

An Odyssey to the Iron Curtain: A History of the USSR-Philippine Cultural Dispatches (1966-1987)

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Abstract: Philippine expeditions to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics at the height of the Cold War had not warranted much attention. These relentless efforts were intended to extend courtesy, hospitality, and support between Filipino and Soviet peoples. This article contends cultural diplomacy to be the most developed area in Philippine and USSR relations by tracing the continuities of Soviet foreign policy before during, and after the Détente. In light of stronger bilateral relations as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, might this article start to examine new documents that have come to light through a history of foreign affairs. The article hopes to recover shared undercurrents in academics, culture, and the arts in the promotion of Philippine and Soviet cultures alike.

Keywords: Soviet Union, Détente, the Philippines, cultural diplomacy, diplomatic history

Introduction

Not more than fifty years ago did culture serve as a language to bridge nations divided by a global conflict of identities and ideologies. Philippine diplomatic ties with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), or the Soviet Union were formally initiated in 1966 during Ferdinand Marcos' interregnum of power. Yet the impact of these bilateral relations had not been weighed in the face of cultural cooperation at the time of the Détente. Meantime, Soviet aid and influence in other parts of the world, particularly in developing non-communist countries with nationalist frontiers were largely feared by the United States to become wellsprings of communism (Guan-fu, 1983, pp. 72-75). The People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union's scramble for power gushed with various communist victories that transpired in insular and peninsular territories (Singh, 1987, p. 276-295).

At the breach of the Sino-Soviet divergence in 1960, Southeast Asia was a region of great interest. The Second Indochinese War and Konfrontasi are no hollow compliments to North Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, and Indonesian socialist forces which were all influenced by Marxist, Leninist, and Maoist creeds. It is sufficiently easy to

assume that these conflicts threatened commonwealths of democracy and national securities of non-communist nations. As an effort to prevent further encroachment, these countries were quick to assert their independence, reputations, and images. Only a few studies on this area have been carried out despite the vast array of sources that have faded into obscurity over the years. An adequate number of materials from local private collections document the USSR-Philippine cultural activities were gathered for this study prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Part of the difficulty, however, involved in this research is the inaccessibility of relevant documents and archives in the Russian language.

This study is an attempt to reconstruct a sketch of Philippine cultural dispatches to the Soviet Union that led to the broadening of Filipino culture, particularly in the areas of art, history, literature, music, and dance in the USSR. Tracing the continuities and changes in USSR-Philippine cultural contact from 1966 to 1987, this study uses cultural diplomacy as a framework of analysis and examines regional politics that led to ongoing interactions between the two countries. Careful attention must also be paid to the role of these expeditions vis-à-vis to the political climate of Southeast Asia during that time. This is key in

understanding how cultural diplomacy becomes a developed area of USSR-Philippine relations. Such follows after the fact that these inceptive bilateral relations are paving a way for local healthcare with the adoption of Russia's Sputnik V vaccines as a cure against the COVID-19 pandemic. This article hopes to expand more on Soviet cultural policy without having to discuss much of its economic dimensions. It would be remiss to say the least, that the short-sighted frailties of the Cold War included the manipulation of image as power.¹ Finally, the article identifies various Filipino groups and individuals who were representatives to the USSR to bring about a 'new image' of Philippine involvement during the Cold War.

Cultural Diplomacy and the Iron Curtain

The goals of Soviet foreign policy do not veer away from the greater body of Marxist writing – a 'cultural revolution' will try to engulf the world in communism. It is enriched by an advocacy of a class war, best represented by eliminating private means of production within a regime, thereby replacing it with communal efforts. Vladimir Lenin, one of its early proponents, rationalized that Soviet power was an extension of the people's power against a class system of bourgeoisie oppression. (Zvorykin et al., 1970, pp. 9-13). The removal from power of the Czarist Romanovs in the 1917 October Revolution sat well with the Russian peasantry who demanded equal treatment from their commercial patricians.

Lenin saw this collective dominance as a refashioning of society as he saw it fit where capitalist countries can make the necessary efforts to secure a successful transition to socialism. In two years, Lenin gathered socialist supporters from all around Europe creating an alliance of communist parties called the Communist International, or Comintern. Each member nation-state was represented by a delegation in the Executive Congress that stressed the news of Russia's revolutionary cause to their people (Raymond, 1969, pp. 363-364). Soon, the Comintern turned into an international platform where Soviet compatriots espoused diplomatic ties with other nations

vindicated by 'cultural' diplomacy. Out of this confluence, Comintern members emerged with mutual support from reformed governments in Central, and later, East Asia.

