War cultural exchange, focusing on the role of the British Council's Soviet Relations Committee (SRC). Originating from a 1955 Soviet proposal for reciprocal film weeks, the project faced over four years of delays and aborted attempts due to a division of opinion among British state and non-state actors. The SRC sought to bridge the conflicting policy motivations between the British Council, the Foreign Office and the British film industry towards the film weeks, but the contradictory priorities and interests of the groups led to an ambiguous approach. The article reconstructs the negotiations, organisation and delivery of the film weeks from the British perspective, drawing on archival sources including the British Council Records at The National Archives to reveal new perspectives on the divergent policy motivations towards the use of films and film weeks in cultural exchange. In doing so, the article contributes to wider research into the role of the SRC and film weeks in the cultural Cold War.

Keywords: cultural Cold War; Soviet Relations Committee; film weeks; cultural exchange; cultural diplomacy; British Council; film festivals; Foreign Office

In 1955, the USSR's Ministry of Culture submitted a proposal to the British Council's newly formed Soviet Relations Committee (SRC) for reciprocal film weeks to be held in three cities in the USSR (Moscow, Kiev and Leningrad) and three cities in the UK (London, Birmingham and Glasgow). It would take over four years and several aborted attempts before the film weeks were arranged and successfully delivered. The delays were due to a multiplicity of tensions that erupted between the political, cultural and industrial groups involved in the cultural exchange activity, all with vested interests in the film weeks and all frustrating, delaying and even reframing their purpose, size and focus to varying extents. The British Council and SRC became the key drivers of and flagbearers for the increasingly fraught project, but they were reliant on the political

support of the UK Foreign Office and the cooperation of the British film industry, primarily represented by the British Film Producers' Association (BFPA), to ensure the successful organisation of the film weeks. Yet, all of them had divergent perspectives and policy motivations.

In this article, I investigate the differing policy motivations of the British state and non-state actors involved towards the 1959 UK–USSR film weeks, using archival sources: the British Council Records and the Foreign Office Records at The National Archives and newspapers and political speeches from the time. Film weeks became an important form of cultural exchange during the Cold War and were increasingly organised by the British Council throughout the second half of the century. The article foregrounds the work of the British Council's SRC, a committee that was central to UK–USSR cultural exchange in the late 1950s, and reconstructs the negotiations, organisation and delivery of the film weeks from the British perspective, evaluating their context, impact and legacy. The article builds upon and contributes to the wider field of research into the cultural Cold War, specifically case studies examining UK approaches to cultural exchange, and furthers understanding of the UK's use of film and film weeks.

Cultural exchange was a key feature of the Cold War, but its focus varied between cultural diplomacy and cultural propaganda, dependant on the specific state actors involved and the policy objectives being pursued. For example, whilst studies of US cultural exchange of the era have argued that it was often overtly propagandistic,[1] British motivation has been understood as being more ambiguous.[2] Studies of Britain's use of cultural exchange have argued that it was a means of 'subtle propaganda',[3] international trade,[4] British geopolitical positioning in the aftermath of the Second World War,[5] and cultural supremacy.[6] For the British Council, cultural exchange was about cultural diplomacy and soft power. Cultural diplomacy in this context was based on an ethos of internationalism and the promotion of a 'mutual interchange of knowledge and ideas with other peoples'[7] through the facilitation of artistic, technological, academic and educational resources and activity, thereby projecting cultural and social values and enabling socio-economic development. Diana J. Eastment argues that the British Council's policy focus aimed to generate 'a peace of understanding by the peoples of the world by a wider appreciation of British culture and arts'.[8] The Foreign Office was 'lukewarm' to cultural exchange, though it was open to exceptions when

[1]Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture and the Cold War 1945–1961* (1997).

[2]J. M. Lee, 'British Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War: 1946–61', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 9 (1998), 122–3.

[3]Sarah Davies, 'The Soft Power of *Anglia*: British Cold War Cultural Diplomacy in the USSR', *Contemporary British History*, 27 (2013), 297–323; Nicholas Barnett, 'The British State–Private Network and Way of Life Propaganda at the Anglo-Soviet Trade Fairs of 1961', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, (2025), 1–24.

[4]Mark B. Smith, 'Peaceful Co-existence at All Costs: Cold War Exchanges between Britain and the Soviet Union in 1956', *Cold War History*, 12 (2012), 537–58.

[5]Lee, 'British Cultural Diplomacy'.

[6]David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy During the Cold War* (Oxford, 2003).

[7]Draft memorandum and articles of association, 1935, quoted in Diana Jane Eastment, 'The Policies and Position of the British Council from the Outbreak of War to 1950' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Leeds, 1982), 2.

[8]*Ibid.*, 3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100431 Published online by Cambridge University Press

necessary if there was the possibility it could be 'harnessed to the cause of anti-communism on both a domestic and international level'.[9] The Foreign Office concluded at the start of the 1950s that the Cold War was 'a struggle for men's minds'[10] and that cultural exchange was actually about cultural propaganda, with the arts being utilised in political persuasion and ideological destabilisation. As Nicholas Cull and Theo Mazumdar have argued, 'At the height of the Cold War the contending powers sought to use ideas and persuasion to rally, sustain and extend their respective blocs and bombarded one another's home populations with messages to elicit political advantage.'[11] The conflicting policy motivations towards cultural exchange were to become a key source of friction between the British Council and the Foreign Office during the organisation and delivery of the 1959 film weeks.

Cultural exchange was not taken seriously by the British government in the immediate post-war years.[12] The British Council, for example, was subject to budget cuts that severely limited its cultural exchange activity on mainland Europe by the early 1950s, leading officials in the organisation to argue that the UK was 'lagging behind other nations ... and is failing to make use of a powerful influence on public opinion abroad'.[13] That 'powerful influence' was British culture in all its forms: performing arts, visual arts, heritage, education and technology. But the growing uncertainty of Britain's identity in the world by the mid-twentieth century, with the rapid process of decolonisation and the fear of the Americanisation of culture, led to a turn to cultural exchange by the late 1950s to ensure a 'British presence after Empire'.[14] It became a key facet of British government policy in its dealings with the USSR, a recognition of how culture could 'project' national image and values to overseas audiences, with the intent, as Peter Waldron argues, of 'persuading people of the virtues and strengths of their respective social structures'.[15] Cultural exchange increased as a result, with arrangements for reciprocal trade fairs and 'cultural manifestations' – performing artists, theatre groups, museums, galleries and other cultural sectors were subsidised and supported to tour, perform and exhibit overseas. Manifestations were a form of cultural exchange that allowed for the low-risk projection of power and cultural values. By the end of the decade, the British prime minister Harold Macmillan was involved in attempts to formalise cultural contact between the UK and the USSR, leading to the signing of the first UK–USSR cultural agreement in 1959.[16] There were significant reciprocal cultural manifestations between the UK and USSR prior to this formalised

[9]Sarah Davies, 'From Iron Curtain to Velvet Curtain? Peter Brook's *Hamlet* and the Origins of British-Soviet Cultural Relations during the Cold War', *Contemporary European History*, 27 (2018), 601–26, at 603.

[10]Unsigned Foreign Office memo, 1951, quoted in Philip M. Taylor, 'Power, Propaganda and Public Opinion: The British Information Services and the Cold War, 1945–57', in *Power in Europe? Great Britain, France, Germany and Italy and the Origins of the EEC, 1952–1957*, ed. Ennio Di Nolfo (Berlin, 1992), 445.

[11]Nicholas Cull and Theo Mazumdar, 'Propaganda and the Cold War', in *The Routledge Handbook of the Cold War*, ed. Artemy M. Kalinovsky and Craig Daigle (Abingdon, 2014), 323.

[12]Lee, 'British Cultural Diplomacy'.

[13]Frances Donaldson, *The British Council: The First Fifty Years* (1984), 206–7.

[14]Lee, 'British Cultural Diplomacy', 122; Antonio Varsori, 'Britain as a Bridge between East and West', in *Europe, Cold War and Co-existence, 1953–65*, ed. Wilfred Loth (2005), 7–22.

