

PERSPECTIVES ON EUROPE

Translating Secrecy: The Birth of the Iron Curtain Viewed from the West, the East, and Right Under

Cristina Vatulescu, New York University*

SPRING 2015
VOLUME 45
ISSUE 1

As he was contemplating the subject of his future critically acclaimed movie *Secrecy*, filmmaker Robb Moss told me that he was worried that secrecy was not an ideal subject for a movie, for how can you film something that is meant to be invisible?¹ I was surprised by his question. For me, secrecy had never seemed invisible: instead, it had been a rather showy everyday presence since childhood. Images of secrecy popped before my eyes ready to contradict Robb: signs with photo cameras dramatically crossed out in red paint; massive buildings housing secret institutions that we passed by right in the center of town, pretending not to see; after 1989, documents with various 'strictly secret' seals were routinely published in the press. What was playing in my brain was no silent movie, either: there was a strong aural side

1 Peter Galison and Robb Moss, *Secrecy* (Redacted Pictures, 2008), videorecording.

* I thank Neringa Klumbytė for the invitation to contribute to this issue. I am indebted to Ilya Kliger, Natalia Klimova, and Neringa Klumbytė for thoughtful commentary on an earlier draft. Emma Hamilton, Anastassia Koustriokova, and Nicoleta Marinescu contributed excellent research assistance. It gives me great pleasure to thank Kiki Pop-Eleches for expert help with the creation of the graphs.

The author may be reached at: cristina.vatulescu@nyu.edu

to secrecy. I discovered that secrecy still sounds like government-produced static to me: now crackling or monotonous, now strangely high-pitched sounds covering over forbidden foreign radio stations. I wondered if Robb's and my different ways of envisioning secrecy spoke to cultural differences, since my memories seemed steeped in Cold War imagery. Or maybe our differences in envisioning secrecy were personal. Yet childhood and secrecy surely go together in many cultures.² Adults, as children, always have secrets. There were likely doors, and curtains, and condoms in the back of drawers on both sides of the Iron Curtain. However, even this kind of secrecy has its own twists in the Soviet bloc. A British friend told me of her school exchange visit to perestroika USSR, when opening the fridge in her host family's apartment she found, camouflaged among the jars of pickles, a jar with a *prezervativ* (condom) instead of a preserve. Thus carefully preserved, the condom had been turned multi-use. The condom, the cover *par excellence*, was carefully encased in the particular jar and then in the collection of preserves, itself hidden in the refrigerator, in a nestling effect that created a giant Perestroika Matryoshka doll. In Romania, where I grew up, condoms were both a private and a state secret, as they, and all forms of contraception, were outlawed in 1964. You can call the many of us who were born as a result of that lack of contraception the literal illustrations of Foucault's dictum that power, and the secrecy that goes with it, is productive, in this case, even reproductive.³ In Romania, we were more humorously called *decreței*. This was a public-private secret that everyone knew, and whose translation as "little decree baby" loses its cutting humor together with the brevity of the original.⁴

2 Katherine Verdery reviews ethnographic literature where "secrecy is always coupled with hierarchy." A fundamental type of hierarchy ensured by secrecy is that between elders in possession of secret knowledge and the uninitiated youth. Katherine Verdery, *Secrets and Truths: Ethnography in the Archive of Romania's Secret Police* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014), 92.

3 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 194.

4 Verdery explains that, as opposed to political science and sociology, which have generally placed secrecy in the private

In my first book, *Police Aesthetics*, I described the Soviet and Eastern European brand of secrecy epitomized by the era's secret police as "a spectacle of secrecy" whose style varied with the times.⁵ The spectacle of secrecy was histrionic in the Soviet 1930s, when the purges were at times showcased in public trials, and hyper-realist in the 1970s due to changing political conditions and to the explosion of new surveillance technologies.⁶ The theatricality of secrecy has also been at the center of recent investigations of Western law and policing.⁷ Tim Melley's contribution in this volume links to an illuminating chapter on the "Spectacles of Secrecy" of the national security state in his monograph *The Covert Sphere*.⁸ Michael Taussig builds an overarching theory of the theatricality of the secret partly based on a study of Yamana Indians. He starts his sub-chapter, "Instant Theater," with the observation: "It is a marvelous thing, this secret, the way it theatricalizes everything as if with a magic wand," and concludes with a breathtaking insight: "This theatricality emerges in the 'leap' from the secret as made by persons to the secret, in its turn, making persons. It is in this surrender to the thing made, to the creation taking over the creators, that we find the pathos

realm, anthropology has followed the "social and cultural relations of secrecy." Verdery, *Secrets and Truths*, 90. The outlawing of condoms – together with other methods of control of women's bodies, such as obligatory pregnancy tests in socialist Romania – is one example of the ways in which secrecy challenged such clear boundaries between the private, the public, and the political. For the classic study of the topic, see Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceausescu's Romania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

5 Cristina Vatulescu, *Police Aesthetics: Literature, Film, and the Secret Police in Soviet Times* (Stanford: Stanford, 2010), 1–5.

6 Ibid., 46–54.

7 Julie Stone Peters, "Theatres of Policing: Deterrence, Dissembling, and the Dramaturgy of Interrogation from 17th-Century Polizeiwissenschaft to Abu Ghraib," in *Performance and Justice* (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2014). This keynote speech was part of Peters's book-length "historical study of legal performance and the law's fraught relationship to its own theatricality."

8 Tim Melley, "Spectacles of Secrecy," in *The Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction, and the National Security State* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

of the real as really made up.”⁹ Do these spectacles of secrecy have anything in common? If so, what are the meeting points between the ways this theatricalized secrecy has been envisioned in the east, in the west, and in the more abstract spheres of theory?

This article argues that an archeology of the Iron Curtain as a meeting point between East and West can throw some new light on these questions.

In particular, I will focus on the decisive moment in the history of this topos when the iron curtain turned into the powerful metaphor we all recognize: Winston Churchill’s “Sinews of Peace” speech of March 5, 1946, and its immediate translation on the other side of the Iron Curtain that

Iron curtains first existed, as material objects, in theaters. These curtains made of strong screens of metal, originally iron, were introduced after disastrous theater fires in the nineteenth century, to separate the audience from the flammable objects and special effects used on stage.

he had just named. Widely known as Churchill’s Iron Curtain speech, “The Sinews of Peace” was considered by many, including Churchill, as the most important speech of his life; it was also considered by many, including Joseph Stalin, as the beginning of the Cold War.¹⁰ To most of us, the Iron Curtain is one of those curious combinations of words, an abstract figure, a metaphor without a material referent. Yet, iron curtains existed long before Churchill made his famous speech. Iron curtains first existed, as material objects, in theaters. These curtains made of strong screens of metal, originally iron, were introduced after disastrous theater fires in the nineteenth century, to separate the audience from the flammable objects and special effects used on stage. The term had been used metaphorically a handful of times before Churchill, as scholars inform

us after arduous research.¹¹ In 1915, Vernon Lee, a woman pacifist, first referred to an iron curtain lowered by the Great War between the British and the Germans, despite the deeper aesthetic connections of appreciating Bach during Christmas service.¹² Soviet critics found great satisfaction in pointing out that Goebbels spoke of an iron curtain separating the Soviets from the rest of Europe before Churchill.¹³ However, for most of Churchill’s

audience in Fulton, as well as for the enormous audience of his immediately widely translated speech, the term “iron curtain” was strongly associated with the material curtains found in theaters.

