

Hegemony of Brotherhood: The Birth of Soviet Multinational Literature, 1922–1932

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National Communists in the Land of Communist Imperialists

Starting in the 1930s, a ramified narrative about the history of the rise of Soviet multinational literature began to be intensively created in the Soviet Union. Great efforts were expended to tie its genesis to the year 1934. This was of course understandable: an event so important to the Soviet imperial project had to have taken place by the will of Iosif Stalin, and it simply could not be linked to the “rakish 1920s.” And since the Soviet imperial project, the result of Stalin’s efforts, had little in common with revolutionary avant-garde art, this viewpoint prevailed in the west as well. Hence the idea that the birth and inauguration of *Soviet multinational literature* took place at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in August 1934 came to be generally accepted, and has to this day not been questioned. Nonetheless, this event had a long prehistory that has not been systematically studied and documented in the scholarly literature. This article is dedicated to this page in the history of Soviet multinational literature, and specifically to its rise long before 1934.

The Soviet multinational literary project emerged at least ten years before 1934, in May of 1924 in the context of VAPP, which was managed by the Central Committee’s Press Division. The archives of RAPP, VAPP, and VOAPP have allowed us to trace how the interaction between the leaders of the USSR’s national literatures before 1932 was shaped and how among them the proto-institutions of the future Soviet multinational literature took shape.¹ These archival materials significantly change our notions about the nature of these institutions and about the origin of Soviet multinational literature. This article, therefore, is not about any particular national literature (be it Russian or Ukrainian) or literary organization (be it VAPP or RAPP), but rather about the unitarian policies promoted by Moscow. Its goal is to specifically address this formative decade that has not received adequate scholarly attention.

Multinational (or “all-union”—that is, non- or supranational, but decidedly class-aware) literature was the *proletarian* literature written in the national languages that before 1932 was solidly associated with RAPP. After the breakup of RAPP in April 1932 and the actions of the RAPPists who refused

1. RAPP (Rossiiskaia assotsiatsiia proletarskikh pisatelei): the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers. VAPP (Vsesoiuznaia assotsiatsiia proletarskikh pisatelei): the All-Union Association of Proletarian Writers. VOAPP (Vsesoiuznoe Ob’edinenie assotsiatsii proletarskikh pisatelei): the All-Union Alliance of Associations of Proletarian Writers.

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to accept the Central Committee resolution, an extremely negative attitude towards them took hold in the party leadership, and linking such a propagandistically important and politically sensitive project as multinational Soviet literature to them was politically disadvantageous.² Hence this page of history (1922–32) was torn out, and history thenceforth would begin with the triumphant First Congress of the Soviet Writers' Union in 1934.

From the very beginning, Ukraine posed an existential threat to the Soviet imperial project. As we shall see, the chief opposition to attempts to create pan-Soviet (“all-union”) literary institutions was raised by the Ukrainian literary groups. (Although Ukrainian writers were the most vocal opponents of the Central Committee’s imperial agenda, Belorussian, Tatar, and Armenian writers also vehemently opposed the unificationist trends.) This opposition was so strong that Stalin was forced to personally insert himself into the course of the “literary discussion” in Ukraine by exerting pressure on how it proceeded.³ On the one hand, he attempted to slow the process of Ukrainization; on the other, he was interested in its excesses, since they gave the opposition a pretext to attack the policy of indigenization and Ukrainian nationalism, which, in turn, allowed Stalin to present his own position as moderate and compromising and, under this guise, to curtail indigenization.

Although the party leaders were strongest advocates of unification, they were forced to deal with reality. The interests of the nationally-oriented intelligentsia partially coincided with those of the Bolsheviks, and because before the Revolution there simply had not been national political elites in power (or close to it) in the republics, these intelligentsia were moving towards cooperation with the Bolsheviks. And the new regime was obliged to reckon with them, often even making concessions due to this support.

Meanwhile, the party nomenklatura and the national cultural elites had different goals. The former aspired to create a unified Soviet nation; the latter, on the contrary, wanted to preserve national/ethnic diversity. And it was their cooperation that defined the dynamics of the collaboration of the literatures and the genesis of a unified Soviet multinational literature from it. The party nomenklatura was indeed the main driving force of the multinational literary project as one of the leading components of creating a unified Soviet nation.

Here we must not forget about the nature of the 1920s literary struggle (in particular, as it applied to the national republics). The literary struggle existed here only to the extent that the intraparty political struggle raged, and the former was a reflection of the latter. It was no accident that with the defeat of the main oppositional forces in the latter 1920s, it was abruptly scaled down, and in the early 1930s, with the rout of all the anti-Stalin ranks in the party, it drew to a definitive close. Bearing in mind that without the sanction and support of the authorities not a single literary organization could spring up and function in the country, it is easy to assume that the whole struggle among them was essentially a battle among intraparty factions. In the republics, the divergent

2. See Edward J. Brown, *The Proletarian Episode in Russian Literature, 1928–1932* (New York, 1953), 202–5.

3. On the literature discussion in Ukraine, see George S.N. Luckyj, *Literary Politics in the Ukraine, 1917–1934* (Durham, NC, 1990), 92–111; Vitalii H. Donchyk, ed., *20-i roky: Literaturni dyskusii, polemiky* (Kyiv, 1991); Olena Palko, *Making Ukraine Soviet: Literature and Cultural Politics under Lenin and Stalin* (New York, 2020).

understandings by one faction or another of the scale of independence and of the prospects for indigenization were superimposed upon this. But on the whole, the limits of this struggle were determined by the party apparatus.

The Revolution had radically changed the status and relationship to power of all cultural actors—from leftist artists to traditionalists, from fellow travelers to implacable enemies of the regime. But the Revolution did not give rise to these actors; they had functioned within culture long before it. Only one cultural stratum was directly its product: the “proletarian culture” born in Proletkul’t in 1917. When Lenin realized, however, that Proletkul’t might challenge the party’s monopoly on power, he nationalized it in 1920, subordinating it to the People’s Commissariat for Education.⁴ Lenin understood that a proletarian culture completely dependent on the Proletkul’t with no chance to survive without party tutelage could be put to the Bolsheviks’ service and become an effective means for political pressure on the intelligentsia.

At this point, Proletkul’t began to bud. One literary group after another began to grow out of it: “October,” “The Young Guard,” “Workers’ Spring,” the “Smithy,” RAPP, VAPP, and other proletarian literary organizations. These metastases of Proletkul’t were not simply the result of unrestrained growth. On the contrary, the majority of these organizations were created within the party apparatus by party journalists as a subordinate structure, as yet another instrument for control and appropriation of the various cultural spheres.⁵ And this was exactly how these groups functioned. Hence, the elements in them called “proletarian” (culture, literature, music, art, and the like) actually had no class content whatsoever; they were above all instruments for *party* control. There is a fundamental difference between the proletarian literature that was nurtured by Proletkul’t, and the “proletarian literature” created and managed by VAPP/RAPP and curated by the party. The term in the latter case was a euphemism for “party-minded literature,” not so much for literature as such as for the institutions and organizational structures whose main task was to pursue and enforce the “party line” in art.

There were quite a few attempts made in the 1920s to “unite writers” into unions, but none of these organizations were successful, and none of them exerted the kind of influence on the future Soviet Writers’ Union that VAPP and RAPP did. This experience was nonetheless never examined, since RAPP’s reputation after its rout was such that no one felt it possible to link the Soviet Writers’ Union to “sectarians” condemned by the party. However, the situation was quite different in the era of the hegemony of RAPP/VAPP. VAPP leaders considered one of its most important achievements the fact that it was “the only all-union organization that had succeeded in becoming an organizing center of all the national literatures of the USSR.”⁶

In actual fact, out of all the movements in early Soviet art, only Proletkul’t had shown interest in the non-Russian regions, and it alone was programmatically international and class-consciously focused on purposefully engaging

4. See Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future: the Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia* (Berkeley, 1990), 203–4.

