

# POLITICAL CONVERSION OPPOSITES: TWO WRITERS AND THEIR 1920S SOVIET UNION EXPERIENCE

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**Abstract:** This study reopens the question of the nature of political commitment and its causes during a time that drastically altered the history of the 20th century, the 1920s and 1930s. Focused largely on a body of texts produced by Japanese female writer Miyamoto Yuriko (1899-1951) who returned from a three-year long trip to the Soviet Union in late 1920s as a convinced communist, the study offers a comparison with communism renunciation writings produced by leftist Romanian French writer Panait Istrati (1894-1935), as well as other communist and fellow travelers who experienced the same Soviet realities

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as Miyamoto but with opposite outcomes, such as French writer André Gide (1869-1951). What made those members of the intelligentsia so passionately embrace or renounce certain political ideologies that ultimately changed the face of modern history?

**Keywords:** *Ideology; Communism; Propaganda; Japan; Soviet Union; Miyamoto Yuriko; Panait Istrati; André Gide; Japan Communist Party.*

### **Introduction: Two Destinies**

The two main writers<sup>2</sup> whose experience is explored here never met nor knew of each other's work, although their literary and personal destinies are intricately intertwined by their visits to the Soviet Union during the late 1920s. One, Miyamoto Yuriko (1899-1951),<sup>3</sup> was a Japanese female writer best known for her realistic depictions of the plight of poor farmers in her early work and *shishōsetsu* (semi-autobiographical) writings<sup>4</sup> later, all written prior to her Soviet Union trip (1927-1930). The other, Panait Istrati (1894-1935), was a Romanian-French realist working-class writer, discovered and encouraged to publish by Romain Rolland (1866-1944), who launched his career by labeling him the "Gorky of the Balkans" in his "Preface" to Istrati's first novel published in France in 1923.<sup>5</sup>

Born in 1899 in Tokyo, Miyamoto Yuriko was the daughter of Seiichirō (1868-1936) and Yoshie (1876-1934) Chūjō (or Nakajō), the family name by which she would be known throughout most of her artistic and political career.<sup>6</sup> Following on his illustrious father's footsteps—Chūjō Masatsune

<sup>2</sup> A slightly different version of this research was previously published in the since discontinued journal *Human and Social Studies* 7(3)/2018, 113-154.

<sup>3</sup> Japanese names follow the traditional order Last name First name.

<sup>4</sup> Unique and heavily contested category of Japan's literary modernism, *shishōsetsu* (literally, "I fiction," often rendered in English as I-novel) comprises narratives based on the pre-established convention between an author and the readers that characters and events described in fictional format are, in fact, based on real events that occurred in the author's life.

<sup>5</sup> On the relationship between Istrati and Rolland, see, for instance, Fisher, D. J. (1988) *Romain Rolland and the Politics of Intellectual Engagement*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press. pp. 214-217.

<sup>6</sup> Biographical information here is indebted to several sources, including Nakamura, T. (1973) *Miyamoto Yuriko*. Tokyo: Chikuma shobō.; Miyamoto, K. (1955) *Miyamoto Yuriko*. Tokyo: Chikuma shobō.; Takiji Yuriko kenkyūkai, T. Y. (ed.) (1976) *Miyamoto Yuriko: sakuhin to shōgai*, Tokyo: Shin Nihon shuppansha.; Phillips, S. P. (1979)

(1841-1900), one of the best known civil engineers of the first half of the Meiji period (1868-1912),—Seiichirō became a famous modern Japanese architect. Miyamoto's mother, Yoshie, highly educated by the standards of the time, was the eldest daughter of Japanese thinker and educator Nishimura Shigeki (1828-1902).

Miyamoto spent the first three years of her life on Japan's northern island of Hokkaidō, where the Ministry of Education had dispatched young Seiichirō as a part-time instructor in the Civil Engineering Department of the Sapporo Agricultural School. During Miyamoto's early childhood, Seiichirō also spent three and a half years at Cambridge University in England conducting research and taking classes. The family income was modest for a while, but as soon as Seiichirō returned to Japan, on the eve of Japan's involvement in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), well-trained architects were in high demand, which led to a sudden increase in wealth and social status for the family.

Miyamoto showed interest in literature and writing very early. In the Chūjō household, she had easy access to works of classical Japanese literature, as well as writings on European art and architecture brought back from England by her father.<sup>7</sup> In high school, she started missing classes to go to the Ueno library and read. This is when she first came in contact with Western and Russian literature. She read works by Lev Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Ivan Turgenev, Anton Chekhov, Maksim Gorky, Edgar Allan Poe, Oscar Wilde, William Shakespeare, Romain Rolland and Friedrich Nietzsche, along with popular modern Japanese writers. Strongly encouraged to read and write by her family, Miyamoto's literary path started to take shape around 1915.

In April 1916, she entered the English Literature Department at Japan Women's University only to withdraw after the first term, as her literary career took off after the publication of her debut story "Mazushiki hitobito no mure" (A Flock of Poor People)<sup>8</sup> in the popular magazine *Chūō kōron*. Inspired by the plight of poor farmers working on her paternal grandfather's

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*Miyamoto Yuriko: Imagery and Thematic Development from Mazushiki hitobito no mure to Banshū heiya.* MA, University of British Columbia.; Soeshima, Y. (2006) *The Politics of Gender, Class and Sexuality in Miyamoto Yuriko's Fiction.* PhD, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

<sup>7</sup> Sawabe, H. (1990) *Yuriko, dasuvidaniya : Yuasa Yoshiko no seishun.* Tokyo: Bungei shunju. 21.

<sup>8</sup> In Miyamoto, Y. (1979) *Miyamoto Yuriko zenshū.* Tokyo: Shin Nihon shuppansha. 1:5-98. Hereafter *MYZ*.

farm, “A Flock of Poor People” is the result of the deep impression Russian literature had made on her. Michiko Niikuni Wilson commented that in the story “Yuriko already displayed the seed of feminist-socialist spirit, ready to sprout at any time given the right environment,”<sup>9</sup> although “socialist” may be too early a description for “A Flock of Poor People. The Russian word *narodnik*,<sup>10</sup> one often used to describe Gorky’s work, may be more adequate.

After this first success, the young writer became well known within the literary circles (*bundan*) of the time. It was around the same time that she met fellow writer Nogami Yaeko (1885-1985), an active member of the Seitōsha (Blue Stocking Association), a female writers’ group, part of the larger Shirakaba (White Birch) literary group. The humanistic and egalitarian attitude that animated the members of the Shirakaba seems to have been a major influence in Miyamoto’s early literary activity.

In the fall of 1918, she followed her father to New York, and chose to stay there after he returned to Japan. She attended courses at Barnard College and met Araki Shigeru (1884-1932), a Japanese man fifteen years her senior, and a graduate student of ancient Persian languages at Columbia. Defying her parents’ plans for an arranged marriage, she married Araki in October 1919.

Soon after however, her mother’s health condition worsened and Miyamoto needed to return to Japan, followed a few months later by her husband, who had abandoned his studies. Once back in Japan, Araki defaulted to the conventions of a traditional marriage, but Miyamoto’s independence could not to be bridled by social expectations. Michiko Niikuni Wilson wrote about this period in Miyamoto’s life:

[...] Yuriko, a naïve but intellectually sophisticated woman with a firm commitment to writing, from an upper-middle-class urban family, was hardly suited to Araki Shigeru, a passive, insecure, unreflective man from the countryside. Back in Japan, despite well-meaning efforts, mostly on the part of Yuriko, the marriage ended...<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Niikuni Wilson, M. (1997) “Misreading and Un-Reading the Male Text, Finding the Female Text: Miyamoto Yuriko’s Autobiographical Fiction.” *US-Japan Women’s Journal*, 13, 26-55. 27.

<sup>10</sup> *Narodnik* (from *narod* – people, in Russian) were called writers who expressed feelings of sympathy for the poor and outcasts of society.

<sup>11</sup> Niikuni Wilson, M. (1997) “Misreading and Un-Reading the Male Text, Finding the Female Text: Miyamoto Yuriko’s Autobiographical Fiction.” *US-Japan Women’s*

Her diary from the period records a desperate quest for ideals both in love and in social life. Her literary output declined throughout 1924, when she separated from Araki and whom she divorced the following year.

Nogami Yaeko introduced Miyamoto to Yuasa Yoshiko (1896-1990), a Russian literature specialist, translator, and well-known feminist activist. The moment, particularly salient for the writer's future career path, is captured in Miyamoto's 1926 semi-autobiographical novel *Nobuko*:

- Allow me to make the introductions. This is Ms. Nobuko Sasa, and here is Ms. Tomoko Yoshimi, who depends on her father's good social status to make a living.
- That was a rather strange introduction, Tomoko replied and laughed. At least for food I manage to make it on my own. I am the editor of Magazine X.<sup>12</sup>

The two felt an instantaneous attraction for one other. Miyamoto was impressed by Yuasa's independence, although the latter's first thought—as recalled years later—was: “Met Chūjō. Plump housewife impression. She seems older than me. [...] Not a bad feeling, though. Interest for strange things.”<sup>13</sup> The two women moved in together as soon as Miyamoto's separation from Araki was final, and Miyamoto's need for passion and intimacy took literary form in several letters to Yuasa in which she declared her love.<sup>14</sup>

After the creatively unproductive period of her marriage, Miyamoto started writing again. In 1926, the semi-autobiographical novel *Nobuko*, still her most popular work today, was published. One of the most representative works of the Japanese *shishōsetsu* literary category, *Nobuko* remains virtually unknown outside Japan. In *Nobuko*, Miyamoto describes her relationship with Araki, their married life, and the challenges they faced upon their return to Japan. After completing *Nobuko*, Miyamoto would not return to the *shishōsetsu* category convention until after the end of World

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*Journal*, 13, 26-55. 27.

<sup>12</sup> *MYZ*, 3:58. All translations from Japanese are mine, unless indicated otherwise. In good *shishōsetsu* tradition, the names of the characters are changed in the novel, although the two would have been easily identifiable by the readers of the time as Yuasa and Miyamoto. The magazine referred to here was *Aikoku fujin* (Patriotic Women). See Sawabe, H. (1990) *Yuriko, dasuvidaniya: Yuasa Yoshiko no seishun*. Tokyo: Bungei shunju. 17.