[15]Peter Waldron, 'Cultural Diplomacy during the Cold War: Britain and the UK–USSR Cultural Agreements', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 100 (2022), 727.

[16]*Ibid.*, 709–10.

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agreement, mostly organised by the British Council's SRC,[17] which was formed in 1955 during the post-Stalinist trend for formalised cultural exchange agreements.[18] Some of these were notable successes – Peter Brook's production of *Hamlet*, for example, which toured Moscow in 1955.[19] Others were aborted or frustrated by wider political contexts, as in the example of the UK–USSR film weeks that are the focus of this article.

The article draws upon previous examinations of the SRC's motivations and objectives, and its use of cultural manifestations.[20] The SRC was created with the aim of countering Soviet propaganda by UK-based front organisations and fellow travellers. Paul Sinker, Director General of the British Council in the 1950s, described the SRC as being a committee created at the request of the Foreign Office to 'provide a single official channel for the organisation of exchanges of visits between groups of people distinguished in professional and other fields and to avoid such exchanges being handled by bodies which are not genuinely representative of this country'.[21] The SRC negotiated and delivered cultural exchange activity to contribute to the destabilisation of the USSR and bring about the 'peaceful evolution of the Soviet system' through exposure to British culture.[22] But the SRC's policy framework was underpinned by the concept of cultural reciprocity, in which not only would tours and exhibitions of British art and culture and delegations of British cultural workers, academics and scientists be exported overseas to the USSR, but official visits would be accepted in return.[23] The purpose of reciprocity was to neutralise the potential influence and impact of front organisations operating in the UK.[24]

The SRC has been described by Sarah Davies as a 'Cold War operation' and as a 'weapon in the battle against communism both at home and abroad'.[25] Whilst officially a British Council committee, the SRC was chaired by the Labour Party MP Christopher Mayhew, was closely aligned to the Foreign Office through the presence of, initially, Northern Department representatives and later Cultural Relations Department representatives, and included other political representatives such as a Conservative MP, trade representatives including the Chair of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), and the Director General of the British Council.[26]

Cultural manifestations were a low priority in the list of SRC cultural exchange policy objectives, primarily because of the cost of such activity, but also because they were perceived by the Foreign Office as the type of cultural exchange that would most benefit the USSR, validating the Soviet authorities on an international stage and giving the

[17] *Ibid.*, 708–9; Smith, 'Peaceful Co-existence', 547–8.

[18] Naima Prevots, *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War* (Middletown, CT, 1999); Andrei Kozovoi, 'A Foot in the Door: The Lacy–Zarubin Agreement and Soviet-American Film Diplomacy during the Khrushchev Era, 1953–1963', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 36 (2016), 21–39.

[19] Davies, 'From Iron Curtain'.

[20] *Ibid.*; Larraine Nicholas, 'Fellow Travellers: Dance and British Cold War Politics in the Early 1950s', Dance Research, 19: 2 (2001), 83–105; Smith, 'Peaceful Co-existence'; Waldron, 'Cultural Diplomacy'.

[21] Paul Sinker to Henry French, 18 Jul. 1955, London, The National Archives (TNA), British Council Records, BW/64/16.

[22] Davies, 'From Iron Curtain', 603.

[23] Nicholas, 'Fellow Travellers', 98.

[24] Davies, 'From Iron Curtain', 603.

[25] *Ibid.*, 609.

[26] *Ibid.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100431 Published online by Cambridge University Press

communist regime 'the maximum impression of free contact'.[27] But within the British Council, cultural manifestations were considered as a way of visibly demonstrating the success of the SRC in meeting its policy objectives.[28] Sarah Davies has indicated that the conflicting motivations of the actors represented on the SRC led to its work and impact at times being vague. Whilst the work of the SRC was intended by the Foreign Office to 'undermine and perpetuate divisions' between the East and West, it was also marked by the British Council's emphasis on 'internationalist sentiment'.[29] Davies positions the cultural exchange programme of the SRC as leading to – intentionally or otherwise – international cooperation, the bridging of divides and the breaking down of stereotypes, what she collectively refers to as 'contradictory tendencies' given its stated role as a weapon to fight communism.[30]

Film and film weeks are particularly instructive when investigating the 'contradictory tendencies' of cultural exchange between the West and the USSR. Broader studies of Cold War film culture have demonstrated the importance of films and the film industries in reaching the 'masses' at home and abroad to shape opinions and perspectives and to undermine overseas societies and governments.[31] Hollywood's power and influence in projecting American ideology, power and Western values globally was reinforced by the close collaboration between industry and government.[32] It is estimated that Hollywood produced 107 films between 1948 and 1962 containing explicit themes or storylines about the Western struggle against communism, most of which would have been distributed within the UK.[33] Tony Shaw has argued that Hollywood's dominance of film in the UK led to an 'Americanization of British Cold War mentalities'.[34] But British cinema and British film-makers were not operationalised by the state in the same way as in the USA and USSR during the Cold War. As such, whilst popular post-war British film production did generally reflect the dominant political attitudes of the time, and generally espoused Western values, the films were less overtly anti-communist in theme and there was a growing uncertainty, even cynicism, among British film-makers by the end of the 1950s and into the 1960s towards the political class.[35] The relationship between the British state and the film industry was therefore much more ambivalent, with the greater fear for film-makers and producers being of the Americanisation of the national industry.[36]

[27] *Ibid.*, 610.

[28] *Ibid.*

[29] *Ibid.*, 604.

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] Tony Shaw, *British Cinema and the Cold War: The State, Propaganda and Consensus* (2006); Tony Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War* (Edinburgh, 2007); Tony Shaw and Denise J. Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggles for Hearts and Minds* (Lawrence, KS, 2010); Caute, *The Dancer Defects*.

[32] Ross Melnick, *Hollywood's Embassies: How Movie Theaters Projected American Power around the World* (New York, 2022).

[33] Shaw, *British Cinema*, 4.

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] *Ibid.*, 194.

[36] Margaret Dickinson and Sarah Street, *Cinema and the State: The Film Industry and the British Government, 1927–84* (1985); Jonathan Stubbs, 'The Eady Levy: A Runaway Bribe? Hollywood Production and British Subsidy in the Early 1960s', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 6 (2009), 1–20; James Fenwick, 'The Eady Levy, "the Envy of Most Other European Nations": Runaway Productions and the British Film Fund in the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100431 Published online by Cambridge University Press

There was growing pressure from British film producers in the 1950s to counteract the financial monopolisation of the industry by American producers and production companies, led by industrial interest groups such as the British Film Producers Association (BFPA) and the Federation of British Film Makers (FBFM). A key policy aim of these groups was to protect and advance the commercial viability of British films and the economic interests of the British film industry, as well as aiming to project and represent a British national cinema on the world stage; the latter aim was achieved through collective British submissions to international film festivals and the use of publicity campaigns in which films that may have received funding from American companies were reclaimed as being British. The overriding interest of the BFPA was commercial: protecting intellectual property and seeking new markets for its members. One such market was the USSR, but the BFPA was struggling to break into the USSR due to the refusal of Soviet authorities to pay the market rates for film distribution rights.

Film festivals and film weeks came to play an important role in the cultural Cold War due to their potential operationalisation as spaces for cultural diplomacy, exchange and propaganda.[37] Film festivals had emerged as part of programmes of cultural propaganda in the 1930s, but were increasingly focused on discourses of commerce and art.[38] In contrast, film weeks were explicitly intended as 'cultural and diplomatic undertakings, carefully organized with clear political objectives', with commercial and artistic imperatives generally sidelined.[39] But global political and economic contexts increasingly defined and influenced both film festivals and film weeks by the 1950s, with international relations and global geopolitics even shaping 'discourses of world cinema'.[40] Soviet-sponsored film festivals, for example, were at times more diverse than their Western counterparts and contributed to broader ideas of cultural internationalism (even if unintentionally),[41] which concerned Western cultural officials.[42] In response, some Western nations, such as the USA, the UK and France, began to prioritise film weeks as part of wider programmes of cultural exchange and the promotion of individual national cinemas, as did the USSR, India and China.[43] And in the

Early 1960s', in *The Routledge Companion to British Cinema History*, ed. I. Q. Hunter, Laraine Porter and Justin Smith (Abingdon, 2017), 191–9.

