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# "Spreading Intimacy and Influence: Women's Correspondence across the Iron Curtain"



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# Spreading Intimacy and Influence:
# Women's Correspondence across the Iron Curtain[*]

For Review Only

Althea Grossman addressed her letter to no one in particular, just "a Friend, Russia." "I am a citizen of the USA, just as you are a citizen of the USSR," she began. "I am writing to you because I should like to assure you that I have a friendly feeling for you and that, though we come from different cultures and customs, I think that we are really much more alike than un-alike." Confident their lives were similar, the sixty-six-year-old Missourian covered sheets of blue stationery with personal details about her daughters, her heart trouble, even the quirks of her twin-in-a-door beds. "Tell me of your life and ask me any questions," she concluded.[1]

Grossman posted her letter in July 1946. When it reached the USSR, it was forwarded to the Soviet Women's Anti-Fascist Committee (AKSZh), an agency in the Agitation and Propaganda section of the Communist Party.[2] AKSZh was created during World War II to strengthen solidarity and cooperation between Allied women. It mounted various campaigns to achieve this, including a letter-writing initiative through which Soviet women implored British and American women to send more supplies and troops to the Red Army. Britons, especially industrial workers, responded readily, but women in the United States did not reply until late 1943 when, saturated with messages about Soviet sacrifice and bravery at Stalingrad, their

[*] The author would like to thank Dr. Brooke Blower, Dr. Frank Costigliola, the two anonymous peer reviewers, the editorial team at *Diplomatic History*, and the other authors in this forum for their helpful feedback and suggestions.

[1] State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), fond (f.) R7928, inventory (op.) 2, file (d.) 146, sheet (l.) 111, July 20, 1946.

[2] AKSZh moved to the Foreign Policy Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party shortly after WWII.

appreciation for their Soviet ally grew.[3] By the war's end, U.S. letters streamed into AKSZh's Moscow headquarters. Some of those who wrote were war widows seeking solace from their Soviet sisters in mourning. Others wanted to thank the Soviet people for their sacrifices. All were curious about the USSR. Initially, AKSZh marked the letters as "warranting no reply." After all, the war was over, and victory had been achieved. But by 1946, when Grossman penned her note, it was clear that American women's eagerness for contact was a golden opportunity to promote Soviet values and visions of postwar peace. AKSZh recruited Soviet women to reply, and by the late 1940s, some 300 pairs were corresponding. The letter-writing campaign peaked in 1949 and endured, diminished form, until 1958.

AKSZh paired Althea Grossman with Ol'ga Roll' because, as Grossman predicted, they had much in common. Roll' too was a widow and mother of two. The Muscovite had been a literature teacher and she loved Mark Twain. That delighted Grossman, who lived on the Mississippi.[4] The pair exchanged fifteen letters between 1946 and 1949. They also convinced neighbors, friends, and grandchildren to join in, creating an intergenerational cluster of six letters-writers, aged twelve to eighty. This article represents the first scholarly investigation of this correspondence project. It focuses on the letters that Grossman, Roll', and their associates exchanged during the late 1940s and uncovers how they practiced friendship and politics in each note they penned.

[3] GARF, f. R8581, op. 1, d. 71, ll. 13-29. The complete history of this pen-pal project, covering WWII through the 1950s, is told in: Alexis Peri, *Dear Unknown Friend: Soviet and American Women Discover the Power of the Personal,* a manuscript under contract with Harvard University Press. On 1943 as the height of American enthusiasm for the Soviets, see: Ronald Smelser and Edward J. Davies II, *The Myth of the Eastern Front The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Imagination* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 11.
[4] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 146, l. 112, November 29, 1946.



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All of the pen-pals, including the Grossman-Roll' cluster, hoped to defuse tensions and foster understanding between their nations through letter-writing. At the same time, they promoted their respective values and cultural practices. Both sides yearned for peace but based on the model provided by their own countries. Pen-friendship offered a way for them to champion peace and their own way of life simultaneously. And rather than debate policy or abstract ideological tenets, the letter-writers used personal experiences to substantiate their views. They wove their stories into the story of the nation, endowing the political fault lines of the Cold War with personal meaning. Not only did they keep their arguments personal, they infused each letter with empathy, affection, and reassurances of peaceful intent. This style of politicking enabled them to maintain their pen-friendships over several years and many disagreements—a feat considering the diplomatic impasse between American and Soviet statesmen during that time. Below, I highlight some of the rhetorical strategies that the correspondents, especially the Grossman-Roll' circle, used to cultivate friendly relations and exercise political influence.

The historiographical significance of this pen-pal project extends far beyond the specific conversations it facilitated. First, the participants practiced this personalized diplomacy at a time when scholars assume there was little contact between Soviet and U.S. citizens. The letters substantially complicate our view of the Truman-Stalin era. That time was marked by Soviet isolationism, U.S. efforts at containment, and mutual anxiety about foreign infiltration. Grossman received her first reply from Roll' in 1947, a year when hostilities between their nations escalated. The Marshall Plan, Truman's "Loyalty Order," the CIA, and the Cominform—the arm of the international communist movement—were all launched in 1947. The USSR also forbade Soviets from marrying foreigners that same year. Both governments considered contact



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between U.S. and Soviet citizens suspicious if not treasonous. And yet, the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the U.S. State Department allowed hundreds of women to correspond. Scholars tend to associate this strategy of using "ordinary" people to establish ties and exert influence with a later era, that of "peaceful coexistence," when there was a proliferation of letter-writing campaigns. Even then, however, most of the correspondence was not between Soviet and U.S. citizens directly.[5] This pen-pal initiative, by contrast, reveals how individuals in the United States and Soviet Union conversed and connected long before the "thaw" and a full decade before their countries signed their first treaty on cultural and citizen exchange.[6]

Second, this pen-pal project provides a new perspective on the shift in U.S.-Soviet relations from allies to adversaries. When viewed through these cordial letters, that transition appears to have occurred much more slowly than high-level politics suggest. The correspondents continually drew inspiration from the wartime alliance throughout the 1940s. They saw it as proof that their countries had common values and could indeed cooperate. They did not accept the Cold War as a reality, much less an inevitability. Out of hundreds of letters sent during the 1940s, I found only one usage of the term "cold war," by an American, and two of "iron

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[5] Other cold-war letter exchanges, mostly from the 1950s and between U.S. citizens and peoples of Europe, the Eastern Bloc, and East Asia, not the USSR, are analyzed in: Wendy L. Wall, *Inventing the 'American Way': The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 2008); Kenneth Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (Lawrence, KS, 2006); Jennifer Helgren, *American Girls and Global Responsibility: A New Relation to the World during the Early Cold War* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2017).

[6] Recent studies of this strategy, which credit the Khrushchev and Eisenhower administrations for introducing it, include: Eleonory Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die: The Soviet Lives of Western Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 2018); Norman E. Saul, "The Program that Shattered the Iron Curtain: The Lacy-Zarubin Agreement (January 1958)," *New Perspectives on Russian-American Relations*, ed. William Benton Whisenhunt and Norman E. Saul (New York, 2016); Yale Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War: Raising the Iron Curtain* (University Park, PN, 2003); Justin Hart, *Empire of Ideas: The Origins of Public Diplomacy and the Transformation of U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York, 2013).

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curtain"—one by a U.S., the other by a Soviet citizen (quoted below). Moreover, when using these terms, the pen-pals put them in scare quotes or referred to them as "so-called."[7] The letters remind us that such concepts were not necessarily meaningful descriptors of individual experience, especially in the postwar decade.

This correspondence campaign enriches our knowledge of U.S.-Soviet exchanges in a third respect. Its participants were not the political or cultural elites who typically starred in such programs.[8] They were women of little prominence. And they saw their low status as an advantage. They touted their femininity and their humble origins as reasons why they could find common ground when their more illustrious compatriots had failed. The pen-pals described themselves as "ordinary" and "little people" bearing a simple message of peace and friendship. They conveyed this by imbuing their letters with personal stories and expressions of affection. Some participants explicitly couched this message in gendered terms as well, claiming women were better than men at making friends and avoiding conflict. "If only the women of the world used all of their influence to create a better life for the whole world," Mary Roe Hull of Osh Kosh, Wisconsin wrote to Nina Morozova of Moscow. "We need to compel men away from their idea: 'I do what I want or else…' and bang!"[9] Other correspondents, including those in the Grossman-Roll' cluster, evoked their femininity indirectly, stressing how, as wives and mothers, they were determined to protect future generations from war. Through such maternalist

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[7] GARF f. R7928, op. 2, d. 480, l. 4, January 3, 1949. On the gap between popular versus politicians' and pressmen's acceptance of the Cold War as a phenomenon, see: George Gallup, "Term 'Cold War' Unknown to 46%," *The Washington Post*, December 3, 1948, 16; Masuda Hajimu, *Cold War Crucible: The Korean Conflict and the Postwar World* (Cambridge, MA, 2015), 1-2.
[8] *Divided Dreamworlds?: The Cultural Cold War in East and West*, ed. Peter Romijn, Giles Scott-Smith, and Joes Segal (Amsterdam, 2014), 3.
[9] GARF, f. R7928 op. 2 d. 361, l. 30, July 10, 1948.

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arguments and essentializing views of womanhood, they appealed not only to their pen-friends' common humanity but to what they assumed were their common roles, experiences, and values as women.[10]

Fourth, this letter-writing campaign brings new voices and individualized perspectives to a growing body of scholarship on women's global activism during the late 1940s, an era often discounted in studies of the international women's movement, which concentrate on the 1960s and beyond.[11] These self-described "ordinary" women were not full-time activists. The vast majority did not belong to any national political organizations, much less attended the international congresses for peace and for racial and gender equity that dotted the decade.[12] Still, by corresponding, they commanded a role for themselves in international politics. Their letters,

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[10] Maternalist arguments for peace only appeared in Soviet women's rhetoric during WWII, but they were a mainstay of the rhetoric used by U.S. women's groups, conservative and progressive alike. The vast literature on this tradition is summarized in: Harriet Hyman Alonso, *Peace as a Women's Issue: A History of the U.S. Movement for World Peace and Women's Rights* (Syracuse, NY, 1993). On maternalist thinking among U.S. progressives, see: Jacqueline Castledine, *Cold War Progressives*: *Women's Interracial Organizing for Peace and Freedom* (Champaign, IL, 2012). On Soviet wartime and postwar maternalism, see: Peri, *Dear Unknown Friend.*

[11] On women's international politicking during the 1940s, see: Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Baltimore, MD, 2001); Helen Laville, *Cold War Women: The International Activities of America Women's Organisations* (Manchester, UK, 2002); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: the Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York, 2008); Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia, PA, 2018).

[12] Two of the U.S. correspondents were active in their local chapters of the League of Women Voters and third supported the Women's International League of Peace and Freedom. Less than fifteen percent of Soviet letter-writers were in the Communist Party or candidates for membership. On the numerous international congresses women organized for peace and gender equity during the 1940s, see: Francisca de Haan, "Continuing Cold War Paradigms in the Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organisations: The Case of the Women's International Democratic Federation," *Women's History Review* 19, no. 4 (Sept. 2010): 547-573; Melanie Ilic, "Soviet Women, Cultural Exchange, and the Women's International Democratic Federation," *Reassessing the Cold War,* ed. Sari Autio-Sarasmo and Katalin Miklóssy (New York, 2011), 157-174.

textual forms associated with the intimate and the everyday, capture how the personal was political without any mention of the women's movement, which helped that insight gain widespread acceptance.[13]

Fifth, just as the letters offer a new vista onto women's international politics, they broaden our view of the Soviet and U.S. peace movements. They shift attention away from the conferences and institutions on which scholars generally focus and allow us to see the movement through smaller, interpersonal connections. The letter-writers' tone and tactics differed significantly from most peace activists of the 1940s and 1950s. While the latter concentrated on crises like nuclear proliferation and or campaigns like the Stockholm Appeal, these correspondents delivered their ideas in the register of everyday life, rarely debating policy or press events.[14] The Soviet letter-writers lacked the prestige to serve in the World Peace Council or Soviet Peace Committee—two strongholds of the Soviet "peace offensive" initiated by the Cominform. Moreover, AKSZh played a subsidiary role in these organizations, contributing to them only at the local level. Moreover, the amiable tone of the Soviet pen-pals' letters clashed sharply with the fiery, anti-American rhetoric wielded by the delegates of these groups. Meanwhile, the U.S. correspondents, though certainly left-leaning, rarely associated with the socialist, communist, labor, or civil rights groups, which studies of the peace movement in the

[13] On letter-writing's import to second-wave feminism: Margaretta Jolly*, In Love and Struggle: Letters in Contemporary Feminism* (New York, 2008); Katherine M. Marino, "Transnational Pan-American Feminism: The Friendship of Bertha Lutz and Mary Wilhelmine Williams, 1926–1944," *Journal of Women's History,* 26, No. 2 (Summer 2014): 63-87.
[14] Vladimir Dobrenko, *"*Conspiracy of Peace: the Cold War, the International Peace Movement, and the Soviet Peace Campaign, 1946-1956" (PhD thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2016).



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United States tend to emphasize.[15] As I discuss below, many of the U.S. letter-writers did not intentionally associate with the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship, the group responsible for mailing their letters to the USSR, either. Much of the scholarship on the U.S. peace movement during the Cold War emphasizes activists' motives and loyalties. By contrast, through a close examination of these letters, I focus on the pen-pals' styles of communication and argumentation—that is, on how they attempted to establish peace through intimate language and personal storytelling.