5. See Brown, *The Proletarian Episode in Russian Literature, 1928–1932*.

6. Otdel rukopisei, Institut Mirovoi Literatury im. A.M. Gor’kogo Rossiiskoi Akademii Nauk (hereafter, OR IMLI RAN), fond (f.) 155, opis’, (op.) 1, delo (d.) 155, list (ll.) 1.

in integration. Proletkul't (and its institutional derivatives) was the only force in the new literature that programmatically and institutionally aspired to "hegemony" (an aim the authorities supported). First of all, the other groups all sprang up later. Second, they had no institutional agenda (that is, they were not so much literary institutions as literary clubs). Third, they were largely indifferent to problems of class and nationality (they were dominated by aesthetic agendas, rather than political ones). Fourth, they had no aspirations to ideological leadership of literature. Finally, they did not have at their disposal the party-state support (administrative resources) that the structures accreted after 1920 to Proletkul't and the party-state did (the People's Commissariat for Education and the Department for Agitation and Propaganda of the Party Central Committee [Agitprop]).

Adherents of Proletkul't began to appear in the national republics, and the All-Russian Proletkul't Counsel (hereafter "APC") began to spawn its own branches: a department of Proletkul't workers was created in Georgia's Commissariat for Education. In Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia, various groups, sections, associations, and federations were organized. Although these latter were not specifically called such, they were allied with Proletkul't. As early as 1920, the APC created a special bureau for Ukraine, the Caucasus, and Crimea, which undertook to popularize Proletkul't ideas in the republics. Although these ideas, which boiled down to a class-conscious international literature devoid of any national (regional) features whatsoever, had no support from the "bourgeois" (that is, nationally oriented) intelligentsia, they enjoyed a widespread popularity in party circles, where references to national/regional themes were interpreted as a "surrender of class-conscious positions" and a "concession to bourgeois ideology." It was party leaders who actively engaged in the creation of the All-Ukrainian Proletkul't. The Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party even promulgated a special circular to all the party's provincial committees and to the local apparatus of Glavpolitprosvet (the Main Political and Educational Committee of the People's Commissariat of Education) and provincial labor unions that urged them to "promote the organizational bureau in every possible way in its work to organize proletkul'ts in major industrial centers."⁷

The Ukrainian advocates of Proletkul't felt that the local Proletkul't organizations should be organized into an All-Ukrainian Proletkul't and, by federative principles, become part of the All-Russian Proletkul't. However, the "Russian comrades" cooled the ardor of the Ukrainian "brothers by class." The Presidium of the All-Russian Proletkul't had no intentions of recognizing the legitimacy of an all-Ukraine center nor the autonomy of the Ukrainian Proletkul'ts, as they considered all the local associations to be their own branches. At the plenary meeting of the Proletkul't Central Committee on February 4, 1922, Valerian Pletnev explained to the "Ukrainian comrades" that he had no intention of recognizing any all-Ukrainian Central Committee of Proletkul'ts: "We think otherwise, and suggest that in Ukraine you might

7. Quoted in Mikhaïlo I. Pryhodiï, *Vzaiemodiïa radians' kykh literatur: Vzaiemozv'iazky rosiïs' koi ta ukrains' koi literatur v protsesi ikh stanovlennia, 1917–1925* (Kyiv, 1966), 225.

have merely a Southern Bureau of the Central Committee of the All-Russian Proletkul't, as Proletkul't is inherently a purely international organization."⁸

For Pletnev, "Russian" meant international, and in practice, to conduct all the business in the Proletkul't only in the Russian language. Here a profound schism was established, one that in the coming decade defined the struggle of the "Ukrainian comrades" with the Russian proletarian writers who aspired to crush the "nationals" underfoot and had no desire to consider the national feelings of even their ardent advocates. It was like a church schism: Moscow Proletkul't considered itself something like a Constantinople Patriarchate, wielding its power over the local churches. And even when Proletkul't was liquidated in the republics (as was the All-Ukrainian Soviet of Proletkul't in the Ukrainian Communist Party Central Committee's Agitprop, by the resolution of that party's Organizational Bureau in March of 1923), this "proletarian imperialism" was inherited by the successors of the Proletkul'tists—the VAPPists. In the 1920s, no one but they needed unification of the national literatures, neither politically, ideologically, economically, or aesthetically.

The interest in all-union status was there in VAPP from the very start, and was no doubt supported by the party leadership. On May 1, 1924, VAPP's board of directors held a meeting, chaired by Semen Rodov, with delegates "from the field." One of VAPP's leaders, Vladimir Kirshon, declared in a speech that "VAPP must be transformed into an All-Union Center, thus eliminating Great Russian chauvinism. It is advisable to create local bureaus to assist the All-Union Association, which will eliminate the danger of fouling up the institutions with nationalist elements."⁹

How the VAPPists viewed this struggle is obvious from the discussion of "the Ukrainian question." The real situation was clear to practically everyone: Ukraine had the Ukrainian association of proletarian writers "Hart", as well as the Russian association VUAPP (All-Ukrainian Association of Proletarian Writers). The former of these did not consider the latter Ukrainian writers, and the latter considered the former nationalists. The person responsible for the national literatures in VAPP, Sigismund Valaitis, bluntly asserted that "The Great Russians in Kharkov are hardly more correct than the Ukrainian 'Hart', with whom they are having practically a nationalist feud. We must look for unification."¹⁰ But what sort of unification were VAPP's leaders discussing? The resolution on the Ukrainian question stated that "Unified organizations are being created in the Union Republics, having national sections. The All-Ukrainian Association must without delay be linked organizationally with 'Plug'¹¹. 'Hart' is recommended to accept the platform of VAPP, and if it does not accept it, to cause a split among them. 'Hart' resolved not to send representatives to the VAPP plenary meeting, and this must be considered their position."¹²

8. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva (hereafter, RGALI), f. 1230, op. 1, d. 11, ll. 35.

9. OR IMLI RAN, f. 155, op. 1, d. 2, ll. 15.

10. OR IMLI RAN, f. 155, op. 1, d. 2, ll. 14 ob.

11. *Plug* was a literary organization of Ukrainian peasant writers.

12. OR IMLI RAN, f. 155, op. 1, d. 2, ll. 14 ob.

Another VAPP leader, Il'ia Vardin, the head of the Party Central Committee's press subdivision, laid out the goal of such a tactic: "After the plenary meeting, we advise creating in Ukraine a unified organizational center with the platform of VAPP, comprised of representatives from 'Hart,' 'Plug,' and the All-Ukrainian Association according to the VAPP model, with representatives from Agitprop and the Central Bureau of Press Workers. [We also advise] creating a journal in Ukrainian and Russian, and sending our representative to Ukraine."¹³

VAPP did indeed do the work it suggested, introducing a schism in "Hart" and playing on national conflicts. And although the breakup of "Hart" in the following year (1925) was caused by internal reasons, the creation of VUAPP was the direct result of VAPP's activities. As if a magic wand had been waved, after the First All-Union Conference (further discussed below) the "October" group was formed in Kiev, and proletarian writers' associations that dissociated themselves from "Hart" emerged in Kherson and Nikolaev. VUAPP unified the Russian writers in Kharkov and Odessa, fully reproducing the Revolution-era Omguardist rhetoric that, as things stood in Ukraine, found no support in the nationally oriented writers' milieu, turning the proletarian writers into anti-national outcasts.