[37]Ji'an Lin and Yijun Li, 'Transcending the Iron Curtain: Foreign Film Weeks and Transnational Film Exchanges in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1966', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 45 (2025), 13.

[38]Marijke de Valck, *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia* (Amsterdam, 2007); Skadi Loist, 'The Film Festival Circuit: Networks, Hierarchies, and Circulation', in *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*, ed. Marijke de Valck, Brendan Kredell and Skadi Loist (Abingdon, 2016), 49–64.

[39]Lin and Li, 'Transcending the Iron Curtain', 3.

[40]Dorota Ostrowska, 'Introduction to the Special Issue, "Film Festivals and History"', *Studies in European Cinema*, 17 (2020), 79.

[41]Dorota Ostrowska, 'Producers' Playground: The British Film Producers Association and International Film Festivals in the Post-war Period', *Studies in European Cinema*, 17 (2020), 128–39; see also Elena Razlogova, 'World Cinema at Soviet Festivals: Cultural Diplomacy and Personal Ties', *Studies in European Cinema*, 17 (2020), 140–54; Yong Zhang, 'Socialist China's Participation in the Asia–Africa Film Festival (1958–1964)', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 44 (2024), 525–41.

[42]Elizabeth Walters, 'Festival Diplomacy: CINE, American Nontheatrical Cinema, and the Film Festival Network', *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, 63 (2024), 122.

[43]*Ibid.*, 121; Lin and Li, 'Transcending the Iron Curtain'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100431 Published online by Cambridge University Press

1950s and 1960s, film industry bodies, particularly those made up of producers outside the Hollywood system, used film festivals and film weeks to represent their own interests and members.[44] As such, film festivals and film weeks in the 1950s and 1960s were contested spaces of politics, propaganda, national projection, industrial representation and cultural exchange and were rooted in what Elizabeth Walters describes as a 'fusion of culture and international relations'.[45] Art, diplomacy and propaganda were the focus of discourse within the space of the film week, the balance and tension between them dependent on the wider political contexts, policy motivations, and state and non-state actors involved.

Agreements for the exchange of films and for the staging of film weeks were complicated by the commercial imperatives of the film industries in the UK and USA. Whilst in 1958 the USA formalised a film exchange agreement with the USSR,[46] the UK did not have any such agreement in place and struggled in this regard with its eventual wider cultural agreement of 1959. Instead, it was noted in the cultural agreement of 1959 that there was a need to improve relations in the exchange of films between the UK and USSR, building on the delivery of the 1959 film weeks.[47]

What follows is a reconstruction of the development, organisation and delivery of the 1959 UK–USSR film weeks, focusing on the role of the SRC and the state and non-state actors involved. The remainder of this article is divided into three sections. The first section investigates the initial Soviet proposal and British attempts to organise the film weeks between early 1955 and the end of 1956, at which point the project was aborted. The second section examines the resurrection of the film weeks project in 1957, investigating why the SRC decided to revive the project and the complications involved. The final section is focused on the delivery, reception and impact of the film weeks in autumn 1959 in the UK and USSR, assessing the critical reaction to the respective film week programmes and the evaluation of their success from the UK perspective. The article concludes by considering the legacy of the 1959 film weeks and evaluates how they further understanding about the UK's approach to cultural exchange during the Cold War.

Origins and development of the reciprocal UK–USSR film weeks, 1955–1956

The initial Soviet proposal for reciprocal film weeks consisted of the following expectations:

1. A one-week festival, featuring three or four British feature films, supplemented by two or three short documentaries or cartoons, with screenings to take place across six cinemas in Moscow.
2. A one-week festival of Soviet films to take place in the UK in three or four cities.
3. Comparable seating capacity in the UK cinemas to that of the Moscow cinemas.

[44]Ostrowska, 'Producers' Playground'; Marijke de Valck, 'Fostering Art, Adding Value, Cultivating Taste: Film Festivals as Sites of Cultural Legitimization', in *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*, ed. Marijke de Valck, Brendan Kredell and Skadi Loist (Abingdon, 2016), 100–16.

[45]Walters, 'Festival Diplomacy', 126.

[46]Kozovoi, 'A Foot in the Door'.

[47]Waldron, 'Cultural Diplomacy', 714.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100431 Published online by Cambridge University Press

4. A shortlist of ten to fifteen British films to be provided to the Soviet authorities, who would make the final selection.[48]

The Soviet authorities wanted all films that were to be screened at the film weeks – both British and Soviet – to have been purchased for distribution beforehand. But the Soviet authorities insisted upon the 'principle of reciprocity', as they had found it difficult to do business with the British film industry to date.[49] Sovexportfilm – the body that represented the interests of the Soviet film industry internationally – believed British film producers were demanding too high a price for each of their films, typically in the region of £20,000 per film. But the Soviets were only prepared to pay £8,000 or, at the most, £10,000 for a quality colour film and additional prints. The Soviets argued that if British film producers relented and accepted the lower price for the sale of their films, it would lead to greater dividends in the long run as it would open the Soviet bloc countries to them.[50] The Soviets were not prepared to proceed with the film weeks on a non-commercial basis at this stage as they claimed the dubbing of British films would be much too high. As such, the film weeks had to be on a fully commercial basis. If they were not, then the British films would only be shown for a select private audience in Moscow.

The Soviet proposal included expectations that were clearly problematic for the British Council and SRC, the UK government, and the British film industry, not least the desire for film weeks that were based entirely on commercial reciprocity. The initial attempt to develop the reciprocal film weeks by the UK between 1955 and 1956 was hampered by divided opinions, not only between the Foreign Office, the British Council and the British Film industry, but also *within* these groups. And it was at the SRC, which brought together representatives of these groups, where these conflicts played out.

The primary supporter and driver of the reciprocal film weeks was Christopher Mayhew, chair of the SRC. Mayhew's motivation in the use of film in cultural exchange could have been influenced by his visit to the USSR in 1954. Mayhew said the UK was being misrepresented in the USSR, describing the image he believed Soviet citizens had of the UK in a speech he gave in 1959: 'It was a doctrinaire Marxist-type image of masses of cloth-cap proletarians, poor, unemployed and pro-Soviet, kept in order with increasing difficulty by some capitalists who were anti-Soviet.'[51] Mayhew believed that a selection of well-chosen British films could have a substantial impact in the USSR, portraying the British way of life in a 'favourable light'.[52] He was supported by Kenneth Loch, then the British Council's Controller for Arts and Sciences, who believed there was a commercial opportunity for the reciprocal sale of British and Soviet films. Loch believed, somewhat optimistically, that the attitude of the British film industry towards the USSR was changing, stating in a memo that, 'Whatever may have happened in the past, I feel we are now situated with a "new deal".'[53] In contrast, Paul

[48]Report by Joe Dobbs, Jul. 1955, TNA, BW/64/16.

[49]*Ibid.*

[50]*Ibid.*

[51]Christopher Mayhew, 'British-Soviet Cultural Relations', 10 Nov. 1959, Chatham House Meetings and Speeches, 8/2649, 1–2.

[52]Soviet Relations Committee minutes, 12 Jan. 1956, TNA, BW/64/16.