Letter-Writers and -Readers

The letters were deeply personal but never private. They were shared around family dinner tables and read aloud to friends. They were inspected, translated, and censored by the organizations facilitating the exchange. They also were monitored by the Central Committee and the FBI and referenced in hearings and publications during the postwar Red Scare as evidence of communist infiltration. The vast majority of American pen-pals, including Grossman, do not have FBI files, but the individuals who oversaw their exchange do. Some were tried for subversion.[16]

[15] Lawrence Wittner, *The Struggle Against the Bomb,* Vols. 1 and 2 (Stanford, CA, 1993-2003); Robbie Lieberman, *The Strangest Dream: Communism, Anticommunism, and the U.S. Peace Movement, 1945-1963* (New York, 2000).
[16] The U.S. Congress' and the Department of Justice's actions against NCASF are summarized in: Records of the House of the U.S. House of Representatives. Un-American Activities Committee, # HM FY95, Cards 9-15, Box 32, RG233, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C.; Herbert Brownell Jr. "Report and Order of the Board," Attorney General of the United States vs. the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship, Inc. (Docket No. 104-53), February 7, 1956.



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All of the Soviet letters were sent to the United States through AKSZh, but the U.S. letters were dispatched in several ways. Some individuals sent letters on their own; others tucked them into parcels they donated via Russian War Relief. Still others gave their notes to the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship (NCASF), a private organization that worked with the Soviet Consulate in New York City to deliver them. After WWII, AKSZh chose NCASF as its exclusive U.S. partner because it was openly sympathetic to communism and had fellow-travelers on its executive board. NCASF presented itself as a pro-peace organization, not a pro-Soviet one. However, it stridently criticized American foreign policy without publishing a jot against the USSR. The result of this partnership was that, by the war's end, no matter how American women sent their notes to the Soviet Union, they received replies through NCASF. Thus Americans who had never heard of NCASF and did not share its politics became associated with it. And NCASF, which the U.S. Attorney General and House Un-American Activities Committee declared a "communist front," was granted the unique opportunity to put U.S. and Soviet women in conversation.

The Soviet and U.S. governments not only permitted these contacts, they abetted them. Internal Central Committee and State Department documents suggest that both agencies hesitated to expose their countrywomen to the propaganda of an archrival. Nevertheless, drawing on some of the same gendered assumptions as the letter-writers, they wagered that friendly female correspondents might inspire positive feelings toward their countries, promote national ideals, and gather useful information about their interlocutors.[17] So, while both governments restricted pen-pal ventures involving men during this era, they allowed women and youngsters—

[17] State Department Memo of May 10, 1946, #811.42761, Folder 2, Box 4809, RG59, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD (hereafter NARA); Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), f. 17, op. 128, d. 69, ll. 49-54, May 27, 1946.



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namely, the Anti-Fascist Committee of Soviet Youth, Girl Scouts, and Campfire Girls—to make contact, albeit under close FBI and Party surveillance.[18] No doubt this decision was informed by the assumption that women and children were socially disarming, politically unsophisticated, and unable to divulge state secrets.[19] So, in February 1946, when Flora Saulsbury, a self-described homemaker from Valley Stream, New York, asked the U.S. Secretary of State for a Soviet pen-pal, Secretary James F. Byrnes authorized the U.S. Embassy staff in Moscow to pass her request to AKSZh.[20] Saulsbury received two replies. She chose Anna Volkova, a worker in Moscow's Nogin stocking factory, as her pen-pal. Volkova mistakenly addressed her as "Flora Slobbery," but she invited Saulsbury to call her Ania—all her friends did—and reassured her that she too was a mother committed to peace.

Along with government officials, translators and censors read the letters. Most of the translation and censorship was done in the USSR by AKSZh's staff. A comparison of the initial and final versions of each letter shows that translators made only minor mistakes—"Flora Slobbery" being an exception—and that editors checked all letters for political correctness. They censored them lightly, however, leaving most untouched. None of the quotations cited in this essay were altered.

Self-censorship played a much bigger role than censorship. The letters document their authors' expressed views, not necessarily their true beliefs. Some participants concealed their

[18] Jennifer Helgren, "'Homemaker Can include the World:' Female Citizenship and Internationalism in the Postwar Camp Fire Girls," *Girlhood,* ed. Jennifer Helgren and Colleen Vasconcellos (New Brunswick, NJ, 2010); Catriona Kelly, "Defending Children's Rights in Defense of Peace," *Imagining the West in Eastern Europe and the USSR,* ed. György Peteri (Pittsburgh, PA, 2010).
[19] This thinking shifted during the Red Scare, when female spies like Elizabeth Bentley and Ethel Rosenberg created hysteria.
[20] Letter from U.S. Embassy to the State Department, June 8, 1946, #811.42761, Folder 3, Box 4809, RG59, NARA.



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names, addresses, and other details. They likely felt pressure—either externally or internally imposed—to present themselves and their country in a positive light, and they often dodged tough queries. It does not necessarily follow, however, that their stated opinions were insincere. One cannot assume their remarks were engineered simply because they aligned with official politics, nor can one presume they were uttered in total freedom. To be sure, the participants from the United States were at greater liberty to be open and critical, but some may have felt defensive of U.S. politics when addressing someone from a historically hostile polity. The same logic applies to Soviet correspondents. Whatever criticisms they might have voiced if given the opportunity, many might have supported the USSR's overarching values, especially when challenged by foreigners.[21]

It is possible some correspondents were agents planted to manipulate their pen-pals or who wrote from a script. After all, the FBI had infiltrated NCASF, and the Central Committee presided over AKSZh. However, it seems unlikely that many participants were operatives. AKSZh and NCASF offered guidelines and suggested topics for conversation, but they did not dictate what or how to write. The letters' unique contents and diverse array of styles indicate there was considerable room for creativity. Moreover, there were no obvious attempts at espionage. Participants asked for photos of each other but not of strategic sites.[22] Some U.S. correspondents mentioned relatives who worked for the military or in weapons' laboratories, but their Soviet pen-pals never inquired about them. A few Americans expressed sympathy for socialism or read Marx, but they received no encouragement from their pen-friends in the Soviet

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[21] On this point, see: Susan Reid, "Who will Beat Whom? Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959," *Imagining the West,* 194-237.
[22] Contrasting examples in: "Canadians Warned of 'Pen Pal' Spies," *The New York Times*, September 3, 1948, 1.

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Union. Likewise, Soviet praise of U.S. culture elicited little response. If these remarks were attempts to bait each other, the participants did not bite. As Robbie Lieberman noted in her study of U.S. peace activists, we must allow for people to have multiple motivations and interests and not to conflate the pursuit of influence with attempts at subversion.[23]

Whether externally or internally motivated, the letter-writers claimed the space that their governments provided to reach across the "iron curtain." And, intentionally or not, they did significant propagandistic and intelligence work for their governments. In light of these considerations, I treat the letters not as outpourings of the self but as works of self-portraiture, which construct the life of an individual and of a nation on the page.[24] It is not their authenticity but their modes of storytelling and persuasion that interest me.

Though not representative of Americans or Soviets as a whole, the correspondents came from many walks of life. The Americans hailed from thirty-nine states, most from coastal cities or Midwestern towns, and a great many wrote through women's clubs and Christian organizations, where NCASF heavily advertised. Politically, they ranged from conservatives to progressives; two identified as socialists. The pool of U.S. participants gradually shifted leftward, especially by 1950 when those who wrote did so in open defiance of anti-communist crusaders. Of the several hundred letters I have found thus far, about ninety percent of the U.S. letter-writers were white, middle-class, and Christian; some had Jewish surnames but did not self-identify as such. All had high-school diplomas and roughly half had some post-secondary education. In these ways, they differed from NCASF's female leaders who included several

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[23] Lieberman, *The Strangest Dream*, 15.
[24] Michèle Lamont and Ann Swidler, "Methodological Pluralism and the Possibilities and Limits of Interviewing," *Qualitative Sociology,* 37, no. 2 (2014), 159.

prominent and highly educated Jewish and African American activists. Roughly eighty percent of the U.S. letter-writers were mothers and less than thirty percent worked outside of the home.

By comparison, I have tabulated that three-quarters of Soviet participants were mothers, and all did paid labor outside of the home except for those in their eighties or who had seven or more children. The working mother was the norm in the USSR. In other respects, the Soviet correspondents were atypical. More than half were highly educated professionals, including doctors, scientists, and artists. No doubt they were recruited to showcase the array of opportunities available to Soviet women. They also skewed urban; most lived in Moscow and Leningrad. Moreover, they were as ethnically homogeneous as the U.S. pool: about ninety percent were Russian or Ukrainian. Finally, all Soviet participants were politically vetted. However, less than fifteen percent were members or candidates for membership in the Communist Party, and just a handful held state or party positions, all at low levels. While some Soviet women may have felt compelled to partake in the project, others likely participated out of a growing sense of civic consciousness and increased social activism that characterized the postwar USSR.[25] Timothy Johnston found Soviets "rallied passionately and often emotionally around the slogan of peace" in the late 1940s, voluntarily sending hundreds of letters and donations to *Pravda* and the Soviet Peace Council.[26] Many would have likely dispatched notes abroad if given the chance.

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[25] Elena Zubkova, *Russia After the War: Hopes, Illusions and Disappointments, 1945-1957* (New York, 1998); Mark Edele, "More than just Stalinists: The Political Sentiments of Victors 1945-1953," *Late Stalinist Russia Society between Reconstruction and Reinvention,* ed. Juliane Fürst (New York, 2006): 167-191.
[26] Timothy Johnston: "Peace or Pacifism? The Soviet 'Struggle for Peace in All the World,' 1948-1954," *Slavic and East European Review*, 86, no. 2 (April 2008), 282.

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The six members of the Grossman-Roll' cluster—hereafter the focus of this essay—share many of the features described above. Althea Somerville Grossman (1880-1954) was a life-long resident of St. Louis, Missouri, and educated at Wellesley College and the University of Chicago. A member of the executive board of the St. Louis Equal Suffrage League, Grossman had worked tirelessly through local political channels for women to be enfranchised, but she never mentioned this in her letters.[27] Grossman had two grown daughters and had been a widow for thirteen years when she began corresponding with Roll'.[28] Roll' (1876- ?) was also a widow and had a daughter and a son; the latter perished in WWII. A retired schoolteacher, Roll' lived in Moscow with her son's widow and two grandchildren, one of whom, Natal'ia (Nata) Ryzhova, she persuaded to write to Grossman's neighbor, Margie. Margie (Margaret Hanford Cowdry) (1935- ) was the daughter of famed oncologist Edmond Vincent Cowdry.[29] Margie dreamed of being "a doctor or a nurse" and Nata "a technical engineer."[30] Both girls were twelve years old when they began corresponding.

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Roll' wrote to Grossman irregularly while her daughter, Faina, was battling cancer. When Faina died in 1948, Roll' asked Faina's friend, Ekaterina Germant, to write with Grossman until she felt well enough to resume the correspondence. Germant (1894- ?) was a widow but fifteen years younger than Grossman and twenty years younger than Roll'. Though a trained historian, she worked for AKSZh as a translator. Germant wrote more politically assertive letters than

[27] Althea S. Grossman, "The Part of the St Louis Equal Suffrage League in the Campaign for Equal Suffrage," *Missouri Historical Review* 14, no. 3-4 (April/July, 1920): 306-320.
[28] *The University of Chicago Alumni Directory* (1920), 137.
[29] E.V. Cowdry was on faculty at Washington University and a research director of the Barnard Free Skin and Cancer Hospital in St. Louis.
[30] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 481, l. 46, April 24, 1948; GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 639, l. 24, April 29, 1949.

Roll', which may be why Grossman enlisted "someone more capable to answer her."[31] This was seventy-five-year-old Irma Palb Shapleigh. Also a widow from St. Louis, Shapleigh travelled widely, visiting the USSR in 1924. This was extremely rare among U.S. participants. Most had no first-hand knowledge of the Soviet Union and relied on the press for information. Like Grossman, Shapleigh was interested in "international questions and the peace movement," and she shared Germant's letters with Grossman and with members of her family. Grossman, Roll', Germant, and Shapleigh corresponded though 1949 and Nata and Margie through 1951.

The Russian state archives contain twenty letters from this cluster, but their holdings are incomplete. The writers alluded to other letters, some lost, and complained that several months transpired before they arrived.[32] I now turn to those letters in order to demonstrate how the pen-pals sustained their conversations through these long intervals and how they used personal stories and language to befriend, probe, and influence each other.

## Friendly Persuasion

Most correspondents joined the pen-pal project in hopes of extending the wartime alliance into the postwar period. Based on their common opposition to fascism, they assumed Soviet and U.S. citizens shared other values and interests—especially a desire for peace. "I think that we are really much more alike than un-alike," Grossman surmised in her first letter. She then immediately declared her "friendly feelings" toward the USSR and her hope for peace.[33] Roll'

[31] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 480, l. 16, November 3, 1948.
[32] The letters are located in: GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, dd. 50-1973.
[33] Ibid, d. 50, l. 47. On the (more common) tendency of Soviets and Americans to imagine each other as opposites, see: David S. Foglesong, *The American Mission and the Evil Empire: the Crusade for a 'Free Russia' since 1881* (New York, 2007); Milla Fedorova, *Yankees in*



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replied with mutual appreciation, telling Grossman how her son's death at the front fueled her determination to prevent war.[34] This was the first of many times she substantiated her commitment to peace with maternalist arguments, which had long shaped U.S. women's arguments for peace but which only began to color Soviet women's rhetoric around WWII.

**Commented [PA1]:** For author's note: (a common strategy among many women's peace movements throughout the twentieth century, yes?)(yes, I mention this on p. 6 and in footnote 9. Would you like more discussion of maternalism or a reiteration that it was a common strategy here as well?)