Teeming with confidence, Premier Nikita Khrushchev sought to provide aid as the backbone for developing Third World nations.² Nations who were in the process of attaining autonomy and independence from the clutches of colonial, and imperialist regimes (Guan-fu, p. 76-77, 82-86). Such sweeping ambitions were not the full story. Though the Soviet Union offered economic and military agreements, it strategically chose to which countries it offered aid (Birgersson, 1997, pp. 214-16). Soviet competition antagonized capitalist and Maoist control of these regions driving ever-growing nationalist frontiers to fan out in every direction.

Soviet cultural diplomacy was not limited to nurturing aesthetic and intellectual proportions of Marxist-Leninist creeds, too, was the exercise of power through image. Gouldin-Davies (2003) argues that often scholars have blithely disregarded cultural diplomacy as a linchpin in Cold War-era relations largely for the fact that it has not been considered part of "high politics." This is to suggest that "low politics" includes escaping direct military confrontation, less important for the state's survival while remaining ideologically dominant. Such diplomacy warrants culture and heritage as the common ground in pursuing foreign affairs with other nations. The USSR used this as a tool to converse with scientific and humanitarian dialogue by taking part in cultural and educational exchanges meant to enhance Lenin's "productionist vision of a socialist future," (pp.193-195). Able to draw note under his sway, the state-sponsored Agentstvo Pechati Novosti or APN Novosti Press Agency began to use this power as an olive-branch to its advantageous allies.

Novosti was a collective of scholars, journalists, and writers with contacts to friends of the Soviet Union abroad. Novosti monopolized foreign intellectuals by opening its publication floodgates to spread pertinent materials that were of interest to other nations. On one hand, Novosti invited foreign delegations to visit the USSR to

¹An edifice complex as where the exercise of state-power is merely a reflection of state-image.

² It is sufficiently easy enough to assume that the USSR was not equipped to compete with resilient capitalist countries. The Soviet Union's

eager capacity to provide aid to the Third World gave it an edge to support its allies and inundate their markets with Soviet goods.

gather confidence on the part of the two countries. On the other, committees within the Foreign Affairs Ministries arranged cultural tours and exhibitions within the Soviet Union. The Agency commissioned Soviet artists, dancers, musicians, and scientists to propagate prominent impressions of the USSR to foreign lands. Its passive nature, however, leaves

Culture as Influence in Ante-Détente Southeast Asia

The USSR's interest in Southeast Asia was reactive to pressures on two frontiers: the nuclear arms race against the US; and the Sino-Soviet hegemony. Truly, this was the pervading conflict for the former until when tensions were more relaxed during the Détente – a period of US-USSR negotiations (1967-1979). Such talks initiated a dialogue on recuperating markets, disarmament of small arms, and prevention of a nuclear war. For the latter, what was largely caused by a rivalry as the leading influence of communism in the world. It is fair to note that communist ideologies whether Marxist-Leninist or Maoist creeds, found it fairly easy to cohabitate with one another in the region. The responses to these frontiers, whether direct or indirect, did not only shape politics in the region but stirred how countries saw themselves. Soviet cultural diplomacy was largely impinged by ideology but more so as a culture of image in state-making and un-making. On one hand, nations descried autonomy and independence as counterbalances to age-old colonial systems. On the other, sweeping groves of citizen dissidents opposed home-grown authoritarian regimes.

After all, the Philippines offers curious parallelisms to these cultural influences. For one, a shared declaration between the Philippines and US mutually announcing the dissolution of the Laurel-Langley Agreement by 1978. Another reduced the Military Bases Agreement to less than a quarter of a century but was later renegotiated in 1979 (Official Gazette, 1979). Marcos made it seem easy to sympathize with his vision of a New Society (Bagong Lipunan) as an exercise of local authoritarianism. In Southeast Asia, There was a mutual fear and rejection of communism.³ As a

³ The Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) reorganized as a Mao-inspired movement in December 1968. The CPP denounced policies of the USSR in Southeast Asia. Although this was not the Philippines' official position, Filipino politicians

the door unlatched for the transmission of ideas and identities. Cultural identity was such a crucial dimension to the Soviet Union, that as it welcomed reform and diminished antagonism over other Western convictions, the USSR fell and the Cold War ended.

consequence of their prevailing concern for the region's security, the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) was formed in 1967 with five member-states including the Philippines. Almost immediately the USSR began engaging with ASEAN. It established embassies in countries and instantaneously formed contacts as US interventions ebbed in the region (Birgersson, 217-218). It came as no surprise as Marcos had welcomed the idea of trading with the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc in January 1968.