[53]Memo from Kenneth Loch, 12 Jul. 1955, TNA, BW/64/16.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100431 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Sinker, the British Council's Director-General, did not think the reciprocal film weeks were a good idea, believing that 'the best British films could probably be used by the Soviet authorities for anti-British propaganda'.[54]

The Foreign Office's assessment was that the Soviet proposal was not workable and that reciprocal film weeks would be 'beset with practical difficulties'.[55] The Foreign Office believed that Soviet films only had a small commercial distribution potential in the UK, limited to a dozen cinemas at most, compared to the significant distribution potential of British films in the USSR.[56] And the Foreign Office also believed the mistrust between the British film industry and the Soviet authorities was unreconcilable.[57] As such, the initial official Foreign Office conclusion was that the proposal for reciprocal commercial film weeks was not viable and that the project could work only if documentaries were shown. This latter suggestion was based on the perception of documentary's potential power as cultural propaganda, with the screening of British documentaries in the USSR being framed as 'a rare opportunity for giving wide masses of Soviet people an inkling of life in the West and of Western art and culture'.[58] However, opinion was divided within the Foreign Office, with some officials arguing internally that there was no justification whatsoever for the screening of Soviet films in the UK because Soviet films had an 'obvious or concealed propaganda slant and the Russians clearly believe the film week would be to their advantage'.[59] Those taking this position believed British films, including documentaries, had little value as anti-communist propaganda, and that they would only serve Soviet interests in portraying the 'decadent West'.[60] Presumably they feared that organising a reciprocal film week in the UK would lead to criticism from the British press and, as a result, the wider public.[61] As one Foreign Official put it in an internal memo, if the film week in the UK went ahead then, 'the Beaverbrook Press and other habitual critics will no doubt complain that the taxpayers' money is being wasted, through the British Council with Foreign Office agreement, on boosting Soviet propaganda in this country'.[62]

The success of the film weeks at this stage rested on commercial reciprocity and therefore required the cooperation of the British film industry. The British Embassy in Moscow advised the Foreign Office that British film producers had to be persuaded to sell films to the Soviets under the market price.[63] This was something to which most British film producers were highly unlikely to agree. The British Council argued that it was necessary to engage 'really influential men' in the British film industry to try to sway British film producers to this viewpoint.[64] The influential men were the executive committee of the British Film Producers Association (BFPA), with the

[54]'Anglo-Soviet Film Week', 20 Jan. 1956, TNA, FO 371/123000.
[55]George Jellicoe to Paul Sinker, 8 Jul. 1955, TNA, BW/64/16.
[56]H. A. F. Hohler to British Embassy, 27 Jun. 1955, TNA, BW/64/16.
[57]*Ibid.*
[58]H. A. F. Hohler to British Embassy, 27 Jun. 1955, TNA, BW/64/16.
[59]Item 7: Proposed film festival, extracts from minutes, n.d., TNA, FO 371/123000.
[60]*Ibid.*
[61]*Ibid.*
[62]Memo from J. G. Ward, 4 Feb. 1956, TNA, FO 371/123000.
[63]Cecil Parrott to H. A. F. Hohler, 27 Jun. 1955, TNA, BW/64/16.
[64]Item 7: Proposed film festival, extracts from minutes, n.d., TNA, FO 371/123000.

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SRC requesting its official support for the film weeks in mid-1955. The BFPA confirmed it would 'do everything we can to be helpful'.[65] By August 1955, the BFPA Executive Committee voted to accept becoming the official channel of communication with the Soviet Embassy in London and Sovexportfilm, and for Sir Henry French, the then Director-General of the BFPA, to lead the negotiations on the general terms and framework for the reciprocal film weeks.[66]

The formal cooperation of the BFPA was short-lived, however. In December 1955, Henry French reported to the SRC that the negotiations were not proceeding 'satisfactorily'.[67] Days later, French wrote to the Foreign Office – sidelining the SRC – notifying it of the withdrawal of the BFPA's cooperation. French outlined the reason behind the BFPA's Executive Committee decision:

> There is no indication that the Russians are likely, no matter how successful the British Film Week in Moscow might be, to offer prices for British films above the very low level which has hitherto ruled ... The Committee of this Association after very careful consideration came to the conclusion that from a business point of view a British Film Week in Moscow was not likely to produce results of any value to British film producers.[68]

The BFPA's decision to withdraw was primarily motivated by potential financial losses. The SRC expected the BFPA to cover most, if not all, of the British costs for the film weeks. But a draft BFPA budget for cinema hire, publicity and advertisement, film dubbing and film prints, customs taxes and travel and accommodation estimated a total cost of £6,500, though with the true cost likely to be much higher.[69] For the BFPA, the costs were unjustifiable, and the organisation and its members would therefore not participate any further.

Throughout 1956, the film weeks remained at an impasse due to a 'conflict of opinion' on the UK side as to their purpose, both cultural and political, and because of the lack of formal support afforded by the British film industry.[70] These conflicts and divisions played out in a series of SRC meetings, with any final decision as to whether the British would engage in the film weeks being persistently deferred. The Foreign Office directed its representatives on the SRC not to veto whatever positions or decisions were adopted by the majority and to remain 'neutral'.[71] In particular, the Foreign Office did not want to intervene in decisions about the sale price of British films to the Soviets, telling its SRC representatives to 'acquiesce' to the majority viewpoint:[72] the market price of British films was a private business concern, not the concern of the British government. But the Foreign Office directed its SRC representatives to oppose calls from the BFPA for it to 'sponsor and give financial assistance' to the proposed film

[65]Henry French to Paul Sinker, 29 Jul. 1955, TNA, BW/64/16.
[66]Henry French to Paul Sinker, 11 Aug. 1955, TNA, BW/64/16.
[67]Soviet Relations Committee minutes, 6 Dec. 1955, TNA BW/64/16.
[68]Henry French to P. F. Grey, 8 Dec. 1955, TNA, BW/64/16.
[69]Estimate of costs, Dec. 1955, TNA, BW/64/24.
[70]'Anglo-Soviet Film Week', 20 Jan. 1956, TNA, FO/371/123000.
[71]Memo from J. G. Ward, 4 Feb. 1956, TNA, FO/371/123000.
[72]Report from H.A.F. Hohler, 3 Feb. 1956, TNA, FO/371/123000.

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weeks.[73] Instead, the Foreign Office representative told the SRC that the Soviets had to be persuaded to increase their offer for the purchase of British films, which might then encourage the BFPA to provide a financial contribution to the film weeks.

Paul Sinker of the British Council agreed with the Foreign Office position and committed only £3,000 to the film week's budget, significantly under the projected costs. But Christopher Mayhew continued to lobby the Foreign Office and the British Council to proceed with the film weeks and to cover the financial costs of the project. He argued that the film weeks were 'just the sort of project the SRC should encourage'[74] and that there would be little Soviet propaganda advantage given that a significant number of Soviet films had been exhibited in the UK already, including at dedicated seasons at the British Film Institute in London.[75]

Despite the impasse, the SRC established a Film Selection Working Party in May 1956 tasked with identifying potential British films should a film weeks project eventually go ahead. The Working Party was chaired by Kenneth Loch and comprised British Council Film Department representatives, two Foreign Office representatives, a *Sunday Times* film critic (Dilys Powell), and the President of the Association of Specialised Film Producers (Frank Hoare), whose organisation represented documentary and short film-makers. The Working Party's remit was to 'select films of a type likely to interest the Soviets and of a quality calculated to redound to the credit of our film industry' and 'to avoid subject matter which shows up our way of life in a bad light or could be represented as such by ill-disposed people'.[76] An initial list of sixteen feature films and twelve short films was selected (see Table 1).[77]

The film selection process appears to have been uncontentious, probably because it was only a scoping exercise to judge the viability of the reciprocal film weeks.[78] The dominant genre of feature films selected was comedy, with a combination of films by prestigious production companies (Ealing, Rank, British Lion) or starring renowned British actors (Alec Guiness, Dirk Bogarde) or British comedy icons of the era (Norman Wisdom). Comedy was preferred as it was seen as a more popular and accessible choice for Soviet audiences. But the Working Party expressed caution about selecting *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1952) as it believed its sophisticated humour would not be understood by Soviet audiences, indicating an attitude of cultural superiority from the representatives. However, the film was eventually selected following the intervention of the Foreign Office representatives, who noted that the text of Oscar Wilde's play was widely available across the USSR and its language and themes understood.[79] Films were also selected that clearly projected British imperial achievement (*Conquest of Everest*, 1953), endeavour (*Scott of the Antarctic*, 1948) and majesty (*A Queen is Crowned*, 1953). The selection of short films similarly aimed to project British power, innovation and culture, particularly in documentaries about the UK's technological entrepreneurialism (*A Powered Flight*, 1953; *Steel*, 1945; *Stanlow Story*, 1952; *Distant Neighbours*, 1956) or