<sup>13</sup> In *Yoshiko nikki*, cited in *ibid.* 17.

<sup>14</sup> Miyamoto, Y. & Yuasa, Y. (eds.). (1978) *Yuriko no tegami*, Tokyo: Chikuma shobō.

War II. Her life with Yuasa is covered in the 1948 novel *Futatsu no niwa* (The Two Gardens), while the trip they took together to the Soviet Union will be detailed in the voluminous *Michishirube* (Road Posts, 1949).

The trip Miyamoto and Yuasa took to the Soviet Union between 1927 and 1930 changed the former's life and made her a firm believer in the need for political engagement as the only means through which an artist can bring positive contributions to social advancement. Literary critic Iwabuchi Hiroko, on the other hand, believes the trip to the Soviet Union marks the beginning of a "weakening of her literature."<sup>15</sup> All texts written by Miyamoto during the time spent in the Soviet Union—mostly newspaper and magazine articles—were later gathered by the editors of her Complete Works in the volume "'Soveto kikō'" (Soviet Travelogue), and constitute the main object of the current analysis.

Inspired by the realities of post-revolutionary Soviet Union, Miyamoto secretly joined in 1931 the rather shaky Japanese Communist Party (JCP) and the Japanese Proletarian Writers Association (NAPF) and committed to supporting the feminist arm of the movement by serving as editor of the magazine *Hataraku fujin* (Workingwomen).

The next year, she met her future husband, Miyamoto Kenji (1908-2007), one of the leaders of the underground Communist Party, and longtime (1958-1977) postwar leader of the JCP. In February that year, she had left her increasingly dissatisfying relationship with Yuasa. Brett de Barry remarked on Yuriko's union to Kenji that "The marriage of a daughter from the prestigious Chūjō family with a communist eight years her junior once again aroused the curiosity of the press, who labeled Yuriko's romance with Kenji 'red love' (*akai koi*)."<sup>16</sup>

With the Japanese government taking a sharp conservative turn at the beginning of the war in China, and the end of the last civilian government in 1932, most JCP leaders were either arrested or forced to continue their activity underground. In 1933, Miyamoto Kenji was arrested and remained in prison until the end of the war, one of the very few Japanese communists to do so. Throughout the twelve years of his imprisonment, Miyamoto

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<sup>15</sup> Iwabuchi, H. (1996) *Miyamoto Yuriko : kazoku, seiji, soshite feminizumu*. Tokyo: Kanrin shobō. 158.

<sup>16</sup> de Barry, B. (1984-1985) "Wind and leaves: Miyamoto Yuriko's The Weathervane Plant." *Journal of the Association of Teachers of Japanese*, 19(1), 7-28. 9. The term "red love," often used in a derogatory manner by the Japanese media of the time, is a reference to the 1927 novel bearing that title and written by Soviet female writer and revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1952).

Yuriko was also detained several times—the incarceration would eventually compromise her health—although she was never forced to renounce her political allegiance to communism (*tenkō*<sup>17</sup>), like so many leftists of the time. In 1937, as a present for his birthday, the writer decided to adopt her husband's family name, and became known as Miyamoto. The twelve-year correspondence between the two, gathered in a volume and published after the war, was an immediate sensation in Japan. The volume, entitled *Jūninen no tegami* (Letters of Twelve Years, 1950), became a testimony of relentless resistance against state oppression.

Miyamoto's postwar political and literary activity on behalf of the reborn JCP and feminist and leftist organizations is overwhelming. She wrote prolifically, as if she were trying to make up for time lost during the war years—during part of which she was forbidden to publish—and got involved in numerous democratic initiatives and organizations. Her health had been, however, severely compromised during imprisonment, and her time was limited. During her final years of life, she published two massive novels, *Banshū heiya* (Banshū Plain, 1946), and *Fūchisō* (The Weathervane Plant, 1947). The former engages the reality of Japan in defeat and has been deemed “one of the most soberly detailed literary evocations of Japan in August and September 1945.”<sup>18</sup> The latter, more closely inspired by the writer's own experience, narrates a couple's reunion after long years of separation and the painful process of readapting to living together, much like the Miyamotos went through after Kenji's return from prison. The tension between the main character's sexual experiences with women in the absence of her spouse, on one hand, and her admiration and love for her husband's resilience, on the other, make that adjustment all the more difficult.

Yuriko died in January 1951, at the height of her creativity and activism. Her staunch commitment to Stalinism, to which she had adhered after living in the Soviet Union, remains both an inspiration and an enigma. Criticized by some for not having been a true communist because she had shown no

<sup>17</sup> *Tenkō* (often rendered in English as “conversion”), is a term describing the coerced political conversion of Japanese leftist and democracy activists who were imprisoned and made to publicly denounce and renounce their political beliefs. With very few exceptions, the majority of the arrested leftist activists recanted *en masse*, making *tenkō* a heavily charged social, political, and ideological phenomenon of prewar Japan. For more on *tenkō*, see, among others,

<sup>18</sup> de Barry, B. (1984) “After the War: Translations from Miyamoto Yuriko.” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 16(2), 40-47. 40.

interest for it prior to 1927 and admired by others for her determination to defend its principles to whatever end under the radical revolutionary dictum “the end justifies the means”, Miyamoto Yuriko, her life, political views and literary and journalistic work have been studied extensively in Japan. Beyond Japan, however, there is still much to understand about her life and work, as well as her sudden adherence to communism after her return to Japan from the Soviet Union.<sup>19</sup>

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Unlike Miyamoto Yuriko, Romanian French writer Panait Istrati went to the Soviet Union a convinced communist and returned to France, and later to his native Romania, not only disappointed by the realities of the revolutionary society in which he had placed all his artistic and political hopes, but also a vehement, and sometimes unfair, critic of all things Soviet.

Born just outside the city of Brăila, at the time a major harbor on the Danube River, Panait Istrati was often described as a global vagabond. Of humble origins, his father was a Greek smuggler he never met and his mother a Romanian laundress.<sup>20</sup> An avid reader, poverty pushed him to quit school after completing elementary school to begin working as an apprentice for various businesses and stores in his native Brăila.

Primed to understand and depict firsthand the inherent cruelty of the capitalist system from the perspective of a low-skill laborer, Istrati started writing for socialist magazines in Romania around the time he turned 23 and became heavily involved in local union work. He traveled abroad extensively to Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Italy, and finally France and Switzerland, making a point of not using a passport and paying nothing along the way. Most of his travels are captured in semi-autobiographical novels, having Adrian Zografi—an alter ego of sorts—as the protagonist.

<sup>19</sup> Recently, Jill Dobson has produced a doctoral dissertation on Miyamoto’s Soviet experience: Dobson, J. (2015) *Self and the City: A Modern Woman’s Journey. Miyamoto Yuriko in the Soviet Union and Europe, 1927-1930*, PhD, University of Sheffield, and an article based on that research, Dobson, J. (2017) “A ‘Fully Bloomed’ Existence for Women: Miyamoto [Chūjō] Yuriko in the Soviet Union, 1927-1930”. *Women’s History Review*, 26(6), 799-821.

<sup>20</sup> The biographical details here are indebted to several sources, primarily to Bălan, Z. & Feodosiev, S. (eds.). (1996) *Panait Istrati, Omul care nu aderă la nimic: Documente din Rusia Sovietică*, Brăila: Editura Istros a Muzeului Brăilei.; Cogălniceanu, M. (2005) *Panait Istrati: Tentativa și ghimpii libertății*. Brăila: Ex libris.; Koëlla, C. E. (1947) «Panait Istrati, le Vagabond Humanitaire.» *The French Review*, 20(4), 292-301.; and Bacot, J.-F. (1988) «Panait Istrati: ou la conscience écorchée d’un vaincu.» *Moebius*, 35, 95-114.



Struggling with tuberculosis since childhood, Istrati hoped, unsuccessfully, for a cure while in Switzerland. After a brief return to Romania where he worked as a house painter and tried to become a pig farmer, he decided to go back to France and become a writer. Full of admiration for Romain Rolland and his 1915 Nobel Prize for literature, Istrati reached out to him, but his letter was never delivered to the French writer because it had been sent to an address where the author had resided only briefly. Sick and depressed, in 1921 Istrati attempted suicide by cutting his throat, but failed. A second undelivered letter addressed to Rolland and found on his body on that occasion was delivered to the French writer by a good Samaritan from the hospital where the suicidal Romanian was being treated. This is what Rolland wrote about the episode in his “Preface” to Istrati’s first novel, *Kyra Kyralina*, published in 1924 in France:

During the first days of January 1921, I received a letter from the hospital in Nice. It had been retrieved from the body of a person, who, at the height of despair, had cut his throat... I read it, and I was shaken by the tumultuous spirit of a genius. A flaming wind rushing across the plains. I was holding in my hands the confession of a new Gorky of the Balkans. They managed to save his life. I wanted to meet him. We began to write to each other. We became pals. His name: Istrati.<sup>21</sup>

For most of the rest of his life, Istrati lived in France, and stayed active within the Socialist writers’ circles, animated mostly by the humanist and egalitarian side of the revolution. The years following the first encounter with Rolland were his most prolific, and some of his best-known writings were published over the next ten years. Chief among them, in addition to his debut with *Kyra Kyralina*, he wrote and published in French, *Oncle Anghel* (Uncle Anghel, 1924); *Codine* (1926); *Mikhail* (1927); *La Famille Perlmutter* (The Perlmutters, 1927); *Les Chardons du Baragan* (The Thistles of Baragan, 1928); *Tsatsa Minnka* (Auntie Minnka, 1931); *La Maison Thuringer* (The Thuringer House, 1933). Some of these he would translate into his native Romanian and publish almost simultaneously in his home country, while others remained available only in French during his lifetime.