Initially, most pen-pals hoped the United Nations would preserve the spirit of wartime cooperation between the United States and Soviet Union.[35] But that confidence faded as U.S. and Soviet delegates sparred over veto power, trade agreements, Iran, and other issues. Hostilities escalated in 1946 with Canada's Soviet spy scare in February, Stalin's and Churchill's charged speeches in February and March, and John Foster Dulles' call for a "get tough with Russia" policy in *Life* that June. Concerned, women joined the pen-pal program as a way to take U.S.-Soviet relations into their own hands. "Close human contacts like these are even more important in my mind than a thousand diplomatic overtures,"[36] observed Henrietta Buckmaster of Sharon, Connecticut. "We, little people, are already aware that there are no 'sides'," Grossman explained in 1947.[37] They were not responsible for the divisive, hawkish rhetoric peddled by public officials. Or, as young Margie Cowdry put it: "If all the good people are united, we can force our common enemies, the enemies of humanity, to be quiet."[38]

Knowing virtually nothing their interlocutors, members of the Grossman-Roll' circle declared their friendship in their first letters, then reiterated it in every note to follow. They

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*Petrograd, Bolsheviks in New York: America and Americans in Russian Literary Perception* (DeKalb, IL, 2013).
[34] GARF, f. R7928 op. 2, d. 146, l. 112, 29 November 1946.
[35] In 1945, eighty-five percent of U.S. citizens polled believed the United Nations would establish global peace and understanding. See: Laville, *Cold War Women,* 96.
[36] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 50, l. 3.
[37] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 245, l. 86, August 27, 1947.
[38] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 639, l. 14, December 16, 1949.

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constantly called each other "my dear" and "dear friend" and praised each other's insights. They opened with exclamations like "your letter gave me so much joy!" and signed off affectionately "with the most sincerely friendship."[39] "Your letter is so interesting that I want very much for our correspondence to continue and will look forward eagerly to a letter from you," Ekaterina Germant told Irma Shapleigh after their first exchange.[40] The participants were equally effusive when worried. After a long gap between letters, Grossman beseeched Roll': "I really do not want to lose you as a correspondent and, if I may say so, as a friend. I hope from my soul that you will write soon."[41] When she finally received a reply, Grossman admitted: "I thought that you had declined the growing of our friendship. I had such a feeling of personal loss."[42] Once forged, such epistolary pacts fostered a strong sense of reciprocity and mutual obligation even among individuals who had never met.[43]

The pen-friends also connected through the international language of grief. They discussed their health challenges and sought comfort when friends and relatives died. In 1949, Ol'ga Roll' penned a heart-wrenching letter to Grossman about Faina's struggle with cancer. "She was not only my daughter, but my dearest friend. I am unable to go out. In losing her, I have lost all." Roll' flouted conventional Soviet stoicism to admit: "They tell me I must live for my grandchildren, but I miss her, my daughter. […] She died, while I, an old woman, live." Roll' linked her daughter's illness duress of war, incorporating it into her argument for peaceful U.S.-

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[39] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 482, l. 93, July 9, 1948; GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 480, l. 16, November 3, 1948.
[40] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 483, l. 87, June 19, 1949.
[41] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 638, l. 31, March 3, 1949.
[42] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 639, l. 23, April 29, 1949.
[43] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus, OH, 1982), 87–115; Liz Stanley, Andrea Salter, and Helen Dampier, "The Epistolary Pact, Letterness, and the Schreiner Epistolarium," *Auto/Biography Studies*, 27, no. 2 (Winter 2012), 264.

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Soviet relations. "Her death is also a consequence of the war. It is hard to believe there are people who hope for a new war. Sorry that my letter will give you a few sad moments," Roll' closed, adding: "I will be always happy to hear from you."[44] Grossman's reply was equally heartfelt. "My joy at receiving a letter from you was strongly darkened by your tragic loss of your beloved daughter, Faina. I mourned your great loss, and my husband's death from cancer in 1933," Grossman remarked. Her pen-friend's anguish triggered a resurgence of her own grief. "Try to take comfort in her children and in your memories of what you gave each other and to the world," she advised. [45] Germant also shared her heartaches. She wrote about the death of her friend Faina, her mother's stroke, and her cousin's death in hopes that these tragedies might bring her closer to her pen-pal: "I am telling you all of this at such length because you said in your letter that I told too little about our everyday life."[46]

Photographs also fostered intimacy. Although the older women were shy about exchanging snapshots, the younger ones delighted in it. Nata sent pictures of herself and her mother, while Margie sent photos of her home, her classmates, and herself.[47] The photos were passed around among the pen-friends, who read good intent from them. "Please tell Nata I really liked her picture," Grossman told Roll'. "She looks so affectionate and open with her big wondrous eyes. I also liked that she wrote that she loves you. She looks smart and sweet. […] I feel an immense unity with you just from the contents of your letters and from seeing the picture of your granddaughter."[48] In addition to photographs, the group traded stamps, recipes,

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[44] GARF, f. R7928 op. 2, d. 483, l. 50, July 30, 1949. On Soviet stoicism with regard to WWII: Catherine Merridale, *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Russia* (London, 2000), 312.
[45] GARF, f. R7928 op. 2, d. 639, ll. 23-24, April 29, 1949.
[46] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 483, l. 83.
[47] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 985, l. 23, August 28, 1951.
[48] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 245, l. 86, August 27, 1947.

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postcards, newspaper clippings, and reading recommendations, especially on current affairs and politics.

Reading recommendations were one of the ways the pen-friends tried to shape each other's opinions. They met such suggestions with enthusiasm, not suspicion. Believing that peace was built on mutual understanding, most participants welcomed the chance for more information, especially from a source they trusted. Their prior knowledge of each other's political and economic systems was quite limited and, judging from their references, heavily based on the press. Mainstream news became increasingly inflammatory in its coverage of U.S.-Soviet relations during the late 1940s, but the pen-pals encountered positive and ambivalent portrayals of each other as well. U.S. participants mentioned critical articles in *Christian Science Monitor, Readers' Digest*, and, above all, their local newspapers, but they also read laudatory accounts of the Soviet Union from commentators and fellow-travelers like John Reed, Lincoln Steffens, and Frederick Shuman.[49] Soviet coverage of the United States had long mixed admiration—especially of U.S. industrial and technological achievements—with sharp criticism. Opening *Pravda*, *Izvestiia,* and *Ogenëk* in the late 1940s, Soviet pen-pals encountered dichotomous depictions of "bad Americans," warmongering and greedy, and "good Americans" like Progressives, civil rights activists, and muckrakers.[50] Ekaterina Germant was eager to know Grossman's opinion of Upton Sinclair, George Seldes, and Maurice Milligan, whose *Missouri Waltz* cast Truman as a pawn of machine politics in Kansas City.[51] Some pen-pals went beyond

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[49] Ibid, d. 361, l. 4. None mentioned *The New York Times, The Washington Post*, or other national newspapers.
[50] Rósa Magnúsdóttir, *Enemy Number One: The United States of America in Soviet Ideology and Propaganda, 1945-1959* (New York, 2019), 11, 17, 20-21. On the rise of anti-Americanism in postwar Soviet propaganda, see: V. Pechatnov, "Exercise in Frustration: Soviet Foreign Propaganda in the Early Cold War, 1945-1947," *Cold War History* (Jan. 2001) 1, no. 2, 1-27.
[51] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 482, l. 26, September 20, 1948.

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making recommendations and sent each other newspaper clippings and government-produced propaganda. Grossman suggested Roll' read the State Department's *Amerika*.[52] Grossman herself enjoyed the Soviet Embassy's *Information Bulletin*.

Such published materials made a minor impression compared to the letters, which the pen-pals regarded as alternative and more accurate sources of news. They put more stock in their pen-pals' opinions and accommodated what they saw in published sources to fit the picture painted by their interlocutors. Grossman, for instance, "attentively examined" the "terrific photos" of May Day demonstrations in the *Information Bulletin* and imagined Roll' marching. "I wondered—were you not among those in the crowds of people?"[53] Moreover, they were keen to know about the content of their own country's propaganda and how it played with their pen-friends. Germant asked about Moscow's international radio broadcasts, while Grossman asked her to describe Voice of America. Grossman even proposed a trade: she would send Roll' the *Information Bulletin* if Roll' mailed her copies of *Amerika*.[54] Roll' never replied to this proposal.

Reading recommendations were just the start of how the pen-friends tried to steer each other toward ideals and leaders, which aligned with their own national interests. They also championed various campaigns and events. For instance, several self-described liberal Americans brought their pen-pals virtually aboard the "freedom train." This locomotive carried original drafts of founding documents like the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Gettysburg Address through the forty-eight states in 1947 and 1948. The U.S. Attorney General's office developed the idea for the train as a way to strengthen loyalty and foster political consensus among U.S. citizens at a time when the United States' political landscape

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[52] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 639, l. 25, April 29, 1949.
[53] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 361, l. 22, June 8, 1948.
[54] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 480, l. 25, November 3, 1948.

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seemed increasingly divided.[55] "Indoctrination in democracy is the essential catalytic agent needed to blend our varying groups into one American family," Attorney General Tom Clark proclaimed.[56] Pen-pal Marjorie Streiff of Plains, Kansas, helped disseminate this image of unity among U.S. citizens when she wrote to Evdokiia Il'iushina of Moscow about "how deeply exhilarating" it was to board the train and view these "documents so precious to our people." Streiff even began to recite the Gettysburg Address for Il'iushina to underscore that "the American way" was "'conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.' This, my friend, is the heart of America and as long as it endures, we always will wish for peace for ourselves and for the whole world." Individual rights and freedoms, she explained, were the core of democracy and the foundation of peace, whether at home and abroad. Streiff was eager to educate Il'iushina on other U.S. traditions: "I would very much like to have the opportunity to send you something from our literature," she wrote.[57] Il'iushina never took Streiff up on the offer, but a spirited discussion developed between Grossman and Germant about another influence campaign on wheels, the "friendship train."

The friendship train was conceived by journalist and liberal anti-communist Drew Pearson. Pearson believed strongly in peace as modeled by the United States and exported in the form of aid. His column for 11 October 1947 in the *Washington Merry-Go-Round,* syndicated in over 700 newspapers, relayed how a Soviet ship carrying wheat to Marseilles was greeted by cheering French citizens, while an American ship offloading in Le Havre received no such fanfare. A friendship train, Pearson suggested, full of donations from U.S. citizens, would send a clear message of the United States' goodwill and help curb communist influence on the

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[55] Wall, *Inventing the 'American Way',* 27, 36.
[56] Ibid, 3-4.
[57] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 360, l. 3, April 6, 1948.

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continent.[58] In November 1947, two locomotives—one chugging westward, the other eastward—wound their way through forty U.S. cities, collecting donations for French and Italian citizens. Grossman excitedly told Germant all about Pearson's plan to send another "friendship train" bearing gifts for Russian children as a way to aid the USSR and demonstrate American benevolence. She enclosed a copy of Pearson's June 1948 letter to Stalin making this request. "I really hope that this friendly apolitical gesture will be permitted," she wrote.[59]

Germant, however, did not consider this "strange offer" to be "apolitical" at all. "Of course, we appreciate every friendly gesture towards us," she began, "but we don't need charity and our people would have met such a train with astonishment, and, perhaps, with offense." "Yes, we suffered terribly during the war," Germant admitted, but Pearson had discounted the Soviet people's determination to rebuild. "Here, reconstruction is not the fruit of private initiative, but a state program taken up with enthusiasm by our whole nation. That is why people work here with passion, overfulfilling all norms of output, that is why reconstruction goes on here at such an unheard-of pace."[60] State-organized recovery efforts were more efficient and effective than gathering donations, she argued. Moreover, the USSR was a country of production, Germant proclaimed, citing Soviet exports to eastern Europe. It gave aid rather than received it. Of course, just one year earlier the Soviet government had sought then declined Marshall-Plan aid when the U.S. government disingenuously offered it under terms the Kremlin found unacceptable.[61] It is unclear how much Grossman or Germant knew about this event, but

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[58] Pearson backed "Letters from America," inspired by the friendship train (Wall, *Inventing the 'American Way,'* 242).
[59] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 361, l. 22, June 8, 1948.
[60] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 482, l. 26, September 20, 1948.
[61] Michael Cox and Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, "The Tragedy of American Diplomacy: Rethinking the Marshall Plan," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 27, no. 1 (Winter 2005), 114-123.

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neither mentioned it. The whole episode certainly conflicted with the pictures the pen-pals were trying to paint of the United States' generosity and the Soviet Union's self-sufficiency, respectively. Germant accused Pearson of underestimating not only the USSR's economic productivity but also the Soviet government's solicitous concern for its people. His offer to send a locomotive full of gifts for Soviet children "shows in reality how little Mr. Pearson knows about our country and about the way children are treated here." Modulating her tone between conciliation and condemnation, Germant invited Pearson to come see for himself. "If Mr. Pearson would come here, he would see that the so-called 'iron curtain' has been drawn not by us, this curtain of lies is the work of a certain part of the American press, […] that our Soviet people are deeply engrossed in advancing the reconstruction and further progress of our country, and that towards the American people we have only feelings of friendliness and goodwill."[62] To Germant, rapid reconstruction proved the USSR had peaceful intentions, more so than U.S. gift-giving. Germant closed with well wishes and "cordial greetings" for Grossman. Still, her fervent tone and idealization of Soviet life resonates with Marjorie Streiff's adulation of America. Streiff's and Germant's respective arguments—about the sanctity of individual rights in the United States and about social solidarity and welfare in the Soviet Union—repeatedly surfaced in letters penned by other correspondents.[63]

In return, Soviet pen-friends tried to influence their pen-pals regarding the 1948 U.S. presidential election. They stumped for Henry Wallace whom they praised as "the peace candidate." Roll' quoted Wallace in her first letter to Grossman: "'the USA and Russia should

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[62] Ibid, l. 26. Underlining in original.
[63] Examples in: GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 483, l. 174, December 21, 1948; GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 483, ll. 43-44, July 26, 1949; GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 638, l. 49, January 27, 1949.

live in peace and this is the most important question standing before the world today.'"[64] Wallace, a former Secretary of Agriculture, ran on the Progressive ticket in 1948. He had served as Vice President, but his increasingly leftist views prompted Franklin D. Roosevelt to choose the comparatively moderate Harry S. Truman as his next running mate. Wallace called for arms reduction deals, trade agreements, and peaceful coexistence with the USSR. These policies drew support from some labor organizers, peace activists, socialists, and their sympathizers. But this radical base doomed his campaign. Most voters considered Wallace pro-socialist, and he won less than three percent of the vote.[65] Roll' urged Grossman to back Wallace, but the Missourian did not need any convincing. Progressive women like Grossman were heavily involved in Wallace's campaign at the state and municipal levels, championing his pro-peace and his pro-woman platforms, the latter of which promised laws to fight sexual discrimination and to ensure fair working conditions.[66] For Grossman, however, peace trumped all other political concerns. "I agree with Henry Wallace. The deeper currents of human life merge together and under the surface there is the real unity of all humanity," she wrote in June 1948.[67] Grossman had strong faith that the "little people" of the United States and USSR—including herself and her pen-friends—had more in common than in conflict.