Churchill’s metaphorical usage of the term iron curtain was striking. In fact, this use of the term was so striking that it raised unexpected translation quandaries. In this article I start by following the ways in which Churchill mobilized what to us are largely buried theatrical connotations of the term to create a new post-war *theatrum mundi*. I then focus on the peculiar translation choices regarding the term “Iron Curtain” made in the Soviet press following Churchill’s speech and the ways those choices rearranged the design of his *theatrum mundi*. Last I move to Romania, the country that topped Churchill’s infamous percentage list of Eastern European nations in terms of Soviet influence. I follow the textual as well as visual quotations and translations of the term from English, French, and Russian, to show the perception of the very

9 Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 118, 21.

10 Fraser Harbutt, *The Iron Curtain: Churchill, America, and the Origins of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 210.

11 A readable and thoroughly researched history of the iron curtain prior to Churchill’s use is Patrick Wright, *Iron Curtain: From Stage to Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

12 Ibid., 76–82.

13 D. Zaslavskii, “Fel’eton. Lobyzanie Gebbel’sa,” *Pravda*, August 1, 1946, 4.

moment of the Iron Curtain's descent not just from the West and the East, but also from right under. In the process, I hope to show the differences as well as mutual shaping influences in the ways secrecy was envisioned at a key moment in East-West relations.

Churchill's "Iron Curtain" as the axis of a new post-war *theatrum mundi*

Let us then start with the beginning, with Churchill's quote that instantly propelled the Iron Curtain to international fame:

From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an iron curtain has descended across the continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia; all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject, in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and in some cases increasing measure of control from Moscow.¹⁴

Churchill traveled all the way to Fulton, Missouri, deep into the heart of the American Midwest to give his momentous speech in order to place himself in the position of distant non-participant observer announcing to the whole world that the Soviets were gradually dropping an Iron Curtain over Eastern Europe. By some accounts, he hoped to stop this surreptitious action from the wings by turning all gazes toward the stage. He intended to shine the lights, albeit momentarily, on all those capitals, which, however "ancient," Westerners had a legendary hard time pronouncing and an unusually easy time mixing up. By other accounts, Churchill found a good excuse to tell his Western audience, after the brief eye-catching number featuring the capital names-

dropping, that the Iron Curtain was lowered, the show was over, and it was time to go home. There was not much to see and thus worry or feel responsible for, just in time as the Soviets and their local allies were preparing to rig elections and murder political oppositions.¹⁵ Despite significant differences, however, in both accounts the West was placed in the position of spectator, Eastern Europeans were the victims, and the Soviets were the sinister operators of the Iron Curtain. Churchill set up this *theatrum mundi* around his key topos, the Iron Curtain, and thus the theatricality of his rhetoric appears much more muffled to us than to his audiences, for whom the iron curtain was not yet primarily a metaphor but was still very much associated with the theatrical firewall. Furthermore, Churchill bolstered his creation of this *theatrum mundi* throughout his speech. Thus, in preparation for the Iron Curtain paragraph, he warned: "a shadow has fallen on the scenes so lately lighted by the Allied victory," so that "As I stand here on this quiet afternoon I shudder to visualize what is actually happening to millions now..."¹⁶

While carefully positioning himself in the quiet American Midwest at the time of the speech, Churchill was, in fact, as Larry Wolff aptly puts it, "a far from entirely innocent observer of what befell the Eastern states of Europe," for he had been "eager to play a part in drawing the line and hanging the curtain."¹⁷ Indeed, at the actual time of the drawing of the Iron Curtain, in October 1944, Churchill had been on the other side of the stage, in Moscow, where at a late-night meeting with Stalin in the Kremlin, it was Churchill who proposed the infamous portioning of Eastern Europe according to percentages.

¹⁵ Thus Larry Wolff argued: "Throughout the Cold War the Iron Curtain would be envisioned as a barrier of quarantine, separating the light of Christian civilization from whatever lurked in the shadows, and such a conception was all the more justification for not looking too closely at the lands behind." Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 2.

¹⁶ Muller, *Churchill's "Iron Curtain,"* 8,3.

¹⁷ Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe,* 2.

¹⁴ James Muller, *Churchill's "Iron Curtain" Speech Fifty Years Later* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 8-9.

While this was being translated, I [Churchill] wrote on a half-piece of paper:
 Rumania: Russia 90% - The others 10%
 Greece: Great Britain 90% - Russia 10%
 Yugoslavia: 50:50%
 Hungary: 50:50%
 Bulgaria: Russia 75% - The others 25%¹⁸

After this there was a long silence. The penciled paper was in the center of the table. At length, I said: "Might it not be thought rather cynical if it seemed we had disposed of these issues, so fateful to millions of people, in such an off-hand manner? Let us burn the paper." "No, you keep it," said Stalin.¹⁹

Published in 1959, this passage of Churchill's memoirs allows his readers a glimpse behind the scenes, where the two masterminds are shown in the act of pulling the strings, with Churchill performing a sleight of hand that worried him may have seemed so off-hand to the larger audience that it would warrant a burning of "the half-paper." It bears recalling that it was precisely because of this kind of incendiary gestures on stage that iron curtains were designed in the first place. While the Fulton speech depicted the Iron Curtain as being placed by the Soviets for the purposes of hiding their doings in Eastern Europe, Churchill's memoirs show him in fact masterminding the show, performing incendiary tricks, and pulling down the curtain himself. He shows himself doing it all with the classic purposes of shielding the audience from the fire and from the unwanted spectacle of the destruction of those caught behind the iron curtain, but also hiding negligent stage tricks. The ending of the scene suggests Churchill's regard for his demos was just strong enough to inspire the idea of burning the papers, hiding the deal, and lowering the iron curtain. Stalin appears, in this case, to be above this concern with secrecy,

18 Churchill's copy of the paper is kept in Britain's Public Record Office, and available for view following this link: [PREM 3/66/7 \(169\)](#).

19 Winston Churchill, *Memoirs of the Second World War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), 885–86; my emphasis.

security, and appearances, three terms closely folded in Churchill's Iron Curtain.

II. The Iron Curtain and the smoke screen: Soviet translations

One of the first discoveries allowed by searching for the translation of the Iron Curtain speech in Soviet newspapers is that there was a drawn out hesitation concerning the official translation of the term. The common translation of the term, *zheleznyi zanaves*, appears only once in the text of any central Soviet newspaper in the three months following Churchill's Fulton speech. It is not that the speech was not commented on. After a week of panicked silence and search for an official reaction, many full articles were dedicated to it in the main newspapers, *Pravda* and *Izvestiia*.²⁰ On March 11, *Pravda* gave a translation of relevant parts of Churchill's speech, including the Iron Curtain citation, where the term is translated as *zavesa*, not *zanaves*.²¹

This is a most peculiar choice, then as now. In Russian, there are two terms that usually translate the English "curtain": regular theatrical curtains as well as theatrical fire curtains are and were then translated as *zanaves*, while *zanaveski* refers to domestic curtains. *Zavesa* is "obs[olete for] curtain," and used "fig[uratively for veil or screen]."²² *Zavesa* was already obsolete for curtain in 1935, as the *Tolkovyi slovar'* informs us.²³ The general preference for *zheleznyi zanaves* over *zheleznaia zavesa* as a translation for Iron Curtain is evident by running a search for each term in the Russian central newspapers database – the first search yields more than 10,000 results, while the latter a total of 15.²⁴ Of these 15, 8 appear in 1946,

20 Harbutt notes the week of panicked anxiety in the Soviet Union and then follows mostly the Soviet diplomatic reaction to Churchill's speech, based on English language sources. Harbutt, *The Iron Curtain*, 197, 203, 9–41).