A staunch supporter of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and vice-president of the “Les Amis de l’URSS” Society in Paris, Istrati was one of the beneficiaries of a special invitation to the festivities occasioned by the

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<sup>21</sup> Cited in Koëlla, C. E. (1947) “Panait Istrati, le Vagabond Humanitaire.” *The French Review*, 20(4), 292-301. 292.

Tenth Anniversary of the October Revolution in 1927. He traveled across the Soviet Union, with short breaks in Greece, for about sixteen months between 1927 and 1929, accompanied either by Soviet and Comintern officials, such as Christian Rakovsky (1873-1941), Victor Serge (1890-1947) and Boris Souvarine (1895-1984), or by new friends such as Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis (1883-1957), and his wife, Eleni Samiou (1903-2004).<sup>22</sup> His stay in the Soviet Union overlapped almost perfectly with Miyamoto Yuriko and Yuasa Yoshiko's, and, as guests of the Soviet government, many of the sights they visited were the same. As such, the Japanese and the Romanian writers' experiences in the country of the Soviets, while so radically different in outcome, can be argued to have had a dramatic impact on the political awakening—at opposite ideological poles—of the two artists.

Compared to Miyamoto, a self-declared novice in political matters, Istrati was a fervent admirer and supporter of the Soviet regime prior to his trip to Russia. Having gone to the Soviet Union with high expectations for a political and social regime emphasizing equality and elimination of class privilege, Istrati could not help but notice that the lives of most regular Russians had not radically changed under the new order, remaining as miserable as before the 1917 Revolution. Disenchanted with the Soviet authorities and their inability to address poverty, homelessness, and prevent the creation of a new privileged class of Communist Party elites, Istrati took it upon himself to unmask the budding dictatorship of Soviet Russia under Stalin. Animated by deep concern for his fellow humans, Istrati decided to bring down the myth of the communist paradise being built in post-revolutionary Russia and became a vehement critic of the young political order.

In 1929, a non-fiction trilogy of reportage-style volumes was published in France under his name. Entitled *Vers l'autre flamme* (Toward a Different Flame, 1929),<sup>23</sup> it comprises three statements about Soviet Russia: *Après seize mois en URSS: Confession pour vaincus* (After Sixteen Months in the USSR: Confession for the Defeated), *Soviets 1929* and *La Russie Nue* (Russia Unveiled<sup>24</sup>). Although published under Istrati's name, the latter

<sup>22</sup> See Samios Kazantzakis, E. (2013) *Adevărata tragedie a lui Panait Istrati*. Brăila: Editura Istros a Muzeului Brăilei.

<sup>23</sup> Istrati, P. (1929) *Vers l'autre flamme: Après seize mois dans l'URSS*. Paris: Les Éditions Rieder.

<sup>24</sup> Istrati, P. (1975) *Russia unveiled*. Westport, CT: Hyperion Press. Originally published in 1931, the English translation has been published under Istrati's name, so it is cited here as such, although it is now known that the book was in fact written by Boris Souvarine.

two volumes were written by Victor Serge and Boris Souvarine, committed Marxists but staunch critics of Stalin's regime. Soon after Istrati's visit to the USSR, the two revolutionaries would be labeled Trotskyites and eliminated from party leadership in some of the early instances of what will later come to be called Stalin's "Great Purge" or "Great Terror" (1936-1938).

From a historical perspective, it can be argued that Istrati was one of the first leftists to see what other Western intellectuals and artists would only many years later begin to understand about the oppressive nature of the Soviet regime under Stalin. The testimonial published under his name came at a time when Soviet authorities were still enjoying strong support from European and American intelligentsia. As such, with the publication of the *Flame...* Istrati turned almost instantly into a *persona non grata* not only within French and Western European Marxist and communist circles, but also within those of intellectuals who could not conceive of themselves as anything other than supporters of the sole social system in the world that had declared itself the defender of the poor and the oppressed. Chief among them—and crucial to Istrati due to the support he had given to the Romanian on so many occasions before—, Romain Rolland also decided to distance himself from his former protégé and chose instead not to meet with him in the midst of a vitriolic media campaign directed against him by the French socialist media and led by Henri Barbusse (1873-1935), a former friend and political ally.

From 1930 to 1933, Istrati travelled back and forth to Romania, while public attacks against him continued in France. He would eventually leave France for good in 1933, as his tuberculosis advanced and his social relationships crumbled around him. Two years later he died in Bucharest, alone and embittered. His legacy as a humanist writer who, above all, chose to remain faithful to his fellow humans and to never blindly adhere to any ideology, is still being revisited and properly understood.

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Japanese scholars agree that Miyamoto Yuriko's adoption of communism occurred while she was traveling through the Soviet Union and Western Europe (December 1927- October 1930). The 42 texts gathered by her "Complete Works" editors under the title "Soveto kikō" represent the written testimony of the transformation of a writer, who knew nothing of Marxism and was disinterested in politics, into a militant communist. The following pages take a closer look at the timeline of her trip to the Soviet

Union, as related in diaries and texts she wrote while there, and which mark her evolution into a believer in the political and social order proposed by Marx and turned into reality by the Bolshevik Revolution.

Miyamoto and her partner and travel companion, Russian literature translator and Chekhov specialist, Yuasa Yoshiko, made the decision to travel to the Soviet Union sometime in 1926, soon after they had started living together. As a specialist in Russian literature, Yuasa would have naturally benefited most from the trip. Miyamoto, on the other hand, was excited at the idea of eventually having the opportunity to directly experience the land that had fascinated her since childhood and whose writers had inspired her own literary debut in such a major manner.

Dozens of Japanese writers - and hundreds of others coming from fourteen countries - were invited to attend the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the October revolution, and then the First International Conference of Proletarian and Revolutionary Writers that took place in November of the same year. Despite being a well-known writer in her home country, Miyamoto was not the politically engaged writer that Soviet authorities typically would have invited to the events organized for the occasion. Discussing her ignorance of the proletarian movement and its literature in Japan prior to her visit to the Soviet Union and adoption of communism, Miyamoto wrote, in the “Afterword” of a later edition of her 1926 novel *Nobuko*:

I wrote *Nobuko* from 1924 to 1926. Those were the times when the proletarian movement and the proletarian literature movement began. However, my way of life did not really allow me any significant opportunities to come in contact with those movements.<sup>25</sup>

Referring to the same period, Miyamoto Kenji also noted in a postwar book dedicated to her legacy that “Yuriko knew amazingly few things about the proletarian movement.”<sup>26</sup>

Miyamoto’s first impressions of Moscow are captured in an early text, “Mosukuwa no inshōki” (Impressions from Moscow), recorded in the May 7, 1928 entry of her diary, under the title “Jibun, inshō no Tsuzuki” (Continuation of my Impressions). Slightly edited, the text (with a different title, “Mosukuwa no inshō: sono ichi”, Impressions from Moscow, Part 1) was published by the magazine *Kaizō*, in its August issue of 1928.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> MYZ, 18:60-61.

<sup>26</sup> Miyamoto, K. (1963) *Miyamoto Yuriko no sekai*. Tokyo: Shin Nihon shuppansha. 117.

<sup>27</sup> MYZ, 9:593-594.

The “Impressions...” are full of joy at being in Moscow, as she is trying to experience the city on a personal level and engage with its sensations and people. Commenting on the text, Iwabuchi wrote: “The first section of the ‘Impressions...’, written during her first six months in Russia, marks, in fact, the first step of Yuriko’s reception – somewhat by senses, somewhat by intuition – of the Soviets.”<sup>28</sup> The writer’s excitement at being in Russia is noticed by Akita Ujaku as well, in his diary,<sup>29</sup> while Yonekawa recollects her knowledge and passion when talking about Tolstoy’s country.<sup>30</sup>

Their first contact with Russia’s new political regime did not take long. Soviet authorities got involved as Miyamoto wished to visit Moscow in an organized manner, so she needed an official tour guide, a service provided exclusively through a governmental organization supervising and in effect controlling all interactions between foreign visitors regardless of the purpose of their trip and Russian society and its people. As such, Miyamoto came in contact for the first time with the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (Vsesoiuznoe Obshchestvo Kul’turnoi Sviasi s Zagranitsei, best known by the acronym VOKS), the *de facto* tour-organizing agency of the Soviet government, although not formally defined as such, as Michael David-Fox has shown.<sup>31</sup> While critic and literary historian Nakamura Tomoko made the assertion that the *Impressions...* were the result of Miyamoto’s naïve and uninfluenced by politics contact with Russia of her childhood readings,<sup>32</sup> the reality may have been slightly different. The “Impressions...” seem more of a mix between that initial excitement at the experience of a place she had been dreaming to know for a long time, combined with those guided tours that purport to show her the “real” face of new Russia. Guided by the VOKS, the tours offered to foreigners visiting the country were a selection of carefully prearranged sites, meant to showcase the extraordinary advances achieved by the Soviet state since the Revolution. The list of sites offered to her by VOKS and carefully recorded by Miyamoto herself in “Impressions...” is telltale of the

<sup>28</sup> Iwabuchi, H. (1996) *Miyamoto Yuriko : kazoku, seiji, soshite feminizumu*. Tokyo: Kanrin shobō. 160.

<sup>29</sup> See Akita, U. (1975) *Akita Ujaku nikki*. Tokyo: Miraisha..

<sup>30</sup> Yonekawa, M. (1979) “Mosukuwa no Yuriko san.” *Miyamoto Yuriko zenshū*. Tokyo: Shin Nihon shuppansha.

<sup>31</sup> David-Fox, M. (2002) “From Illusory ‘Society’ to Intellectual ‘Public’: VOKS, International Travel and Party: Intelligentsia Relations in the Interwar Period.” *Contemporary European History*, 11(1), 7-32. 11.

<sup>32</sup> Nakamura, T. (1973) *Miyamoto Yuriko*. Tokyo: Chikuma shobō. 178.