"Flies in the Milk": The All-Union Meeting of Proletarian Writers (January 1925)

Lenin is well known to have been quite opposed to the Stalinist idea of "autonomization" and demanded at the formation of the Soviet Union the creation of a voluntary union of equal and sovereign Soviet republics.¹⁴ Stalin was forced to concede, but he developed his autonomization policy in the opposite direction: he autonomized not the national republics but rather the center, transforming a non-viable "union" into an empire. Tamara Krasovitskia aphoristically summed up this policy: "Now he was faced with the task of constructing *autonomous power structures in such fashion that would turn the equality of the republics into a formality.*"¹⁵

Stalin proved himself the master of such transformations, which resulted in a bureaucratic process leading to results directly opposed to the ones declared. In this case, there were four phases: 1) creation of an equal federative structure; 2) creation of its "central apparatus"; 3) parallel functioning of the central and peripheral organs, with "optimization" of the latter by means of pulling power away (through cooptation and delegation of competencies and functions) to the "center"; 4) autonomization of the all-powerful center. It was just this proven strategy that RAPP employed in the internationalization of proletarian literature.

13. Ibid.

14. V.I. Lenin, "K voprosu o natsional'nostiakh ili ob 'avtonomizatsii,'" in his *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5th ed., vol. 45 (Moscow, 1970).

15. Dina A. Amanzholova and Tamara Krasovitskaia, *Kul'turnaia slozhnost' sovetskoi Rossii: Ideologiia i praktiki upravleniia, 1917–1941 gg.* (Moscow, 2020), 151.

Of course, there was nothing new in the operation itself. Lenin managed to prevent it being carried out *de jure*, but not *de facto*. The consequences he described were easily foretold:

Under such conditions it is very natural that the “freedom to leave the union” that we use to justify ourselves will turn out to be a blank sheet of paper unable to defend Russian aliens from the incursions of that true Russian person, the chauvinist Great Russian, essentially the scoundrel and rapist that the typical Russian bureaucrat is. No doubt, a negligible percentage of Soviet and Sovietized workers will drown in this sea of chauvinistic Great Russian ruffraff, like a fly in the milk.¹⁶

It was small consolation that the milk was doomed along with the flies that ended up in it.

Having blundered into the trap set by the rhetoric of party-class unity, the representatives of the national entities ended up in a prison of internationalist discourse, hopelessly entangled in the institutional web, until they found themselves in complete dependency on the federal center that they themselves had legitimized. They foresaw the inevitable consequences, resisted them, but then submitted to the constrictor’s embrace, since being caught at nationalism meant being accused of deviation from the “class line,” of not being “party-minded.” Given the state of the acute intraparty struggle, such political accusations could prove deadly.

Every attempt to create any sort of federation of the national literatures on the basis of internationalist principles ended up recreating an imperial project, since the leaders of VAPP and RAPP, as party functionaries from literature educated in the hierarchical principle of democratic centralism, reacted with hostility to anything that smacked of nationalism. Sympathy to national feelings was regarded if not as a “counterrevolutionary phenomenon,” then as an attribute of “nonconscientiousness.” Nationalism was taken to be a relict no less dangerous than religion. The RAPPists understood the imperial model to be antinationalist and, accordingly, internationalist. Attempts to embrace the national literatures inevitably ended up as attempts to seize them, and thus ran up against stubborn resistance from the republican proletarian writers’ associations.

The leadership of VAPP wanted to proclaim that the first all-Russian meeting of proletarian writers in January 1925 was the “All-Union congress,” but due to the position taken by representatives of the national literatures (above all, from Ukraine), this designation failed, and it was declared to be the “All-Union conference.”¹⁷ It had already become clear that the struggle against Russian nationalism and “Great Russian chauvinism,” which Lenin had declared to be “a fight not to life, but to the death,”¹⁸ was not the main struggle for the RAPPist leadership, not because they were sympathetic to Russian nationalism, but rather because they had not only assimilated but also reproduced imperial practices in their attempts to create a “multinational proletarian literature.”

16. Lenin, “K voprosu o natsional’nostiakh ili ob ‘avtonomizatsii,’” 357.

17. OR IMLI RAN, f. 155, op. 1.

18. V.I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*. 5th ed., vol. 45 (Moscow, 1970), 214.

This first meeting, which took place in Moscow and ran January 6–12, 1925, became a reference point for the history of the institutionalization of Soviet multinational literature, the point at which the purposeful creation of a pan-Soviet organization began, which would conclude a decade later in the creation of the Soviet Writers' Union. Here the national literatures first came up against the attempt at forced brotherhood.

Wishing to be the center of unification, the VAPPists at first wanted to solve the problem of their leadership in one fell swoop. When he opened the meeting on January 6, Vardin proposed renaming it a congress, but advised that he had encountered serious opposition to this the day before.¹⁹ On behalf of "Hart", the most authoritative proletarian literature organization in Ukraine, which the newly organized VAPP had suggested "join" them, the VAPPists were opposed by Mykola Khrystovyi, who was not only a member of "Hart's" Central Bureau but also the head (1924–29) of the arts division in the Ukrainian People's Commissariat for Education. It was hard to find a common language, since VAPP operated by the logic of Stalinist "autonomization," whereas "Hart's" position was based on principles of union federalism:

We oppose a single center. No doubt there should be some sort of organization; I will not talk about its form now, but I think there ought to be some sort of tie between the associations of individual republics. Maybe this will be an all-union bureau, or maybe something else, but this will not be a single organization with a central committee. We will not go for that, comrades.²⁰

But the comrades were not listening: they were little bothered by the concerns of the "nationals." They sought "the hegemony of proletarian literature on the all-union scale." An "all-union" status was necessary for this, which meant that the meeting had to declare itself a congress. And only when it became clear that there was no getting around compromises, Rodov suggested they designate the meeting not a congress, but a conference.

In vain Khrystovyi tried to explain to those assembled that "proletarian literature can and does exist in Ukrainian, in Belarusian, and in other languages. We must not, comrades, forget this nor consider this a deviation, nor consider it a Petliura-type thing, but must agree that a single proletarian literature does not mean one only in Russian."²¹ But the opponents of unification turned out to be the minority. As a sign of protest against the demands to call the meeting a congress, as well as against ignoring the interests of the national republics, the Belarusian group "Young Growth" left the meeting, effectively taking a whole national literature away with them.²² Hryhoryi Epik, who represented the oldest group of Ukrainian peasant writers, "Plug," at the meeting, declared that "national literature, that very literature that will serve as a great tool in the fight for proletarian culture in the field, is very poorly represented" at the meeting.²³

19. OR IMLI RAN, f. 155, op. 1, d. 38, l. 1.

20. *Ibid.*, l. 4.

21. *Ibid.*, l. 22.

22. "Young Growth" (Maladniak) was a youth literary organization in Belarus.