21 "Rech' Cherkhillia v Fultone," *Pravda*, March 11, 1946, 4.

22 Marcus Wheeler et al., "zavesa," in *Oxford Russian Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

23 G. O. Vinokur et al., "zavesa," in *Tolkovyi slovar' russkovo iazyka* (Moscow: OGIZ, 1935).

24 I ran the search using "Universal Database of Russian Newspapers," (Minneapolis: East View Publications, 1999). This includes *Russian Central Newspapers (udb-com+)* and

Translation choices for Iron *Curtain*: *Zavesa* vs. *Zanaves*

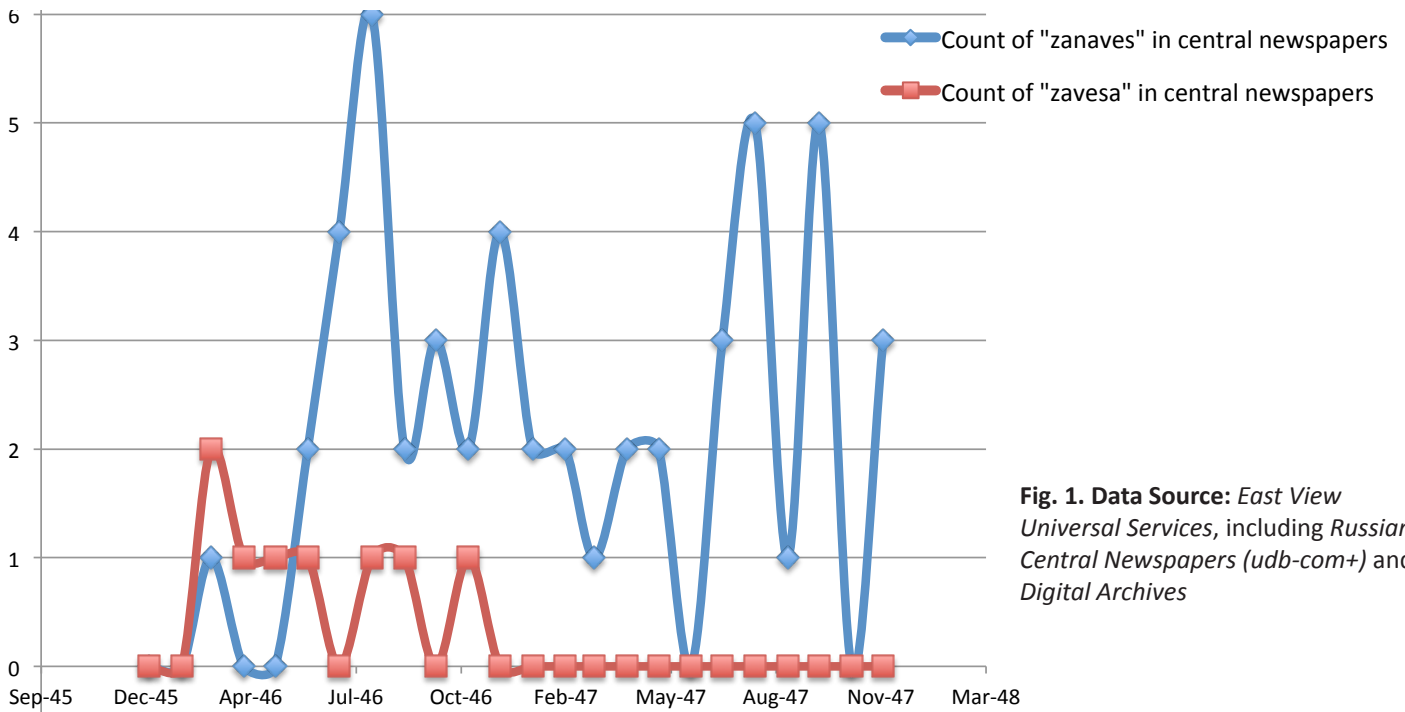


Fig. 1. Data Source: East View Universal Services, including Russian Central Newspapers (udb-com+) and Digital Archives

while the other 7 are dispersed over a century! Furthermore, for the first three months after Churchill's speech, that balance of power between the two translations was reversed, with one mention of *zanaves* and five mentions of *zavesa*. As the months and then years went on, the standard translation, already in use by 1930 to refer to the Soviet Union as a political twist on the theatrical prop, won out.

So what happened in those three months of translation anomaly? If we investigate the one appearance of the standard translation of *zanaves* in the first three months after Fulton, we find that it appears in the same article by Tarle, right next to the atypical *zavesa*.²⁵ The two translations are not interchangeable versions of each other, but are rather used in contrast to refer to two very different things. In the March 12 *Izvestiia*, Tarle polemicized in detail with the term Iron Curtain, initiating a move

its Digital Archives, for a total of 6,500 publications between 1900 and 2015.

25 E. Tarle, "Po povodu rechi Cherrhillia," *Izvestiia*, March 12, 1946, 3.

that would become a standard Soviet response. While deriding the accusation of the fencing of Eastern Europe by a Soviet "Iron Curtain" (*zavesa*) as ridiculous, Tarle traded defense for attack as he accused England of having recourse to its "own Iron Curtain" (*zanaves*) in Germany and Indonesia, "an Iron Curtain (again, *zanaves*) that is dropped so quickly in front of the curious that it may well hit them on the head."²⁶ The difference in the use of the two terms gives us a clue to the translation enigma.²⁷ Tarle, like all other writers who choose to translate the term "Iron Curtain" in the first three months after Churchill's speech, all refused the high drama of Churchill's theatrical term. However, rather than burying the term's theatrical connotations, Tarle knowingly reassigned them to the British-made Iron Curtain, thus reversing the

26 Ibid. For similar turns from defense to attack, where the Iron Curtain is shown to be a screen behind which the United States hides its true relationship to the republics in Latin America, see Nabliudatel', "Na mezhdunarodnye temy," Ibid., June 13.

27 E. Tarle, "Po povodu rechi Cherrhillia," 3.

direction of the spectatorial gaze from East to West.