“techniques of hospitality” employed at the time by VOKS. “A Soviet tour: factories, the Revolution Museum, elementary schools, peasants’ homes, and in the evening, shows at the Bolshoi Theater.”<sup>33</sup> Other foreign tourists in the Soviet Union of the time describe similar set-menu tours offered to them by the same organization.<sup>34</sup>

The factory she visited was a must-see objective for all foreign tourists of the time. It was the pride of Soviet Moscow, the candy-making factory “Red October.” Miyamoto was shown the nursery, the library, the workers’ clubs, and the guide explained to her the meaning of the slogans hanging on the walls. The inability to fully connect linguistically made Miyamoto uncomfortable, and solidified her determination to learn Russian, a feat that she could not ultimately achieve completely. Either frustrated by this linguistic handicap, or sensing that what she was being shown was not a full picture of regular people’s lives—which fascinated her since adolescence and literary debut—she wrote in “Impressions...”:

I cannot be happy with this kind of superficial tour that only shows me the surface of real life in the USSR. My interest and love for Russia, which I have been carrying in my heart ever since I read *The Cossacks*<sup>35</sup> and *Twenty-Six Men and A Girl*,<sup>36</sup> became a life purpose on that December night when, after getting off the train, I watched sleighs and horse silhouettes on the streets of Moscow through the car window. I must get rid of my English as soon as possible.<sup>37</sup>

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The three full years (1927-1930) Miyamoto spent in Russia and Europe are usually presented as three distinctive periods. The first covers the period from December 1927 to April 1929, when her VOKS tours across Russia took place and which resulted in “Impressions from Moscow” and “Roshia no tabi yori” (From a Trip to Russia, published in *Yomiuri shinbun*, October 12, 1928)<sup>38</sup>, a short travelogue about the trip she and Yuasa took on the river Volga. During that time she was also hospitalized in Moscow for gallbladder inflammation from January to April 1929. The second period,

<sup>33</sup> MYZ, 9:22.

<sup>34</sup> See, for instance, Burton Holmes, *The Traveler’s Russia* (New York: G.P. Putman’s sons, 1934).

<sup>35</sup> Lev Tolstoy’s 1863 novel.

<sup>36</sup> Maxim Gorky’s 1899 short story.

<sup>37</sup> MYZ, 9:23.

<sup>38</sup> MYZ, 9:45-46.

from April to November 1929, corresponds to a trip Miyamoto took alone to Western Europe to meet with her parents in Paris and then to travel to other places. Finally, the third period, her last year in Russia, spans November 1929 to December 1930, and marked her complete political conversion and commitment to the cause of communism and is punctuated by several other tours organized by VOKS.

The three periods are important markers for the stages of Miyamoto's political awakening. The first was a time of accumulation of new information about Russia. The imagined land of her youthful literary adventures gradually and steadily became "the country of the Soviets," a space of political and social experimentation, very much new and unique to the politically unaware female writer from Japan, who, worldly and educated as she was, must have felt that, at the age of 28, she was still aimless and unfocused on a greater goal for her life and art. At this stage, Miyamoto's texts are almost devoid of pro-Soviet propaganda, as information was coming at her in waves, and the process of accumulation was carefully directed by VOKS guides, well-trained in "techniques of hospitality," ultimately a refined form of propaganda and indoctrination.<sup>39</sup> During this period, in addition to the two articles discussed earlier, Miyamoto also wrote the short story *Akai kasha* (The Red Freight Car, *Kaizō*, August 1928<sup>40</sup>), her first attempt at a socio-revolutionary plot. The young female protagonist of the story arrives in Moscow from the countryside to find a job, and the story focuses on her experiences in the city. Other writings dealing with the writer's memories and impressions of this first period are later texts, so although their subject matter belongs timewise to the first period, their tone and political commitment place them outside it. They are, "Donbasu tankō ku no 'rōdōgun'" (The Workers' Club of Donbas Coalmine Town, published in *Taishū no tomo*, November 1931) and "Sekiyū no miyako Bakū e" (To the Oil Capital, Baku, 1933, first published in the 1952 edition of the author's "Complete Works" at publisher Kawade shobō).

According to the texts written during this period (or about it), as well as the postwar novel *Road Posts*, the first trip the two Japanese female

<sup>39</sup> For extensive research on "techniques of hospitality," see, among others, Hollander, P. (1988) *The Survival of the Adversary Culture: Social Criticism and Political Escapism in American Society*. New Brunswick & London: Transaction Publishers. 170 et passim, and Hollander, P. (1998) *Political Pilgrims: Western Intellectuals in Search of the Good Society* (3rd ed.). New Brunswick & London: Transaction Publishers.

<sup>40</sup> *MYZ*, 4:67-126.

writers took across Russia was “[...] not exactly what we call today a standard tourist tour, but an excursion full of experiences.”<sup>41</sup> They went to Nijni Novgorod, visited Gorky’s native place and the town bazaar and then took the boat on the Volga and reached Stalingrad in five days. From Stalingrad they continued to the Northern Caucasus region, and, after a ten-hour drive through picturesque landscape, arrived at Tiflis, the Georgian capital. From there they traveled to Baku, where they visited oil workers’ living facilities, and then to Yalta, where they visited Chekhov’s memorial house. Eventually they reached Donbas and visited the coalmine workers’ recreation facilities. Back in Moscow, Miyamoto got sick and spent four months at the University of Moscow Hospital.

Miyamoto’s trip to Western Europe is said to have also played a major role in her decision to dedicate herself to the cause of communism. In contrast to what was presented to her by the Soviet government as Soviet workers’ daily life, the crushing poverty, unemployment, and overall misery of the working masses in the wake of the great economic depression in Western Europe must have been a shocking reality, reminiscent of the conditions in her own country. “London, 1929” is a somber-toned, dark text in comparison with the luminous, bright descriptions of Soviet society. There is nothing but a striking and revolting discrepancy between the lives of the poor and those of the rich in England, human degradation, and collapse, all brought about by the capitalist system and its intrinsic socio-economic inequality. As if engaging in a dialogue with that reality, as soon as she returned to Moscow, Miyamoto wrote “Kodomo, kodomo, kodomo no Mosukuwa” (Children’s, Children’s, Children’s Moscow, published in *Kaizō*, October 1930), a text about the dignified and fair protection guaranteed by Soviet law to pregnant women and children.

As of 1929, Miyamoto seems to have been deeply engaged in the realities of a perpetually changing Soviet society. These were historic times for Stalin’s leadership of the Union, and, under his direction, the Lenin-inherited New Economic Policy (NEP) was replaced in 1928 with a strictly centralized state economy organized on five-year plans. The first five-year plan in Soviet history (1928-1933) was already on its way in 1929, and slogans and solemn promises to fulfill its commitments as quickly as possible were part and parcel of daily life in Moscow.<sup>42</sup> Revolutionary propaganda

<sup>41</sup> Nakamura, T. (1973) *Miyamoto Yuriko*. Tokyo: Chikuma shobō. 115.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Fitzpatrick, S. (1999) *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* Oxford University Press.



filling the air must have been intoxicating, and the sentiment that something more than one's usual daily life was at stake, that the responsibility for the entire nation was resting on the shoulders of each and all must have been exhilarating. Shaken emotionally by her brother's suicide in 1928 and by the experience of the Western European trip, Miyamoto started to apply herself to the study of Marxism, to better understand and connect with the lives of the people around her. Visits to factories and cooperative farms were no longer simple curiosity. She wanted to grasp the essence of Soviet society. Her knowledge of Russian improving, she began to read journals and to comment in her diary, as well as in conversations with Yuasa, on various aspects of Soviet society. The articles she writes now are in-depth analyses of women's issues, workers' problems, and provide insight into cultural debates on the nature of proletarian art and literature. Increasingly convinced that she had found an ideal to which to dedicate herself and her art, Miyamoto was adjusting her whole persona from her ideas to writing style. Talking about "Children's..." Tomoko Nakamura noticed that this was the first article in which Miyamoto directly compared the socialist and capitalist systems and qualified them as "good" and "bad," respectively. As for her writing, "compared to "Impressions from Moscow" of two years before, "Children's..." is stylistically completely different."<sup>43</sup>

During this gradual transformation, as she is embracing communism and is making it her fight, what remains unchanged is the way she travels around Russia. Although she could now find her way in Russian and could have potentially arranged visits on her own, she continued to ask VOKS for assistance. Her decision may have been driven either by a conscious desire to stay within the state-prescribed boundaries allowed to foreigners and respectfully follow the rules of her host country, or by a very conscious decision not to see what Soviet authorities would not have wanted her to see. If the latter, then it must be assumed that what she wanted to see was no longer a process of discovery, but one meant to confirm that her decision to commit to communism in its Stalinist format was right. Through the last days she spent in the Soviet Union, Miyamoto never expressed the slightest suspicion that she may have been the victim of VOKS's "techniques of hospitality." "I would like to see the March 8 celebration at the Tekstilinyi Factory. I went to VOKS", she wrote, for instance, in her diary (March 6, 1930).<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Nakamura, T. (1973) *Miyamoto Yuriko*. Tokyo: Chikuma shobō. 135.

<sup>44</sup> MYZ, 24:494.

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The reasons behind Miyamoto's commitment to communism have been debated by scholars over the years in an attempt to understand the nature of political commitment in general, and to communism, in particular. If in the case of Panait Istrati, his public renunciation of communism was clearly explained in his 1929 trilogy as disenchantment with the Soviet regime, disgust with the privileges accorded the party elites, and deep sadness at the plight of the social categories remaining on the fringes of society, Miyamoto's commitment to communism confused her contemporaries and made them regard it with significant suspicion. What could have driven a successful young writer coming from privilege and money to commit herself to a political movement that had been under scrutiny by the Japanese police and the Special Higher Police (Tokubetsu kōtō keisatsu, or Tokkō) ever since the formation of the first Japan Communist Party (JCP) in 1922? The mass arrests of the communists and leftists that shook Japan's public opinion in 1928 (The March 15 Incident, *San ichi go jiken*), and then again in 1929 (The April 16 Incident, *Yon ichi roku jiken*) must have been well-known to Miyamoto and should have deterred her from even considering joining a weakened political organization constantly under police surveillance. Despite the hostile political environment that she found at home upon her return from the Soviet Union, Miyamoto remained faithful to her commitment, and dedicated herself to working from within numerous leftist organizations.