Even though they supported the same candidate, the 1948 election did draw out differences between them. Grossman seized upon their discussion of Wallace to promote democratic institutions in the United States. Grossman gave Roll' a primer on campaigning under a multi-party system, something foreign to her pen-pal. "Now on the radio," she added,

[64] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 245, l. 85, August 27, 1947.
[65] Castledine, *Cold War Progressives*, 13-16.
[66] Ibid, 24.
[67] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 245, l. 86, August 27, 1947.



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"they broadcast many speeches of different political candidates because this month will be caucuses of Democrats, Republicans, and other smaller parties for the best candidates. Then in November we will all vote, choosing among those candidates of different parties who we want to be president and vice-president." Grossman explained that two parties generally dominated the field, but third parties, like the Progressive Party, emerged when political discontent achieved a critical mass. At the next official debate, Grossman noted, "our friend Wallace, who is advancing a 'new' and 'third' party, will not be among the candidates even though he delivers in my view the very best speeches, much better than the speeches of others."[68]

Grossman's description of the campaign was one of several lessons she penned on American democracy. The Missourian was critical of U.S. political institutions and practices, but she lauded the United States' democratic values and traditions. Sometimes she stated so directly; at other times, she sent Roll' and Germant copies of her letters to the *St. Louis Star Times,* which both evoked and performed the democratic right to criticize. In one letter to the editor, Grossman called for an open, face-to-face dialogue between Truman and Stalin, underscoring that Truman should respect her request "considering that we are a democracy and that we have a representative form of government," where "the president is the servant of the people."[69] In reply, Germant commended Grossman as a "dear friend—I hope you will let me call you so"—for confronting Truman and demanding peace. Germant reassured her pen-pal that it was not a problem if Truman refused to meet with Stalin because Wallace had agreed to do so.[70] When

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[68] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 361, l. 22, June 8, 1948.
[69] Ibid, l. 22; *St. Louis Star Times*, March 23, 1948, 25.
[70] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 482, ll. 24-25, September 20, 1948.

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Wallace lost the election two months later, the Muscovite was crushed—even more so than Grossman, who conceded that Truman was a good man with "many good initiatives."[71]

Reciprocally, Germant expounded upon the meaning of Soviet socialism. She helped Grossman understand the difference between socialism and communism. On one occasion, the Missourian asked why the *Information Bulletin* declared that the new Five-Year Plan "carries the Soviet Union very far down to road to communism," when "here in the USA we say that communism rules in Russia."[72] The confusion was that U.S. rhetoric conflated the ruling party's name with the socioeconomic system it aspired to build. Germant explained that socialism was a transitional phase, where capitalist structures were dismantled and replaced with state ownership and a planned economy. The USSR had achieved this, but "war has set us back considerably: we are first obliged to re-built (sic) everything that has been destroyed before we are able to build anew and go forward to our goal […] a new, higher, social order—Communism."[73]

Germant further defined Soviet socialism by framing it through personal experiences. When telling Irma Shapleigh about her cousin's untimely death, Germant touted her society's welfare policies and collectivist ethos. "I have suffered a great loss," Germant explained; her cousin was "one of my dearest friends." However, she took comfort in the fact that her cousin had received free medical care and paid sick leave. The trade union committee at her place of work "often came to see her, to inquire if she was in need of anything, and to bring her flowers and good things to eat." "As you can see, all through her illness she had no material worries. She was just as well provided for as if she were working. All through her illness, both in hospital and at home, she was visited and showed all kind[s] of help and concern by her fellow-workers, her

[71] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 480, l. 15, November 3, 1948.
[72] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 361, l. 22, June 8, 1948.
[73] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 482, l. 24, September 20, 1948.



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'collective' as we say here," Germant explained. "This is a characteristic trait of our life. Nobody is ever left alone, even if they have no family, no relatives. All get help and care from their respective collectives. I feel this is exactly what you, Americans, don't understand and from this arise your wrong ideas about our life. […] You don't understand that our Soviet nation—all our Soviet people […] are all one, we are all just one big, united family wherein all are for each and each for all."[74] Germant's political lessons were more heavy-handed than Grossman's, but her proclamation of perfect unity between state and society in the USSR resembled Marjorie Streiff's rhapsodies about the "freedom train" and Attorney General Clark's remarks about "one American family" described above.

Just as Grossman touted democratic elections and freedoms in the United States, Germant argued that the Soviet welfare policies were guided by democratic principles of public service. "Our government, elected on the basis of our democratic rights from the best people of our country, is concerned with our welfare. We believe in our Government and stand for it because we feel its concern for us."[75] Germant's declaration obscured the fact that top Soviet leaders were elected indirectly, not by the general population. They did not rule with the consent of the governed. However, Germant insisted, they ruled with public interests in mind. She presented this as a form of democracy. Participants outside of the Grossman-Roll' circle made similar arguments. Soviet letter-writers often cited social welfare policies as evidence that their state existed for the public good, whereas their U.S. interlocutors pointed out that the lack of civil liberties in the USSR contradicted this claim. In fact, progressives in the United States often supported substantial social welfare policies themselves, arguing that peace meant not just the

[74] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 483, ll. 84-85, June 19, 1949.
[75] Ibid, l. 85. Underlining in original.



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absence of war, but social justice and equality.[76] However, those who signed up as pen-pals, like Grossman, rarely raised this point to their Soviet correspondents. Instead, they emphasized the freedom to criticize the government and to create new parties as the hallmarks of true democracy as practiced in the United States.

This is how Irma Shapleigh pushed back on Germant's claims about the democratic spirit of Soviet socialism. She too framed her political views in a personal anecdote. Shapleigh told Germant about her "most interesting" visit to the USSR in 1924, her boat ride down the Volga, and her friendly chats with "an enthusiastic communist," Julius Rozinskii. "Much to my sorrow, I heard he had been put to death," she wrote. "I wonder if you could enlighten me on the subject of the freedom of your people? So much of the propaganda here is that there is practically none in your country, that fear abounds everywhere, that individuals must be entirely subservient to the State and no one is allowed to express any criticism. Also, that millions are in concentration camps largely because they have indulged in criticism. I would be so glad to know the truth." Did Soviet citizens have freedom to speak out against their governments? To live by their own choices? "Of course, there is much else that I myself should like to know, for I long for the people of the USSR and our people should be friends. But I fear I shall weary you with my deluge of questions," Shapleigh concluded, softening her tone.[77]

In reply, Germant doubled down on Soviet democracy but avoided Shapleigh's question about the gulag. Instead, Germant evoked the 1936 constitution which promised the "right to free speech, free press, free gatherings" and so on. "An essential fact of our constitution is that it not only proclaims the rights and freedoms of our citizens, but really puts them into practice" by

[76] Castledine, *Cold War Progressives*, 2.
[77] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 638, ll. 37-38, February 25, 1949.



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ensuring equitable opportunities through free, accessible health care, education, and pensions. "This can be easily demonstrated on whichever example you will choose," Germant claimed, but she chose her example carefully. "Let us take, for instance, college education. In your country, college education is very expensive, whereas here all who want a college education not only can go to any university or other higher school of learning, but are paid a state stipend, which allows them to devote all their energies to their studies without worrying about material things. On being graduated (sic), our young specialist[s] can choose from several jobs offered to them in their special field, the one that suits them best and is the most convenient for them. [78] Indeed, Soviet citizens, especially women, did have greater access to affordable higher education and to a variety of professions than many U.S. citizens did. Germant failed to mention, however, that Soviet citizens—again, especially women and particularly in the devastating aftermath of WWII—lacked the freedom not to work. "I can say boldly that nowhere, in no other country exists such freedom of choice of one's work as in our Soviet Union," she concluded. Germant closed with "kind regards" for "dear Mrs. Shapleigh" and added: "I see that I have written so much that I will have to leave the answers to your other questions." But she never did address them.[79] Still, Shapleigh found Germant somewhat convincing. "I absolutely rejoiced from my soul" to read about Soviet care for the ill, Shapleigh told Grossman. Germant "categorically denied what we have heard about how people are forced to do only the work that the government lets them do. She, evidently, is a very smart woman and I would like to have the opportunity to meet her face-to-face."[80] Of course, they never did meet. And without meeting or seeing each other's societies, the correspondents were not accountable for the claims they made about

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[78] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 483, ll. 83-84, June 19, 1949.
[79] Ibid, l. 84.
[80] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 639, l. 24, April 29, 1949.

themselves and their countries. Their pen-friendships were based on a combination of revealing and concealing. They were a blend of intimacy, performance, and evasion.

The Grossman-Roll' circle comprised only six of the hundreds of Soviet and American women who took up their pens to cultivate friendly relations in the late 1940s—a time when talks between their governments stalled. Letter-writing provided these "ordinary" women with the opportunity to do diplomatic and propagandistic work, to promote peace and their national way of life simultaneously. The fact that the correspondents had different political values and opposing views of democracy is hardly surprising. What is telling is how they embedded their claims in matrices of well wishes, personal stories, and emotional appeals. When it came to establishing peace, much of the message was in the mode of articulation. The letters showcase the personal within the political as well as the persuasive power of storytelling. Correspondents constructed a rapport, not just an argument, on the page. Although rarely convinced by each other, they thoughtfully engaged each other's ideas and formulated counterarguments without alienating their interlocutors. Considering the open hostility that permeated the press and halls of government at this time, the letter-writers' consistent, dedicated communication is striking and runs counter to scholarly assumptions about U.S.-Soviet relations, especially in the Truman-Stalin era.

The pen-friends communicated at great personal risk. Grossman and Shapleigh stepped away from the project in late 1949, a landmark year for two parallel campaigns against foreign subversion, McCarthyism and *zhdanovshchina*. Increasingly aware of government surveillance and wary of political reprisals, the number of women participating in the pen-pal program



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declined. Nevertheless, in the 1950s and beyond, letter-writing became a ubiquitous form of Cold-War citizen diplomacy. The U.S. and Soviet governments went on to back numerous epistolary ventures and cultural exchanges on a much larger scale. The idea that regular, monitored contact between U.S. and Soviet citizens was politically expedient—whether to foment understanding or engage in competition—was one of the few points upon which authorities in the United States and Soviet Union consistently agreed. It was a lesson that this early and hitherto unknown pen-pal project helped to impart.

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Spreading Intimacy and Influence:

Women's Correspondence across the Iron Curtain[*]

Althea Grossman addressed her letter to no one in particular, just "a Friend, Russia." "I am a citizen of the USA, just as you are a citizen of the USSR," she began. "I am writing to you because I should like to assure you that I have a friendly feeling for you and that, though we come from different cultures and customs, I think that we are really much more alike than un-alike." Confident their lives were similar, the sixty-six-year-old Missourian covered sheets of blue stationery with personal details about her daughters, her heart trouble, even the quirks of her twin-in-a-door beds. "Tell me of your life and ask me any questions," she concluded.[1]

Grossman posted her letter in July 1946. When it reached the USSR, it was forwarded to the Soviet Women's Anti-Fascist Committee (AKSZh), an agency in the Agitation and Propaganda section of the Communist Party.[2] AKSZh was created during World War II to strengthen solidarity and cooperation between Allied women. It mounted various campaigns to achieve this, including a letter-writing initiative through which Soviet women implored British and American women to send more supplies and troops to the Red Army. Britons, especially industrial workers, responded readily, but women in the United States did not reply until late

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[*] The author would like to thank Dr. Brooke Blower, Dr. Frank Costigliola, the two anonymous peer reviewers, the editorial team at *Diplomatic History*, and the other authors in this forum for their helpful feedback and suggestions.

[1] State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), fond (f.) R7928, inventory (op.) 2, file (d.) 146, sheet (l.) 111, July 20, 1946.~~.~~ ~~(In your citations from here you don't provide dates to the letters. Is this information you have and can provide?)~~

[2] AKSZh moved to the Foreign Policy Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party shortly after WWII.

1943 when, saturated with messages about Soviet sacrifice and bravery at Stalingrad, their appreciation for their Soviet ally grew.[3] By the war's end, U.S. letters streamed into AKSZh's Moscow headquarters. Some of those who wrote were war widows seeking solace from their Soviet sisters women in mourning. Others wanted to thank the Soviet people for their sacrifices. All were curious about the USSR. Initially, AKSZh marked the letters as "warranting no reply." After all, the war was over, and victory had been achieved. But by 1946, when Grossman penned her note, it was clear that American women's eagerness for contact was a golden opportunity to promote Soviet values and visions of postwar peace. AKSZh recruited Soviet women to reply, and by the late 1940s, some 300 pairs were corresponding. The letter-writing campaign peaked in 1949 and endured, diminished form, until 1958.

AKSZh paired Althea Grossman with Ol'ga Roll' because, as Grossman predicted, they had much in common. Roll' too was a widow and mother of two. The Muscovite had been a literature teacher and she loved Mark Twain. That delighted Grossman, who lived on the Mississippi.[4] The pair exchanged fifteen letters between 1946 and 1949. They also convinced neighbors, friends, and grandchildren to join in, creating an intergenerational cluster of six letters-writers, aged twelve to eighty. This article represents the first scholarly investigation of this correspondence project. I, and it focuses on the letters that Grossman, Roll', and their associates exchanged during the late 1940s and uncovers how they practiced friendship and

[3] GARF, f. R8581, op. 1, d. 71, ll. 13-29. The complete history of this pen-pal project, covering WWII through the 1950s, is told in: Alexis Peri, *Dear Unknown Friend: Soviet and American Women Discover the Power of the Personal,* a manuscript under contract with Harvard University Press. On 1943 as the height of American enthusiasm for the Soviets, see: Ronald Smelser and Edward J. Davies II, *The Myth of the Eastern Front The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Imagination* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 11.
[4] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 146, l. 112, November 29, 1946.