The previous graph (Fig. 1) suggests that this moment of translation tension may go well beyond Tarle's strategically placed *Izvestiia* article, and as such it asks for further investigation. Why, despite all linguistic common sense, was the Iron Curtain briefly translated by an obsolete term for curtain and a contemporary term for screen in the Soviet translations of 1946? We can rule out ignorance. The term and the link between the fireproof iron curtain in theaters and the political metaphor is already documented in 1930, when a striking front-page article in *Literaturnaia gazeta* was titled "Zheleznyi zanaves."²⁸ The author's purpose was to announce that an Iron Curtain was being created to separate Russia from the West. Delving into a drawn-out parallel between the theatrical iron curtain and the metaphorical Iron Curtain, he then explained that from the point of view of the bourgeoisie, in Russia the fire of communism had been burning for the past decade; thus the bourgeoisie and its reactionary press had decided to put up an Iron Curtain toward Russia. In this account, the Iron Curtain was created by the West. However, writing from Paris in the last days of 1929, the author also warned that "reckless and unwise people have tried to push the levers and to lower the iron curtain" on the Soviet side as well, for example, by attacking Soviet writers who travel abroad. The 1930 article presented what already by 1887 the journal *The British Architect* had argued was the best design for theatrical iron curtains: "two screens of wrought-iron plate" (in this case, one Western, one Soviet- wrought).²⁹ *The British Architect* recommended that "6 inches of air space" be left in between the two screens. In the 1930 article, there was not yet any mention of air space between the Western and the Eastern screens of the double-paneled Iron Curtain, the space that by 1946 would be called Eastern Europe.

So, if the term, in both its literal and figurative, Western and Soviet, versions, existed already in 1930, why would *zheleznyi zanaves* not

be used in the first translations of Churchill's speech and instead be replaced by *zavesa*? A closer look at *zavesa* in Soviet dictionaries and encyclopedias of the time might contain a clue. In the 1932 *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, *zavesa* has a short entry, where it appears first as "a theatrical term," referring to the "different pieces of canvas serving as part of the decorative design of the stage." As such, it appears as a synonym for *zanaves*, and also for theatrical "wings."³⁰ The second entry for *zavesa* is about five times more voluminous, and it refers to the military terms "cavalry screens," (*kavaleriiskie zavesy*), the foremost part of the cavalry, (riding in front of the avant-garde), with a mission of reconnaissance and protection. In the next edition of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, from 1952, the theatrical sense of the word completely disappeared, and the cavalry *zavesa* moved into first position with added detail.³¹ Furthermore, the second and the third meanings build on the military sense, adding two adjectives. "Artillery curtain fire," *ognevaia artilereiiskaia zavesa*, refers to rapid, continuous artillery fire on a designated line. The third entry sends us to *dymovaia zavesa* – smoke curtain, or more idiomatically in English, to military smoke screen. Russian already had then a word for curtain/screen, which was routinely paired up with adjectives referring to fire. A search reveals that "smoke screen" (*dymovaia zavesa*) was about ten times more popular as an expression in the Russian press between 1900 and 1947 than *zheleznyi zanaves*.³² However, *zavesa*, and the idiom it readily conjures to mind, *dymovaia zavesa*, referred not to

30 Otto I. Ulevich Schmidt, *Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia*, 65 vols., vol. 25 (Moskva: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1932).

31 *Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia*, 2nd edition, vol. 16 (Moskva: Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1952). While it is difficult to pinpoint exactly the moment of the turn from the old theatrical meaning of *zavesa* as "thick curtain" to the military and metaphorical sense of *zavesa*, we have evidence that this happened before 1946, as a dictionary entry from the *Tolkovy slovar' russkovo iazyka* from 1935 already calls the first meaning "anachronistic." Instead, its first definition is "that which covers, hides from view." Like the 1932 *Bol'shaia*, and all other Soviet-era dictionaries I consulted, this much shorter entry also mentions the military sense of smoke screen (*dymovaia zavesa*).

32 "Universal Database of Russian Newspapers."

28 L. Nikulin, "Zheleznyi zanaves," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, January 13, 1930, 1.

29 William White, "Theatre Panic and Protection," *The British Architect* 28 (1887): 206.

the curtain which protected the audience in the theater from stage fires but to the curtain/screen of actual smoke that the military “intentionally created” in order “to hide” or “mask” one’s actions or “secret intentions” from the enemy.³³ Besides its first use for “masking” (*maskirovka*) the smoke screen was also deemed useful in “attracting the attention of the enemy away” from the actual movement of troops.³⁴ It may be that rather than a clumsy translation, the translation preferred by the central Soviet newspapers in the first three months after Fulton’s speech expressed a different

understanding of the uses, forms, and perils of secrecy. Harnessed to a complex rhetorical edifice, the translation may have tried to shift the public perception of the divide between Eastern Europe and Russia from an Iron Curtain to a smoke screen.

The main Soviet response to Churchill’s speech, Stalin’s interview published on the first page of *Pravda* of March 12, 1946, worked in the same direction. Much like contemporary Soviet and East Europeans citizens, we can look for clues as to where the wind was blowing by reading it closely.³⁵ First, although Stalin quoted Churchill word for word in his enumeration of the capitals of Eastern Europe fallen behind the Iron Curtain, he cut the quote so as not to include the phrase “Iron Curtain.” Instead, his interview translated the phrases “Soviet sphere” and “Soviet influence.” The most successful coinage of Churchill’s speech, his theatrical metaphor, was excised from Stalin’s rendering of the quote, and did not appear at all in the long interview. It is not that Stalin did not make use of theatrical metaphors: on the contrary, the speech was replete with them, used to

maximum effect. Rather, all theatrical metaphors were carefully used to refer to Churchill and his camp, and never to the Soviets and to Eastern Europe. Thus, Churchill’s “tragedy,” explains Stalin, “is that, as an inveterate Tory, [having just lost elections], he does not understand a simple and evident (*ochevidnoi*) truth,” that the world

was turning toward communism. Wanting to conceal his political loss, Churchill “sounds the alarm,” placing himself in a “comical position with his cries about totalitarianism, tyranny, and policing.” Because of these inappropriate

Although Stalin quoted Churchill word for word in his enumeration of the capitals of Eastern Europe fallen behind the Iron Curtain, he cut the quote so as not to include the phrase “Iron Curtain.”

responses, Churchill’s personal tragedy of being on the losing side of world history turned into an “absurd” tragicomedy, and in the last paragraph of the interview, Stalin portrayed him as a ridiculous “Don Quixote.”

According to Stalin, Churchill’s “ridiculous poses” “masked” not only tragedy but something more dangerous. While appealing to England’s treaty with the USSR, Churchill, Stalin explains, did not understand that his actions make that treaty “an empty little piece of paper” behind which Churchill would have like to “hide and *mask* his anti-Soviet stance.” Repeating again the mention of the “empty little piece of paper” (*pustuiu bumazhku*), Stalin also reminded Churchill and his audience that the decision regarding borders, such as the borders of Poland, was taken by Stalin “not alone but together with the British.” Stalin mentioned the conference in Berlin, but the mention of “the little piece of paper” and the reminder that the borders of Eastern European countries and thus the Iron Curtain was not just USSR’s doing could have well been meant as veiled allusions to the October meeting in Kremlin and to Yalta.

Leaving out Churchill’s catchiest phrase, the Iron Curtain, Stalin instead craftily uses fire imagery to allude to it and undermine it. While “sounding the alarm,” Churchill’s speech, in fact, hides his real

33 Vinokur et al., “zavesa.” *Slovar’ russkova iazyka* from 1957 defines *dymovaia zavesa* as “the artificial creation of a band of dust, serving as a mode of masking.”

34 Vvedenskii, *Bol’shaia*, 16.

35 “Interv’iu tov. I. V. Stalina s korrespondentom “Pravdy” otnositel’no rechi g. Cherrhillia,” *Pravda*, March 14, 1946, 1.