According to Miyamoto's own statements, later captured and developed in her husband's writings about her and turned into official JCP lore, three main reasons led to her political transformation while in the Soviet Union: the treatment of Soviet women as equal partners to men in building the socialist society; her younger brother's suicide in 1928, and the letter he left behind about his uncertainty about the future; and her trip to Western Europe, which further convinced her that socialism was superior to capitalism in terms of protecting the proletariat masses from misery and poverty.<sup>45</sup> Never directly stated was her love for Russia fostered by childhood readings.<sup>46</sup> To all these, Miyamoto's emotional readiness to dedicate herself to an ideal

<sup>45</sup> Iwabuchi, H. (1996) *Miyamoto Yuriko : kazoku, seiji, soshite feminizumu*. Tokyo: Kanrin shobō. 161.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 159.

that she had been lacking and that would henceforth drive her life and art must have played an equally important role in her decision-making process. The dissatisfaction with the life she had been leading, as a Japanese citizen and writer, may have equally constituted an impetus in this crucial decision. The various reasons offered for Miyamoto's adoption of communism never completely convinced all the analysts and fellow travelers. Only two weeks after her death in 1951, communist female writer Hirabayashi Taiko (1905-1972) called Miyamoto's path to communism "easy," and wrote: "She did not become a socialist inspired by Japanese society, but by the Soviet society."<sup>47</sup>

Miyamoto's search for a social and political ideal can be arguably traced back to her ardent involvement in social and humanitarian activities, such as the relief work she did to counter the effects of the Russian famine of 1921, or for the victims of the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923. Moreover, inspired early in her life by humanitarian and egalitarian-utopian literature, a pining for an ideal society where all humans are equal and treated equally well by the state, had underlined Miyamoto's own literary work in her youth. Educated within a Western paradigm, Miyamoto would not have been radically different than her European and American counterparts who were at the time actively engaged in finding and living in those social systems and societies they perceived as incarnations of the "good society." In his 1998 work *Political Pilgrims: Western Intellectuals in Search of the Good Society*,<sup>48</sup> Paul Hollander took a closer look at the reasons that led many artists and members of the 1920s and 1930s intelligentsia to become firm believers in societies they considered embodiments of utopian ideas only to end up having to make peace with the fact that they could never live up to those expectations.

Hollander invoked two reasons that led Western intellectuals to support totalitarian regimes, such as the Soviet Union was becoming in the 1930s. One is the intellectuals' alienation from their own societies and their quest for utopias where they may feel empowered to build a new, "perfect" society, in accordance with their ideas about what that may mean.

Not surprisingly, my inquiry found that alienation from one's own society and susceptibility to the attractions, real or imagined, of others are very

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<sup>47</sup> In *Miyamoto san no oshimu*, "Yomiuri shinbun", 1951, January 22, quoted in *ibid.* 161.

<sup>48</sup> Hollander, P. (1998) *Political Pilgrims: Western Intellectuals in Search of the Good Society* (3rd ed.). New Brunswick & London: Transaction Publishers.

closely linked. The late 1920s and early 1930s provide an excellent example. [...] The Soviet case offered the most helpful alternative to the economic and social chaos of the [...] period.<sup>49</sup>

Artists and intellectuals found in the Soviet and in later oppressive regimes “a sense of purpose” and seemingly “meaningful lives for their citizens.”<sup>50</sup> As such, “a favorable predisposition toward these societies was based in part on the belief that they stood for the values the intellectuals cherished.”<sup>51</sup>

The second reason—already invoked here—is what Hollander coined “techniques of hospitality”. VOKS was the Soviet materialization of Hollander’s concept and it must have been one of the essential factors contributing to Miyamoto’s adoption of communism.

Two of the reasons considered crucial for Miyamoto’s political transformation, her brother’s suicide and the trip to Western Europe merit additional attention here. Miyamoto was the eldest of four siblings, but neither Kunio, Chūjōs’ next born, nor Hisaeko, the junior, were as close to her as Hideo. He is reportedly the model for Yasushi, an often-present character in her *shishōsetsu* writings, a serious, sensitive, loving young man. Funny and energetic, Yasushi’s hobby is to cultivate flowers in a greenhouse. Miyamoto’s grief at his death is depicted in several short stories such *Omokage* (Visage, 1940<sup>52</sup>), as well as in the long novel *Road Posts* (part 1, chapter 3).<sup>53</sup>

The fact that her diary entries stopped abruptly for weeks in 1928 after she received the telegram informing her of her brother’s death<sup>54</sup> is often indicated as a sign of the emotional effect Hideo’s passing must have had on Miyamoto. “Her pain was so profound that even after she resumed writing her diary, she could not utter a word about her brother’s death.”<sup>55</sup> On October 13, she received a letter from her father with details about Hideo’s suicide and it was only in that day’s entry that, for the first time, she mentioned her brother’s death.<sup>56</sup> On October 19, in “words that seem to hit the paper,”<sup>57</sup> she wrote:

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>52</sup> MYZ, 5:325-337.

<sup>53</sup> MYZ, 7:269-342.

<sup>54</sup> MYZ, 24:298.

<sup>55</sup> Nakamura, T. (1973) *Miyamoto Yuriko*. Tokyo: Chikuma shobō. 113.

<sup>56</sup> MYZ, 24:307.

<sup>57</sup> Nakamura, T. (1973) *Miyamoto Yuriko*. Tokyo: Chikuma shobō. 113.

His silhouette in the summer *kimono*, with the black muslin *obi*, or in his high school uniform... I plunge myself deep into these visions, dear visions. But it is so painful. (Oh, God!) Somehow, all my life's prospects for the future collapsed. [...] He did not want to live a lie.<sup>58</sup>

Iwabuchi Hiroko does not, however, take this first expression of pain as relevant for the connection between Hideo's death and her adoption of communism. "Yuriko herself stressed Hideo's death [as a reason for her political transformation], in later years."<sup>59</sup> In other words, the significance accorded to her brother's suicide originated from an older Miyamoto looking back on her youth. Nakamura Tomoko also wrote: "In her later written "Nenpu"<sup>60</sup>, Yuriko attached a great meaning to her brother's suicide." The passage of "Nenpu" (Timeline, 1948) that Nakamura is referring to is:

1928: this summer, on August 1, my brother Hideo (21) committed suicide. In his last letter to me, which was never sent, there are words of hate. Awake day and night, both his unexpected death (=downfall) and the ardent progress of this new [Soviet] society opened my eyes. I finally understand the aim, the shape, and the meaning of the fight I fought alone. I have an entirely different perspective of what political action is now. As an artist, I will not give up the uncompromising way of this social system. I will not give up my hate."<sup>61</sup>

In fact, both Nakamura and Iwabuchi followed the same reasoning as Honda Shugo, when he wrote in 1957: "I don't quite understand why she [Miyamoto] felt there to be such a direct connection between her true acceptance of communism and her brother's death."<sup>62</sup>

It is not unlikely that postwar Miyamoto would have looked back on the events of 1928 and attribute more significance to her brother's suicide than it might have had at the time. That, however, does not diminish the fact that she considered that personal event of her life relevant enough to have had a devastating impact on her worldview. Coming only a year after the suicide of Japanese writer Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892-1927), whose death was a

<sup>58</sup> MYZ, 24:311.

<sup>59</sup> Iwabuchi, H. (1996) *Miyamoto Yuriko: kazoku, seiji, soshite feminizumu*. Tokyo: Kanrin shobō. 161.

<sup>60</sup> MYZ, 18:657-685.

<sup>61</sup> MYZ, 18:662.

<sup>62</sup> In *Miyamoto Yuriko: Sono shōgai to sakuhin*, in Honda Shugo (ed.), *Miyamoto Yuriko kenkyū* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1957), 4, quoted in Iwabuchi, H. (1996) *Miyamoto Yuriko: kazoku, seiji, soshite feminizumu*. Tokyo: Kanrin shobō. 161.

shock not only to Miyamoto, but to all Japanese society, and whose famous final letter addressed to his friend, writer Kume Masao (1891-1952), talked about “a vague anxiety” about the future, Hideo’s letter is eerily similar. Moreover, Akutagawa’s gesture was interpreted in 1929 as the end of an era of politically unengaged literature by no other than Miyamoto Kenji, Miyamoto’s future husband, in the seminal essay “Haiboku no bungaku” (The Literature of Defeat).<sup>63</sup> By the time she was re-evaluating the significance of Hideo’s death in her own political awakening, Miyamoto Yuriko must have seen all these connections and purposely chose to augment the impact her brother’s death had on her adoption of communism.

The other cause typically invoked for Miyamoto’s adoption of communism, the trip to Western Europe and the ensuing comparison with the Soviet Union, represented more the occasion than the actual reason for her political awakening. Yuasa Yoshiko, her travel companion and life partner at the time, does put a lot of weight on Miyamoto’s reaction to the misery of the working class in Western Europe:

It is generally believed that she [Miyamoto] ‘got red’ while in the Soviet Union, and it is very true that the two years of life there changed the second half of her life, but I don’t believe the importance of her experiences in the month she spent in London was without significance in her decision-making process.<sup>64</sup>

Similar to Hideo’s death, Miyamoto declared in postwar writings that the economic collapse in Europe had been a determining factor in her political choice.<sup>65</sup> Had it not been for the Soviet Union propaganda and “techniques of hospitality”, however, she might not have been primed the same way to notice the difference. By the time she left Soviet Russia, she might have already been convinced of its superiority. Miyamoto had lived in England and the United States during her childhood and adolescence, so the tares of that kind of capitalist society should have been familiar. Moreover, Europe’s deep economic crisis at the end of the 1920s was not unknown to Miyamoto. While impactful, the experience of being there physically should not have been more than a confirmation of what she already knew from the media of the time.

<sup>63</sup> For more on Miyamoto Kenji’s reading of Akutagawa’s final letter “Aru kyūyū e okuru shuki” (Letter to a Certain Friend), see Lippit, S. M. (2002) *Topographies of Japanese Modernism*. New York: Columbia University Press. pp. 39 et passim.