[73] *Ibid.*
[74] *Ibid.*
[75] Memo from J. G. Ward, 4 Feb. 1956, TNA, FO/371/123000.
[76] Kenneth Loch to unknown, n.d., TNA, BW/64/16.
[77] SRC Working Party minutes, 15 May 1956, TNA, BW/64/25.
[78] Kenneth Loch to Paul Sinker, 14 Sept. 1956, TNA, BW/64/16.
[79] *Ibid.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100431 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 1. The initial selection of films for the British film week in the Soviet Union, May 1956

Feature films	Short films
The Cruel Sea (1953)	*Bridge of Time* (1950)
The Colditz Story (1955)	*Foxhunter – Champion Jumper* (1955)
Conquest of Everest (1953)	*Rival World* (1955)
Scott of the Antarctic (1948)	*Steel* (1945)
Richard III (1955)	*Powered Flight* (1953)
A Queen is Crowned (1953)	*Stanlow Story* (1952)
The Importance of Being Earnest (1952)	*The Undefeated* (1951)
Trouble in Store (1953)	*Thursday's Children* (1954)
Whisky Galore (1949)	*The Drawings of Leonardo da Vinci* (1953)
Genevieve (1953)	*The Heart is Highland* (1952)
Doctor in the House (1954)	*The Bespoke Overcoat* (1956)
The Lady Killers (1955)	*To the Rescue* (1952)
Geordy (1955)	*Distant Neighbours* (1956)
The Sound Barrier (1952)	
West of Zanzibar (1955)	
The Tales of Hoffman (1951)	
Gilbert & Sullivan (1953)	

films that showcased the UK as a premier tourist destination (*Bridge of Time*, 1950; *The Heart is Highland*, 1952). But films were also selected that reflected on the compassion of the British political and social model, including a film about scientific efforts to alleviate hunger and poverty (*Rival World*, 1955), a film about the care afforded to injured soldiers (*The Undefeated*, 1951) and a film about disability (*Thursday's Children*, 1954).

Despite the Working Party making its film selections, the decision on whether to proceed with the film weeks remained unresolved. The archival record indicates Soviet frustration at the British delay. The Soviet Minister of Culture attended a meeting of the SRC to urge it to 'take a favourable decision', while the BFPA was being pressured by the Soviets to commit to the film weeks.[80] The impasse largely resulted from the lack of financial backing and cooperation from the BFPA and an unwillingness from any of the SRC's representatives to veto the film weeks. This decision not to impose a veto appears to have been political. Some within the Foreign Office did not want to offend the Soviets and cause diplomatic controversy. Instead, an internal memo suggested that the Soviets could eventually be informed the project was being 'put on ice, without

[80]'Anglo-Soviet Film Week', 20 Jan. 1956, TNA FO/371/123000.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100431 Published online by Cambridge University Press

prejudice to its revival in a subsequent year', due to the lack of financial backing from the BFPA.[81] The BFPA informed the Foreign Office that 'if and when the project is finally abandoned' it would inform the press that the Soviets were to blame because they were refusing to buy British films at the market price.[82]

However, as it turned out the fate of the reciprocal film weeks was determined by external events. In December 1956, Christopher Mayhew, in a letter to the Soviet ambassador to the UK, stated that the SRC had decided not to proceed with the project 'owing to public opinion in this country'.[83] This was a reference to British outrage at the violent suppression of the Hungarian Revolution by the USSR a few weeks before, in which thousands were killed or wounded.

Yet, the Soviet ambassador contested Mayhew's suggestion that public opinion had led to the cancellation of the project. An article appeared in *The Times* in January 1957 in which the Soviet ambassador placed the blame on the SRC.[84] At this point, instead of engaging in private correspondence, both the British and Soviets waged a public relations campaign in the pages of *The Times*, with politicians on either side writing letters to the editor outlining their views. The Soviets argued that the SRC was using the Hungarian Revolution as nothing more than an excuse to break the agreement on cultural reciprocity. British politicians argued that the Soviets were to blame for the cancellation of the film weeks and other cultural manifestations due to their aggressive actions and their unwillingness to cooperate on genuinely commercial terms. Mayhew, in his own letter to *The Times*, revealed some of the problems encountered during the negotiations for the film weeks. Mayhew's letter expanded on the public opinion narrative, suggesting that it was also the opinion of industry and cultural organisations that had led to the pausing of cultural manifestations. But there was probably some truth to the Soviet claims that the Hungarian Revolution had been used as an excuse, with the incident serving as a convenient means to pause a project that the Foreign Office had viewed as a low priority since the establishment of the SRC.

The Foreign Office was clearly influencing the policy direction of the SRC at this point, even instructing Mayhew not to send any letters to the Soviet authorities until 'we saw what reaction there had been to your letter in *The Times*'.[85] The Foreign Office provided Mayhew with a 'suggested reply' to the Soviet ambassador, which was eventually sent at the end of January. The letter was much more diplomatic than the exchanges in *The Times* and was constructed principally to place blame for the cancellation of the film weeks on the film industry, rather than on the SRC or the UK government. In taking this approach, it also left open the possibility for reinstating cultural manifestations in the future.

Resurrecting the film weeks, 1957–1959

Revival of interest in the film weeks project came about in part because of UK government cuts to the budgets of the British Council and SRC in 1957. The SRC agreed that,

[81] *Ibid.*
[82] Report from J. L. W. Price, 29 Jan. 1956, TNA, FO/371/123000.
[83] Christopher Mayhew to A. A. Roshchin, 19 Dec. 1956, TNA, BW/64/16.
[84] 'Russian Film Festival Called Off', *The Times*, 9 Jan. 1957, p. 3.
[85] B. M. H. Tripp to Christopher Mayhew, 30 Jan. 1957, TNA, BW/64/24.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100431 Published online by Cambridge University Press

given the budget constraints it now faced, it could only consider financing those activities likely to have 'maximum impact on the Russian public', with a festival of British films in the USSR being the obvious option.[86] But the Foreign Office representatives on the SRC wanted a one-week only festival of British films in the USSR, with no Soviet festival in the UK. Protracted negotiations took place between the SRC and the Soviet Ministry of Culture throughout 1957 and into 1958, with an attempt to secure a non-reciprocal, non-commercial basis for the project. But the Soviets objected to any film week that was not reciprocal.

The SRC also re-approached the BFPA to seek its support for the revived film weeks project. Christopher Mayhew, in a letter to the BFPA, emphasised that the film weeks were in the 'national interest'.[87] The call to patriotic duty appears to have been a desperate attempt to engage an otherwise indifferent and at times hostile British film industry. In response, the BFPA offered its cooperation in December 1957, though with reservation and caution:[88] the organisation would not cover any of the costs for the film weeks, including the costs of providing film prints, which it estimated would total over £7,000 based on screening fourteen films across seven days.[89] It expected the SRC, the British Council or the Foreign Office to pay for the entire project, explaining that its members could not contribute costs to a venture that had no commercial prospects for them.[90] The BFPA's support therefore amounted to locating the relevant film prints for the film weeks as needed.