Fig. 2.: Churchill leading "The War Instigators Brigade," *Pravda*, 7 November 1946.

intentions, imperialist warmongering. Stalin started out the article by announcing that Churchill placed himself, through this speech, "in the position of a war instigator." In Russian, the first meaning of the term "instigator" (*podzhigatel*) is arsonist. A *Pravda* caricature that later picked up on Stalin's term shows Churchill leading a detachment of pretend firefighters, who, at a closer look, turn out to be arsonists (See Fig. 2.)³⁶ Under the title "The War Instigators/Arsonists Brigade," the caricature was paired up with a humorous poem:

Wanting to start yet again a fire
That still creeps in the ashes
Mister Churchill makes a speech
About world peace.

...

36 Kukryniksy and S. Marshak, "Komanda podzhigatelnei voyny," *Ibid.*, November 7, 6.

So that no one from the sides
Would know
Where the smoke comes from
All the instigators of the war
Scream – "War, war!"

...

The garish brigade carries
Fire hydrants...no, in fact they are
flamethrowers!

The fire as well as the smoke comes from the flamethrowers of the instigators' brigade. The epicenter of the fire is Churchill and his mouth, whose speech, just like his proverbial pipe, produces a smoke screen behind which hide his real intentions – his belligerent imperialism, as well as his being on the losing side of history.

Responding to Churchill's most successful flight of rhetoric with his own rhetorical tour de force, Stalin's interview and the verbal as well

as visual rhetoric that it spawned in the Soviet press categorically rejected not just Churchill's Iron Curtain, but the whole *theatrum mundi* that Churchill had built around his powerful metaphor. It is not that Stalin rejected the idea of *theatrum mundi* itself; on the contrary, his interview propagated it. However, Stalin reversed the architecture of the theater, the direction of the gaze, the distribution of the roles – who the audience, the spectacle, and the iron curtain operators were. Instead of having the West, and Churchill himself, watching from the distance of a quiet Midwestern town as the Soviets lowered the Iron Curtain over Eastern Europe, Stalin cast a very different scene. In it, Churchill was shown to have been in the heart of the East European problem, in Berlin, deciding the borders with the Soviets. Showing himself in his defining gesture of unmasking, Stalin claimed to see through Churchill's smokescreen of inflammatory rhetoric and reveal Churchill "fixing the cards." Stalin is here generating his "fund of power" by a dialectic of "concealment and revelation," a dialectical

move that, according to Michael Taussig, defines secrecy.³⁷ Katherine Verdery further argues that "in socialism this dialectic took on a characteristic form ... in practices of unmasking and denunciation," which, as Sheila Fitzpatrick shows, culminated in Stalinism.³⁸

Once launched on the international stage by Churchill, the Iron Curtain metaphor underwent a brief period of unidiomatic translation in the Soviet Union. By using *zavesa* instead of *zanaves*, the central press may have intended to displace the metaphor by calling to mind the idiomatic *dymovaia zavesa*, smoke screen, and switching the area of reference from the theater to the military. Untenable in the long run, this curious translation

37 Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 50; "Transgression," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 355.

38 Verdery, *Secrets and Truths*, 133. Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

Count of Iron Curtain (*zheleznyi zanaves*) in Russian and Soviet press

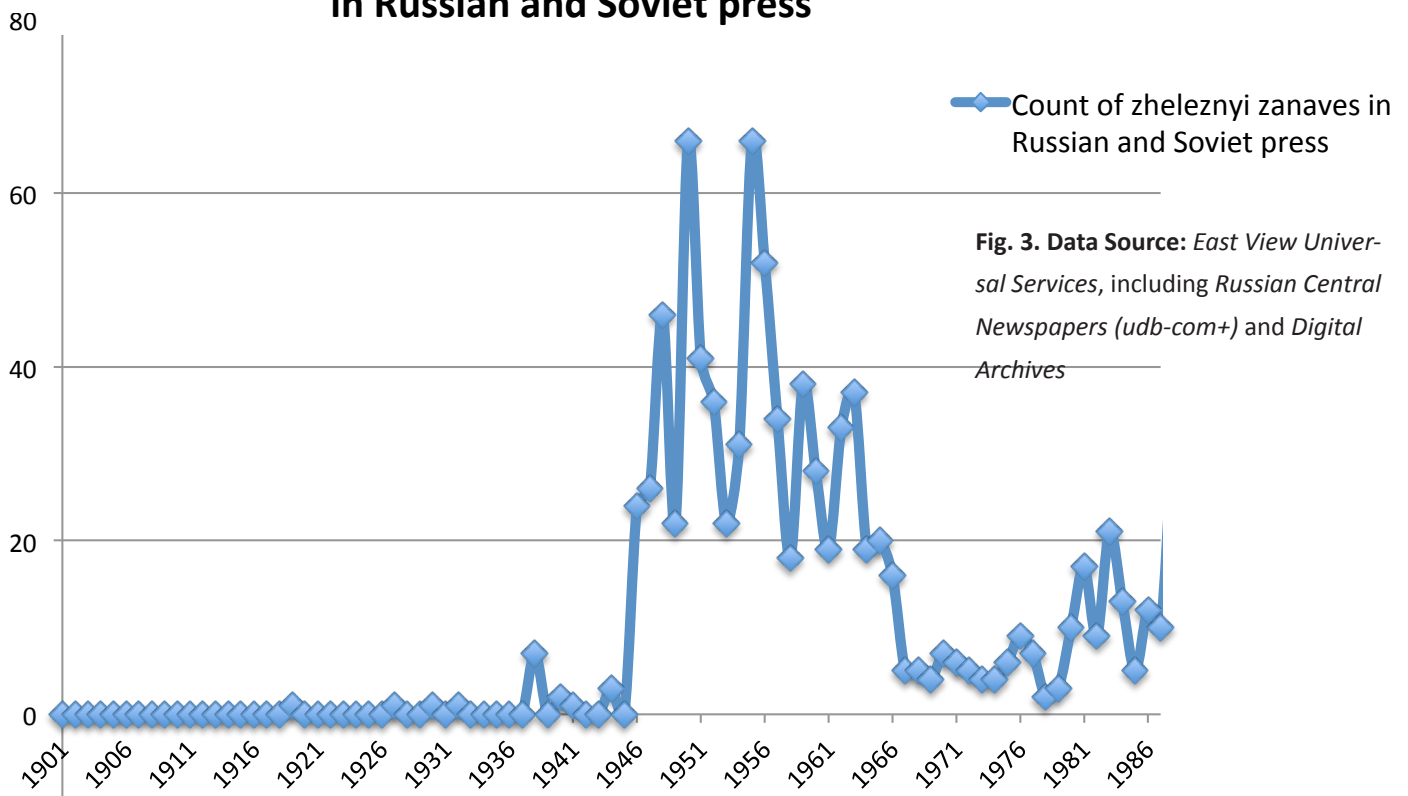


Fig. 3. Data Source: *East View Universal Services*, including *Russian Central Newspapers (udb-com+)* and *Digital Archives*

Count of Iron Curtain (*zheleznyi zanaves*) in Soviet and Russian press 1961-2014

