



## DOS PASSOS'S U.S.A. THROUGH THE LENS OF LEFT-WING PUBLICATIONS IN THE USSR

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### **Abstract:**

The subject of this paper was borne out of engagement with the genre of proletarian literature in 1930's America, the artistic output of the Popular Front era, as well as the multifaceted scholarly debates that surround them. Slightly refining the scope of this investigation, I will be examining John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy, and situating it within the context of the nuanced interconnection of aesthetics and politics in that era. I wish to argue that *U.S.A.* became a highly contested space of literary and ideological conflict. Within this space, a wide-ranging and sometimes heated debate on form and content transpires which is inseparable from the political project of socialist construction in the USSR. This debate was held between proponents of the aesthetic movements of modernism and realism, and was intensely present in organs and publications affiliated with these left-wing institutions. Therefore, I divert my attention towards one of these Anglophone publications, namely *International Literature*, in order to map Dos Passos's presence within them and gauge the extent to which my hypothesis is legitimate. I will develop an exposition of archival material from this journal which serve the purpose of illuminating the extent to which there was a preoccupation with the work of Dos Passos within the literary circles of the organised Left, as well as outlining the content of the attitudes expressed towards him. This exposition however will necessarily be accompanied by an engagement with the scholarship around this subject, especially taking into consideration the historicity of the scholarship itself; that is to say, the recognition of historical limitations within the scholarship, as well as the attempt to supersede these limitations by more recent critical works.

**Keywords:** left-wing criticism, USSR, debates on form, international literature, John Dos Passos

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## 1. Introduction

In order to understand Dos Passos's *U.S.A* in all its complexity it is a necessary step to situate it within the historical moment in which it was written. Inevitably the attempt towards the understanding of a concrete historical epoch implies the examination of evidence that in many ways can be heterogeneous and even contradictory. Dos Passos's novel arguably cannot be thought apart from certain circumstances, formations, and processes that ultimately make up the uniqueness of a concrete historical moment. Broadly speaking, the growth of left-wing radicalism in the United States in the period between the two World Wars; the formation and consolidation of official Communist institutions and their interventions in literary life and cultural production in general; the rapidly changing field of debate in terms of form, content and tendency, as well as the relationship of these institutions with the corresponding Soviet Union organisations and their policies; all of these historical elements directly or indirectly influence the work of an author deeply concerned with the question of socialism. To be sure, the number of distinguishable social, political and cultural processes at hand, as well as the interesting ways in which they interact with and constitute each other, is a great task that requires the analysis of a wealth of documents pertaining to the turbulent times of the 1930s. For the purposes of this essay, however, I will focus on a relatively small aspect of left-wing cultural production, which is the journal *International Literature* published in the USSR, and dealing exactly with literary matters from a Communist perspective - and towards Communist ends. To be sure, regardless of its size and circulation, *International Literature* has only recently been recognized as "*an archive of the uneven, at times messy fashion in which Soviet aesthetics consolidated itself in the 1930s*" (Salton-Cox, 2017, p. 148). Therefore, this research has two aims that are closely related; firstly, I aim to examine the reception of John Dos Passos's work among his radical peers, both American and Soviet as outlined in the English-language journal. This investigation will ultimately serve the second aim, which is to expose the debates on form, content and tendency that surrounded Communist literary circles of the time - debates that arguably informed Dos Passos's work as well.

## 2. The reception of John Dos Passos's work: an approach

Before embarking on this effort, however, it is necessary to briefly discuss the formative study on the literary left of the 30s, Dos Passos, and *International Literature*; that is, Deming Brown's *Soviet Attitudes Toward American Writing* (Brown, 1962), as well as his 'Dos Passos in Soviet Criticism' (Brown, 1953). The reason why I deem this necessary is two-fold: primarily, although Brown's works were published in the 50s and 60s, it exhibits an unprecedented level of scholarly engagement with the critical appraisal of American literature in Soviet publications and therefore establishes the first sizeable precedent in the field; secondarily, however, this critical work is naturally influenced, like many others, by the historical moment in which it was written, namely Cold War suspicion of the USSR and a pervading anti-communism (Wald, 1993, pp. 289-294). To that extent, I

hope to show that more recent scholarship has taken steps towards revealing aspects of these matters that were partially hidden, or overlooked entirely. To be sure, the fact remains that Brown's authoritative engagement with the primary material imposes certain limitations on this paper. Much of the material examined in his book demand a high level of competence in Russian, as well as much more space than that afforded by this paper. Therefore, it is important to reiterate that the primary material that this paper will approach critically is necessarily published in English, accessible, and more or less pertinent to John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.*