<sup>64</sup> Yuasa Yoshiko in the “Afterword” of *Seishun no kōkan: Wakaki hi no Miyamoto Yuriko no tegami*, in “Fūjin kōron”, republished in *MYZ*, bekkān:9.

<sup>65</sup> See, for instance, *MYZ*, 18:78-79.

In conclusion, Miyamoto's adoption of communism was not necessarily the result of one direct factor, but an intricate net of reasons, spanning her entire life. From childhood readings to anxieties about a politically unengaged future to the sense of emotional and spiritual aimlessness to the experience of a capitalist system on the brink of collapse, and in light of the success of the "techniques of hospitality" employed by VOKS, Miyamoto's turn to communism became not only a conscientious choice, but also a well calculated one.

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A closer look at some of the texts produced by Miyamoto Yuriko during her time in the Soviet Union show a deliberate choice to introduce to Japanese readers selected aspects of life in Soviet Russia. Initially enticed through the VOKS "techniques of hospitality," there came a moment when, although she had more access to access the society around her, Miyamoto must have decided that the negative aspects she encountered were inevitable and small obstacles on the way to achieving the goals of the Bolshevik Revolution. It was, however, those negative aspects that shocked, disappointed, and led to loss of faith in the cause of the revolution for Soviet supporters, sympathizers, and fellow travelers. Istrati's denunciatory trilogy will be famously followed, a few years later, in 1936, by French writer André Gide (1869-1951).

Miyamoto's "Soveto kikō" texts can be categorized in different ways. The chronological order gives the reader the ability to better understand the author's evolution into a communist believer, and it has been touched upon earlier. Identifying overall themes offers, in turn, a different, and more meaningful way to analyze them individually, and as pieces of the whole group. Miyamoto Kenji grouped the texts by themes he identified.<sup>66</sup>

As such, the portrayal of the lives of regular people in a socialist country is one of the major themes. Miyamoto paid close attention to factories and workers, women and children, cultural aspects of daily life, all described objectively, with no ideological *parti pris*, at least in Miyamoto Kenji's view.

The theme comprises texts written mostly in 1928 and 1930, with the latter being better informed and showing more in-depth understanding of Soviet realities. "Life and culture are now portrayed using historical analyses

<sup>66</sup> Miyamoto, K. (1963) *Miyamoto Yuriko no sekai*. Tokyo: Shin Nihon shuppansha. 122-127.

of economic and political realities.”<sup>67</sup> From 1928 until 1930, Miyamoto’s position on Soviet issues turned partisan, supportive of revolutionary goals, and she adopted a stance diametrically opposed to that of the former Soviet supporters who renounced their allegiance to the cause after experiencing the Soviet Union in person. Miyamoto made a deliberate choice here, one in the name of the cause, and that would later defend when responding sharply to André Gide’s criticism of Soviet Russia in her 1937 article, “Jiido to sono Soveto ryokōki” (Gide and His Soviet Travelogue).<sup>68</sup>

A different theme, in Miyamoto Kenji’s assessment, is the interest of a *literata* for the literature, art, and culture of the Soviets. Most texts categorized here tend to be long discussions about writers, their political engagements, or comments on heated debates on the nature of literature, as well as reportage-like narratives about interactions between workers and proletarian writers, or about writers from the working class. Some, such as “Soveto bundan no genjō” (Current Conditions of the Soviet Literary Circles, 1931), go into detail about various Soviet writers of the time, and their works, discuss literary icons of the time, such as modernist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930),<sup>69</sup> and express the author’s opinion on policies concerning the arts in the Soviet Union.

In these texts, Miyamoto often shows a keen interest in understanding how ordinary people’s lives are impacted by pressures experienced at societal level:

How does society change? And to what extent does that change impact people’s feelings and makes them change? The Soviet people don’t want to simply change their lives, they strive for internal change. The new, socialist literature shows them that they need to change their destinies on their own. Tolstoy was a great man, and Dostoyevsky’s world is as violently colorful as a tempest in May, but they did not understand the revolution. They did not comprehend the turmoil and the changing nature of historical moments. Their personalities did not possess a trigger for class issues.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> *MYZ*, 11, 20-31; See later a commentary on Miyamoto’s position on Gide’s *Travelogue*. Very similar to Istrati’s, Gide’s public denunciation of the Soviet regime came later, in 1936.

<sup>69</sup> Vladimir Mayakovsky, a futurist poet who transitioned after the October Revolution into a proletarian playwright, clashed with the official doctrine of socialist realism in arts, and came under heavy criticism from governmental art watchdog organizations. His suicide in 1930 is treated rather callously by Miyamoto as a necessity for the advancement of revolutionary ideals and somehow does not elicit feelings similar to Akutagawa’s suicide from only three years before, although ironically, they are very similar.

<sup>70</sup> *MYZ*, 18:79.



Another theme in the Soviet texts is the writer's concern for changing her own writing style. That desire is increasingly more visible from "Impressions..." to texts such as "Atarashiki Shiberia o yokogiru" (Crossing the New Siberia, published in January-February 1931 in the magazine *Shojin geijutsu*). In the latter's "Chōsha no kotoba" (Author's Words), the preoccupation with her writing style is clearly stated: "I still write using my old techniques," and "I am thinking of putting an end to this manner of writing literature." Finally, Miyamoto wrote: "I am making a promise to myself, and to my readers: my next book will describe life in the Soviet Union in an organized manner. And in simpler words."<sup>71</sup> Simple words and an organized writing manner were demands originating from workers and addressed to Soviet proletarian writers to make literature more accessible to the working masses, as Miyamoto herself indicated in "Current Conditions of the Soviet Literary Circles."

A final theme mentioned by Miyamoto Kenji is the comparison between the realities of Soviet society and those of capitalist Japan, Western Europe or imperialist Russia. The comparison, Miyamoto Kenji claims, is "the expression of the author's belief that the Japanese masses will begin to desire their own liberation by realizing the shortcomings of the capitalist system and the benefit of the socialist model."<sup>72</sup>

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In addition to the themes proposed by Miyamoto Kenji and detailed above, the texts in "Soveto kikō" can also be classified along the lines of other overarching topics: Soviet women, children, workers, and culture. Close readings along these themes allow for comparisons with texts dealing with the same in Panait Istrati's denunciation of the Soviet regime, as well as André Gide's, in his 1936 volume *Retour de l'URSS* (Return from the USSR), and the 1937 sequel *Retouches à mon Retour de l'URSS* (Revisions of my Return from the USSR).

The texts dealing with the social status and conditions of Soviet women are the most numerous in Miyamoto's "Soveto kikō". Published in both leftist and general interest magazines, they convey Miyamoto's admiration for the progress achieved in the status of women in the Soviet Union. To summarize, Miyamoto records Soviet working women who enjoy guaranteed political and social rights, benefit from equality with their male

<sup>71</sup> MYZ, 18:18.

<sup>72</sup> Miyamoto, K. (1963) *Miyamoto Yuriko no sekai*. Tokyo: Shin Nihon shuppansha. 127.

counterparts, and are encouraged to return to school and continue their education. Additionally, they enjoy state protection as mothers. All, of course, undoubtedly great strides for women's rights. And they were even more shocking when compared to the status and rights of Japanese women at the same time. Miyamoto's excitement was, as such, not at all unwarranted.

She was impressed and fascinated by the celebration of March 8 as Women's Day. "In the USSR, every year on March 8, women leave the workplace one hour earlier to celebrate."<sup>73</sup> In an effort to be as authentic as possible, rather than commenting herself on Soviet women's rights, as they are presented to her, Miyamoto opts for quoting full speeches delivered by party leaders about the importance of women in Soviet society to show that it was indeed the official position of the Soviet authorities. Surprisingly, she seems to ignore the Japanese official propaganda about motherhood and the importance of women as Japan was sliding into fascism, to perhaps identify similarities and distinguish between reality and mere official posturing.

When comparing Soviet and Japanese women, Miyamoto emphasized the elevated status of the former, as portrayed in official state propaganda:

Ever since the victory of the Revolution, Soviet women bring their contribution to proletarian production as well as to the building of socialism. In other words, they have their human rights recognized. [...] when they possess similar skills, men and women alike receive *exactly the same wages*.<sup>74</sup>

The reality, however, did not match such an ideal as presented by the Soviet regime.

*Russia Unveiled*, the third volume of the trilogy published under Panait Istrati's name (albeit written by former Soviet leading journalist Boris Souvarine, who had broken away from the Party in 1924 following his criticism of Stalin's leadership), is filled with examples of abuse, misery and poverty experienced by Soviet citizens. All the examples in *Russia Unveiled* are excerpts from Soviet newspapers, selected by a former insider of the regime who was intimately acquainted with the realities of post-Lenin Soviet Union and the growing privilege of Party leadership under Stalin.

"Pravda" of March 20, 1925 described the plight of female workers at Tula: "Investigations reveal a gloomy picture. The low level of education and almost complete ignorance, the absence of any qualifications for work

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<sup>73</sup> MYZ, 9:127.

<sup>74</sup> MYZ, 9:349. (emphasis added)

and the consequently low wages, the expenses of feeding their families—all weigh heavily upon them and hamper their social and cultural development.” Nearly all [women] had three, four, some five and six mouths to feed, and wages corresponding to the third category and were worth, at that time, about 10 rubles a month.<sup>75</sup>

Cited by Souvarine, Leon Trotsky too indicated the same issue in his article “Review of Economic Situation of Adolescents in 1924-25 and 1925-26”:

In many branches of industry, the wages earned by women workers in March 1926 were 51, 61 and 83 percent of the men’s. The necessary measures have not been taken to protect female labor in such branches of industry as the working of turf-pits, lading and unlading, etc.<sup>76</sup>

Souvarine also acknowledged that “There certainly are some model maternity hospitals and crèches which visitors, tourists, and ‘sham friends of the USSR’ are taken to see. But surely these are totally insufficient for a country embracing ‘one-sixth of the globe!’”<sup>77</sup>

Throughout her stay in the Soviet Union, Miyamoto must have encountered extraordinary female characters whom she projected into archetypal models for the Soviet woman. Captured in some of her texts, one of them is Ana Simova (a character in the postwar novel *Road Posts*), whom she met in Leningrad, as the president of the Leningrad Women’s Council. An energetic party member, factory worker by day and student at night, she fascinated Miyamoto. Another was Natasha, the nurse who took care of her during her hospitalization in 1929. Natasha (Tania in “Children’s, Children’s, Children’s Moscow”<sup>78</sup>) was also a party member, married to a factory worker who was going to school to become a baritone. Natasha was a nurse by day and taking School of Medicine courses in the evenings. Moreover, she shared her wish to become a mother one day, an idea that exhilarated Miyamoto, as Natasha did not seem concerned that having a baby would lead to her losing her hard-earned job.<sup>79</sup> These women existed in Soviet society, and they were certainly part of Miyamoto’s experience there, but they were not the rule as much as the exception.