What was no less impressive – though much more often ignored – is the fact that USSR-Philippine diplomatic relations began directly after the US-Philippine bulletin. Exactly eight years before the Agreement's abrogation. The little-known facts reveal what could have been the Marcos administration's vexation to US interference in national economic and political affairs. This is not altogether distressing for it favored Filipino control over dollar exchanges and crude export quotas. Meantime in August 1968, members of a Filipino music band touring the USSR were photographed in Moscow by Novosti.⁴ This would mark as one of the first of many unofficial cultural dispatches to the USSR.

USSR-Philippine Cultural Interchanges

Détente Contingent (1968-1978)

Voyages to the Soviet Union by Filipinos were not new even during the Détente. Cultural and political vanguards were notorious visitors to the USSR. National Artist for Literature F. Sionil José in 1967 was a guest of the Soviet Writers Union on the 50th Anniversary of the Russian Revolution (José, 2020). He was toured around Eastern Europe, provided his own pocket money and guide as a

feared that it would negatively impact ties between the two countries.

⁴ See Alexander, 1968, [Online image], Sputnik Images.

patron to the occasion. Local racism was lobbed against threes of impending conflict with China. His visit was impressionistic when a Russian man prejudiced him for a Chinese instead of a Filipino. José was also friends with Igor Podberezky, a Soviet scholar of Tagalog in Manila. He exonerated his fears of becoming a communist, but Podberesky chortled that it would be less than convincing because of the discrimination. In 1969, Senator Benigno Aquino, Jr. was also invited by the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries after he publicly aspired to run for the 1973 presidential elections (Sumsy, 2011). At any rate, influential personas were well thought of, perhaps not only as innovators but as tools for extending Soviet political influence elsewhere.

Various members of the Cabinet, Congress, and Senate followed suit. It was more than apparent that the Marcos administration remained adamant to deal with the USSR. Philippine delegations attended to the Soviet Union on numerous occasions between 1968 to 1985. Executive Secretary Alejandro Melchor, Jr. saw the benefits of Soviet aid in India in refining natural resources before his visit in 1969. He saw how the exploration of oil introduced basic industries to South Asia (Bigornia, 1971, pp. 7-10 & Bigornia, 1971, pp. 10-11). Upon his arrival in Moscow, it was clear that he had become convinced that arriving at an economic agreement would surely suit Filipino interests. Across several months from May to September 1970, Philippine Congress delegates were toured Moscow and exposed to expositions of Soviet advancements in commercial and aerospace technologies.⁵ In September 1971, Senate President Gil Puyat is photographed at the Kremlin together with his Soviet counterpart, Yagdar Nasriddinova.⁶ Puyat's visit came with precedence as preparations were underway for First Lady and Culture Minister Imelda Marcos's visit to the USSR in October.

In an oral history with Valery Sorokin, a cultural attaché at the USSR Consulate in Manila, he recalled that the visits aimed to build cooperation on several pressing issues to generate equality amongst all peoples. Novosti spoke to Mrs. Marcos who said, "Peace and prosperity in the whole world depend on good relations between nations," she

proclaimed in a statement (Araos et al., 1986). These visits by state officials continued beyond May 1972 when Tourism Minister Jose Aspiras attended the 15th Congress of Soviet Trade Unions. It is instructive to note these visits as continuous and perhaps for good reasons. Marcos's declaration of martial law in 1972 eased his administration's position in international politics by suppressing domestic criticism and propelled his agenda without scrutiny. The same year, Sorokin attests, Mrs. Marcos institutes a USSR-Philippine Friendship Society in Manila but the actual date of its inauguration is contested. There is a Novosti photograph naming Labor Minister Blas Ople as head of a similar delegation in Moscow in June 1974.⁷ University of the Philippines Madrigal Singers performed at Lenin State Academic Capella in 1973, marking the first official Philippine cultural dispatch to succeed a state visit to the USSR.