A good starting point for this endeavour is the explication of the popularity the American author enjoyed in the Soviet Union due to what was perceived as his progressive attitudes and the content of his work. In a review named 'American Authors Popular in Soviet Russia' it is revealed that "*Dos Passos was the foreign author most read and talked about between 1932-1934*" (Steiger, 1936, p. 101). His great popularity, however, was not a matter of trend or vogue; instead, "*he ha[d] come to be regarded as the writer's writer; admired for his sympathies to proletarian heroes, imitated for his novelties of style, respected for his revolutionary convictions*" (Ibid). Furthermore, in the same article John Dos Passos is referenced along with Langston Hughes, Mike Gold and Agnes Smedley as a "*revolutionary writer*" (Ibid). There appears, therefore, to be an interest in American authors in general and Dos Passos in particular concerning the contributions they can make to the revolutionary movement through their art. Nevertheless, a closer look at *International Literature* documents reveals that his acceptance as an important writer was not unanimous and in fact was the subject of a broader series of debates concerning his status and usefulness. In 1932 K. Selvinsky and P. Pavlenko address the 'Open Letter To John Dos Passos' in which, while addressing him as a "comrade", offer criticism which reveals that his work is lacking. On the one hand, they state:

*"Your works have played quite a part in our literary controversies. And this is quite comprehensible. The boldness and originality of certain of your artistic methods and your powerful devices for representation make necessary an analysis of their ideological significance... you relate the history of your heroes, famous Americans, with a skill truly wonderful. You have discovered a sticking and exact method of recovering phenomena in their ebb and flow."* (1932, p. 109)

On the other hand, the two Soviet intellectuals extend their criticism:

*"But in your efforts to be as objective as possible you tend to be mentally divorced from life. In striving to "catch the moment", you fall under the influence of James Joyce's Ulysses. The stenographic reports of daily happenings in your 42nd Parallel involuntarily call to mind the empirical method of James Joyce, which attempts to make an inventory of the world like a sheriff or law agent in carrying out his duties."* (Ibid)

An equally important element of this criticism is the immediate connection of matters of literary style to the broader sociopolitical context, and this is something that

can be found in other Soviet analyses as well; for Selvinsky and Pavlenko “*it is difficult to separate creative writing from politics. The one is but the continuation of the other*” (Ibid). In 1933 Sergei Dinamov published his article ‘Contemporary Capitalism and Literature’ in which there is yet another testament of John Dos Passos’s popularity. The American author is again mentioned among other figures of the 30s in regards to his partisanship, the “betrayal” of his own class position and his alignment with the interests of the working-class in general, and of the Soviet Union in particular:

*“The best writers are seeking new foundations for their creation; they gradually go over to other positions; they quit the bourgeois soil, and parting with the petty-bourgeois illusions, they join the ranks of the fighters for revolution, they become honest and staunch defenders of the Soviet Union. Anatole France, Romain Rolland, Theodore Dreiser, Bernard Shaw, John Dos Passos... how many artists have broken away from capitalism, how many great writers have been lost by the bourgeoisie, how many new friends have been acquired by the working class!”* (1933, p. 87).

In an interesting variation, we can also notice the pervading appreciation of Dos Passos’s work in the poem *Song of the 42nd Parallel* by N. Aseyev, also published in 1933. In that poem the American author’s revolutionary potential as expressed through his novels is venerated:

*America again!  
America of The Forty-Second Parallel  
With the Danger sign off the dynamite.  
An America against the dollar kings,  
A fighting,  
Indicting, scathing America  
Glimpsed, seen and understood by Comrade John Dos Passos,  
Written-not upon the wall- but in the hearts and brains  
O workers, punctuated by the fists,  
Dictated to the arch stenographer, John Dos Passos,  
Who in turn from many proletarian communications  
Wrote the American letter* (1933, p. 69).

However, research of the *International Literature* journals reveals also ‘Soviet Literature and Dos Passos’, arguably the most interesting document that pertains to the author and his work as viewed by Soviet critics. This article primarily serves to exhibit the amount of attention - positive or negative - the author’s work received in the Soviet Union. Indeed, the article contains parts of a discussion held by the Organisation Committee of Soviet Writers and the editors of the magazine *Znamya* in the spring of 1933 on Dos Passos’s work; the editor notes that “*the discussion raised a tremendous amount of interest among Soviet writers generally*” (1933, p. 103). To be sure, the discussion that is presented contains within it a wealth of different perspectives and attitudes towards the

author and his work. Critics like A. Leites treat Dos Passos with respect but also comradely criticism: "*Dos Passos is the literary representative of the bourgeois intelligentsia of the West which sympathizes with the proletarian communist movement, but this sympathy is more passive than active*" (1933, p.105). Others, such as V. Pertsov, express reservations as to the level of development of Dos Passos as an artist: "*Dos Passos is the fashion, and I think the fashion of a season, if we speak of the Dos Passos we know today*" (1933, p. 111). However, the opinions of V. Vishnevsky are of special interest since he exhibits great sympathy for the American writer and goes to great lengths to defend him from criticism: "*What's good in Dos Passos? That he is seeking. That he is active and hates the old world. That he has experienced on his own skin the meaning of peace and war (capitalistic). That he is broad. That he is candid. That he is simple*" (1933, p. 108)