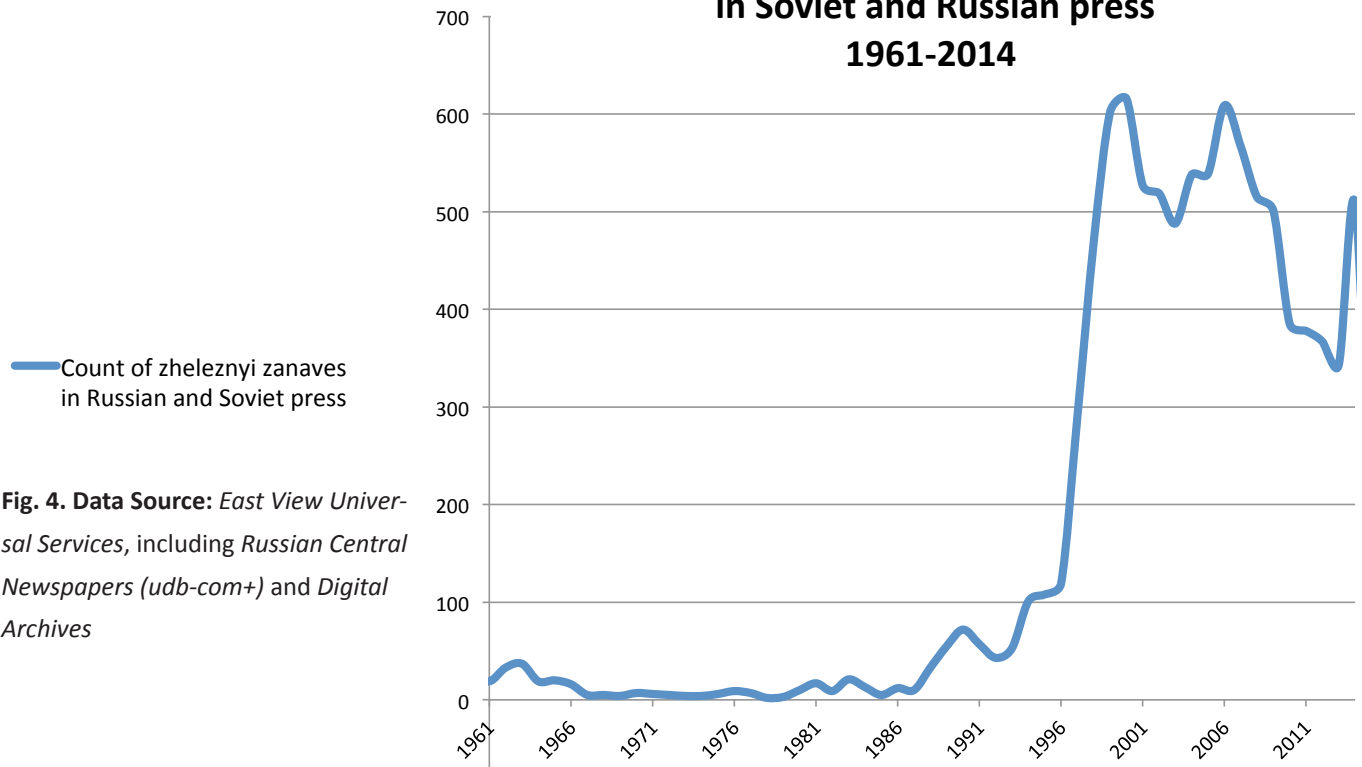


Fig. 4. Data Source: East View Universal Services, including Russian Central Newspapers (*udb-com+*) and Digital Archives

of the Iron Curtain as *zavesa* gave place after three months to other undermining techniques already sketched out in Stalin's interview and in the other attendant responses in the Soviet press. To start with, there was straight-out censure, modeled in the first week of tense silence following Fulton and in the erasure of the term in Stalin's interview about the speech. Yet in the same interview, Stalin also modeled the art of rhetorical undermining of the term: turning the accusation of theatricality against the West, reversing the direction of the spectatorial gaze so that it is the West that was revealed putting up an unsavory show behind the infamous curtain. Once the Iron Curtain received the adjectives "British," "imperialist," and "capitalist," it could be easily displaced in a very different *theatrum mundi*, where it shielded Western wrongdoings in Latin America or Indonesia. While a close analysis of the peripetias of the term is beyond the scope of this essay, the graphs below present a suggestive roadmap. (See Fig. 3, 4.)

Among the most striking features is the Iron Curtain's brief fall from grace around the

construction of the materialized version of the Iron Curtain, the Berlin Wall, in 1961, as well as the term's significant lowering, almost relative disappearance from the official horizon during the Brezhnev era (1964–1982), starting around the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Instead, the explosion of interest and of publishing venues brought on by Perestroika raised the popularity of the term sharply until 2000, when a noticeable downward trend continued through the Putin years, until 2014, when the invasion of Crimea and the war in Ukraine propelled the possibility of a "new Iron Curtain" in the midst of feverish debate.

The Iron Curtain and the sphere of influence: Romanian translations and illustrations

The Romanian press immediately perceived the importance of Churchill's speech. The communist party newspaper *Scântea* noted that both Churchill's speech and Stalin's interview were "amply commented on" in five leading publications.³⁹ However, Churchill's Iron Curtain did

³⁹ *Timpul*, *Națiunea*, *Scântea*, *Drapelul*, *Semnalul*. "Presa română și declarațiile generalisimului Stalin," *Scântea*,

not travel well to Romania either. Of the more than 20 articles that I found covering the speech in the mainstream press in March 1946, only one contains the phrase. The two times “Iron Curtain” appears in the article it is translated by the awkward *perdeaua de fier*. In Romanian, there are two different words for curtain, theatrical curtain – *cortina* – and window curtain – *perdea*. The difference between the two words is much more marked than in Russian, as the words do not share a root or any resemblance. *Cortina* is of Italian extraction, while *perdea*, of Turkish extraction, was used for window curtain and was considered anachronistic for theatrical curtain already by 1927.⁴⁰ The one notable use of *perdeaua de fier* belongs to Nicolae Iorga, Romania’s most well-known historian at the time, who met the news of the Soviet Union’s occupation of then Romanian Bessarabia by writing: “From now the iron (*perdeaua de fier*) curtain will descend over the whole life, even over domestic life, to its most intimate.”⁴¹ Iorga’s choice seems justified given his strong emphasis on the domestic domain.

This was not the case for the translator of Churchill’s phrase. In choosing to translate “Iron Curtain” by the anachronistic *perdeaua de fier*, the writer turned away from the strong theatrical metaphor, refusing to place himself and his country on the stage. It is not that he did not use theatrical vocabulary. He did, but, just like his Soviet counterparts, he used it to describe Churchill:

March 27, 1946, 1. It is significant that the pro-Western press was largely silenced by the speech, while the pro-Soviet press was railing. Thus, the Party’s *Scântea* and *România Liberă* published 11 and 7 articles, respectively, on the Fulton speech in March, whereas the newspaper of the democratic opposition, *Semnalul*, published two pieces. 40 Lazăr Șăineanu, *Dicționar universal al limbei române* (Craiova: Editura Scrisul Românesc, 1929); *Dicționarul limbii române literare contemporane*, vol. III (Bucharest: Editura Academiei, 1957).