President Marcos met with Premier Leonid Brezhnev in 1976 where they conferred on the shared goals of peace in the region. An agreement promoting bilateral trade and cultural interchange was drafted and drawn during the visit. (Araos et al., 38-41). Five months later, Soviet businessmen flocked to Manila to attend the World Trade Fair. Non-interference in domestic affairs adapted from the United Nations (UN) Charter appeared in the same accord. It was included to emancipate the Philippines from the implication in another 'Vietnam,' or what later ensued as the 1979 Soviet-Afghan War. Cultural dispatches abated the Philippines any obligation to take part in socialist antagonism, thus, averting any hostilities in its wake. This best illustrates what low politics meant – to merit nothing more than their actual worth in image, symbol, esteem, and artistic excellence.

Indeed, a turning point of USSR-Philippine cultural relations culminated with the signing of a cultural collaboration agreement between Mrs. Marcos and Andrei Gromyko in July 1978.⁸ Likewise, in keeping with two accords, she worked closely with her Soviet counterpart Pyotr Demichev to deliver Bolshoi ballet, Beryozka folk dance, Yumost, and Kabardinka ensemble performances to Filipino audiences at the Cultural Center in Manila. Later in September, the UN Alma-Ata Declaration

⁵ See Sinitsyn, May 1970, [Online image] & August 1970, [Online image], Sputnik Images.

⁶ See Gravnoskiy, September 1971, [Online image], Sputnik Images.

⁷ See Marounov, February 1974, [Online image], Sputnik Images.

⁸ See Prihdhoko, July 1978, [Online image], Sputnik Images.

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March 11-12, 2021

on Primary Health Care was enacted at the Lenin Convention Center in Kazakhstan as part of the Détente conventions (WHO, 1986). How the Declaration unanimously infused the spheres of influence to sit down and talk at the mercies of ongoing conflict was remarkable. Moreover, the almost impossible dream of reaching a consensus to normalize accessible and universal health care services remains to be unparalleled to this day.

A two-man delegation from the UN Association of the Philippines (UNAP) arrived in Moscow no sooner than October of that year. Comprised of Marcelino A. Foronda, Jr., a professor of History from De La Salle University, and Alexander Ruiz, an official from the Chamber of Trade and Commerce. Foronda (1979) who led the contingent was not new to the USSR. He had been to Leningrad previously in 1975 as a representative to the International Congress of the World Federation of UN Associations. It was in this visit that he first came to know of the USSR Academy of Science. With full confidence, Foronda's contingent was chiefly informational and brought common academic practices between the two countries to the grassroots (pp. 47-57). His meeting with Soviet historians and Filipinologists Vladimir Trukhanovsky and George Levinson awakened a discourse on the issues posed by pre-sixteenth century contact and ethnic histories of the Filipinos.

Other scholars like Igor Podberezky and Vladimir Makareno, who had a command of Tagalog, were more interested in Foronda's literary works in English and Ilocano which were published in journals locally and abroad. Works by avant-garde Filipinos like Jose Rizal was being translated into Russian for mass consumption. Foronda was also able to get a grasp into the quality of publications and volume of journals produced by Soviet and foreign authors annually. Three days were spent touring the UNAP delegation in Alma-Ata. At this juncture, Foronda noted how their Kazakh guide Ms. Basanova of the All-Union 'Znanie' (Knowledge) Society called attention to the impact of Soviet development before and after the 1917 Revolution.⁹ What is interesting was Basanova's focus on the prominence of women as the prime movers in the revolutionary era of Kazakhstan. To Foronda, the uniformity and depth of Soviet university education and historical research emerged as quite unparalleled. Needless to say, this intrigues one

with a desire to uncover the true extent of Philippine studies done in the USSR at that time.



The Lenin Convention Center in Alma-Ata, Kazakh SSR (Foronda Private Collection, 2021).



A remembrance celebrating 30 years of the All-Union "Znanie" Society in 1977 (Foronda Private Collection, 2021).

Post-Détente (1979-1985)

Of all these cultural exchanges, visits from 1979 to 1985 stand out as riveting contrasts to their predecessors. Scores of performances from Filipinescas and Bayanihan Dance Companies and the Philippine Philharmonic Orchestra were popularly flocked in the Soviet Union. A similar case finds Virgilio Almario, Chairman of the Writer's

⁹ Ibid.