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politics in each note they penned.~~. (Would this be a good spot to state the paper's argument/thesis?)~~

All of the pen-pals, including the Grossman-Roll' cluster, hoped to defuse tensions and foster understanding between their nations through letter-writing. At the same time, they promoted their respective values and cultural practices. Both sides yearned for peace but based on the model provided by their own countries. Pen-friendship offered a way for them to champion peace and their own way of life simultaneously. And rather than debate policy or abstract ideological tenets, the letter-writers used personal experiences to substantiate their views. They wove their stories into the story of the nation, endowing the political fault lines of the Cold War with personal meaning. Not only did they keep their arguments personal, they infus~~mbu~~ed each letter with empathy, affection, and reassurances of peaceful intent. This style of politicking enabled them to maintain their pen-friendships over several years and many disagreements—a feat considering the diplomatic impasse between American and Soviet statesmen during that time. Below, I highlight some of the rhetorical strategies that the correspondents, especially the Grossman-Roll' circle, used to cultivate friendly relations and exercise political influence.~~. (Is there a way to boil the argument encapsulated here in this paragraph into a sentence to place at the end of the previous paragraph above?)~~

The historiographical significance of this pen-pal project extends far beyond the specific conversations it facilitated. First, the participants practiced this personalized diplomacy at a time when scholars assume there was little contact between Soviet~~s~~ and U.S. citizen~~American~~s. The letters substantially complicate our view of the Truman-Stalin era. That time was marked by Soviet isolationism, U.S. efforts at containment, and mutual anxiety about foreign infiltration. Grossman received her first reply from Roll' in 1947, a year when hostilities between their



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nations escalated. -Twhen the Marshall Plan, Truman's "Loyalty Order," the CIA, and the Cominform—the arm of the international communist movement Cominform—(is it worth identifying this group? For unfamiliar readers? What do you think?), Marshall Plan, and Truman's "Loyalty Order," were all launched in 1947 inaugurated. That same year, tThe USSR also forbade Soviets from marrying foreigners that same year. Both governments considered cContact between U.S. and Soviet citizens was considered suspicious if not treasonous. And yet, the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the U.S. (please change US to U.S.) State Department allowed hundreds of women to correspond. Scholars tend to associate this strategy of using "ordinary"everyday people to establish ties and exert influence with athe later era, that of "peaceful coexistence," when there was a proliferation of letter-writing campaigns. Even then, however, most of the correspondence was not between Soviet and U.S. citizens directly.[5] This pen-pal initiative, by contrast, reveals how individuals in the United States and USSR Soviet Union conversed and connected long before the "thaw" and a full decade before their countries signed their first treaty on cultural and citizen exchange.[6]

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[5] Other cold-war letter exchanges, mostly from the 1950s and between U.S. citizens and peoples of Europe, the Eastern Bloc, and East Asia, not the USSR, are analyzed in: Wendy L. Wall, *Inventing the 'American Way': The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 2008); Kenneth Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (Lawrence, KS, 2006); Jennifer Helgren, *American Girls and Global Responsibility: A New Relation to the World during the Early Cold War* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2017).

[6] Recent studies of this strategy, which credit the Khrushchev and Eisenhower administrations for introducing it, include: Eleoinory Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die: The Soviet Lives of Western Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 2018); Norman E. Saul, "The Program that Shattered the Iron Curtain: The Lacy-Zarubin Agreement (January 1958)," *New Perspectives on Russian-American Relations*, ed. William Benton Whisenhunt and Norman E. Saul (New York, 2016); Yale Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War:- Raising the Iron Curtain* (University Park, PN, 2003); Justin Hart, *Empire of Ideas: The Origins of Public Diplomacy and the Transformation of U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York, 2013).

Second, this pen-pal project provides a new perspective on the ~~transition~~ shift in U.S.~~American~~-Soviet relations from allies to adversaries. When viewed through these cordial letters, that transition ~~shift~~ appears to have occurred much more slowly than high-level politics suggest. The correspondents continually drew inspiration from the wartime alliance throughout the 1940s. ~~For them~~They saw it ~~,~~ as~~it~~ proof that~~ved~~ their countries had common values and could indeed cooperate. They did not accept the Cold War as a reality, much less an inevitability. Out of hundreds of letters sent during the 1940s, I found only one usage of the term "cold war," by an American, and two of "iron curtain"—one by a U.S.~~an American~~, the other by a Soviet citizen (quoted below). Moreover, when using these terms, the pen-pals~~y~~ put them in scare quotes or referred to them as "so-called."[7] The letters remind us that such concepts were not necessarily meaningful descriptors of individual experience, especially in the postwar decade~~s~~.

This correspondence campaign enriches our knowledge of U.S.-Soviet exchanges in a third respect. Its participants were not the political or cultural elites who typically starred in such programs~~events~~.[8] They were women of little prominence. And they saw their low status ~~is~~ as an advantage. They touted their femininity and their humble origins as reasons why they c~~w~~ould find common ground when their more illustrious compatriots had failed. The pen-pals described themselves as "ordinary" and "little people" bearing a simple message of peace and friendship. They conveyed this by imbuing their letters with personal stories ~~-~~and expressions of affection. Some participants explicitly couched this message in gendered terms as well, claiming women

[7] GARF f. R7928, op. 2, d. 480, l. 4, January 3, 1949. On the gap between popular versus politicians' and pressmen's acceptance of the Cold War as a phenomenon, see: George Gallup, "Term 'Cold War' Unknown to 46%," *The Washington Post*, December 3, 1948, 16; Masuda Hajimu, *Cold War Crucible: The Korean Conflict and the Postwar World* (Cambridge, MA, 2015), 1-2.
[8] *Divided Dreamworlds?: The Cultural Cold War in East and West*, ed. Peter Romijn, Giles Scott-Smith, and Joes Segal (Amsterdam, 2014), 3.



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were better than men at making friends and avoiding conflict~~preserving peace~~. "If only the women of the world used all of their influence to create a better life for the whole world," Mary Roe Hull of Osh Kosh, Wisconsin wrote to Nina Morozova of Moscow. "We need to compel men away from their idea: 'I do what I want or else…' and bang!~~"~~"[9] Other correspondents, including those in the Grossman-Roll' cluster, evoked their femininity indirectly, stressing how, as wives and mothers, they were determined to protect future generations from war. Through such maternalist arguments and essentializing views of womanhood, they appealed not only to their pen-friends' common humanity but to what they assumed were their common roles, experiences, and values as women.[10]

Fourth, this letter-writing campaign brings new voices and individualized perspectives to a growing body of scholarship on women's global activism during the late 1940s, an era often discounted in studies of the international women's movement, which concentrate on the 1960s and beyond.[11] These self-described "ordinary" women were not full-time activists. The vast majority did not belong to any national political organizations, much less ~~They did not~~ attended the international congresses for peace and for racial and gender equity that~~, which~~ dotted the

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[9] GARF, f. R7928 op. 2 d. 361, l. 30, July 10, 1948.

[10] M~~This approach recalls longstanding m~~aternalist arguments for peace only appeared in Soviet women's rhetoric during WWII, but they were~~, which~~ a mainstay of the rhetoric used by U.S. ~~numerous~~ women's groups, conservative and progressive alike. ~~mobilized.~~ The vast literature on this tradition is summarized in: Harriet Hyman Alonso, *Peace as a Women's Issue: A History of the U.S. Movement for World Peace and Women's Rights* (Syracuse, NY, 1993). On maternalist thinking among U.S. progressives, see: Jacqueline Castledine, *Cold War Progressives: Women's Interracial Organizing for Peace and Freedom* (Champaign, IL, 2012). On Soviet wartime and postwar maternalism, see: Peri, *Dear Unknown Friend.*

[11] On women's international politicking during the 1940s, see: Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Baltimore, MD, 2001); Helen Laville, *Cold War Women: The International Activities of America Women's Organis~~z~~ations* (Manchester, UK, 2002); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: the Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York, 2008); Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia, PA, 2018).

decade.[12] Still, by corresponding, they commanded a role for themselves in international politics. (Did they at all relate to other contemporary groups that may have had local chapters in their area that were thinking about the USSR? Like WILPF or even the CP?) Their letters, textual forms associated with the intimate and the everyday, capture how the personal was political even without any mention ofing the women's movement, which helped that insight gain widespread acceptance.[13]

Fifth, just as the letters offer a new vista onto women's international politics, they broaden our view of the American and Soviet and U.S. peace movements. They shift attention away from the conferences and institutions on which scholars generally focus and allow us to see the movement through smaller, interpersonal connections. The letter-writers' tone and tactics differed significantly from most peace activists of the 1940s and 1950s. While the latter concentrated on crises like nuclear proliferation and or campaigns like the Stockholm Appeal, these correspondents delivered their ideas in the register of everyday life, rarely debating policy or press events.[14] The Soviet letter-writers lacked the prestige to serve in the World Peace

[12] Two of the U.S. correspondents were active in their local chapters of the League of Women Voters and third supported the Women's International League of Peace and Freedom. Less than fifteen percent of Soviet letter-writers were in the Communist Party or candidates for membership. On the numerous international congresses women organized for peace and gender equity during the 1940s, see: Francisca de Haan, "Continuing Cold War Paradigms in the Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organisations: The Case of the Women's International Democratic Federation," *Women's History Review* 19, no. 4 (Sept. 2010): 547-573; Melanie Ilic, "Soviet Women, Cultural Exchange, and the Women's International Democratic Federation," *Reassessing the Cold War,* ed. Sari Autio-Sarasmo and Katalin Miklóssy (New York, 2011), 157-174.

[13] On letter-writing's import to second-wave feminism: Margaretta Jolly*, In Love and Struggle: Letters in Contemporary Feminism* (New York, 2008); Katherine M. Marino, "Transnational Pan-American Feminism: The Friendship of Bertha Lutz and Mary Wilhelmine Williams, 1926–1944," *Journal of Women's History,* 26, No. 2 (Summer 2014): 63-87.

[14] Vladimir Dobrenko, "Conspiracy of Peace: the Cold War, the International Peace Movement, and the Soviet Peace Campaign, 1946-1956" (PhD thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2016).



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Council or Soviet Peace Committee—two strongholds of the Soviet "peace offensive" initiated by the Cominform. Moreover, AKSZh played a subsidiary role in these organizations, contributing to them only at the local level. Moreover, ~~And~~ the amiable tone of the Soviet pen-pals' ~~ir~~ letters clashed sharply with the fiery, anti-American rhetoric wielded by the delegates of these ~~organizations~~groups. Meanwhile, the U.S. correspondents, though certainly left-leaning, rarely associated with the socialist, communist, labor, or civil rights groups, which studies of the ~~US~~ peace movement in the United States tend to emphasize.[15] As I discuss below, many of the U.S. letter-writers did not intentionally associate with the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship, the group responsible for mailing their letters to the USSR, either. ~~(What about the groups organizing the letter writing campaign did they relate to these groups?)~~ Much of th~~eis~~ scholarship on the U.S. peace movement during the Cold War ~~investigates~~ emphasizes~~peace~~ activists' motives and loyalties. By contrast, through a close ~~contrast,~~examination of these letters, I focus on the pen-pals' styles of communication and argumentation—that is, on how they attempted to establish~~make~~ peace through intimate language and personal storytelling.

Letter-Writers and -Readers

The letters were~~Though~~ deeply personal~~,~~ but ~~these letters were~~ never private. They were shared around family dinner tables and read aloud to friends. They were inspected, translated, and censored by the organizations facilitating the exchange. They also were monitored by the Central Committee and the FBI and referenced in hearings and publications during the postwar

[15] Lawrence Wittner, *The Struggle Against the Bomb*, Vols. 1 and 2 (Stanford, CA, 1993-2003); Robbie Lieberman, *The Strangest Dream: Communism, Anticommunism, and the U.S. Peace Movement, 1945-1963* (New York, 2000).





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Red Scare as evidence of communist infiltration. The vast majority of American pen-pals, including Grossman, do not have FBI files, but the individuals who oversaw their exchange do. Some ~~Many~~ were tried for subversion.[16] ~~(citation?)~~

A~~While a~~ll of the Soviet letters were sent to the United States through AKSZh, but the U.S. letters were dispatched in several ways. Some individuals sent letters on their own; others tucked them into parcels they donated via Russian War Relief. Still others gave their notes to the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship (NCASF), a private organization that worked with the Soviet Consulate in New York City to deliver them. After WWII, AKSZh chose NCASF as its exclusive U.S.~~American~~ partner because it was openly sympathetic to communism and had fellow-travelers on its executive board. NCASF presented itself as a pro-peace organization, not a pro-Soviet one. However, it stridently criticized American foreign policy without publishing a jot against the USSR. The result of this partnership was that, by the war's end, no matter how American women sent their notes to the Soviet Union, they received replies through NCASF. Thus Americans who had never heard of NCASF and did not share its politics became associated with it. And NCASF, which the U.S. Attorney General and House Un-American Activities Committee declared a "communist front," was granted the unique opportunity to put U.S. and Soviet women in conversation. ~~(Interesting.)~~

The Soviet and U.S. governments not only permitted these contacts, they abetted them. Internal Central Committee and State Department documents~~iscussion~~s suggest that both agencies

[16] The U.S. Congress' and the Department of Justice's actions against NCASF are summarized in: Records of the House of the U.S. House of Representatives. Un-American Activities Committee, # HM FY95, Cards 9-15, Box 32, RG233, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C.; Herbert Brownell Jr. "Report and Order of the Board," Attorney General of the United States vs. the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship, Inc. (Docket No. 104-53), February 7, 1956.