41 N. Iorga, “Ce se duce cu noi din Basarabia,” *Neamul Românesc*, no. 147 (1940): 1. Traian Lazăr briefly notes that Iorga’s use of the term precedes Churchill’s and wonders whether Churchill was inspired by Iorga, seemingly unaware of previous uses of the phrase in English and other languages. Traian Lazăr, “1940. Perdeaua de fier precede cortina de fier,” in *Bătălia pentru Basarabia 1941–1944*, ed. Gh. Buzatu (Bucharest: Mica Valahie), 23–4.

Mr. Churchill – although constantly *playing at being “particular”* – has however searched to synthesize as faithfully as possible the thoughts and plans of the reactionaries of all countries ... His highness has not forgotten Romania. Bucharest finds itself ... in his opinion ... beyond the “iron curtain” (*perdeaua de fier*)... Mr. Churchill puts on trial the freedoms in East and Central Europe, aiming in this direction *the tip of his spade*... Mr. Churchill will not be able to make anyone forget that we beyond the “iron curtain” *eat Soviet bread* and that we gained our independence and liberty aided by the Soviet Union.⁴²

In the course of this translation commentary, the Iron Curtain gained quotation marks, which then became one canonical way it was printed in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The quotation marks marked the phrase as the speech of another, as the so-called Iron Curtain, weaken it, make it part of a false discourse.

Indeed, the whole phrase, as the larger discourse initiated by Stalin’s interview and developed in the translations and commentaries in the Romanian press, either rejects or reverts the positions of the watcher and watched, audience and spectacle, life and fiction, all dichotomies that Churchill’s Iron Curtain had set up. Thus, in this paragraph, it is Churchill who “plays at being ‘particular’” – being faithful to a fictive ideology, striking an overly theatrical pose as he aims “the tip of his spade” to Eastern Europe. On the contrary, the people of Eastern Europe are not playing at anything; they prove their reality by going through the age-old reality check applied to anyone from ghosts to extraterrestrials – they eat bread, with a twist, Soviet bread, and engage in political action, gain their freedom and independence, with quite the twist, independence with the aid of the Soviet Union. The title of another article even more clearly

42 “Declarațiile generalisimului Stalin și România,” *Scântea*, March 16, 1946; 4, my emphasis.



Fig. 5: Collection of international cartoons titled "The Peace Seen by the Foreign Press," *Contemporanul*, 11 October 1946.

reverts the direction of the gaze, setting Churchill's speech as a curtain of words: "Behind Churchill's speech hides reactionary politics."⁴³ Continuing with this logic of unmasking, where the hidden is to be found not on the Eastern but on the Western side of the "Iron Curtain," another early report on the speech announces that: "In reality the call of Mr. Churchill is a call to war and international conflict tending to divide the world in two ... a western and a Russian bloc."⁴⁴ The real divide is then not the Soviet-operated Iron Curtain, but Churchill's speech itself, which, following Stalin's lead, the article frames as a smoke screen hiding the West's expansionist tendencies.

In the more than 20 articles that followed Churchill's Iron Curtain speech in March, as well as through the following year, as they continued commenting on the speech and on the Paris Peace Conference where the borders of post-bellum Europe were being drawn, the Romanian press avoided the phrase Iron Curtain, using instead "sferă," "bloc," and even "lagăr" (camp),⁴⁵ with

sphere being the favorite. This is most likely because sphere was the synonym Churchill used, almost in the same breath, in his Fulton speech. While in the West "sphere" was eclipsed by the success of his metaphorical coinage of the Iron Curtain, in Romania the reverse was true. Part of the reason seems linked with the caricaturists' irresistible soft spot for the parallelism between Churchill's outward appearance, particularly his iconic belly and round head, and his use of the word "sphere." For the next year, the Romanian communist press had a ball representing the deepening divide between the East and the West and what they saw as the West's threatening expansionist tendencies through caricatures. In the October 11 issue *Contemporanul* edits a selection of cartoons from the international press to express its disappointment about the Paris Peace Conference, then in its closing days.⁴⁶ (See Fig. 5.) A large suited man sprawls over the globe, laughing satisfied. The only writing that is visible is "Adriatique," the one end of the Iron Curtain named in Churchill's

43 "Îndărătul cuvântării d-lui Churchill se ascunde reacțiunea," *Scânteia*, March 14, 1946.

44 "Cercurile anglo-americane desaproabă discursul d-lui Churchill," *Scânteia*, March 9, 1946.

45 Some examples: "Dividing the world in a western and a Russian bloc," *Ibid.* "The division of the world in two camps (lagăre): capitalist and communist," and "Marea Britanie

și întreaga lume nu au nici un viitor fără o înțelegere cu Uniunea Sovietică," *Scânteia*, March 10, 1946. Mr. Churchill speaks ... of "the sphere" (*sfera*) in which Warsaw ... Bucharest, and Sofia, would find themselves." Also see "Conștiința lumii stă de veghe," *Scânteia*, March 17, 1946.

46 "Pacea văzută de presa străină," *Contemporanul*, October 11, 1946.



Fig. 6: Caricature of Churchill in the Romanian press captioned "Come, little ones, let us federalize you!" *Contemporanul*, 4 January 1947.

speech, typed as a North-South divide along the Iron Curtain. As almost half of his body crosses over the line, the man says: "Let everyone keep his positions." The adjacent cartoon has a small Churchill figure, with a head looking like a globe divided with longitude lines and a spherical belly divided in half eyeing a pathetically strutting peace pigeon, who, offended, rebels: "I am not what you think!" While at first we are made to think of peace as a prostitute that has been bought or sold at the conference, we see the bird strutting in the direction of the next cartoon, where it is cooped up in a cage.

The cage and Churchill reappear together, in a centrally placed and locally produced anonymous cartoon on January 4, 1947.⁴⁷ (See Fig. 6.) Here, Churchill gestures to a little boy and a girl, inviting them to enter a cage set up with a jug and two cups. The top hat, tuxedo, and white gloves, as well as the exaggerated gestures and the cage, all suggest a circus impresario. The caption, "Come, little ones, let us federalize you," makes the immediate link with the weighty title of the article, "The Wings of the Plans of Federalizing

47 "Poftiți, vă rog, prichindeilor, să vă federalizăm!," *Contemporanul*, January 4, 1947.

Europe (From Kant and Rousseau to Winston Churchill).⁴⁸ The article is indeed substantive. Briefly mentioning Kant, Rousseau, and Schiller, it spends ample time providing background on current American literature on federalizing Europe, and also discusses French contributions such as the then-recent full volume *L'avenir de l'Europe Centrale*. Churchill gets a subheading as leading proponent of federalism. Equal space is dedicated to Lenin, who, the article argues, had shown, *avant-la-lettre*, how federalist ideas mask capitalist and imperialism expansionism. The article ends with the longest subheading, titled "Against and ... for small states." Together with the caricature, the subheading lead me to think that the article was going to end by militating for the rights of small states against the machinations of large imperialist powers. However, the article shows that this would be unrealizable, as it was in contradiction with "present social life and with the fight that is carried on for the undoing of a just and democratic peace." Instead, the article ends with the expected call to collaboration between all countries.