<sup>75</sup> Istrati, P. (1975) *Russia unveiled*. Westport, CT: Hyperion Press. 93-94.

<sup>76</sup> Trotsky, *Review of Economic Situation of Adolescents in 1924-25 and 1925-26*, cited in *ibid.* 93.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* 97.

<sup>78</sup> See Iwabuchi, H. (1996) *Miyamoto Yuriko: kazoku, seiji, soshite feminizumu*. Tokyo: Kanrin shobō. 163.

<sup>79</sup> *MYZ*, 9:101.

And she was bound to encounter the exceptions by virtue of the fact that she was a foreigner in a society that had a vested interest in projecting a certain image for outsiders. Moreover, most of the people she interacted with were carefully selected by VOKS and the authorities. The somber of Soviet women was better captured in this quote from a *Pravda* article from 1925, cited in *Russia Unveiled*:

Out of 42 who were questioned, five women could not send their children to school for want of material needs of various kinds; 11 had no boots or underclothing either for themselves or for their children; 14 could not always provide one hot dish a day; 12 were illiterate. [...] In the Astrakhan fisheries, women workers had for a long time been forced into immoral intercourse and “above all, received no payment for their services.” So weak were they from want of food that they could not refuse the advances made on them by the foremen. Even the most courageous of them lost their means of livelihood. “Morals have hardly been altered at all by the Revolution. Just as in the old days, the directors of the concern run after the women on the rafts and into the rushes and catch them, and not only the responsible chiefs but even the humblest of the employees make this a practice.” Newspaper labor correspondents called attention to numerous cases of this sort, but the Unions only dismissed those who were caught in the act. “That was no remedy at all,” for their seducers...<sup>80</sup>

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The situation is similar in the case of Miyamoto’s articles about children. As is the case with the women described in her reportages, the children she encountered and introduced to her readers in Japan are real, and other visitors to the USSR saw them as well in their VOKS-organized tours. The same visitors, however, also saw the poverty most children in Soviet Russia experienced from the second half of the 1920s throughout the outbreak of War World II. Few travelers of the time fail to mention in their travelogues the omnipresent *bezprizorni*, homeless children, who lived on the street and in sewers after running away from their parents’ homes due to physical abuse, lack of food, and exploitation. A major social issue, sometimes openly and directly debated in the Soviet media, *bezprizorni* are strikingly absent from Miyamoto’s writings.

Most of her articles dealing with children are also articles about women and motherhood, although two are dedicated exclusively to children and the care the Soviet state accords them. They are “Tanoshii Soveto no kodomo”

<sup>80</sup> Istrati, P. (1975) *Russia unveiled*. Westport, CT: Hyperion Press. 94.

(The Enjoyable Children of the Soviets, published in *Fujin geijutsu*, March 1931) and “Soveto no pioniēru wa nani shite asobu ka” (How Do Soviet Union’s Young Pioneers Play? in *Shōnen senki*, May 1931).

In Miyamoto’s Soviet Union, children are happy, well-fed and go to daycare centers in factories where their parents work. Misha is one of the young Russian children in Miyamoto’s articles. He is barely a toddler and goes to daycare every morning. There he learns how to take care of his body, how to wash his hands and brush his teeth. His mother takes him to daycare by streetcar. “The streetcar is always full, but Misha and his mother don’t need to worry about it. In the Soviet Union, children and their parents can always get on public transportation using the driver’s door.”<sup>81</sup> At daycare, Misha plays with other children, and makes fun of one of his playmates, Varosha. When his family moves to a new apartment building, he no longer needs to go to the factory daycare, because their new building has a kindergarten on the first floor.

Children are very important in Soviet Russia. For them to grow up to be healthy, strong, good workers, the state allocates whenever possible money for their development. So, Misha can easily change his daycare for a kindergarten because there are many such institutions in the cities. And the plan is to keep increasing their numbers [...] The number of beds in daycare facilities in 1928 was 34,000. By 1933, it is expected to reach 65,000. The number of children going to nurseries and daycare centers was of 225,300, but it is expected to reach 1,040,000 by 1933.<sup>82</sup>

Miyamoto borrowed all the data from official Soviet five-year plan documents.

Missing from the official picture—and, as such, absent from her writings—is the dark side of children exploitation, still prevalent in Soviet Russia.

At the Fourth Congress of the Communist Youth a delegate said in his report: “Painful though it be, the fact is that no one troubles with the amount of work done by children. At first sight it seems impossible to believe that the conditions revealed in their letters really do exist in the USSR. Members of the children’s organizations (‘pioneers’) are unanimous in saying that children are obliged to work 14 to 16 hours a day for a monthly salary of between five and 10 rubles.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> MYZ, 9:237.

<sup>82</sup> MYZ, 9:239.

<sup>83</sup> Istrati, P. (1975) *Russia unveiled*. Westport, CT: Hyperion Press. 99. Cited from “Youth

Dozens of similar examples of child abuse are included in the trilogy signed by Panait Istrati. Here is just another one about the plight of girls, the very same who were to become empowered Soviet women, as Miyamoto's articles indicate. "Little girls in the tens of thousands worked as nurses and general maids and worked like slaves. Absence of education, harsh treatment, and deplorable sanitary conditions were frequently reported."<sup>84</sup>

Miyamoto equally praised young pioneer camps, and many deserved the praise as other visitors of the time include in their own testimonials. French writer André Gide wrote a few years after Miyamoto: "the camp was marvelous. [...] Everything one might imagine for the children's well-being, their hygiene, sports training, amusement, and pleasure was present. The children breathed health and happiness."<sup>85</sup> Gide was, however, distraught by the level of political indoctrination that seemed to suffocate and obliterate general education. The children he encountered knew virtually nothing of the world outside Russia and declared proudly that there was no need for them to ever study foreign languages. Their education seemed to him rather basic and steeped in propaganda slogans and phraseology they recited mechanically to all foreign visitors.

Gide was equally saddened by his encounters with *bezprizorni*. When he visited the Soviet Union, they were still a major problem, as troublesome as in 1929, when Istrati and Miyamoto were there. Gide saw them on the streets of Sevastopol and he was told that there were many more in Odessa. In summertime their presence was striking, because having no place to live, they were forced to wear all the clothes they owned. So, while everyone else wore light pants and shirts, the *bezprizorni* children looked unusually warmly dressed.<sup>86</sup> Gide noted:

We talked with some of them; we won their confidence. They ended up showing us the place where they slept when the weather wasn't good enough to sleep outside: it was near the place where a statue of Lenin, placed under a beautiful portal, dominated the embarking platform.<sup>87</sup>

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Numerous articles in Miyamoto's "Soveto kikō" focus primarily on Soviet workers and their life in a budding communist society, and as active participants in its building.

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Pravda" of July 25, 1929.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 99. In the same "Youth Pravda" issue of July 25, 1929.

<sup>85</sup> Gide, A. (1936) *Retour de l'URSS*. Paris: Gallimard. 58.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. 123.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. 124.

To summarize Miyamoto's articles on Soviet workers, she defines the class itself as everyone in the Union, from picturesque Moscow sleigh drivers to the artists she encounters on her trips throughout the country. A full description of the Soviet worker as experienced and understood by the Japanese writer is virtually impossible, scattered as it is throughout all the texts of the time, but there are several points that return consistently throughout the collection. In essence, Soviet workers are the leading social class of one of the largest countries in the world and the "vanguard of the proletariat's fight for freedom."<sup>88</sup> Main work force of the Soviet Union and sole beneficiary of its production, they work seven hours per day, six days per week. Miyamoto makes, however, a point of mentioning that not all Soviet workers are party members, and the Soviet government does discriminate based on party membership.<sup>89</sup>

Workers benefit from various services, such as daycare centers, professional schools, libraries,<sup>90</sup> all provided at the workplace. Most of the benefits she listed are owed to a text about the Rostov Tobacco Factory (The Giant), a model factory, famous throughout the Soviet Union and preferred destination for VOKS-guided tours. According to Miyamoto, housing shortages affected only foreign residents who were no longer allowed by the Soviet state to rent houses and had to settle for hotel rooms. Workers, although not permitted to own a home, had priority to rent, and the state, the only legal landlord in the country, found ways to accommodate their needs. "If they are in Moscow, individuals or associations must go to the Moscow City Administrative Bureau of Residential Locations in order to rent a house."<sup>91</sup> It is worth noting here that one of the major points of contention for Panait Istrati in his separation from the Soviet regime was the way in which state authorities forcefully removed one of the old communist revolutionaries from his own home to make room for a new party leader in what came to be known as the "Russakov Affair."<sup>92</sup>

In Miyamoto's view, all evils perpetrated against the Russian working class were things of the past. Very much a supporter of all Stalin-initiated policies and legislation, Miyamoto adopted a critical attitude toward most

<sup>88</sup> MYZ, 9:332.

<sup>89</sup> MYZ, 9:564.

<sup>90</sup> MYZ, 9:563.

<sup>91</sup> MYZ, 9:413.