23. RGALI, f. 1698, op. 1, d. 921, l. 51.

Another explosive theme closely intertwined with the status of the meeting/congress was that of the organizational principles of the future unification of the republican literatures of the USSR. The delegates of “Hart” and “Young Growth” were opposed to the creation of an all-union center that would be a governing body and would be in charge of ideological and organizational issues. The maximum to which they would agree was for an informational body to be set up, since a board of directors working in Moscow did not understand the problems of the national republics and it would be impossible to assure national representation without creating national cells of VAPP; the formation of a single center of proletarian writers that “would assume rights of a managerial nature” would lead to “misunderstandings in the field” and “slow down the business of our association, without accounting for local circumstances, the local setting, and local conditions.”²⁴ This was in clear contradiction to the vision of an all-union center that the VAPPists were promoting, and about which Rodov spoke in his closing speech to the meeting:

We should have a single cohesive central organization on both an all-union scale and the republican scale, as well as in every provincial city. I say there should be such a strong, cohesive organization, and not to yield to [pressure]. . . We will not give in on what we have fought two years for. No one wants to assume the role of a dictator, and no one is doing so, but you must feel, here in Moscow, a guiding hand [*rukovodiashchuiu ruku*].²⁵

The republican representatives had every reason to fear this “hand” and the arbitrariness of the self-styled “center.” In the course of the discussion of a resolution, the representatives of Tatarstan (Usmanov) and Armenia (Zar’ian) spoke out forcefully against the unificationist aspirations of the VAPPists. The latter told a story about the arrival of Kirshon and Libedinskii, who had created the Transcaucasus Bureau of Proletarian Writers’ Associations: “What is this, comrades?” Zar’ian asked indignantly. “Turns out, we don’t know what kind of bureau this is. That is, you make an order. You travel here, create a bureau, we don’t know about it, and then you say that we created the Transcaucasus Bureau. But that means this is all a sham, the Transcaucasus Bureau. A sham bureau. We don’t know anything about it.”²⁶

The very actions of the “Moscow guests” demonstrate their level of unparadonable overconfidence. If the Moscow leaders had been able to allow themselves to do such things before a meeting without any authorization while essentially being self-appointed inspectors, it is not hard to imagine what sort of activities they might spin in “mergers and delimitations,” having attained the legal rights that they so persistently sought during the meeting. This time the battle ended with the defeat of the VAPPists. The designation of “conference” served only as a face-saving measure. VAPP had not yet received all-union status. A federative principle underlay the association, but the RAPPists did not accept this. They aspired to a centralized organization.

24. OR IMLI RAN, f. 155, op. 1, d. 48, ll. 97–100.

25. OR IMLI RAN, f. 155, op. 1, d. 49, ll. 22.

26. OR IMLI RAN, f. 155, op. 1, d. 135, ll. 242–246.

The euphemisms of “ideological unity” and “a united front” really meant that everything was subordinated to the leadership of RAPPist leaders.

The RAPPists viewed the catchphrase of “national literature” as a concession to “bourgeois ideology,” similar to the one made by the party in the economic sphere during NEP. For example, one of VAPP’s fundamental tasks was formulated thus in Valaitis’s theses:

keep watch so that the creative work of the peasant revolutionary writers is not penetrated by the tendencies of “nationalist literature,” illusions about creating a great national state (a great Finnish state, a great Kirghizia), hatred of “the Russian oppressors” or neighboring peoples, and so forth. Rather than these, we should strive for a nascent literature to aspire to liberate its people from religious fanaticism, narrowly nationalistic egotism, pan-Islamism, and other national relicts and limitations.²⁷

This was the discourse of empire. Bolshevik internationalism had been transformed into sublimated imperialism. The Proletkul’tists (and subsequently, RAPPists and VAPPists, as well) were not so much internationalists as anti-nationalists, and thus—by the law of transference—they reproduced nationalistic discourse and its logic, while sublimating their own imperialism into Marxist internationalism. While these views were widely shared in the Bolshevik milieu, they began to come into ever-increasing conflict with the main political task of attracting the national elites to their side. This task was far more important to the regime than the issue of class purity. The VAPPists were obliged to look for common ground and retreat.

Enforced Brotherhood: The First All-Union Congress of Proletarian Writers (April–May 1928)

The First All-Union Congress of Proletarian Writers, where Soviet multinational literature was finally institutionally framed (admittedly, in only one segment, the “proletarian” one), took place in an atmosphere of scandal. The circumstances in which it opened are attested to by this fact: an 84-page samizdat pamphlet was being passed around at the venue titled “National Proletarian Literature Accuses. Fight Averbakhism in National Literature.” It consisted of articles written by leftist opposition figures.²⁸

Before 1928, VAPP, and subsequently VOAPP, was RAPP’s “all-union showcase.” It had maintained a confrontational policy, especially in 1926–28, accusing the nationally-oriented intelligentsia in the republics of fascism. The heart of this policy was not only the current leftist opposition but also the leadership of RAPP. However, at a moment of acute intraparty struggle, supporting the republican elites was much more important to Stalin than the purity of ideological garments. The era of “consolidation” had arrived, and it was necessary to pay attention to the national literatures. This was no easy task for RAPPists: the new VAPP leaders were proud to proclaim that “VAPP has to a significant extent been transformed, no longer just in words but

27. *Oktiabr'* 1925, no. 5 (1925), 181.

28. RGALI, f. 631, op. 4, d. 16.

indeed, into an all-union organization, and not the all-Russian organization that it was before,” as it now had “thirty national cohorts.”²⁹

But how were the VAPPists intending to take advantage of this wealth? Vladimir Sutyrin, the head of the printing department of the party’s Transcaucasus Regional Committee, who would after the congress become the secretary of VOAPP, was the keynote speaker. In his opening speech, he formulated the task as that of achieving “even greater cohesion of those cohorts of proletarian literatures that are scattered across our Soviet Union, and who are to be found in all of the republics.”³⁰ In other words, the task of VAPP was to transform national literatures into international ones. In his closing speech, Sutyrin’s view of the priorities would become even clearer: “The national question. . . is to a certain extent for us a pseudonym for the question that one might pose as the creation of a united proletarian literary front of the Soviet Union for a forced attack against the Soviet Union’s rightist-bourgeois literature.”³¹

Thus the “national-ness” of the national literatures was viewed in the best case as an indicator of backwardness, and in the worst, of reactionary tendencies. In any case, it was an obstacle to the main goal: a class-conscious (proletarian) literature, culture, art, cinema, and theater (even if in various languages). This was the sphere in which “hegemony” could be achieved, of which Leopold Averbakh spoke at the congress: “Our strength lies in the fact that we do not limit ourselves with national frameworks, and we see ourselves as the kind of organization of writers who are doing the very same thing in various languages.”³² Managing national literatures is not easy when you view the national factor as merely a hindrance to the class principle.

In actual fact, there was a correlation between the national and class factors. The problem was that it bore little resemblance to what the VAPPists in Moscow and the proletarian association participants in the republics envisioned. Both were communists, but the former were communist imperialists and the latter were nationalist communists. The reality was such that in the “outlying [*okrainnye*] republics” (the term used by the republican association members themselves) the bulk of the local population were peasants.³³ The proletariat was mainly concentrated in the cities (Kharkov, Kiev, Odessa, Iuzovka, Minsk, Baku, Tiflis) but they hardly seemed bastions of national culture, as they were cosmopolitan. The titular nations were by no means predominant here (both in the cultural milieu and the proletarian environment); mainly Russians and Jews were. Creating proletarian literature under such conditions was no simple matter, as it was firmly associated with the Russian language and with Moscow. Accordingly, in the nationally-oriented milieus of these republics the “proletarian writers” were seen as Moscow agents alien to national aspirations.

29. OR IMLI RAN, f. 155, op. 1, d. 276, l. 13.

30. OR IMLI RAN, f. 155, op. 1, d. 274, l. 22.

31. OR IMLI RAN, f. 115, op. 1, d. 283, l. 51.

32. OR IMLI RAN, f. 155, op. 1, d. 274, l. 51.

33. OR IMLI RAN, f. 155, op. 1, d. 283, l. 47.

The problem of a united (that is, “all-union”) proletarian (that is, party-sustained) literature was insoluble not only because there was no premise for a living, organically developing proletarian literature in the peasant cultures, but also because the class principle contradicted the national one: to the extent that literature in the republics was party-sustained (“proletarian”), it was not national; and to the extent that it was national, it was not sustained by the party since it emphasized everything that proletarian literature brushed aside (national aspirations, national traditions, the aesthetic diversity of national imagery, and so forth).