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hesitated to expose their countrywomen to the propaganda of an archrival. Nevertheless, drawing on some of the same gendered assumptions as the letter-writers, they wagered that friendly female correspondents might inspire positive feelings toward their countries, promote national ideals, and gather useful information about their interlocutors.[17] While So, while both governments restricted pen-pal ventures involving men during this era, they allowed women and youngstersths—namely, the Anti-Fascist Committee of Soviet Youth, Girl Scouts, and Campfire Girls—to make contact, albeit under close FBI and Party surveillance.[18] (interesting! So, assumptions around gender provide them with opportunity? Did letter writer groups seek them out with this knowledge in mind?) No doubt this decision was informed by the assumption that women and children were socially disarming, politically unsophisticated, and unable to divulge state secrets.[19] So, in February 1946, when Flora Saulsbury, a self-described homemaker from Valley Stream, New York, asked the U.S. Secretary of State for a Soviet pen-pal, Secretary James F. Byrnes authorized the U.S. Embassy staff in Moscow to pass her request to AKSZh.[20] Saulsbury received two replies. She chose Anna Volkova, a worker in Moscow's Nogin stocking factory, as her pen-pal. Volkova mistakenly addressed her as "Flora Slobbery," but she invited

**Commented [PA1]:** Did not address this –note in author's note

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[17] State Department Memo of May 10, 1946, #811.42761, Folder 2, Box 4809, RG59, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD -(hereafter NARA); Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), f. 17, op. 128, d. 69, ll. 49-54, May 27, 1946., RG59, #811.42761, Box 4809, Folder 2.

[18] Jennifer Helgren, "'Homemaker Can include the World:' Female Citizenship and Internationalism in the Postwar Camp Fire Girls," *Girlhood,* ed. Jennifer Helgren and Colleen Vasconcellos (New Brunswick, NJ, 2010); Catriona Kelly, "Defending Children's Rights in Defense of Peace," *Imagining the West in Eastern Europe and the USSR,* ed. GyörgyGyorgy Peteri (Pittsburgh, PA, 2010).

[19] This thinking shifted during the Red Scare, when female spies like Elizabeth Bentley and Ethel Rosenberg created hysteria.

[20] Letter from U.S. Embassy to the State Department, June 8, 1946, #811.42761, Folder 3, Box 4809, NARA, RG59, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD (hereafter NARA). #811.42761, box 4809, folder 3.

Saulsbury to call her Ania—all her friends did—and reassured her that she too was a mother committed to peace.

Along with government officials, translators and censors read the letters. Most of the translation and censorship was done in the USSR by AKSZh's staff. A comparison of the initial and final versions of each letter shows that translators made only minor mistakes—"Flora Slobbery" being an exception—and that editors checked all letters for political correctness. They censored them lightly, however, leaving most untouched. None of the quotations cited in this essay were altered.

Self-censorship played a much bigger role than censorship. The letters document their authors' expressed views, not necessarily their true beliefs. Some participants concealed their ~~full~~ names, addresses, and other details. They likely felt pressure—either externally or internally imposed—to present themselves and their country in a positive light, and they often dodged tough queries. ~~However, I~~It does not necessarily follow, however, that their stated ~~-~~opinions were insincere. One cannot assume their remarks were engineered simply because they aligned with official politics, nor can one presume they were uttered in total freedom. To be sure, the ~~American~~ participants from the United States were at greater liberty to be open and critical, but some may have felt defensive of U.S. politics when addressing someone from a historically hostile polity. The same logic applies to Soviet correspondents. Whatever criticisms they might have voiced if given the opportunity, many might have supported the USSR's overarching values, especially when challenged by foreigners.[21]

[21] On this point, see: Susan Reid, "Who will Beat Whom? Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959," *Imagining the West,* 194-237.



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It is possible some correspondents were agents planted to manipulate their pen-pals or who wrote from a script. After all, the FBI had infiltrated NCASF, and the Central Committee presided over AKSZh. However, it seems~~is~~ unlikely that many participants were operatives. AKSZh and NCASF offered guidelines and suggested topics for conversation, but they did not dictate ~~give concrete instructions on~~ what or how to write. The letters' unique contents and diverse array of styles indicate there was considerable room for creativity. Moreover, t~~T~~here were no obvious attempts at espionage. Participants asked for photos of each other but not of strategic sites.[22] Some U.S. correspondents mentioned relatives who worked for the military or in weapons' laboratories, but their Soviet pen-pals never inquired about them. A few Americans expressed sympathy for socialism or read Marx, but they received no encouragement from their pen-friends in the Soviet Union. Likewise, Soviet praise of U.S. culture elicited little response. If these remarks were attempts to bait each other, the participants did not bite. As Robbie Lieberman noted in her study of U.S. peace activists, we must allow for people to have multiple motivations and interests and not to conflate the pursuit of influence with attempts at subversion.[23]

Whether externally or internally motivated, the letter-writers claimed the space that their governments provided to reach across the "iron curtain." And, intentionally or not, they did significant propagandistic and intelligence work for their governments. In light of these considerations, I treat the letters not as outpourings of the self but as works of self-portraiture,

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[22] Contrasting examples in: "Canadians Warned of 'Pen Pal' Spies," *The New York Times*, September 3, 1948, 1.
[23] Lieberman, *The Strangest Dream*, 15.

which construct the life of an individual and of a nation on the page.[24] It is not their authenticity but their modes of storytelling and persuasion that interest me.

Though not representative of Americans or Soviets as a whole, the correspondents came from many walks of life. The Americans hailed from thirty-nine states, most from coastal cities or Midwestern towns, and a great many wrote through women's clubs and Christian organizations, where NCASF heavily advertised. Politically, they ranged from conservatives to progressives; two identified as socialists. The pool of U.S. participants gradually shifted leftward, especially by 1950 when those who wrote did so in open defiance of anti-communist crusaders. Of the several hundred letters I have found thus far, about~~Over~~ ninety percent of the ~~American~~ U.S. letter-writers were white, middle-class, ~~educated,~~and ~~and~~ Christian; some had Jewish surnames but did not self-identify as such. All had high-school diplomas and roughly half had some post-secondary education. In these ways~~In this way~~, they differed from NCASF's female leaders who included several prominent and highly educated Jewish and African American activists. Roughly eighty percent of the U.S. letter-writers were mothers and less than thirty percent worked outside of the home. ~~(Can you cite this info? Where'd it come from?~~

By comparison, I have tabulated that three-quarters of Soviet participants were mothers, and all did paid labor outside of the home except for those in their eighties or who had seven or more children. The working mother was the norm in the USSR. In other respects, the Soviet correspondents were atypical. More than half were highly educated professionals, including doctors, scientists, and artists. No doubt they were recruited to showcase the array of opportunities available to Soviet women. They also skewed urban; most lived in Moscow and

[24] Michè~~e~~le Lamont and Ann Swi~~n~~dler, "Methodological Pluralism and the Possibilities and Limits of Interviewing," *Qualitative Sociology,* 37, no. 2 (2014), 159.



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Leningrad. Moreover, they were as ethnically homogeneous as the ~~American~~ U.S. pool: about ninety percent were Russian or Ukrainian. Finally, all Soviet participants were politically vetted. However, less than~~only~~ fifteen percent were members or candidates for membership in~~of~~ the Communist Party, and just a handful held state or party positions, all at low levels. ~~(Same here, where'd you get this info?)~~ While some Soviet women may have felt compelled to partake in the project, others likely participated out of a growing sense of civic consciousness and increased social activism that characterized~~in~~ the postwar USSR.[25] Timothy Johnston found Soviets "rallied passionately and often emotionally around the slogan of peace" in the late 1940s, voluntarily sending hundreds of letters and donations to *Pravda* and the Soviet Peace Council.[26] Many would have likely dispatched notes abroad if given the chance.

The six members of the Grossman-Roll' cluster—hereafter the focus of this essay—share many of the ~~bear some of these~~ features described above. Althea Somerville Grossman (1880-1954) was a life-long resident of St. Louis, Missouri, and educated at Wellesley College and the University of Chicago. A member of the executive board of the St. Louis Equal Suffrage League, Grossman had worked tirelessly through local political channels for women to be enfranchised, but she never mentioned this in her letters.[27] Grossman had two grown daughters and had been a widow for thirteen years when she began corresponding with Roll'.[28] Roll' (1876- ?) was also a widow and had a daughter and a son; the latter perished in WWII. A retired

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[25] Elena Zubkova, *Russia After the War: Hopes, Illusions and Disappointments, 1945-1957* (New York, 1998); Mark Edele, "More than just Stalinists: The Political Sentiments of Victors 1945-1953," *Late Stalinist Russia Society between Reconstruction and Reinvention,* ed. Juliane Fürst (New York, 2006):~~;~~ 167-191.

[26] Timothy Johnston: "Peace or Pacifism? The Soviet 'Struggle for Peace in All the World,' 1948-1954," *Slavic and East European Review*, 86, no. 2 (April 2008), 282.

[27] Althea S. Grossman, "The Part of the St Louis Equal Suffrage League in the Campaign for Equal Suffrage," *Missouri Historical Review* 14, no. 3-4 (April/July, 1920): 306-320.

[28] *The University of Chicago Alumni Directory* (1920), 137.



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schoolteacher, Roll' lived in Moscow with her son's widow and two grandchildren, one of whom, Natal'ia (Nata) Ryzhova, she persuaded to write to Grossman's neighbor, Margie. Margie (Margaret Hanford Cowdry) (1935- ) was the daughter of famed oncologist Edmond Vincent Cowdry.[29] Margie dreamed of being "a doctor or a nurse" and Nata "a technical engineer."[30] Both girls were twelve years old when they began corresponding.~~.~~

Roll' wrote to Grossman irregularly while her daughter, Faina, was battling cancer. When Faina died in 1948, Roll' asked Faina's friend, Ekaterina Germant, to write~~correspond~~ with Grossman until she felt well enough to resume the correspondence. Germant (1894- ?) was a widow but fifteen years younger than Grossman and twenty years younger than Roll'. Though a trained historian, she worked for AKSZh as a translator. Germant wrote more politically assertive letters than Roll', which may be why Grossman enlisted "someone more capable to answer her."[31] This was seventy-five-year-old Irma Palb Shapleigh. Also a widow from St. Louis, Shapleigh travelled widely, visiting the USSR in 1924. This was extremely rare among U.S. participants. Most had no first-hand knowledge of the Soviet Union and relied on the press for information~~ about the Soviet Union~~. Like Grossman, Shapleigh was interested in "international questions and the peace movement," and she shared Germant's letters with Grossman and with members of her family. Grossman, Roll', Germant, and Shapleigh corresponded though 1949 and Nata and Margie through 1951.

The Russian state archives contain twenty letters from this cluster, but their holdings are incomplete. The writers alluded to other letters, some lost, and complained that several months

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[29] E.V. Cowdry was on faculty at Washington University and a research director of the Barnard Free Skin and Cancer Hospital in St. Louis.
[30] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 481, l. 46, April 24, 1948; GARF, f. R7928, op. 2~~Ibid~~, d. 639, l. 24, April 29, 1949.
[31] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2~~Ibid~~, d. 480, l. 16, November 3, 1948.

transpired before they arrived.[32] ~~(Maybe cite the folder or area of archive you found these?)~~ I now ~~now~~ turn to those letters in order to demonstrate how the pen-pals sustained their conversations through these long intervals and how they used personal stories and language to befriend, probe, and influence each other.

## Friendly Persuasion

Most correspondents joined the pen-pal project in hopes of extending the wartime alliance into the postwar period. Based on their common opposition to fascism, they assumed Soviet and U.S. citizens shared other values and interests—especially a desire for peace. "I think that we are really much more alike than un-alike," Grossman surmised in her first letter. She then immediately declared her "friendly feelings" toward the USSR and her hope for peace.[33] Roll' replied with mutual appreciation, telling Grossman how her son's death at the front fueled her determination to prevent war.[34] This was the first of many times she substantiated her commitment to peace with maternalist arguments, which had long shaped U.S. women's arguments for peace but which only began to color Soviet women's rhetoric around WWII. ~~(a common strategy among many women's peace movements throughout the twentieth century, yes?)~~

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**Commented [PA2]:** For author's note: (a common strategy among many women's peace movements throughout the twentieth century, yes?)(yes, I mention this on p. 6 and in footnote 9. Would you like more discussion of maternalism or a reiteration that it was a common strategy here as well?)

[32] The letters are located in: GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, dd. 50-1973.

[33] Ibid, d. 50, l. 47. On the (more common) tendency of Soviets and Americans to imagine each other as opposites, see: David S. Foglesong, *The American Mission and the Evil Empire: the Crusade for a 'Free Russia' since 1881* (New York, 2007); Milla Fedorova, *Yankees in Petrograd, Bolsheviks in New York: America and Americans in Russian Literary Perception* (DeKalb, IL, 2013).

[34] GARF, f. R7928 op. 2, d. 146, l. 112, 29 November 1946.

Initially, most pen-pals hoped the United Nations would preserve the spirit of wartime cooperation between the United States and Soviet Union.[35] But that confidence fad~~lter~~ed as ~~American~~ U.S. and Soviet delegates sparred over veto power, trade agreements, Iran, and other issues. Hostilities escalated in 1946 with Canada's Soviet spy scare in February, Stalin's and Churchill's charged speeches in February and March, and John Foster Dulles' call for a "get tough with Russia" policy in *Life* that June. Concerned, women joined the pen-pal program as a way to take ~~American~~U.S.-Soviet relations into their own hands. "Close human contacts like these are even more important in my mind than a thousand diplomatic overtures,"[36] observed Henrietta Buckmaster of Sharon, Connecticut. "We, little people, are already aware that there are no 'sides'," Grossman explained in 1947.[37] They were not responsible for the divisive, hawkish rhetoric peddled by public officials. Or, as young Margie Cowdry put it: "If all the good people are united, we can force our common enemies, the enemies of humanity, to be quiet."[38]

Knowing virtually nothing their interlocutors, members of the Grossman-Roll' circle declared their friendship in their first letters, then reiterated it in every note to follow. They constantly called each other "my dear" and "dear friend" and praised each other's insights. They opened with exclamations like "your letter gave me so much joy!" and signed off affectionately "with the most sincerely friendship."[39] "Your letter is so interesting that I want very much for our correspondence to continue and will look forward eagerly to a letter from you," Ekaterina

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[35] In 1945, eighty-five percent of U.S. citizens polled believed the United Nations would establish global peace and understanding~~.~~ See: ~~(~~Laville, *Cold War Women,* 96.~~)~~

[36] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 50, l. 3.