The British Council and SRC had invested considerable resources – both labour and financial – in the film weeks project by mid-1958, but no concessions had been made by the Soviets or the BFPA, and no additional funds had been provided by the Foreign Office. By July 1958, the SRC's budget was again under scrutiny. Its programme of cultural exchange was projected to cost at least £67,785 and needed to be reduced to £50,000. Cutting the film weeks from the SRC's programme of work therefore seemed likely. But before taking the action to pull the plug on the project once more, the SRC approached the Foreign Office to 'ascertain the degree of importance they attached to the festival'.[91] The SRC argued that if the film weeks were cut, the programme of cultural manifestations with the Soviets would 'look extremely thin', and that far too much time, labour and money had been invested to abort the project. 'We have gone too far to retreat', concluded W. R. Owain-Jones, the British Council's new Controller of Arts and Sciences.[92] The Foreign Office agreed that the film weeks project could proceed, but the SRC and British Council would have to fund it, with no assistance from the Foreign Office or the BFPA. This included funding the costs of film prints, which would need subtitling and shipping to the USSR; the hiring of cinemas in the UK; the printing of brochures and posters; costs of accommodation and transport for a Soviet delegation coming to the UK; and the staging of gala events in the UK.[93]

[86]Soviet Relations Committee minutes, 16 Aug. 1957.
[87]Christopher Mayhew to John Davis, 25 Oct. 1957, TNA, BW/64/24.
[88]E. J. Lee to Shepherd, 19 Dec. 1957, TNA, BW/64/24.
[89]Arthur Watkins to Christopher Mayhew, 27 Jan. 1958, TNA, BW/64/24.
[90]*Ibid.*
[91]W. R. Owain-Jones to F. Murray, 15 Jul. 1958, TNA, BW/64/24.
[92]*Ibid.*
[93]Notes on reciprocal film festivals, 23 Jan. 1959, TNA, BW/64/24.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100431 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Between 1957 and 1959, the operational delivery of the film weeks in the UK was being driven by the British Council, rather than the British film industry, as had been the intention during the original attempts to organise the festival between 1955 and 1956. This was due to the film weeks no longer having a commercial focus and because of the lack of financial sponsorship from the British film industry. The SRC continued to provide strategic oversight and remained the forum where both the state and non-state actors debated the project and attempted to assert influence over its direction. But the key barriers to organisation were the lack of progress in negotiations with the Soviets, which were being held up by a combination of budgetary constraints (see above), delayed responses from the Soviet authorities to correspondence from the British Council and SRC, an unenthusiastic British film and cinema industry that was not overly cooperative, and interference by the Foreign Office and the British Embassy in Moscow, both of which were trying to set the overall policy direction for the project.

A key example of the frustrated process of organising the film weeks was the delay in finalising a date on which they would take place. The BFPA wanted to ensure that the film weeks did not clash with major international events, such as the Cannes Film Festival in May 1959, whilst the British cinema industry would not allow the film week in the UK to take place without at least three months' notice and outside the distribution window of any major film releases. The Soviet authorities wanted to avoid their own major international cultural events, including the Moscow International Film Festival in August 1959. The British Council wanted to avoid clashes with any of its other cultural manifestations, including a planned book exhibition in autumn 1959 and a visit by the Stratford Theatre Company. And the British Embassy wanted to avoid the film week in the USSR clashing with the ambassador's annual leave.[94]

Most of the operational delivery was left to C. M. Middleton, the Director of the British Council's Films Department. Middleton engaged in frantic correspondence between 1958 and 1959 as she liaised between the various state and non-state actors involved. Middleton's attempts to hire cinemas in London, Birmingham and Glasgow for the Soviet festival in the UK were arguably her greatest challenge. Cinema managers were not cooperative and were often outright dismissive of her letters requesting quotes and availability. She even attempted to co-opt political support, including asking Christopher Mayhew to liaise with fellow MPs who sat on cinema trade associations. Her attempts to secure cinema spaces of an adequate capacity were also undermined by the Soviet authorities, who questioned whether the choices of cinema were prestigious enough. For example, Middleton was able to reserve the National Film Theatre in London. But the Soviet ambassador to the UK was lukewarm about the suggestion, indicating that he felt it was in an undesirable location as it was on the south bank of the Thames.[95] Middleton's task was therefore not merely an administrative process of finding and hiring available cinemas, but also a diplomatic task fraught with potential offence: the space, size and location of the cinemas were instrumental to the overall need to soothe and boost the standing of the Soviet authorities and its film industry on an international stage. As Middleton concluded several months after the festivals had taken place, 'all overseas film festivals are hell to organise!'[96]

[94]Christopher McAlpine to Michael Warr, 23 Jun. 1958, TNA, BW/64/24.

[95]Memo, UK Embassy, 23 Jan. 1959, TNA, BW/64/24.

[96]C. M. Middleton to W. R. Owain-Jones, 8 Jun. 1960, TNA, BW/64/52.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100431 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The key organisational task remained the final selection of films to be screened. The SRC reconvened the Film Selection Working Party in March 1958 to revisit the list originally drawn up in May 1956.[97] The Working Party again included representatives of the British Council, Foreign Office and film critics. They requested that the BFPA put forward a new long list of fourteen films – seven features and seven documentaries – from which the Working Party would select a final shortlist of seven films, all of which would be screened at the Soviet Embassy in London for final approval. Should the Soviets object to any of the seven films, they would be substituted with another from the long list of fourteen. However, at a meeting of the SRC in April 1958, the Foreign Office intervened, suggesting a preference for fourteen films to be submitted to the Soviets.[98] Following exchanges with the British Embassy in Moscow, the SRC Working Party was instructed by the Foreign Office to provide a list of fourteen feature films (including documentaries) and fourteen short films to the Soviet Embassy, from which they would choose seven of each.[99] The Foreign Office's motivation was to try and prevent the Soviets from submitting a limited list of their own, arguing that a wider choice of films 'would make it less easy for them to make suggestions of their own which we might not like'.[100] The British Council was not happy with this instruction, believing that an expansive list from which the Soviets would choose seven films would only further delay the organisation of the festival, which was tentatively scheduled for February or March 1959.[101]

The BFPA, with the assistance of the Federation of British Film Makers (FBFM), had selected twenty films for the Working Party by the end of November 1958.[102] The BFPA was meant to have representatives on the Working Party, but withdrew them at the start of December, saying it could no longer be involved in the selection process.[103] It is not clear why the BFPA withdrew its representatives at this point. It might have been due to wider discontent from members of the BFPA, who were complaining about the decision not to include particular films on the long list. One such complainant was the producer John Woolf, who was 'considerably surprised' at the omission of *Moulin Rouge* (1952), *Room at the Top* (1959) and *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957). The BFPA had encouraged the Working Party to consider the latter film because it had become known as an American film and its inclusion in the British film week would remind 'the Russians and the world in general that it *is* a British film'.[104] The Working Party informed the BFPA that *The Bridge on the River Kwai* was not selected because its American distributors had recently shown it in Moscow to Soviet authorities, whose reaction had been one of admiration for the film-making craft but incredulity that a film had been made 'about a general who collaborated with the enemy!'[105] Similarly, *Room at the Top* was perceived by the Working Party as being too salacious and that it

[97]C. M. Middleton to W. R. Owain-Jones, 20 Mar. 1958, TNA, BW/64/24.
[98]Soviet Relations Committee minutes, 29 Apr. 1958, TNA, BW/64/24.
[99]Michael Carr to W. R. Owain-Jones, 3 Nov. 1958, TNA, BW/64/24.
[100]Christopher McAlpine to Michael Warr, 23 Jun. 1958, TNA, BW/64/24.
[101]C. M. Middleton to Arthur Watkins, 13 Nov. 1958, TNA, BW/64/24.
[102]Arthur Watkins to C. M. Middleton, 20 Nov. 1958, TNA, BW/64/24.
[103]E. J. Lee to C. M. Middleton, 2 Dec. 1958, TNA, BW/64/24.
[104]Arthur Watkins to C. M. Middleton, 8 Dec. 1958, TNA, BW/64/24.
[105]C. M. Middleton to Arthur Watkins, 12 Dec. 1958, TNA, BW/64/24.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100431 Published online by Cambridge University Press

would shock Soviet audiences: 'Russians, as I think you know, are somewhat puritan in their tastes in films.'[106]

The final selection of British films underwent several changes between the summer of 1958 and the actual British film week in October 1959 (see Table 2). Notable films that were dropped from the shortlist included *Brief Encounter* (1945) and *The Red Shoes* (1948), replaced by *Richard III* (1955) and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which were seen as projecting an image of high culture. Popular Ealing comedy *The Ladykillers* (1955) was dropped from the list due to a week-long screening of Ealing Productions in Moscow being privately arranged by Contemporary Films.[107] Ultimately, the Working Party aimed to select a list that would be accepted outright by the Soviet authorities and that would also be 'quite innocuous from a political point of view'.[108]