The fundamental task of the congress was to create a unified all-union institution through which party-sustained literature could be created in the republics. The aspiration for unification and centralization in them was born of the necessity that the proletarian literatures artificially created in the republics survive. As a certain representative of Azerbaijan at the congress, identified only as “Pir,” stated, “behind the bourgeois intelligentsia writers stands the tremendous culture of their class, but behind ours—the proletarian writers—stands not so much the culture of our class as a lack of culture; hence we need an organization so we can have this additional advantage. We need centralization.”³⁴

Although converging on ideological and aesthetic issues, the nationals and the RAPPists could not find a common language on the national question. Underlying the various institutional concepts were different philosophies that were cast in the corresponding organizational forms. This became strikingly apparent at the congress. National literatures defended their sovereignty, as they understood it. The VAPP leaders saw this only as a tendency towards “local nationalism.” For the “Ukrainian comrades,” the matter was completely different, and their defense of at least a semblance of “independence” was for them a question of survival. Attempting to explain himself, one of the leaders of Ukrainian proletarian literature Kovalenko spoke with unusual frankness:

We have difficulties with the development of proletarian literature as a future hegemon particularly because proletarian literature is not popular in Ukraine in the larger groups of Ukrainian writers precisely as it concerns the difficulties of the national question, because proletarian literature in the opinion of many fellow travelers is a “regiment of loyal Little Russian Cossacks”; “Kochubeyans” who have sold themselves to Moscow and lost their national “conscience.”³⁵

The discussion had immediate “organizational repercussions.” Ukraine’s position was determined by its internal situation. If even in such an industrially developed part of the country as Ukraine the status of proletarian literature was uncertain, then the aim of “winning hegemony” seemed unattainable. As Kovalenko put it, despite the fact that “we have leadership such as perhaps there is only in VAPP, that is, the overwhelming majority of leadership organizations—the communist part,” this was not what defined the status of proletarian writers: “we nonetheless have to take the non-party part of

34. OR IMLI RAN, f. 155, op. 1, d. 283, l. 27.

35. OR IMLI RAN, f. 155, op. 1, d. 282, ll. 53.

the association into account, and, besides that, Soviet literature. If our proletarian organizations in Ukraine are unable to organize Soviet literature, they are not worth a cent in the eyes of the party and society. We must make this task of ours in every way easier, and not complicate it.”³⁶ And the actions of the VAPP leadership were “significantly complicat[ing] [the task], if not to say completely frustrat[ing] the matter.” But the RAPPists did not know how to “take the non-party part. . . into account,”³⁷ although the party curators invested in the support of the republics were pushing them to do so.

The situation in Ukraine as Kovalenko portrayed it was such that “among the revolutionary and even semi-proletarian intelligentsia a distrust, and a very deep one, of all centripetal tendencies has developed,” owing to which many writers who were proletarian in the nature of their work and who “have fought against Khvylovism from its very inception. . . are categorically rearing up when the question of becoming part of VAPP is raised, indeed to such a degree that if they are pressured, then they will go over to Khvylovy’s side”³⁸; Mykola Khvylovy was calling on Ukrainian writers to “flee from Moscow.”³⁹ Even the members of VUSPP,⁴⁰ Kovalenko told the congress, “when they found that we were going to Moscow, then, assuming that we would pour in,” warned that they would leave the organization. As they saw the fight against Vaplite⁴¹ and Khvylovy as their main priority, the leaders of VUSPP called on the VAPP leadership to understand the problems and recognize the stance of VUSPP: “There can be no question of joining VAPP. Joining VAPP guarantees the principle of democratic centralism, and this principle annuls the work on unifying the union organization, splinters it, and by so doing, makes Khvylovy’s group stronger.”⁴²

A similar situation had developed in Belarusian literature as well in the group *Polymia*, whose membership besides the classic Belarusian writers Ianka Kupala and Iakub Kolas included such eminent writers and visible party members as Tishka Gartnyi and Mikhas’ Charot.⁴³ The role of Vaplite here was assumed by the group *Uzvyshsha*.⁴⁴ They all declared themselves proletarian and loyal to the regime, while remaining national-oriented, which made the recklessly internationalist position of the Belarusian Association of Proletarian Writers a knowingly losing one.

This is why Kovalenko, striving to expand the VAPP base in the republics, suggested they arm themselves with “the Narkompros principle, or rather, the RSFSR principle. Then *Polymia* and *Molodniak*⁴⁵ will join, and the

36. OR IMLI RAN, f. 155, op. 1, d. 278, l. 5.

37. *Ibid.*

38. OR IMLI RAN, f. 155, op. 1, d. 278, l. 5.

39. See: L. Boiko, “I ne levropa, i ne osvita,” in V. Donchyk, ed., *20-i roky: Literaturni dyskussii, polemiky* (Kyiv, 1991).

40. VUSPP (Vseukrainskii soiuz proletarskikh pisatelei): The All-Ukraine Union of Proletarian Writers.

41. Vaplite (the Free Academy of Proletarian Literature), was a literary organization in Ukraine that had originated in Kharkov.

42. OR IMLI RAN, f. 155, op. 1, d. 278, l. 6.

43. *Polymia* (Flame) was a Belarusian literary organization.

44. *Uzvyshsha* (The Hill) was a literary organization of Belarusian writers.

45. *Molodniak* was a literary organization of Ukrainian Komsomol writers.

organizations in Transcaucasia, who are now in opposition over this issue, but who are ideologically valuable, will join too.”⁴⁶

Nevertheless, it was precisely the RAPPist vision of the national literatures that became the basis for the institutional shaping of the “all-union literary brotherhood” that was driven by the efforts towards all-union unification and putting the national literatures under the control of a central power. If in 1925 the RAPPists tried to achieve their aims by stealth, by simply declaring the meeting a congress and then agreeing to call it a conference, then they were now using the very same tactic of upping the ante: they declared that a federation was yesterday’s demand. What was needed now was an association. By demanding an “association,” they could get, if not a “federation,” then “unification.”

The discussion on the organizational question introduced by the Ukrainian delegation was the culmination of the work of the congress. Ivan Mykytenko, one of the leading functionaries of VUSPP, was able to withstand the first onslaught by declaring that he was promoting the party line: “We have the guiding directives of our organizations—the resolution of the plenum of the Ukrainian [Communist Party’s] Central Committee, the Politburo decree. . . . It is noted in these decrees that Ukrainian literature has its own paths of development and should develop independently alongside brotherly unity with the literatures of other peoples.” Based on this, “VAPP cannot regard itself as a unified organization in the sense that it should absorb all the proletarian literatures of the peoples of the USSR, as it has done with respect to the literatures of the Northern Caucasus, Transcaucasia, Belorussia, and other peoples.”⁴⁷

The principle of federalism followed from this. VAPP leaders, however, towing the “Central Committee line” (not the Central Committee of Ukraine, but of the All-Union Communist Party), who were supported by representatives of many of the national literatures, wanted associations, that is, for the national proletarian writers’ associations to join VAPP as sections. For the national associations this meant not only organizational self-liquidation but literal self-destruction, since national cultural elites in fact perceived proletarian writers as puppets of Moscow. To join the all-union (read, Moscow) association as sections (that is, without any rights whatsoever) meant erasing themselves from their own national literatures, accepting outcast status. VUSPP was categorically opposed not only to an association but also a federation, understanding that the latter meant purely lip-service “independence.” But to create the Association without Ukraine seemed impossible to VAPP. The result was that the congress created VOAPP, the All-Union Alliance of Associations of Proletarian Writers.