Union of the Philippines, and Artist Manuel Baldemor who were able to display their literary works and art Muscovite exhibitions.¹⁰ Some Filipino students were offered scholarships to study in the USSR. Apart from the opposition of Moscow to Maoist sympathy in the Philippines, the education of the children of left-leaning Filipinos was not as far-fetched. Roman Navarro recalls how he and his siblings would receive letters with Cyrillic characters from some of their older cousins who were sent to study medicine in Moscow.¹¹

Among them, a chosen few were indisputably hand-picked for their virtuosity and exceptional caliber in culture and the arts. In 1982, Lisa Macuja-Elizalde was offered a scholarship by the USSR Ministry of Culture to study at the Leningrad Choreographic Institute (Ballet Manila, n.d.). The Russian ballet genius Tatiana Udalenkova dubbed her as a Prima Ballerina when she was accepted as a soloist for the Kirov Ballet two years later. Rowena Arrieta, a student of the Russian National Artist Yevgeny Malinin, received her Master's Degree in Piano and Russian Language Pedagogy in 1985. She received top-level marks from the Leningrad Conservatory of Music (Khuraskina, 2015). National Artist for Music Lucrecia Kasilag was also awarded the Avicenna Award by Novosti Press Agency the same year (Agcaoili, 2001, p. 3). As Sorokin remarked, "Cultural cooperation was crowned by the signing of the Programme of Cultural Exchanges between the USSR and the Philippines from 1986-1987. It will doubtlessly open new vistas in this important field, which helps world nations find a common language."

Conclusion

In the two final decades of the last century, no one could have guessed the sudden and abrupt end of Philippine cultural dispatches to the USSR. Contrary to popular belief, credit for initiating dialogues with the Soviet Union did not begin with the Marcos administration. If not also for the concerted efforts of previous presidencies that came before. The victory of Filipino guerillas in World War II reinstated independence from Japanese occupation and American colonialism. Freed from less than fifty years of bondage in 1946, the Philippines refused diplomatic relations with the USSR.

Filipino politicians outlawed participation in communist organizations with the Anti-Subversion Act after Huk leader Luis Taruc personally surrendered to President Ramon Magsaysay three years before. Marcos eschewed diplomatic relations with the Iron Curtain by brokering the length of two agreements with the United States. Continued contact with the USSR did not stop the US from using Philippine bases. The goals of the 1985 bulletin remained unrealized as the 1986 People Power Revolution ousted the authoritarian dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. The wake of the regime's fugitive passing ultimately curbed ventures and means linked with the reputation of the former dictator. Amid altruism among the Filipino people to restore liberal democracy, there are but a few who peddle the image of the Marcos regime's power to propagate what could have been its success. However misleading, state affairs are not the only drivers of the nation. The exercise of state-image or state-edifice does not harness the complete efforts and struggles of its people against the backdrop of international relations. Whatever conditions had been like for USSR-Philippine relations, it is often hard to see beyond tropes clouded by variable layers of personal and alternative memories.

In much the same way, this article ultimately used 'cultural diplomacy' rather than 'propaganda' for the lack of a better term. Connections between the use of 'propaganda' during the Cold War often have held the pretense to deceive and misdirect political forces through ideological warfare. Cultural diplomacy, in any case, builds relations with other nations while evading armed interventions between any two countries. The same directions are evident as the first 15,000 doses of Sputnik V vaccines purchased in a deal with Russia's Gamaleya National Center arrived in Manila in May 2021 (CNN Philippines, 2021). This apportionment appears as the product of cooperation between both governments, yet some Filipino political observers inquired how this synergy would affect the Duterte administration's populist market as a bid for re-election in 2022 Philippine Presidential Elections (Ranada, 2021; Venzon, 2021).

USSR-Philippine cultural dispatches are not the least unique but some of the most well-documented efforts to bring more peaceful accords to

¹⁰ Araos et al., 42-49.

¹¹ R. Navarro, Personal Communication, March 14, 2021.

the region. The Soviet Union's invitation of Filipino intellectuals and government representatives might as well convinced its visitors that they were not so much of a threat but a familiar companion. Of course, archives of Soviet-era reports, photographs, and publications in Russian that cater to Philippine studies need also to be continually studied. In a very real sense, these were some of the most well-documented accounts of Filipinos in the Soviet Union at the pinnacle of Cold War tensions.



One of the Soviet Union's crowning technological achievements was the Tupolev Tu-144. Its first supersonic flight from Moscow to Alma-Ata in 1968. It predates the maiden voyage of the English-French Concorde by two months (Foronda Private Collection, 2021).



Soviet Meteor-class hydrofoils were a commercial river transport that could carry 120 passengers at any given time (Foronda Private Collection, 2021).



Alma-Ata quite literally means the "Father of Apples" (Foronda Private Collection, 2021).

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¹² These photos are from the online archive of Rossiya Segodnya / Russia Today (formerly

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