The desire to avoid any political or diplomatic incident impacted on the British approval of Soviet films too, including whether to accept the Soviet selection of the war film *Fate of a Man* (1959).[109] The British Council perceived the film to be 'violently' anti-German and feared that it would cause offence.[110] Yet, the Foreign Office feared the greater offence would be to the Soviets if the film was not screened, thereby undermining the whole objective of the film weeks. The Foreign Office felt it would be much easier to deal with the diplomatic fallout with the Germans than it would with the Soviets, concluding that it was a 'good film' which was 'anti-Nazi' – not simply anti-German – and that screening it would 'undoubtedly help Anglo-Soviet relations'.[111] The Foreign Office concluded that it was a risk 'well worth taking'.[112]

TWhat is discernible from the correspondence in the archive are the differing motivations of those involved in the film selection. For the BFPA, the overriding motive was commercial self-interest, the aim being to project a national British cinema that equalled if not rivalled other film industries, not least Hollywood. For the Foreign Office and British Council, it was about propaganda and diplomacy, the aim here being to screen films that projected British values and ideology, while also avoiding offence at all costs. Approval of both the British selection and Soviet selection of films had taken many months and was only finalised by the summer of 1959, just three months before the film weeks were due to take place.[113]

Delivery and reception of the film weeks, autumn 1959

Despite the struggles, frustrations and diplomatic tensions, the reciprocal film weeks eventually took place in autumn 1959. The Soviet festival in the UK came first, opening in London and Glasgow on 21 September and running to 27 September before moving to Birmingham for seven days from 28 September. Screenings took place at London's Curzon Cinema, with 5,071 attendances; Glasgow's Cosmo Cinema,

[106] *Ibid*.
[107] C. M. Middleton to Andrew Filson, 24 Apr. 1959, TNA, BW/64/24.
[108] C. M. Middleton to Arthur Watkins, 23 Dec. 1958, TNA, BW/64/24.
[109] See Gaute, *The Dancer Defects*, 228–9 for more on *Fate of a Man* and the wider Soviet New Wave.
[110] C. M. Middleton to Michael Warr, 27 May 1959, TNA, BW/64/24.
[111] L. R. Phillips to Christopher Mayhew and H. F. Oxbury, 1 Jul. 1959, TNA, BW/64/25.
[112] *Ibid*.
[113] C. M. to W. R. Owain-Jones, 2 Jul. 1959, TNA, BW/64/25.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100431 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 2. The final approved programme of films for the 1959 UK–USSR Film Festivals

British film week programme	
Features	**Documentaries**
Richard III (1955)	*Journey into Spring* (1958)
Oliver Twist (1948)	*Between the Tides* (1958)
Genevieve (1953)	*Under Night Streets* (1958)
Geordie (1955)	*Thursday's Children* (1954)
Woman in a Dressing Gown (1957)	*Forming of Metals* (1959)
The Importance of Being Earnest (1952)	*An Experiment in Towns* (1958)
The Horse's Mouth (1958)	*Skyport* (1958)
Soviet film week programme	
Features	**Documentaries**
Their Lives are in Your Hands (1959)	*Leningrad Autumn* (1956)
Teenagers (1959)	*Workers of the Dzerjinsky Plant* (1958)
Paternal Home (1959	*Conquering Seven Mountain Peaks*
The New Number (1957)	(1958)
The Idiot (1958)	*Stalingrad Today* (1957)
The Captain's Daughter (1958)	*Lights of Zhiguli* (1958)
Fate of a Man/The Destiny of a Man (1959)	*Amidst the Blue Atlai Mountains* (1957)
	When the Spirit Soars in Flight (1958)

with 5,939; and Birmingham's Forum, with 4,378.[114] One of the most popular films, based on the attendance figures, was *The Idiot* (1958), perhaps because audiences would have been familiar with the novel by Fyodor Dostoevsky from which it was adapted. But attendance overall was lower in Birmingham compared to London and Glasgow. It was a point that the British Council observed, with the Area Officer stating that despite a heavy media campaign, attendance at Birmingham was 'about one third normal (attendance), which seems to show that the Birmingham public does not really take to Soviet films'.[115] There was also a report in the *Daily Mail* that implied attendance was disappointing in Glasgow as well. It described the opening gala performance at the Cosmo Cinema as 'the oddest film premiere of the year' with 'no crowds' and rows of empty seats inside the auditorium.[116] Yet, the Area Officer reported that the festival in Glasgow had been 'a complete success'

[114]C. M. to W. R. Owain-Jones, 20 Oct. 1959, TNA, BW/64/52.
[115]Area Officer to Press Officer, 2 Oct. 1959, TNA, BW/64/52.
[116]*Daily Mail*, 22 Sept. 1959, TNA, BW/64/31.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100431 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and attributed this mainly to the official Soviet delegation who were 'very nice and cooperative'.[117]

British reviews of the Soviet film programme veered between indifference and outright negativity. Those that were critical argued that the programme was just a propaganda exercise in disguise. One regional British journalist wrote that the entire festival 'seemed to me to smack strongly of propaganda'.[118] David Sylvester, writing in *The New Statesman*, argued that it was not a genuine reflection of Soviet cinema:

> I take it that I'm expected to write about The Festival of Soviet Films as something more than a number of films which happen to come from the Soviet Union. But, if I did, would I be writing about the state of the Soviet cinema or about the taste of Soviet cultural officials?[119]

However, a significant number of film critics and journalists agreed that there was one stand-out film: *Fate of a Man*, the film which the SRC Working Party had considered rejecting. The film was praised for its realism and portrayal of the horrors of war. But aside from this, critics and journalists were generally indifferent to the festival, describing it as lacklustre, timid and not representative of Soviet cinema or everyday life in the USSR. Instead, they felt, it was a diplomatic exercise that aimed to present a safe film programme that would not cause offence. The key problem – one that also applied to the British film week in the USSR – was that only seven feature films and seven documentaries were presented by each country, which, as John Gillet in the *Observer* noted, could not do justice to a nation's cinema: 'Seven films cannot, of course, sum up the achievements of [the Russian] industry which, in 1958, produced 103 films and continues to expand rapidly.'[120]

The British film weeks constituted the first wholly British festival of film in the USSR. The first took place in Moscow's Udarnik Cinema and Kiev's Kinoteatr cinema from 20 October; the second in Leningrad's Kinoteatr Velikan cinema from 28 October. An official British delegation comprised the actor Kay Walsh and the producers Ronald Neame and Frank Launder. A report in the *Observer* claimed that the screenings throughout the film weeks were all sold out. The report was in part reliant on the claims of Soviet officials, who said they expected 90,000 people to attend the film weeks across the three cities. But the journalist also described their own experience in the Udarnik Cinema, saying there were queues of Russians trying to buy tickets and that the foyer of the cinema was like rush hour at a central London Tube station.[121]

Just like their British counterparts, Soviet film critics were generally indifferent to the programme of films on offer, though the extent to which their reviews were uninfluenced by the Soviet authorities is questionable. It was certainly the case that many Soviet critics viewed the British films through an ideological lens. As one noted, none of the films 'attempts the more important questions of life, or serious moral

[117] Report, Area Officer, 5 Oct. 1959, TNA, BW/64/31.
[118] *Daily Telegraph* (Peterborough), 22 Sept. 1959, TNA, BW/64/31.
[119] *New Statesman*, 3 Oct. 1959, TNA, BW/64/31.
[120] *Observer*, 27 Sept. 1959, TNA, BW/64/31.
[121] *The Observer*, 25 Oct. 1959, TNA, BW/64/52.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100431 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and aesthetic questions'.[122] Soviet critics argued that the British films represented the excesses of capitalism and degenerate Western lifestyles, thereby using them as a means of propaganda, just as the Foreign Office had feared. One critic said most of the films drew upon the Hollywood concept of the 'happy ending', which changes 'the hard truth of reality into a happy falsehood of chance'.[123] However, many of the critics were drawn to *Richard III*, reviewing it by and large positively. Critics' predisposition to the film was, one wrote, because Russia was the 'second home of Shakespeare'.[124] But whatever the reaction of the Soviet critics, British reports clearly verified the enthusiasm of local audiences for the films on offer, indicating at the very least a curiosity for Western cultural products to which they had limited access.