The problem was that neither the VAPPists nor their party curators could find a partner for the suggested institutional tango, which does not mean, however, that we are dealing with a black and white picture of imperialists (RAPP) versus nationalists (VUSPP). As soon as the talk shifted to Ukrainian literature, the VUSPP leaders themselves turned into RAPPists, and the

46. OR IMLI RAN, f. 155, op. 1, d. 278, l. 7.

47. OR IMLI RAN, f. 155, op. 1, d. 278, l. 1.

memory of them in Ukrainian literature was no better at all than the memory of RAPP in Russian literature. Essentially, the debate was about “hegemony”: VUSPP wanted to take charge in Ukraine without orders from Moscow. Thus, the distinctions between VAPP and VUSPP were not so dramatic as it might seem. The fight of the “Ukrainian comrades” over centralization by no means came from their nationalism. It was a forced position. The standing of VUSPP in Ukraine was far from being any sort of hegemony. In fact, it was a marginal literary group that did not have even a shade of the authority of “Hart,” which had been founded by Vasyl Ellan-Blakytny. After Ellan-Blakytny’s death in 1925, “Hart” fell apart, and its best writers followed Khvylovy into Vaplite, and the rest joined VUSPP and “Molodniak.” This was almost the same thing that happened after the castration of Proletkul’t (“October” and “Smithy,” who broke off from it, formed VAPP/RAPP and “Young Guard”). Class orthodoxy and aggressive loyalism were characteristic of all the proletarian organizations, which always found themselves in the field of party control. But the “nationalism” of VUSPP was politically imposed. In Ukraine, members of VUSPP were called “Moscow sellouts [*zaprodantsy*].” Kovalenko did not hesitate to bring up in his co-report the unflattering characterizations of the Ukrainian “hegemon” attributed to VUSPP in Ukraine: “‘a union of general pen-pushers’ that has no artistic value and that engages in politicking; they want to make Ukrainian culture dependent on Russian culture.” He complained bitterly: “The fellow travelers see us as nationalist renegades, ‘sell-outs’ who are asleep and looking to see how Ukraine might be taken away to the Moscow fair.”⁴⁸ This was a gesture of desperation.

This is why he called on the delegates to “find the sort of *modus vivendi*, the sort of cooperation of proletarian literature through which the maximal operational freedom of this literature would be locally assured; maximal creative freedom, maximal organizational freedom, the lack of any tinge of dependency on any other literature at all.”⁴⁹ Only this, Kovalenko declared in his closing speech, would create a situation in which

there will be no jitters of the individual republics, no unfortunate orders from the center, but there will be a principled unity, there will be unity on the fundamental issues, there will be a common front, but there will not be a petty guardianship, no petty interference, which is very, very harmful. . . . We need to create the sort of forms of unification that with maximal unity would transform the specific nature of literature and thus organize literature for maximal creative, conscientious work, and not for any kind of petty politicking.⁵⁰

This would be impossible to achieve if they were to “create an all-union association via expansion of the all-Russian organization, pulling one new national unit after another into its orbit” as this “would create the impression of VAPP swallowing up the weaker republics.”⁵¹ Summing up, Kovalenko stated, “We cannot undertake to merge with VAPP, as some people seem to

48. OR IMLI RAN, f. 155, op. 1, d. 282, l. 54.

49. OR IMLI RAN, f. 155, op. 1, d. 282, l. 57.

50. OR IMLI RAN, f. 155, op. 1, d. 283, l. 49.

51. OR IMLI RAN, f. 155, op. 1, d. 282, l. 59.

think. This will be interpreted in Ukraine as VAPP devouring our organization,” thereby laying out an ultimatum.⁵²

Clearly, neither the leadership of VAPP nor the leadership of the Party Central Committee that stood behind them shared such “independent” views of cultural construction. But the obstruction set forth by the Ukrainian delegation resulted in a sharp exacerbation of the tone. At certain moments, the appearance of a “comradely discussion” vanished and the reality of the opposition to imperial pressure was laid bare: “Our categorical statement is: stop with the little remarks, both in the press and orally, that Ukraine has, as they say, some kind of nationalists. Stop this business if you want to talk about unity. Stop with the conversations about us being led by the bourgeoisie. We are led by the party, just as you are. Stop trotting out such things, because they smell of Russian chauvinism.”⁵³

But what was the institutional result of the congress?

VAPP had been created in October of 1920 out of the state-appropriated Proletkul't. There was a split in VAPP in February 1926, and its previous leaders became a sort of “leftist opposition” to the new RAPP leadership grouped around the journal *Na literaturnom postu*. After 1922 and the formation of the USSR, the party leadership strove to include other republics in VAPP for political reasons and to create an association renamed from “all-Russian” to “all-Union.” The RAPPists, led by Averbakh, consistently pushed this project and always stood for a unified centralized organization, promoting it as a guarantee of the “monolithic unity of proletarian literature” and demanding unconditional participation of all the national organizations in the all-Russian association, having merely renamed it as an all-union one (which became VOAPP). However, the real goal of the RAPPists and their party curators was “hegemony in literature.”

As a result of this pressure, however, the positions taken by opponents of centralization only intensified, and the Ukrainian VUSPP and “Molodniak” organizations, the Russian “Smithy,” the Belarusian “Polymia” group, and several other organizations remained outside VAPP, and without them VAPP could not be considered “all-union.” All of this forced the VAPPists to make concessions. As a result, they were forced to reject the idea of “absorption” of the national literatures and to emancipate themselves, becoming one of the participants of the unification and reorganizing VAPP into RAPP, which became part of VOAPP, the All-Union Alliance of Associations of Proletarian Writers.

It was specifically because of Ukraine that an “alliance of associations” (VOAPP) was created instead of a “united organization” (VAPP) that was comprised of RAPP, VUSPP, “Smithy,” and the national organizations of Belarus, Transcaucasia, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Formally, this was a federation and a compromise: neither Kharkov nor Moscow achieved all their goals (Ukraine did not even want a “federation,” and Moscow specifically wanted an “association”). However, nothing changed organizationally. RAPP, still managed by the Central Committee, remained at the center, trying to expand

52. *Ibid.*, 1. 64.

53. ORIMLI RAN, f. 155, op. 1, d. 282, l. 64.

its influence not only to other organizations in Russian literature (which it managed to do quite successfully, beginning in 1928) but also to proletarian literary organizations in the other republics, in which it had as yet not quite succeeded.

The Routine of Brotherhood: Bureaucracy and Literature

The 1932 Central Committee resolution, “On the Restructuring of Literary-Artistic Organizations,” changed the institutional framework of Soviet multinational literature. But how did this literature function before this change, and before the preparations for the First All-Union Conference of Soviet Writers began?