[37] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2,~~Ibid,~~ d. 245, l. 86, August 27, 1947.

[38] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, ~~Ibid,~~ d. 639, l. 14, December 16, 1949.

[39] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, ~~Ibid,~~ d. 482, l. 93, July 9, 1948; GARF, f. R7928, op. 2~~Ibid~~, d. 480, l. 16, November 3, 1948.

Germant told Irma Shapleigh after their first exchange.[40] The participants were equally effusive when worried. After a long gap between letters,~~.~~ Grossman beseeched Roll': "I really do not want to lose you as a correspondent and, if I may say so, as a friend. I hope from my soul that you will write soon.~~,~~"[41] ~~Grossman beseeched Roll' .~~ When she finally received a reply, Grossman admitted: "I thought that you had declined the growing of our friendship. I had such a feeling of personal loss."[42] Once forged, such epistolary pacts fostered a strong sense of reciprocity and mutual obligation even among individuals who had never met.[43]

The pen-friends also connected through the international language of grief. They discussed their health challenges and sought comfort when friends and relatives died. In 1949, Ol'ga Roll' penned a heart-wrenching letter to Grossman about Faina's struggle with cancer. "She was not only my daughter, but my dearest friend. I am unable to go out. In losing her, I have lost all." Roll' flouted conventional Soviet stoicism to admit: "They tell me I must live for my grandchildren, but I miss her, my daughter. […] She died, while I, an old woman, live." Roll' linked her daughter's illness duress of war, incorporating it into her argument for peaceful U.S.-Soviet relations.~~.~~ "Her death is also a consequence of the war. It is hard to believe there are people who hope for a new war. Sorry that my letter will give you a few sad moments," Roll' closed, adding: "I will be always happy to hear from you."[44] ~~The imperative of peace remained ever-present in their exchange.~~ Grossman's reply was equally heartfelt. "My joy at receiving a

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[40] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2~~Ibid~~, d. 483, l. 87, June 19, 1949.
[41] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, ~~Ibid,~~ d. 638, l. 31, March 3, 1949.
[42] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, ~~Ibid,~~ d. 639, l. 23, April 29, 1949.
[43] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus, OH, 1982), 87–115; Liz Stanley, Andrea Salter, and Helen Dampier, "The Epistolary Pact, Letterness, and the Schreiner Epistolarium," *Auto/Biography Studies*, 27, no. 2 (Winter 2012), 264.
[44] GARF, f. R7928 op. 2, d. 483, l. 50, July 30, 1949. On ~~postwar~~ Soviet stoicism with regard to WWII: Catherine Merridale, *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Russia* (London, 2000), 312.



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letter from you was strongly darkened by your tragic loss of your beloved daughter, Faina. I mourned your great loss, and my husband's death from cancer in 1933," Grossman remarked. H~~noting how h~~er pen-friend's anguish ~~grief~~ triggered a resurgence of her own grief. "Try to take comfort in her children and in your memories of what you gave each other and to the world," she~~Grossman~~ advised.[45] Germant also shared her~~wrote of~~ heartaches. She wrote ~~—~~about the death of her friend Faina, her mother's stroke, and her cousin's death in ~~—~~hopes that~~ing~~ these tragedies~~it~~ might bring her ~~the pen-friends~~ closer to her pen-pal~~gether~~: "I am telling you all of this at such length because you said in your letter that I told too little about our everyday life."[46]

Photographs also fostered intimacy. Although the older women were shy about exchanging snapshots, the younger ones delighted in it. Nata sent pictures of herself and her mother, while Margie sent photos of her home, her classmates, and herself.[47] The photos were passed around among the pen-friends, ~~and they~~who read good intent from them. "Please tell Nata I really liked her picture," Grossman told Roll'. "She looks so affectionate and open with her big wondrous eyes. I also liked that she wrote that she loves you. She looks smart and sweet. […] I feel an immense unity with you just from the contents of your letters and from seeing the picture of your granddaughter."[48] In addition to photographs, the group traded stamps, recipes, postcards, newspaper clippings, and reading recommendations, especially on current affairs and politics.

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[45] GARF, f. R7928 op. 2, d. 639, ll. 23-24, April 29, 1949.
[46] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, ~~Ibid,~~ d. 483, l. 83. ~~(if these are different sources, it would probably be best to write them out in full. I worry that ibid does not apply. Doesn't make sense to ibid part of a citation, if it's something previously uncited. Ibid refers to the full source~~
[47] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, ~~Ibid,~~ d. 985, l. 23, August 28, 1951.
[48] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, ~~Ibid,~~ d. 245, l. 86, August 27, 1947.

Reading recommendations were one of the ways the pen-friends tried to shape each other's opinions. T~~, but t~~hey met such suggestions with enthusiasm, not suspicion. Believing that peace was built on mutual understanding, most participants welcomed the chance for more information, especially from a source they trusted. Their prior knowledge of each other's political and economic systems was quite limited and, judging from their references, ~~dependent~~ heavily based on the press. Mainstream news became increasingly inflammatory in its coverage of U.S.-Soviet relations during~~by~~ the late 1940s, but the pen-pals encountered positive and ambivalent portrayals of each other as well. U.S. participants mentioned critical articles in *Christian Science Monitor, Readers' Digest*, and, above all, their local newspapers, but they also read laudatory accounts of the Soviet Union from commentators and fellow-travelers like John Reed, Lincoln Steffens, and Frederick Shuman.[49] Soviet coverage of the United States had long mixed admiration—especially of U.S. industrial and technological achievements—with sharp criticism. Opening *Pravda*, *Izvestiia,* and *Ogenëk* in the late 1940s, Soviet pen-pals encountered dichotomous depictions of "bad Americans," warmongering and greedy, and "good Americans" like Progressives, civil rights activists, and muckrakers.[50] Ekaterina Germant was eager~~ly~~ to know~~asked~~ Grossman's ~~for her~~ opinion of Upton Sinclair, George Seldes, and Maurice Milligan, whose *Missouri Waltz* cast Truman as a pawn of machine politics in Kansas City.[51] Some pen-pals went beyond making recommendations and sent each other newspaper clippings and

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[49] Ibid, d. 361, l. 4. None mentioned *T~~t~~he New York Times, The Washington Post*, or other national newspapers.

[50] Rósa Magnúsdóttir, *Enemy Number One: The United States of America in Soviet Ideology and Propaganda, 1945-1959* (New York, 2019), 11, 17, 20-21. On the rise of anti-Americanism in postwar Soviet propaganda, see: V. Pechatnov, "Exercise in Frustration: Soviet Foreign Propaganda in the Early Cold War, 1945-1947," *Cold War History* (Jan. 2001) 1, no. 2, 1-27.

[51] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 482, l. 26, September 20, 1948.

government-produced propaganda. Grossman suggested Roll' read the State Department's *Amerika*.[52] Grossman herself enjoyed the Soviet Embassy's *Information Bulletin*.

Such pPublished materials made a minor impression , however, compared to the letters, which the pen-pals regarded as alternative and , more accurate sources of news. They put more stock in their pen-pals' opinions and accommodated what they saw in published sources to fit the picture painted by their interlocutors. Grossman, for instance, "attentively examined" the "terrific photos" of May Day demonstrations in the *Information Bulletin* and imagined Roll' marching. "I wondered—were you not among those in the crowds of people?"[53] Moreover, they were keen to know about the content of their own country's propaganda and how it played with their what their pen-friends' thought of their own propaganda. Germant asked about Moscow's international radio broadcasts, while Grossman asked her to describe Voice of America. Grossman even proposed a trade: she would send sending Roll' the *Information Bulletin* if Roll' agreed to mailedsend her copies of *Amerika*.[54] Roll' never replied to this proposal.

ReadingSuch recommendations were just the start of how the pen-friendsy tried to steer each other toward ideals and leaders, which aligned with their own national interests. They also championed various campaigns and events. For instance, sSeveral self-described liberal Americans also broughtinvited their pen-pals virtually aboard the "freedom train." In 1947 and 1948, TThis locomotive carried original drafts of founding documents like the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Gettysburg Address through the forty-eight states in 1947 and 1948. The U.S. Attorney General's office developed the idea for the train as a way to strengthen American loyalty and foster political consensus among U.S. citizens at a time when

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[52] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, Ibid, d. 639, l. 25, April 29, 1949.
[53] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, Ibid, d. 361, l. 22, June 8, 1948.
[54] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, Ibid, d. 480, l. 25, November 3, 1948.

~~American~~ the United States' political landscape seemed increasingly divided.[55] "Indoctrination in democracy is the essential catalytic agent needed to blend our varying groups into one American family," Attorney General Tom Clark proclaimed.[56] Pen-pal Marjorie Streiff of Plains, Kansas, helped ~~upheld~~ disseminate this image of ~~American~~ unity among U.S. citizens when she wrote to Evdokiia Il'iushina of~~in~~ Moscow about "how deeply exhilarating" it was to board the train and view these "documents so precious to our people." Streiff even began to recite the Gettysburg Address for Il'iushina to underscore that "the American way" was "'conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.' This, my friend, is the heart of America and as long as it endures, we always will wish for peace for ourselves and for the whole world." I~~I~~ndividual rights and freedoms, she explained, were the core of democracy and the foundation of peace, whether at home and abroad. Streiff was eager to educate Il'iushina on other ~~American~~ U.S. traditions: "I would very much like to have the opportunity to send you something from our literature," she wrote.[57] ~~Il'iushina never took her up on the offer.~~

Il'iushina never took Streiff up on the offer, but a~~A~~ spirited discussion developed between Grossman and Germant about another influence campaign on wheels, the "~~"~~friendship train."~~"~~

The friendship train ~~project~~ was conceived by journalist and liberal anti-communist Drew Pearson. Pearson believed strongly in peace as modeled by the United States and exported in the form of aid. His column for 11 October 1947 in the *Washington Merry-Go-Round,* syndicated in over 700 newspapers, relayed how a Soviet ship carrying wheat to Marseilles was greeted by cheering French citizens, while an American ship offloading in Le Havre received no such

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[55] Wall, *Inventing the 'American Way',* 27, 36.
[56] Ibid, 3-4.
[57] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 360, l. 3, April 6, 1948.

fanfare. A friendship train, Pearson suggested, full of donations from U.S. citizens, would send a clear message of American the United States' goodwill and help curb communist influence on the continent.[58] In November 1947, two locomotives—one chugging westward, the other eastward—wound their way through forty U.S. cities, collecting donations for French and Italian citizens. Grossman excitedly told Germant all about Pearson's plan to send another "friendship train" bearing gifts for Russian children as a way to aid the USSR and demonstrate American benevolence. She enclosed a copy of Pearson's June 1948 letter to Stalin making this request. "I really hope that this friendly apolitical gesture will be permitted," she wrote.[59]

Germant, however, did not consider this "strange offer" to be "apolitical" at all. "Of course, we appreciate every friendly gesture towards us," she began, "but we don't need charity and our people would have met such a train with astonishment, and, perhaps, with offense." "Yes, we suffered terribly during the war," Germant admitted, but Pearson had discounted the Soviet people's determination to rebuild. "Here, reconstruction is not the fruit of private initiative, but a state program taken up with enthusiasm by our whole nation. That is why people work here with passion, overfulfilling all norms of output, that is why reconstruction goes on here at such an unheard-of pace."[60] State-organized recovery efforts were more efficient and effective than gathering donations, she argued. Moreover, (Cite this?) tThe USSR was a country of production, Germant proclaimeddeclared, citing Soviet exports to eastern Europe. It gave aid rather than received it. Of course, just one year earlier the Soviet government had sought then had (unsuccessfully) soughtdeclined Marshall-Plan aid when the U.S. government

[58] Pearson backed "Letters from America," inspired by the friendship train (Wall, *Inventing the 'American Way,'* 242).
[59] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 361, l. 22, June 8, 1948.
[60] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 482, l. 26, September 20, 1948.





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disingenuously offered it under terms the Kremlin found unacceptable~~ just one year earlier~~.[61] It is unclear how much ~~, but neither~~ Grossman ~~n~~or Germant knew about this event, but neither mentioned ~~the fact~~it. The whole episode certainly~~, for it~~ conflicted with the pictures the pen-pals~~y~~ were trying to paint~~ed~~ of ~~American~~ the United States' generosity and the Soviet Union's self-sufficiency, respectively. Germant ~~also~~ accused Pearson of underestimating not only the USSR's economic productivity but also the Soviet government's solicitous concern for its people. His offer to send a locomotive full of gifts for Soviet children "shows in reality how little Mr. Pearson knows about our country and about the way children are treated here." Modulating her tone between conciliation and condemnation, Germant invited Pearson to come see for himself. "If Mr. Pearson would come here, he would see that the so-called 'iron curtain' has been drawn not by us, this curtain of lies is the work of a certain part of the American press, […] that our Soviet people are deeply engrossed in advancing the reconstruction and ~~the~~ further progress of our country, and that towards the American people we have only feelings of friendliness and goodwill."[62] To Germant, rapid reconstruction proved the USSR had peaceful intentions, more so than U.S. gift-giving. Germant closed with well wishes and "cordial greetings" for Grossman. Still, her fervent tone and idealization of Soviet life resonates with Marjorie Streiff's adulation of America. Streiff's and Germant's respective arguments—about the sanctity of individual rights in the United States and about social solidarity and welfare in the Soviet Union—repeatedly surfaced in letters penned by other correspondents.[63] ~~.(cite a few letters that communicate this?)~~

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[61] Michael Cox and Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, "The Tragedy of American Diplomacy: Rethinking the Marshall Plan," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 27, no. 1 (Winter 2005), 114-123.