<sup>92</sup> For more on the "Russakov Affair" see *Soviets 1929*, Victor Serge's volume in Istrati's trilogy. Serge was Russakov's son-in-law, and, as such, deeply impacted by the injustice committed against his family.

everything done before 1928, the starting point of Stalin's first five-year plan. In line with official party directives of the time, Miyamoto expressed outrage in her texts at the privileges of the *kulaks* (rich farmers), one of the economic engines under Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP) of a mostly agrarian-based economy, peppered her texts with slogans printed in special font or set out in boxes to ensure that they stand out to the reader, and gets emotional when describing sessions of self-criticism.

The "dekulakization" movement, officially launched by Stalin in December 1929 took grotesque forms and led to a veritable genocide of an entire social group of wealthy and relatively educated farmers.<sup>93</sup> Their elimination was replaced by the government propaganda with an avid public promotion of the *udarnik* (overproductive workers), who were presented as heroes of the socialist production system. Miyamoto wrote numerous pages in her articles about Soviet workers praising *udarnik* work.

A few short years after Miyamoto's writings, André Gide agreed that social classes seemed to have been indeed eliminated in the Soviet Union. That, however, did not mean that Soviet workers were economically stable and protected by the state, as they should have been: "There are, of course, no more classes in the USSR. But, there are poor. Too many of them; way too many. I was hoping not to see them, or to be more exact: I came to the USSR not to see them anymore."<sup>94</sup>

And while Miyamoto does not go into detail about the actual role played by the *udarnik* system in the creation of the new, reinvented revolutionary worker of a country where farming and not industrial production was the norm, Gide wrote, rather cynically and callously:

They invented the *udarnik* work to counterbalance the nonchalance (in the old days they would have used the whip). *Udarnik* work would be meaningless in a country where workers work. But, here (in the Soviet Union), as soon as they are left to their devices, most people relax.<sup>95</sup>

One text in particular deserves special attention in any discussion about Miyamoto Yuriko's political commitment to communism, her 1931 "Naze Soveto dōmei ni shitsugyō ga nai ka" (Why is there no unemployment in the

<sup>93</sup> For more on *kulaks* and their plight after the victory of the Bolshevik Revolution, see Conquest, R. (1986) *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>94</sup> Gide, A. (1936) *Retour de l'URSS*. Paris: Gallimard. 65.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* 43.



Soviet Union).<sup>96</sup> Written two months after her return to Japan, Miyamoto claimed that the Soviet Union was the only country in the world that had completely eliminated unemployment: “[...] somehow, only the Soviet Union has no more unemployment.”<sup>97</sup> Miyamoto continued by invoking the case of the United States where the Great Depression had turned “the dream of perpetual good times” into 6,000,000 unemployed workers. “In all collapsing capitalist powers, the proletariat is crushed between production rationalization and labor intensification. [...] Regardless of how low their class consciousness may be, workers worldwide have these words imprinted in their minds: There is no unemployment in the Soviet Union.”<sup>98</sup> Miyamoto explained this amazing feat as the result of the implementation of Stalin’s first five-year plan. In 1928 when the plan had started, there were 11,303,000 unemployed workers in the Soviet Union. The five-year plan, however, had created tremendous need for labor force, and, as such, all those unemployed in 1928 had been absorbed into the workforce.

Published in 1929, Istrati’s trilogy does not provide data for the early 1930s, but Gide’s 1936 work addresses the issues of unemployment and low productivity.

Commenting on his late spouse’s misrepresentation in this 1931 article, Miyamoto Kenji would later admit that she must have been aware that her claim was false. After all, Stalin himself addressed the issue in his speech at the 16th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in June 1930, when Miyamoto was still in the Soviet Union. And Miyamoto knew the speech, as she invoked it later in her work.<sup>99</sup> Stalin declared in that speech: “Furthermore, in spite of our unusual growth rate, one might still speak today of negatives, as there are still 1,000,000 unemployed people, according to our information.”<sup>100</sup> Stalin also commented in his speech at the Congress on the overall slow industrial growth rate and added that “compared to capitalist economies, our growth is still *slow*.”<sup>101</sup>

Her own misrepresentation did not prevent Miyamoto from vehemently criticizing Gide on his 1936 and 1937 Soviet travelogues. Published in 1937 the article “Gide and his Soviet Travelogue” accused the French

<sup>96</sup> MYZ, 9:234-237.

<sup>97</sup> MYZ, 9:235.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> MYZ, 24:523.

<sup>100</sup> Cited in Miyamoto, K. (1963) *Miyamoto Yuriko no sekai*. Tokyo: Shin Nihon shuppan-sha. 124.

<sup>101</sup> Cited in *ibid*.

writer of allowing personal feelings to influence his judgement of Soviet society. Miyamoto was referring there to the death in a Sevastopol hospital of Eugène Dabit (1898-1936), gifted socialist writer and one of Gide's companions on the literary tour of the Soviet Union. Dabit's death was due to a case of misdiagnosed typhoid fever, and Gide held the Ukrainian doctors' incompetence responsible for his friend's death. Deeply affected by the loss, Gide dedicated his *Travelogue* to the memory of his friend and fellow artist. Ironically, despite her accusation of Gide, a few years later, in her autobiographical "Timeline," Miyamoto also invoked her brother's suicide as a reason for her own adoption of communism. In the end, Miyamoto dismissed Gide and his criticism of the Soviet society as coming from someone who was not a "true Marxist," and who "lacked class consciousness" and "political culture."<sup>102</sup>

Miyamoto Kenji tried to defend his life partner and the misleading information she provided in her articles. An optimist by nature, he wrote, although she did know of the problems the Soviet society was facing and she was aware of unemployment and slow industrial growth, she took them to be unavoidable hurdles that would be eventually resolved.<sup>103</sup>

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Several articles in Miyamoto's collection from the Soviet Union deal with arts and culture, and two main subthemes are evident. One is the preoccupation with "improving workers' cultural level," and the other is the role of art and artists in socialist society. Completely left out by Istrati in his writings, the workers' clubs are one aspect of Soviet society that Miyamoto and Gide were equally thrilled to experience. The reading, painting, literary criticism and debate clubs in factories, the Culture Parks in all major cities, where people came together to read, watch movies or theater plays, or listen to choir music were all benefits Soviet workers enjoyed.

On the role of the artists and their art in socialist society, however, Miyamoto adopted an ideological hardline. Great early Soviet writers such as Boris Pilnyak (1894-1937)<sup>104</sup> and Vladimir Mayakovsky became in

<sup>102</sup> MYZ, 11:12.

<sup>103</sup> Miyamoto, K. (1963) *Miyamoto Yuriko no sekai*. Tokyo: Shin Nihon shuppansha. 124.

<sup>104</sup> Boris Pilnyak, pseudonym of Boris Andreyevich Vogau (1894-1937), Soviet writer of Symbolist novels and stories, prominent in the 1920s. He traveled to Asia (Turkey, China, Japan) in 1926. Banned by Stalin, Pilnyak was arrested in 1937 for not complying with the norms of Socialist realism and died the same year in prison. Posthumously rehabilitated, a volume offering a very limited selection of his works was published in

Miyamoto's texts grotesque representatives of bourgeois artistic practices and sensibility, and their ultimate defeat, either by ostracization or suicide, a justified act of the class struggle that needs to subjugate art to its own goals. Great theories and debates of the time over the nature of proletarian literature and art were summarily dismissed when they did not comply with the precepts of Marxist materialist dialectics, or fall outside the norms of the newly-defined "socialist realism."

Discussions and debates in other fields, such as film or theater reveal a similar Socialist realism hardline. For instance, artists coming from intellectual families—which happened to be Miyamoto's own case—were deemed valuable only if they adopted and embraced class-consciousness in their works, while art was not to express individualist attitudes or sentiment in any shape or form, as its value was exclusively given by compliance with the taste and the class needs of the working masses. The list of reductionist statements and value judgements goes on.

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In conclusion, the comparative reading of works from writers who came into political consciousness while visiting the budding authoritarian regime of Stalin's Soviet Union in late 1920s revealed that, ultimately, the same experience can lead to completely opposite outcomes. For politically unengaged Japanese female writer Miyamoto Yuriko, the careful selection of sights she was allowed to visit led to the desired outcome of the Soviet authorities and not only convinced her of the superiority of the socialist society that was being built but led to her wholeheartedly adopting communism and making it her life goal. So dedicated was she to the cause of communism that she never gave up her creed despite several arrests and significant time spent in prison that ultimately led to her untimely death. At the opposite pole, fervent communist supporter Romanian French writer Panait Istrati, a genius vagabond and working-class writer, was so disappointed with Soviet realities that he became a vehement opponent of the regime and of communism altogether.

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1976. Miyamoto discussed him in a couple of articles, especially due to his connection with Japan. Pilnyak wrote *Korni yaponskogo solntsa* (The Roots of the Japanese Sun), following a trip to Japan in 1926, where he tried to set up the Japanese branch of the Russo-Japanese Literary Society, and *Kamni i korni* (Rocks and roots), in 1934, after a second visit to Japan. For more on him and other early Soviet writers see Struve, G. (1971) *Russian Literature under Lenin and Stalin, 1917-1953*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Almost contemporaries, the two writers come from diametrically opposed social backgrounds, Miyamoto from wealth, high social status, and advanced education, and Istrati from poverty and *lumpenproletariat*. Similar in their early love for literature, however, both Miyamoto and Istrati were inspired to write by almost the same sources, most prominently modern Russian writers, and ended up with debut works stylistically resembling the Russian modern masters, but most of all, Maxim Gorky's. Constantly dissatisfied and rebellious, both ardently searched for ways to bring a positive contribution to the lives of their fellow humans. And while Miyamoto decided on a political course that ended up placing her on the side of a brutal dictatorial regime, Istrati's flirtations with the Romanian Nazi organization of the Iron Guard in his last year of life may have ultimately led him in that ideological direction, should he had lived longer. Both Miyamoto and Istrati exemplified the tragic destiny of the artists of the first decades of the last century who struggled to make sense of the world around them, of their social, political, and intellectual leadership role in it, of their art and its meaning to their fellow humans, and of the competing ideologies that ultimately broke the world into two opposing camps for half a century. In the end, they both tried to control and organize that troubled and confusing global environment through their art and activism.

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