As the institutional shadow of RAPP, VOAPP copied its procedures and practices. Although a great deal was done to demonstrate the “all-union” (read: non-Moscow) nature of VOAPP, it was clear that the influence of the RAPPist leadership within VOAPP was the defining one. Paradoxically, equality worked against the republics: only together could they be heard, but, though they were “equal” and distinct, none of them could lay claim to equal weight with RAPP in the organization.⁵⁴ This opened up a wide space to the RAPP/VOAPP leadership for a divide-and-conquer policy. The atmosphere of acute intraparty struggle particularly on the cusp of the 1930s enabled this. Each of the republican proletarian writers’ organizations sought a target for fighting their “left” and “right” deviations, competing with the OGPU apparatus in their quest. In his speech, “The Next Tasks of USSR Proletarian Literature,” at the Second Plenum of the VOAPP Council, which took place ten months before the disbanding of RAPP/VOAPP, Averbakh turned his listeners’ attention to the fight against nationalism within the republics, ever more abruptly turning away from the fight proclaimed in the 1920s against “great Russian chauvinism”: “Local chauvinism, which is often a reaction to great Russian chauvinism under the conditions of the class struggle now occurring, is being patently unmasked as a direct expression of the pressure of the class enemy, who knows all too well how to use any reaction at all to the remnants of Russian supreme power in his own interests. It is no coincidence that deviations from the party’s general line in the union republics are almost always combined with deviations in the area of national politics.”⁵⁵

The choice of words is not accidental: there is a “class enemy” in local nationalism, but there is nothing left but “remnants” of the former chief enemy, Russian chauvinism. RAPP not only determined the strategy of VOAPP

54. The more “brotherly literatures” there were in VOAPP, the weaker they became within its institutional framework; VOAPP proudly proclaimed its quantitative growth. In his speech at the second plenum of the organization, entitled “A Literary-Political Report of the VOAPP Secretariat,” Selivanovskii proudly announced, “Before the First All-Union Congress of Proletarian Writers, we had less than thirty national cohorts of proletarian literature. We can now, despite a far from complete and exact accounting, count forty-three national cohorts united in VOAPP”: *Proletarskaia literatura SSSR na novom etape: Sokrashchennyi stenograficheskii otchet 2-go plenuma soveta VOAPP* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1931), 178.

55. *Proletarskaia literatura SSSR na novom etape*, 141.

but, in introducing institutional bureaucratic unification everywhere, influenced the republican groupings by pitting some literary groups against others. For example, why should there have been both VUSPP and “Molodniak” in Ukraine? This weakened the “front of proletarian literature.” But how could they be merged? By fighting the nationalistic elements within the groupings in the republics and isolating the “healthy nucleus” in them. Then this nucleus had to be contrasted to the “unhealthy elements,” and so on. RAPPists were experts in splits, and were right in their element.

According to Averbakh, all of VOAPP’s accomplishments were episodes in an endless “class struggle on the literary front”: “When our Ukrainian comrades—VUSPP and “Molodniak”—were sparring with the neo-classic writers, or when our Belarusian comrades sparred with “Uzvyshsha” and “Polymia,” or when our Tatar and Bashkir comrades sparred with the Dzhigidian group, or when our Uzbek comrades sparred with the Qizil Qalam group. . .”⁵⁶ It was in these “frays,” according to Averbakh, that the emergence of multinational Soviet literature and its hybridization with the party-state took place: all these “groups big and small,” after all, turned out to have been tied to counterrevolutionary organizations, various “deviations,” and “undergrounds” unmasked by OGPU. Thus, literature was becoming party-minded and mature: “The unmasking of the class enemy on the ideological front, the unmasking of such forms of his struggle as sabotage, is a sign of the intensification of our work, a sign of the growing maturity of our cadres, a sign of the successful offensive of each nation’s proletarian literature.”⁵⁷

This sort of understanding of maturity grew out of the concept of literature as a purely political instrument. The national aspect interested Averbakh just so far as it allowed him to open a number of new “fronts of the class struggle.” This was the essence of the “united all-union organization”: “Today VOAPP is not simply a mechanical unification of several detachments. No, today VOAPP is a united military and militant organization of the working class on the literary front.”⁵⁸ These statements won the audience’s applause. In other words, VOAPP was not literary, but the political organization of the working class on the literary front.

For the nationals, VOAPP became a Moscow grandstand for self-affirmation at home in the republics and for amplification of accusations against internal opponents. Here they were among their own, and they spoke the familiar language of hostility and fighting.

On the eve of the plenum, it came to light that one of the leaders of the Transcaucasus organization, Georgii Tatulov, was linked to the first secretary of the Transcaucasian regional party committee, Vissarion Lominadze, who together with Sergei Syrtsov had attacked Stalin in 1930. Lominadze’s fall occasioned the fall of many of his allies and appointees. This included Tatulov, who was accused of “double dealing” while his “grouping” was called “Lominadze’s literary secret agents,” which was meant to “weaken

56. *Ibid.*, 150–51.

57. *Ibid.*, 157.

58. *Ibid.*, 158.

the international unity of USSR proletarian literature.”⁵⁹ Then and there, a “Tatulov affair” was invented in the Transcaucasian organization, against which both the organization itself and VOAPP fought.⁶⁰

The representative of the Central Asian Bureau of Proletarian Writers’ Organizations, Ismail Mardzhan, told of enemies identified in Uzbekistan. They turned out to be the Qizil Qalam group, which “had taken a path of local nationalism, and were the secret agents of ‘Quasimovism.’”⁶¹ He also reported on goings on in Tashkent: “There was yet another organization in Tashkent, the Tashkent Organization of Proletarian Writers (TAPP). It was a great-power, chauvinist organization. The characteristic feature of this organization is that it united the Russian writers as a base group, but the organization of Uzbek writers existed as a section among them.”⁶²

One of the most important functions of VAPP was to serve as an instrument of interference into the affairs of the national literatures and as a means for controlling them. By acting through the all-union association of proletarian writers, and not only through the party apparatus, Agitprop gained control over the literatures in the republics, so to speak, from within.

VAPP actively participated in the literary struggle in the republics, demanded submission from some organizations, merger and delimitation from others, interfered in internal feuds, and set some organizations against others. In so doing, it shaped the picture of literary life for the Party Central Committee. The memoranda in the Central Committee on literary issues, with the light shed on the literary situation in the various republics, is a peculiar genre of VAPP (and later VOAPP) documents. These extremely tendentious and one-sided surveys are more like political denunciations, wherein the representatives of the various “non-proletarian” literary trends are linked to “anti-party” groups of “national deviationists” of one sort or another (Shumskii in Ukraine, Lominadze in Georgia, Sultan-Galiev in Tatarstan, and so forth) or even with outright “enemy agents.”

The VAPPists were dedicated imperialists and passionate opponents of the policy of indigenization. Many of them, themselves representatives of national minorities and committed advocates of assimilation, supposed that this was what “proletarian internationalism” actually was. Thus, the national literatures confronted in VAPP/VOAPP a well-organized force with a well-planned and coordinated attack on their own independence.

There should be no illusions about who stood behind VAPP (a question that in Soviet times was purposefully obscured). The leadership of this organization consisted of party functionaries and employees of the party’s Central Committee bureaucracy. And those who were not party apparatus staff members were part of the Central Committee nomenklatura and provided for

59. “Tatulovshchina—literaturnaia agentura Lominadze,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, November 24, 1930, 1.

60. “Vykorchevat’ korni tatulovshchiny (Iz postanovleniia Biuro TsK KP(b) Gruzii,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, December 14, 1930, 1.

61. On Quasimovism and Qizil Qalam, see Edward Allworth, *Uzbek Literary Politics* (The Hague, 1964), 75, 116, 124, 127, 135.

