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NEW ORGANIZATION TO CONTROL "FRIENDSHIP"

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With the recent dissolution of VOKS, the all-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, the Soviet authorities have rid themselves of an organization which had earned itself such a bad name for the propagandist nature of its activities and the unrepresentative character of the organizations with which it dealt that it had ceased to be useful.

For though Soviet spokesmen speak of improving international understanding they do not mean by this the abolition of their censorship, radio jamming and restrictions on the import of books and newspapers but the stepping up of such cultural activities as the exchange of ballet companies.

VOKS was the Soviet instrument for arranging these cultural activities. But it had the disadvantage of being an organization that was commonly recognized and tacitly admitted to be controlled by the official State Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, under the chairmanship of G.A. Zhukov; at the same time it dealt only with unofficial and unrepresentative organizations such as the Communist-dominated friendship societies in the West. The State Committee itself is responsible for the more reputable exchanges, like those agreed with the Soviet Relations Committee of the British Council.

The place of VOKS has been taken by the Union of Soviet Societies for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, which was constituted on February 18 with Mme. Popova, former chairman of VOKS, as president. Among the five vice-presidents of the new organization two at least, Kalishyan and Vizzhilin, were former vice-chairmen of VOKS. It is in fact clear that the new union is merely VOKS under another name.

Mme. Popova admitted that some of VOKS' past activities have embarrassed the Soviet Government and prejudiced its relations with other countries when she said that its "forms and methods" are "outmoded". VOKS played an important part in the formation of societies to promote friendship between the USSR and certain other countries including, in addition to Soviet bloc countries such as China, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, free countries such as India, Finland and Italy. The foundation meeting of most of these societies was held in the VOKS building in Moscow and was opened by a senior VOKS official. In most cases greetings were exchanged and contact maintained with the Society's opposite number in the respective foreign country. This has brought forth criticism from Governments of countries of the free world which regard these societies with suspicion because of their strongly propagandist and unrepresentative character. Complaints have been made to Soviet authorities that they should not negotiate with unofficial and unrepresentative bodies.

While aware that VOKS dealings with the societies have put them in an awkward position, the Soviet authorities have been understandably reluctant to drop them. They have solved the dilemma by disbanding VOKS and creating a supposedly independent organization which enables them to argue that the friendship societies are unofficial and must therefore be left free to deal with similar unofficial bodies abroad.

It is clear, however, that the new organization is simply VOKS under a new name. Both the VOKS premises in Moscow, and the VOKS magazine, Culture and Life, have been handed over to it. Party interest in the Union is clearly very strong. The Central Committee sent a message of greeting to the conference and Kirichenko attended to read it out.

Madame Popova's opening address suggested that the new organization is intended to be the new spearhead of the Soviet "peace and friendship" propaganda on the model of the Moscow Youth Festival. Its terms of reference are "to acquaint the Soviet people with the life, work, custom, economy, culture, history and languages of foreign countries and to diffuse abroad all kinds of information on the life of the Soviet people, the development of their economy, culture and science and the peace loving foreign policy of the Soviet state."

The Soviet authorities also hope that the new societies will provide a more effective outlet than VOKS for the Soviet public's undoubtedly powerful desire for more contact with foreign countries. It is possible that the Soviet authorities, while maintaining strict control over the Societies' activities, will allow them to have fairly wide membership, thus constructing a propaganda front with which they hope to deceive the free world.