Taking into account the fact that the quotes referenced in this section are representative of only the English version of *International Literature*, two realisations become evident: the first is that the reader is presented with a vast heterogeneity of opinions, as well as a general sense of anxiety that is unusual. Secondly, that this heterogeneity is possibly the surface expression of deeper trends, tensions and processes within the intellectual life of the organised international Left that will be mentioned momentarily, but will also be more explicitly explored below. On the one hand, as Deming Brown notes, "*in discussing Dos Passos, Russian writers and critics were actually, to a great extent, discussing themselves*" (Brown, 1953, p. 337). Namely, Dos Passos's work, at that particular time in Soviet intellectual life acted as a focal point through which different contradictory opinions on literary and political matters were made manifest. These opinions broadly nuanced one of the important literary debates of the time within the Left, particularly the debate concerning the progressive or reactionary character of modernism in general, and the use of modernist techniques and in literature specifically. However, Deming Brown's research focuses predominantly on the Soviet side of the debate and its consequences. He writes: "*All of these topics were made to bear directly on the question of form and content in Dos Passos's art and, ultimately, on the question of whether Russian literature could follow the path of Dos Passos and still remain true to Soviet ideology*" (Ibid). Consequently, a task of this essay will be to explore the presence of this debate in the Anglophone world along with its repercussions on the intellectual and organisational life of the American left; therefore, at this point I wish to stress that, at this particular historical moment, the publication of a small yet succinct part of this debate in the English iteration of *International Literature* reveals that it is not necessarily the future of Russian literature alone that this debate is fought over, but the formation of a progressive literary movement that is international in character and has immediate implications for American literature.

The same issues in terms of the reception of John Dos Passos's work are echoed by American critics as well, who pay close attention to his commitment to the revolutionary cause. It is known that Dos Passos's relationship with the organised forces of the CPUSA was tentative; he was not a member of the Communist Party and had reservations towards the subjection of his creative activity to its various apparatuses, but at the same time was engaged with the affairs and struggles of the working class in general. This is

made apparent through his activity around the trials of Sacco and Vanzetti, his involvement with labour struggles in Passaic, Harlan County and others (Hicks, 1950). Deming Brown argues that critics perceived Dos Passos's work as strewn with "anarchistic individualism", and "while he hated capitalism because it stultified the soul, he feared that socialism, which involved strong obligations to the collective, might prove equally oppressive" (Brown, p. 336). This kind of relationship with the labour movement effectively earned him the title characterising many of his contemporaries, that of the 'fellow traveller'. For the Communist critics aligned with the USSR in the beginning of the 1930s this title often conditioned their behaviour towards and general opinions of the figure of the fellow traveller. For example, for Granville Hicks writing for *International Literature*, Dos Passos is able to solve the "problem" or "dilemma" of the fellow traveler; that is

*"on the one hand, there is the material of bourgeois life, which he knows but finds it almost impossible to treat to his own satisfaction. On the other hand, there are experiences of the proletariat, which he has not shared or has very incompletely shared, and which he is in danger of treating as an outside observer."* (Hicks, 1933, p. 108)

### 3. Conclusion

I embarked on this brief examination of the young Soviet critic's peculiar position within the world of 1930s left-wing journals - as well as the various conclusions that can be drawn from their position - in order to exhibit another form of the interrelationship between aesthetics and politics during that time. More specifically I hope to have begun to complicate the understanding of 1930s Soviet criticism. To be sure, as Barbara Foley argues for compellingly in her work *Radical Representations*, "1930s literary radicalism would not have existed at all - or would have existed in dramatically different form" without the tectonic shifts in politics and culture caused by the Bolshevik revolution and the consolidation of internationally-oriented Communist institutions (Foley, 1993, p. 63). Nevertheless, Foley also argues that it is arguably harmful to resort to a sort of "ritual incantation of some highly loaded binary opposition - for example, 'creative judgement' versus 'party line'" (p. 29). Adopting this measured and cautious perspective is vital to this essay's analysis of John Dos Passos within the literary debates of his time. Finally, this essay can be thought of as the starting point for a more concrete, and thorough investigation of left-wing criticism in regards to the work of Dos Passos, as well as the situation of this figure, within the broader context of aesthetic debates of his time.

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