62. *Proletarskaia literatura SSSR na novom etape*, 118.

accordingly.⁶³ But party funds provided for more than just personnel maintenance; they financed all of “proletarian literature.” Cash statements of the VAPP secretariat have been preserved in the Central Committee’s Press Department archive, where budgets were signed, and it is laid out in detail how VAPP distributed monies—in full accordance with the party’s literary policy. The resources were mainly sent to the local literary organizations, except for those that were “subsidized” by the central committees of the republics.⁶⁴ It is telling that VAPP above all financed the Russian sections in the republics. For example, in Ukraine, the Donbass group “Zaboi” was financed, but not the Ukrainian proletarian literature groups, which created perpetual conflicts. The same happened in other republics as well (Georgia, Chuvashia, Uzbekistan, and Kirghizia). This turned VAPP into the chief defender of the national minorities in the republics—but not a disinterested one. The defense of Russians in the republics did not arise from principles of internationalism, but from an imperial policy of division: by nurturing the parties of the disaffected, the RAPPists created their base there—groups of ardent advocates of centralization.

As we have seen, two models of interaction between the national literatures collided in the 1920s debates: the party-hierarchical model (the principle of democratic centralism), which RAPPists and the party bureaucrats standing behind them defended; and the “narkompros” (federative) model upon which the republican (primarily Ukrainian and Belarusian) associations insisted. The Stalinist “resolution of the national question” in literature was exactly what it was in the arena of politics: a democratic (“federative”) façade was created, with purely representational functions, while the real power was transferred to party structures within the literary institutions that were directly subordinated to the Central Committee bureaucracy.

The 1925 experience, when the creation of an all-union organization failed, was taken into account. When in 1928, at the First All-Union Congress of Proletarian Writers, VAPP was transformed into VOAPP (of which RAPP was nominally a member while in fact remaining its leadership nucleus), it became the first and only all-union “mass organization” to operate in the cultural sphere.

Similar to how the secretariat of RAPP operated with respect to the Russian national sections, the secretariat of VOAPP as early as 1930 heard and approved the reports of the republican proletarian writers’ associations, the plans for editions and translations of authors of the USSR’s various literatures, the makeup of the writers’ brigades sent to the republics, the reports of the central publishing houses on editions of these various literatures, and so forth. In other words, it was here that all the fundamental methods and mechanisms for the management of Soviet multinational literature were tested. VOAPP should be regarded as the institutional forerunner of the “greater Union,” its unique laboratory on the bridgehead of proletarian literature.

The model of the future Union of Writers of the USSR was essentially created in VAPP/RAPP/VOAPP: the party “fraction” of its council was the

63. OR IMLI RAN, f. 50, op. 1, d. 126, l. 7.

64. OR IMLI RAN, f. 155, op. 1, d. 142.

forerunner of that same “communist fraction” that decided all leadership issues and that would be written into the Central Committee’s 1932 resolution. The transcripts of the party fraction’s meetings reveal that all the most important and urgent political questions were discussed there before being brought into general discussion. The communist fraction was directly ruled by the Central Committee, receiving orders and “guidelines” from it. Although no literary group at all could exist in the USSR without the permission of (nor even less against the will of) party organs, only RAPP/VOAPP did so while also taking up the aims of the “hegemony” and “governance” of not only Russian literature but also of “all-union” literature.

The union republics’ proletarian writers’ organizations were part of VOAPP, similar to how in RAPP the national sections were the Chuvash, Tatar, Bashkir, and Komi organizations, among others. The local branches of the national organizations of proletarian writers were at first a part of VAPP, and then of RAPP (which itself became part of VOAPP). Just as in VOAPP, where the leaders of the national proletarian literatures presented reports, the national sections that were part of RAPP submitted reports to its secretariat, and from time to time they were heard in Moscow; brigades of Moscow writers visited them, and the secretaries of VAPP/RAPP gave speeches at their conferences and plenums. This was the proto-structure of the USSR Union of Writers.

The latter 1920s and early 1930s were marked by an escalation of intraparty struggle and various purges. At this time, nationally-oriented communists in the republics (of the likes of Sultan Galiev’s supporters in Tatarstan or Skrypnik’s in Ukraine) were removed from their posts. Since proletarian literature was a purely party-driven project, local party leaders were rather deeply tied to it. With the fall of leaders accused of nationalism (this was the typical charge from the national party nomenklatura), there was also a fall of the press leaders and literary group leaders with whom they were connected: the party and state workers in charge (especially in the areas of ideology, culture, and art), newspaper editors, and journalists, among whom were quite a few national writers. After all, many proletarian writers (and especially those leading the proletarian writers’ associations) were themselves eminent party functionaries (usually, employees of the local propaganda and educational organizations or of the press divisions of the local party organs, or journalists). Hence, there were purges in practically all the local divisions of RAPP—in Bashkiria and Tatarstan, in Chuvashia and Yakutia. The transcripts of the RAPP secretariat’s meetings are full of various kinds of reports about inspection trips to the various local associations and the purges carried out there. Usually, the chief villain excluded from the party was named (who was already being tracked by the OGPU), and everyone involved with him was also condemned. Thus, the intraparty struggle spilled over into the milieu of the national creative intelligentsia, a significant number of whom had been brought into nation-building for duties that were becoming extremely hazardous. A few years later, in the Great Terror era, they would be executed.

Leadership of the national literatures by the RAPPists was doomed to be incompetent and purely bureaucratic, since they were not only ignorant of languages but also failed to understand the very essence of the nationalities issue, which to them seemed secondary and merely to give rise to dangerous

political deviations. As party functionaries involved in literature, dragged into intraparty squabbles, the RAPPists brought not peace, but a sword—Stalin’s sword. And when Stalin decided to sheath it for a while, to prepare for a new wave of terror (into the millstones of which the RAPPists themselves would also fall), and the need for the RAPPist *oprchnina* vanished, the institutional practices created by RAPP became those of the USSR Union of Writers.⁶⁵ What had been developed into proletarian literature was in 1934 extended to all of the Soviet Union’s literature.

At first, Stalin used the experiment in “consolidation” of the national literatures described here when creating the USSR Union of Writers. He was fully cognizant of the scope of the task: if it had been so difficult to drive even ideologically and politically allied proletarian writers into a unified organization, what could one expect of writers not only belonging to different national literatures but also holding on to different (if not opposite) political and aesthetic views?

But the lessons of the years 1924–34 had been learned not only by the regime, but also by the writers themselves, who had anxiously observed how their proletarian confreres had initially been driven into VAPP and then, beginning in 1928, into VOAPP/RAPP as one horde, which like a black hole destroyed and swallowed up all the literary unions surrounding it.

Another important outcome of the transformation described here was legitimizing the process of implanting institutional structures from Moscow in the republics. If at first the literary organizations of like-minded persons had been created “from below,” often spontaneously, then now the organizational structures of the national cultures had become the product of imperial engineering.

Yet another important consequence was the transfer and extrapolation of centralized RAPPist structures and discourse to all the cultural space of a multinational country. It was the RAPPist (that is, party-bureaucratic) model specifically that was taken as the basis for the future USSR Union of Writers. The RAPPist discourse about literature—with its pseudo-class-oriented party-minded rhetoric, its pseudo-internationalist zeal for the people, its pseudo-realist conventional aesthetics and repressive criticism—was legitimized. All of this began to operate so effectively in 1934 because the laboratory experiments spanning the entire preceding decade had been successful.

The “Leninist principles of the party’s national policy,” as we have seen, arose as a result of the intense pressure of the imperial-internationalist center on the nationally-oriented outlying regions. The result of this confrontation in both politics and in literature was a construct in which the republics, for the sake of preserving a nominal equality, went along with creating an all-powerful center with a democratic façade. This construct would become the basis for the future USSR Union of Writers. Essentially, the collisions we have examined here became a unique political and institutional polygon for the future “restructuring of the literary-artistic organizations” that initiated the era of socialist realism.

65. See: Brown, *Proletarian Episode in Russian Literature*, 200–18.