

Wednesday 8 May 2019, Russian World Centre Room (Elvet Riverside 1, A29, 5.00pm)

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The Mystery of *The Red Earth*: Harold Heslop, Soviet Literary Institutions, and World Literature

In 1926, the former South Shields coal-miner and trade union activist Harold Heslop (1898-1983) became, overnight, a Soviet writer. The manuscript of his first novel, on the theme of mining in the English north, having been rejected by a British publishing house, was accepted in the USSR and published in Russian translation under the title *Pod vlast'iu uglia* ('Under the Sway of Coal'). Heslop's next two novels were similarly embraced by the Soviet literary establishment, translated and published in the context of the early-Soviet project of developing a body of international literature that served the cause of the revolution. By 1929 *Pod vlast'iu uglia* was reprinted in a mass edition as part of the cheap 'Roman-Gazeta' ('Novel-Newspaper') series which sold millions of copies across the country. Heslop did not fully enjoy the material benefits of this success as most of the income was by that time being rechannelled into the USSR's first five-year plan, but it marked the apex of his recognition as a valued contributor to Soviet-led international revolutionary cultural production.

In the autumn of 1930, Heslop travelled to the USSR as one of two members of the British delegation attending the conference of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers (IURW), which took place in Kharkov in eastern Ukraine in what was becoming one of the USSR's major industrial centres. After the conference, which included the celebration of the anniversary of the October Revolution and a trip to Dneprostroi (at that point a giant industrial construction site, the epitome of early-Soviet industrialisation, where Heslop experienced 'admiration next to awe'), he went to Moscow, where, on the suggestion of the Soviet authorities, he attended the notorious Industrial Party Trial (Nov-Dec 1930) – one of the early Stalinist show trials, at which a number of Soviet scientists and economists were convicted of plotting against the government.



Harold Heslop, at the Kharkov IURW conference (6-15 Nov 1930).
Drawing by L.A Zil'bershtein, published in the Kharkov newspaper
Communist (18 Nov 1930).

On his return to Britain, Heslop still looked to the USSR as a place where he would be making his mark as a writer and activist. However, his hopes were dashed when he found out in 1931 that the publication of his fourth novel, *The Red Earth* (the translation of which had been commissioned and completed, and for which he had already received part of the honorarium) had been officially cancelled. This turnaround in the fortunes of Heslop as a Soviet writer can, of course, be accounted for by the well-documented changes in Soviet cultural policy during these years. This paper introduces, however, a somewhat different perspective on Heslop's place in Soviet literary production at this juncture by delving deeper into his correspondence with Soviet literary institutions (especially the letters that he exchanged with two top functionaries at the IURW, Béla Illés and Antal Hidas, the editors of the Soviet *International Literature* journal, Sergei Dinamov and Walt Carmon, and finally, the literary critic Anna Elistratova). The paper focuses especially on the two major failures in Heslop's communication with Soviet literary institutions in the early 1930s – firstly, his unsuccessful effort to organise a British Section of the IURW; and secondly, his failed attempt to have his latest novel, *The Red Earth*, published. In particular, the paper places the case of Heslop in a discussion of the evolution of early-Soviet ambitions to define and shape 'World Literature', while at the same time analysing how this case simultaneously relates to more recent theoretical conceptualisations of 'World Literature' specifically as a process of the transnational circulation of texts.

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