[62] Ibid, l. 26.~~Ibid, d. 482, l. 26.~~ Underlining in original.~~(do these letters/sources have dates?)~~

[63] Examples in: GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 483, l. 174, December 21, 1948; GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 483, ll. 43-44, July 26, 1949; GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 638, l. 49, January 27, 1949.

In return, Soviet pen-friends tried to influence their pen-pals regarding the 1948 U.S. presidential election. They~~,~~ stumped~~ing~~ for Henry Wallace whom they praised as “the peace candidate.” Roll’ quoted Wallace in her first letter to Grossman: “‘the USA and Russia should live in peace and this is the most important question standing before the world today.’”[64] Wallace, a former Secretary of Agriculture, ran on the Progressive ticket in 1948. He had served as Vice President, but his increasingly leftist views prompted Franklin D. Roosevelt to choose the comparatively moderate Harry S. Truman as his next running mate. Wallace called for arms reduction deals, trade agreements, and peaceful coexistence with the USSR. These policies drew support from some labor organizers, peace activists, socialists, and their sympathizers. But this radical base doomed his campaign. Most voters considered Wallace pro-socialist, and he won less than three percent ~~3%~~ of the vote.[65] Roll’ urged Grossman to back Wallace, but the Missourian~~she~~ did not need any convincing. Progressive women like Grossman were heavily involved in Wallace’s campaign at the state and municipal levels, championing his pro-peace and his pro-woman platforms, the latter of which promised laws to fight sexual discrimination and to ensure fair working conditions. [66] For Grossman, however, peace trumped all other political concerns. ~~(This is interesting! Is it evident that the experience of letter writing & contact with pro Soviet groups may have pushed her political views to the left? Also, where are you getting your info on Wallace campaign from? You need to cite this)~~ “I agree with Henry Wallace.~~,”~~ ~~Grossman declared in June 1948. “~~The deeper currents of human life merge together and under the surface there is the real unity of all humanity,~~.~~” she wrote in June 1948.[67] ~~For Grossman,~~

[64] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, ~~Ibid,~~ d. 245, l. 85, August 27, 1947.
[65] Castledine, *Cold War Progressives*, 13-16.
[66] Ibid, 24.
[67] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 245, l. 86, August 27, 1947~~Ibid, d. 245, l. 86~~.





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~~peace trumped all other political concerns~~ Grossman~~,~~ ~~and she continued to~~ had~~ve~~ strong faith that the "little people" of the United States and USSR—including~~like~~ herself and her pen-friends—had more in common than in conflict.

Even though they supported the same candidate, the 1948 election did draw out differences between them. Grossman seized upon their discussion~~'s~~ ~~reflections on~~of Wallace ~~provided an opening for her~~ to promote democratic institutions in the United States. ~~teach Roll' about US elections.~~ Grossman gave Roll' a primer on campaigning under a multi-party system, something foreign to her pen-pal. "Now on the radio," she added, "they broadcast many speeches of different political candidates because this month will be caucuses of Democrats, Republicans, and other smaller parties for the best candidates. Then in November we will all vote, choosing among those candidates of different parties who we want to be president and vice-president." Grossman explained that two parties generally dominated the field, but third parties, like the Progressive Partys, emerged when political discontent achieved a critical mass. At the next official debate, Grossman noted, "our friend Wallace, who is advancing a 'new' and 'third' party, will not be among the candidates even though he delivers in my view the very best speeches, much better than the speeches of others."[68]

Grossman's description of the campaign was one of several~~many~~ lessons she penned on American democracy. The Missourian was critical of U.S. political institutions and practices, but she lauded ~~America's~~ the United States' democratic values and traditions. Sometimes she stated so directly; at other times, she sent Roll' and Germant copies of her letters to the *St. Louis Star Times,* which both evoked and performed the democratic right to criticize. In one letter to the editor, Grossman called for an open, face-to-face dialogue between Truman and Stalin,

[68] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, ~~Ibid,~~ d. 361, l. 22, June 8, 1948.



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underscoring that Truman should respect her request "considering that we are a democracy and that we have a representative form of government," where "the president is the servant of the people."[69] In reply, Germant commended Grossman as a "dear friend—I hope you will let me call you so"—for confronting Truman and demanding peace. ~~But the democracy lesson was lost on her.~~ Germant reassured her pen-pal that~~suggested to Grossman~~ ~~there~~ it was not a problem if Truman refused to meet with Stalin because Wallace had agreed to ~~meet with Stalin~~do so ~~instead~~.[70] When Wallace lost the election two months later, the Muscovite was crushed—even more so than Grossman, who conceded that Truman was a good man with "many good initiatives."[71]

Reciprocally, Germant expounded upon~~lained~~ the meaning of Soviet socialism~~, directly and indirectly~~. She helped Grossman understand the difference between socialism and communism. On one occasion, t~~T~~he Missourian asked why the *Information Bulletin* declared that the new Five-Year Plan "carries the Soviet Union very far down to road to communism," when "here in the USA we say that communism rules in Russia."[72] The confusion was that U.S. rhetoric conflated the ruling party's name with the socioeconomic system it aspired to build. Germant explained that socialism was a transitional phase, where ~~of dismantling~~ capitalist structures were dismantled and replaced~~ing them~~ with state ownership and a planned economy. The USSR had achieved this, but "war has set us back considerably: we are first obliged to re-built (sic) everything that has been destroyed before we are able to build anew and go forward to our goal […] a new, higher, social order—Communism."[73]

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[69] Ibid, ~~d. 361,~~ l. 22; *St. Louis Star Times*, March 23, 1948, 25.
[70] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 482, ll. 24-245, September 20, 1948.
[71] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, ~~Ibid,~~ d. 480, l. 15, November 3, 1948.
[72] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, ~~Ibid,~~ d. 361, l. 22, June 8, 1948.
[73] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, ~~Ibid,~~ d. 482, l. 24, September 20, 1948.



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Germant further defined Soviet socialism by framing it through personal experiences. When telling Irma Shapleigh about her cousin's untimely death, Germant touted her society's welfare policies and collectivist ethos. "I have suffered a great loss," Germant explained; her cousin was "one of my dearest friends." However, she took comfort in the fact that her cousin had ~~Her cousin~~ received free medical care and paid sick leave. T~~, and t~~he trade union committee at her place of work "often came to see her, to inquire if she was in need of anything, and to bring her flowers and good things to eat." "As you can see, all through her illness she had no material worries. She was just as well provided for as if she were working. All through her illness, both in hospital and at home, she was visited and showed all kind[s] of help and concern by her fellow-workers, her 'collective' as we say here," Germant explained. "This is a characteristic trait of our life. Nobody is ever left alone, even if they have no family, no relatives. All get help and care from their respective collectives. I feel this is exactly what you, Americans, don't understand and from this arise your wrong ideas about our life. […] You don't understand that our Soviet nation—all our Soviet people […] are all one, we are all just one big, united family wherein all are for each and each for all."[74] ~~(cite?)~~ Germant's political lessons were more heavy-handed than Grossman's, but her proclamation of perfect unity between state and society in the USSR resembled Marjorie Streiff's rhapsodies about the "freedom train" and Attorney General Clark's remarks about "one American family" described above.

Just as Grossman touted democratic elections and freedoms in the United States,~~Such practices and policies,~~ Germant argued ~~continued, proved~~ that the Soviet ~~state~~ welfare policies wer~~as~~e guided by democratic principles of public service~~-~~. "Our government, elected on the basis of our democratic rights from the best people of our country, is concerned with our welfare. We

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[74] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 483, ll. 84-85, June 19, 1949.

believe in our Government and stand for it because we feel its concern for us."[75] ~~In reality,~~Germant's declaration obscured the fact that top Soviet leaders were elected indirectly, not by the general population. T~~Although t~~hey did not rule with the consent of the governed. However, ~~d,~~ Germant insisted, they ruled with public interests in mind. She presented this as a form of democracy. Participants outside of the Grossman-Roll' circle made similar arguments. Soviet letter-writers often cited social welfare policies as evidence that their state existed for the public good, whereas their U.S. interlocutors pointed out that the lack of civil liberties in the USSR contradicted this claim. In fact, ~~American p~~Progressives in the United States often supported substantial social welfare policies themselves, arguing that peace meant not just the absence of war, but social justice and equality.[76] ~~(nice!)~~ However, ~~Progressives~~ those who signed up as pen-pals, like Grossman, rarely raised this point to their Soviet correspondents. Instead, they emphasized the freedom to criticize the government and to create new parties as the hallmarks of true~~, American~~ democracy as practiced in the United States.

This is how Irma Shapleigh pushed back on Germant's claims about the democratic spirit of Soviet socialism. She too framed her political views in a personal anecdote. Shapleigh told Germant about her "most interesting" visit to the USSR in 1924, her boat ride down the Volga, and her friendly chats with "an enthusiastic communist," Julius Rozinskii. "Much to my sorrow, I heard he had been put to death," she wrote. "I wonder if you could enlighten me on the subject of the freedom of your people? So much of the propaganda here is that there is practically none in your country, that fear abounds everywhere, that individuals must be entirely subservient to the State and no one is allowed to express any criticism. Also, that millions are in concentration

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[75] -Ibid, l. 85~~Ibid, d. 483, ll. 83-84~~. Underlining in original.
[76] Castledine, *Cold War Progressives*, 2.

camps largely because they have indulged in criticism. I would be so glad to know the truth.” Did Soviet citizens have freedom to speak out against their governments? To live by their own choices? “Of course, there is much else that I myself should like to know, for I long for the people of the USSR and our people should be friends. But I fear I shall weary you with my deluge of questions,” Shapleigh concluded, softening her tone.[77]

In reply, Germant doubled down on Soviet democracy but~~and~~ avoided Shapleigh’s question about the gulag. Instead, Germant evoked the 1936 constitution which promised the “right to free speech, free press, free gatherings” and so on. “An essential fact of our constitution is that it not only proclaims the rights and freedoms of our citizens, but really puts them into practice” by ensuring equitable opportunities through free, accessible health care, education, and pensions. “This can be easily demonstrated on whichever example you will choose,” Germant claimed, but she chose her example carefully. “Let us take, for instance, college education. In your country, college education is very expensive, whereas here all who want a college education not only can go to any university or other higher school of learning, but are paid a state stipend, which allows them to devote all their energies to their studies without worrying about material things. On being graduated (sic), our young specialist[s] can choose from several jobs offered to them in their special field, the one that suits them best and is the most convenient for them.[78] Indeed, Soviet citizens, especially women, did have greater access to affordable higher education and to a variety of professions than many U.S. citizens did. Germant failed to mention, however, that Soviet citizens—again, especially women and particularly in the devastating aftermath of WWII—lacked the freedom not to work. “~~[…]~~I can say boldly that nowhere, in no other

[77] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 638, ll. 37-38, February 25, 1949.
[78] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, d. 483, ll. 83-84, June 19, 1949.



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country exists such freedom of choice of one's work as in our Soviet Union," ~~Germant~~ she concluded. Germant~~She~~ closed with "kind regards" for "dear Mrs. Shapleigh" and added: "I see that I have written so much that I will have to leave the answers to your other questions." But she never did address them.[79] ~~(Some background/context on Soviet society might be helpful here. Does Germant's description correspond or contradict what you know from secondary literature? If they contradict what you know about Soviet society, why is this? It seems like you are relying on readers' assumed background knowledge here, which might be pretty slim and superficial in the case of some?)~~ Still, Shapleigh found Germant somewhat convincing. "I absolutely rejoiced from my soul" to read about Soviet care for the ill, Shapleigh told Grossman. Germant "categorically denied what we have heard about how people are forced to do only the work that the government lets them do. She, evidently, is a very smart woman and I would like to have the opportunity to meet her face-to-face."[80] Of course, they never did meet. And without meeting or seeing each other's societies, the correspondents were not accountable for the claims they made about themselves and~~or~~ their countries. Their pen-friendships were based on a combination of revealing and concealing. They were~~,~~ a blend of intimacy, performance, and evasion.

~~Conclusion~~

The Grossman-Roll' circle comprised only six of the hundreds of Soviet and American

[79] Ibid,~~Ibid, d. 483,~~ l~~l~~. ~~83-~~84.

[80] GARF, f. R7928, op. 2, ~~Ibid,~~ d. 639, l. 24, April 29, 1949.



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women who took up their pens to cultivate friendly relations in the late 1940s—a time when talks between their governments stalled. Letter-writing provided~~For~~ these “ordinary” women ~~who, their governments presumed, posed little security risk, letter-writing~~ with the opportunity ~~was an accessible means of political persuasion, which allowed them~~ to do diplomatic and propagandistic work, to promote peace and their national way of life simultaneously. The fact that the correspondents had different political values and opposing views of democracy is hardly surprising. What is telling is how they embedded their claims in matrices of well wishes, personal stories, and emotional appeals. When it came to establishing peace, much of the message was in the mode of articulation. The letters showcase the personal within the political as well as the persuasive power of storytelling. Correspondents constructed a rapport, not just an argument, on the pages~~s~~. Although rarely convinced by each other, they thoughtfully engaged each other’s ideas and formulated counterarguments without alienating their interlocutors. Considering the open hostility that permeated the press and halls of government at this time, the letter-writers’ consistent, dedicated communication is striking and runs counter to scholarly assumptions about U.S.-Soviet relations, especially in the Truman-Stalin era.

The pen-friends communicated at great personal risk. Grossman and Shapleigh stepped away from the project in late 1949, a landmark year for two parallel campaigns against foreign subversion, McCarthyism and *zhdanovshchina*. Increasingly aware of government surveillance and wary of political reprisals, the number of ~~US~~ women participating in the pen-pal programs~~nts~~ declined. Nevertheless, in the 1950s and beyond, letter-writing became a ubiquitous form of Cold-War citizen diplomacy. The U.S. and Soviet governments went on to back numerous epistolary ventures and cultural exchanges on a much larger scale. The idea that regular, monitored contact between U.S. and Soviet citizens was politically expedient—whether to



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foment understanding or engage in competition—was one of the few points upon which authorities in the United States and Soviet Union consistently agreed. It was a lesson that this early and hitherto unknown pen-pal project helped to impart.

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