However, the concern and disappointment of one of "the little ones" is at times visible even in the pages of the socialist-friendly newspapers, as a striking caricature captioned "we are the defenders of the small countries" shows with surprising openness. (See Fig. 7.)⁴⁹ The caricature depicts two monsters sitting with their five mouths wide open. It does not take much perspicacity to make out Stalin's features behind the two-mouthed monster, whereas the three-mouthed monster is harder to identify, being potentially a composite portrait of Western leaders. The monsters' enormous spherical bellies are full of gold coins and look both like piggy banks and geographic globes, with the contours of countries traced by the amalgamations of coins. The caricature was published on the first page of the influential cultural weekly *Contemporanul*, accompanying a lead article titled "The Peace Conference at Work..." While the article focused on

48 P. Fedoseev, "Culisele planurilor de federalizare a Europei (Dela Kant și Rousseau to Winston Churchill)," *Contemporanul*, January 4, 1947.

49 "Noi suntem apărătorii țărilor mici," *Contemporanul*, October 11, 1946.

the conflicts *between* small countries—the problems of the Hungarian minority in Czechoslovakia and the territorial disputes between Greece and Bulgaria, the one actual map illustrating it shows the link between the small nations and big nations and their problems: the disputed border between Greece and Bulgaria was, of course, a portion of the descending Iron Curtain, marked with a thick black line on the map.⁵⁰ Romania is barely mentioned in the Paris Peace Conference review itself. However, the article shares the first page with just one other lead article titled “The Crisis of Romanian Culture,” whose illustration parallels and contrasts the monster duo by a contrasting duo of two brooding men which could be sketches after Rodin’s *Thinker*.⁵¹ The caricature and its juxtaposition with the more somber illustration of Romania’s crisis expresses the magazine’s anxiety toward Romania’s situation as a small nation in the aftermath of the Paris Conference in graphically arresting, if unimpeachable, clarity.

So why does the Iron Curtain get lost in Romanian translation, replaced by sphere of influence? It seems like the Romanian press at the time imagined its world as a sphere whose longitudinal lines were coming more and more to resemble a cage’s grid. The cage, the globe, and the heads and bellies of Churchill and Stalin all roll into each other in what appears to be dangerously engulfing circularity. The line, if it appears at all, is somewhere else, further away, at the border of “Greece with all its splendors” and Bulgaria, still on the top of the agenda at the Paris Conference. Romania’s “deep crisis” had to do with its position so deep inside the belly of the beast that it was no longer talked about by the great powers. This was a secret that could not be said out loud, or written about even in the more and more censored Romanian press. As a result, the Romanian press at the time engaged with abandon in ambiguous translations, quotations, and juxtapositions of texts and images from the international press, divesting responsibility for the obscured message.

50 Map accompanying “Conferința de pace lucrează...,” *Contemporanul*, October 11, 1946, 6.

51 Mircea Alifanil, “Illustration for ‘Criza culturii Române,’” *Ibid.*

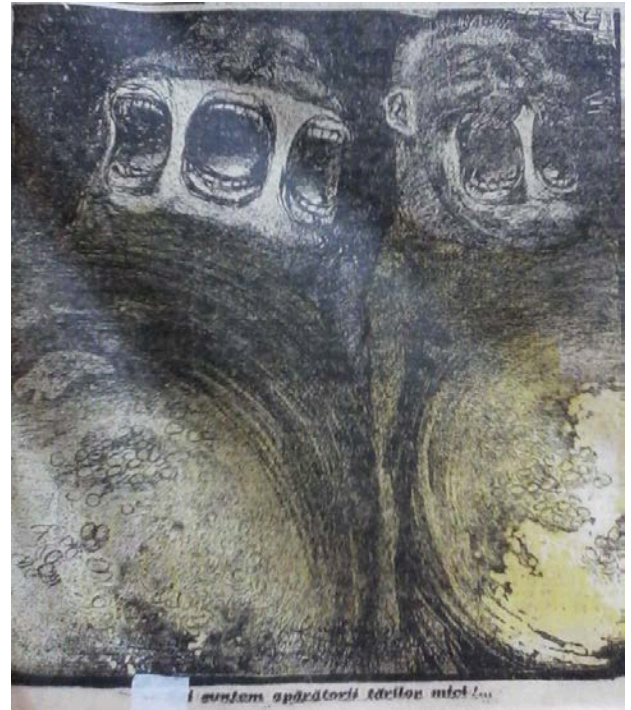


Fig. 7: Caricature of Stalin and the Western powers captioned: “We are the defenders of small countries,” *Contemporanul*, 11 October 1946.

In so doing, it precariously brought together on the pages of a small country’s press worlds that were dramatically drifting apart at that very moment, leaving Romania not on the dramatically lit stage of history but rather deep within the belly of the beast.

Spectacle, theatricality, and secrecy were not absent in the Romanian press covering of the Iron Curtain speech in 1946. But if the world was still seen as a stage at times, this was not Churchill’s theater design. Churchill, and the West, were not seen watching innocently from afar as the Iron Curtain fell on Eastern Europe. Rather, through more or less faithful or tendentious translations from the English, French, and Russian language press, through commentaries, juxtapositions, cutting, pasting, and the addition of quotation marks, the Romanian press painted a very different picture. In this picture, Churchill, and the West, appeared as the dubious ringmasters of this show, which resembled an open-air circus more than a dignified theater with safety features like iron curtains. They were more likely to use incendiary language or put up smoke screens than to need protection from fires, of which there seemed to be

no trace of in Romania. In this vision, the Romanian press, like the Soviets, turned the accusation of theatricality toward Churchill and the West, and saw theatricality and spectacle as a cover for real secret intentions. Rather than a dispassionate observer, Churchill appeared as a histrionic ringmaster, gesturing dramatically, dissembling, and misleading the world toward war for imperialist profit. The Romanian press's twist and difference from the Soviet position was that, at times, Stalin did not look that different from Churchill. From the perspective of "the little ones," the big powers with their enormous bellies and many mouths ready to swallow small countries lose their distinctions. Rather than the two-dimensional map with its linear Iron Curtain line, the globe may have been the favorite geographic representation at the time in the Romanian press because its longitudinal and latitudinal lines were so easily graphically matched over the gridlock of a cage.⁵²

52 That view persisted. In a brief review of the uses of the term in the contemporary Romanian press, Rodica Zafiu notes that "The Romanian *cortina de fier* (iron curtain) is perceived, not just like a barrier, but as a kind of *cort* (tent), (a word which is etymologically related), as a form of cover and pressure). Rodica Zafiu, "Cortina de fier," *Dilema veche*,

Rhetoric and translation played a key role in the shaping of the post-bellum world. An archeology of its main partition, the Iron Curtain, shows the foundational interpenetration of secrecy with theatricality. Theatricality defined the Iron Curtain from the start, so that once the curtain was hung, the world was staged as a *theatrum mundi*. But that is about where the consensus ended, and the fierce battles over who the actors, the audience, the ringmasters, and the Iron Curtain operators were truly began. There were also disputes about what kind of show – tragedy, comedy, circus, or absurd tragicomedy – the world was in for. This article investigated how the views differed depending on one's position in this *theatrum mundi*, looking closely at the role played by rhetoric and translation in securing those seats.

February 27–March 5, 2014. The *cortina/cort* connection was probably more visible in the transition period, when, for the first time, the iron curtain appeared temporary, and Romanians had a sense of being able to exit from under the tent (*cort*) – rather than to penetrate beyond the *cortina*.