One key element of the success of the British film weeks was their accompanying official brochure. In a press release, the SRC specifically highlighted its publication: 'The brochure contains a foreword by the British ambassador in Moscow, a history of the British film industry by Dr Roger Manvell and an address list of the leading film organisations in Britain.'[125] The SRC believed it had secured a propaganda coup with the publication and distribution of the brochure, a point further stressed in a letter by the British Council's Paul Sinker: 'It is nice to think that nearly 5000 copies of the brochure have been left in the Soviet Union.'[126] The brochure commenced with Manvell's essay, 'Sixty-Five Years of British Films', in which he argued that the achievements of Soviet cinema were built on the foundations of the cinematic arts established in the UK, and that without the innovations of British cinematographers, Soviet film-makers such as Sergei Eisenstein could not have made the films they did. The twenty-page essay – printed in both English and Russian – set out a history of British cinema from the 1890s through to the 1950s, but more importantly it repeatedly positioned the UK as the leading nation in terms of cinematic innovation, citing examples such as the development of colour photography in 1906 or the later development of Stereo Techniques and Technirama in the 1950s. The brochure was also a key means of communicating with Soviet film-makers and audiences concerning the advancements shaped by the British capitalist system, as well as a way of advertising British films for sale in the USSR.

Conclusion

It took over four years to negotiate, organise and deliver the UK–USSR film weeks of 1959. Whilst the Soviets remained committed to the cultural exchange throughout, UK state and non-state actors abandoned the project or frustrated its progression on several occasions between 1955 and 1959, reflecting differences of opinion and policy motivation both within and across the groups involved. These divisions – political, cultural, industrial – played out in the forum of the SRC, leading to the 'contradictory tendencies' identified by Sarah Davies.[127] The Foreign Office was split as to the purpose

[122] *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 27 Oct. 1959, TNA, BW/64/52.
[123] *Trud*, 25 Oct. 1959, TNA, BW/64/52.
[124] *Sovetskaya kultura*, 24 Oct. 1959, TNA, BW/64/52.
[125] Press release, n.d., TNA, BW/64/52.
[126] Paul Sinker, 6 Nov. 1959, TNA, BW/64/52.
[127] Davies, 'From Iron Curtain', 604.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100431 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and impact of the film weeks, believing the project gave a propaganda advantage to the Soviets as many British films were likely to portray the UK as decadent. The BFPA was uncooperative due to the lack of commercial incentive and the unwillingness of the Soviets to pay the market rate for British films. The British Council was split as to what the policy focus of the SRC should be, with some siding with the Foreign Office perspective that the film weeks would only benefit the Soviets. All these groups were also wary of the potentially negative reaction of the British press and the wider public to spending taxpayers' money on a festival of Soviet films in the UK.

Given these tensions and conflicting policy motivations, it is intriguing that the SRC proceeded with the film weeks at all and were able to participate on a reciprocal basis. Despite the divisions of opinion, there appears to have been considerable impetus behind the project and – more generally – the use of film as a tool in cultural exchange. This impetus stemmed from the SRC's chair, Christopher Mayhew. He was steadfast in his commitment to the film weeks from the beginning, remaining convinced of their potential for impact within the USSR. He felt they might expose mass audiences to British ideas, values and culture in ways that other forms of cultural exchange could not. For Mayhew, the advantages of the film weeks outweighed any negative effects of screening Soviet films in the UK, many of which were already available in the country. He also saw the film weeks as a means of making visible the work of the SRC, something that became an important consideration by the late 1950s when both the SRC and British Council faced budget cuts.

Arguably the greatest factor in the British proceeding with the film weeks was that no one group represented on the SRC wanted to take responsibility for abandoning the project. The Foreign Office recognised the diplomatic sensitivities given the fact that the Soviets had originated the project; hence they sought to shift the blame onto the British film industry for its lack of cooperation. The BFPA sought to blame the Soviets for their refusal to pay a fair price for British films. And the British Council was frustrated by the Foreign Office's indecisiveness and unwillingness to contribute funds. All this led to the somewhat chaotic organisation and delivery of the film weeks by the British. The SRC pushed ahead with them because no one group or individual wished to be blamed for their failure. In particular, the British Council was acutely aware of the financial and labour resources that had been invested in the project and the potential criticism it could face should the film weeks be abandoned.

The UK–USSR film weeks were not a unique approach to cultural exchange, with nations such as France, India and China having delivered film weeks either in collaboration with the USSR or with other countries earlier in the 1950s. The UK was in fact trailing behind in the cultural Cold War in the delivery of this form of cultural exchange and had only pursued the 1959 film weeks at the initiation of the USSR. The archival record indicates a hesitancy on the part of all the state actors involved: they were unsure about how to deliver the film weeks successfully, and they lacked knowledge about the Soviet film industry.[128] There was also an attitude of cultural elitism expressed by some on the SRC's Film Selection Working Party, reflected in the suggestion that certain British films were too high-brow for Soviet audiences.[129] And there

[128]C. M. Middleton to Howard Harrison, 7 Jul. 1958, TNA, BW/64/24; Memo from Kenneth Loch, 15 Sept. 1955, TNA, BW/64/16.

[129]SRC Working Party minutes, 15 May 1956, TNA, BW/64/25.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100431 Published online by Cambridge University Press

was an opinion among high-profile producers in the British film industry that the SRC, British Council and Foreign Office were outdated in their approach to the Cold War and that they lacked understanding about contemporary international cinema. For example, the critically and commercially successful producer John Woolf accused the British Council of being 'completely out of touch with Russian taste' – he had secured a distribution deal for his film *Room at the Top* in the USSR following its screening at the 1959 Moscow International Film Festival, claiming that it was sold 'at a price which, I understand, is the highest ever paid for a British film by the Russians'.[130]

Yet, there was clearly a recognition by those represented on the SRC of the potential power of film weeks in cultural exchange and the need to pursue them further as part of the cultural Cold War. Film weeks could have mass impact that other forms of cultural exchange could not, generating mainstream press coverage and wide public engagement. Following the completion of the film weeks, the Foreign Office concluded they had been a success and requested that the British Council consider a second set of reciprocal film festivals in the early 1960s. The Foreign Office's tone was very different from that of just a few years before, when it had viewed the film weeks as offering a potential propaganda coup to the USSR. This change was probably due to how the British film weeks in the USSR projected an image of a strong national cinema. The British Council also believed the film weeks had impacted positively on the commercial viability of British films in the USSR. In 1960, an internal memo claimed that the Rank Organisation had sold six of its films for distribution in the USSR, including *Oliver Twist*, and that Lion International had sold *Geordie* for distribution, 'as a result of the festival'.[131] And in 1961, the British Embassy reported that Associated British Pictures Corporation had sold the film *Woman in a Dressing Gown* following its appearance in the film week programme.[132]

The case study of the 1959 film weeks furthers understanding of the cultural Cold War through its focus on the role of such events in cultural exchange and the work of the SRC. While the SRC was the driver of the British attempts to negotiate and deliver the film weeks, it was also where the project was frustrated and delayed due to its representational make-up and attempts to bring together diverse groups of state and non-state actors who had conflicting motivations. This led to compromise and the aversion of risk in terms of the film selection. But the project was still viewed as a success, one of many achieved by the SRC.[133] And whilst the organisation of the film weeks was not smooth, and the policy intentions and impact were not always clear – indeed, the overriding aim seems to have ultimately been the avoidance of offence – their perceived success had a longer-term impact on British Council policy, becoming a key form of cultural exchange organised by the British Council in the following decades.

[130]John Woolf to H. F. Oxbury, 13 Aug. 1959, TNA, BW/64/25.
[131]Memo, C. M. Middleton, 8 Jun. 1960, TNA, BW/64/52.
[132]British Embassy to Foreign Office, 27 Jul. 1961, TNA, BW/64/52.
[133]Davies, 'From Iron Curtain', 624.

Cite this article: James Fenwick, 'The UK–USSR Film Weeks of 1959: Examining Political, Cultural and Industrial Motivations in Cultural Exchange Activity,' *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (2025), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440125100431