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## Feature

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### The Nazi-Soviet Pact Reconsidered

By Geoffrey Roberts

Seventy years after its signature, the Nazi-Soviet pact of 23 August 1939 still stands as the most stunning volte-face in diplomatic history. On the eve of German forces' marching into Poland, Stalin signed a non-aggression treaty with Hitler that guaranteed Soviet neutrality. Stalin's action was so shocking because for the previous six months the Soviets had been negotiating with Britain and France to secure a triple alliance *against* Nazi Germany and for the previous six years both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany had viewed the other as their primary enemy. Suddenly the two ideologically opposed states were apparently pledging peaceful co-existence and political co-operation.

Even more dramatic was what happened next. Attached to the published treaty of non-aggression was a secret protocol delineating German and Soviet spheres of influence in Poland and the Baltic States. In accordance with this agreement the Red Army invaded Eastern Poland on 17 September. Then, at the end of September, the Germans and the Soviets signed a second treaty – a boundary and friendship treaty – that partitioned Poland between the two states. The USSR regained Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine, territories lost as a result of the Polish-Soviet war of 1919–20. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were then forced into the Soviet sphere of influence and later annexed and incorporated into the USSR. Finland refused to join the Soviet sphere, resulting in the so-called 'Winter War' of 1939–40. During that conflict the British and French made plans to intervene on the side of the Finns – an act that would almost certainly have led to an Anglo-French-Soviet war in Scandinavia. Only the Soviet-Finnish peace treaty of March 1940 prevented that nightmare scenario from materialising.

The Soviet-German treaties of August–September 1939 ushered in a period of intense economic, political and military co-operation between the two states. There was also a significant ideological rapprochement. Nazi attacks on Soviet communism stopped and the Soviets curtailed the anti-fascist campaigning of the international communist movement. Britain and France were blamed for the war and the Soviet Union lent diplomatic support to Hitler's false calls for peace. Only in summer 1940 did the Nazi-Soviet relationship begin to unravel. When France fell to Hitler in June 1940 Stalin realised he was facing the threat

of a German-dominated Europe. In response he strengthened Soviet defences, including in the Balkans where the Soviet leader sought to draw Bulgaria into the Soviet sphere too. Hitler saw Stalin's manoeuvres as a threat to his hegemony in Europe and revived the Nazi ideological project of seeking *Lebensraum* (living space) in Russia. In Berlin in November 1940 diplomats from the two sides made one last effort to resolve differences and sign an updated Nazi-Soviet pact. But the negotiations failed and the countdown to the Soviet-German war began.



Operation Barbarossa, 1941 (SCRSS Photo Library)

In June 1941 Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa – a blitzkrieg invasion of the Soviet Union that came within a hair's-breadth of success. By the end of 1941 the German and Axis powers' armies had reached Leningrad, Moscow and Rostov. The initial success of the German invasion raised questions about Stalin's wisdom in signing the Nazi-Soviet pact. From Stalin's point of view the pact was designed to keep

the USSR out of the war for as long as possible and to buy time to prepare Soviet defences. But the pact lasted less than two years and when war came, Soviet defences were found seriously wanting. Hitler, however, was able to make considerable gains during the period of the pact, above all the time and resources to prepare his invasion of Russia. After the war, when the secret protocol of the Nazi-Soviet pact was found in the German archives, suspicions were raised that the pact was not simply a short-term expedient but the beginning of a projected long-term alliance between Stalin and Hitler – a project foiled only by the Nazi leader's perfidy. This was the interpretation of the Nazi-Soviet pact promoted by Western cold-war warriors intent on depicting Stalin and the Soviets in just as bad terms as Hitler and the Nazis. A variation of this interpretation was the view that Stalin saw the Nazi-Soviet pact as a means of fanning the flames of war in Europe – a conflict that he hoped would cause the collapse of capitalism and provide an opening for a communist takeover of the continent.

One of the key issues in the historical debate about the Nazi-Soviet pact has been the extent to which Stalin's decisions were a matter of choice. At the time, the Soviets claimed that they would have preferred a triple alliance with the British and French. Negotiations with the British and French broke down during the course of military talks in Moscow in August 1939. The Soviets withdrew from these talks when it became clear that the British and French were not serious about concluding a military agreement to provide an effective framework for a joint war to be waged against Germany. It seemed to the Soviets that the British and French were playing a game with the military talks, one that was designed to embroil the USSR in a war with Germany while Britain and France stood on the sidelines – a goal thwarted by the Soviet decision to remain neutral when Hitler attacked Poland.

From the 1960s the Soviets published many hundreds of documents from their archives that showed their true aim in 1939 was,

indeed, a triple alliance with Britain and France and that the Nazi-Soviet pact was a second-best alternative forced upon them by circumstances. In post-Soviet Russia many more documents were published and the archives themselves were opened to foreign researchers. The new evidence confirmed that the Soviets were serious about the negotiations with the British and French and only stepped away from the triple alliance project at the last moment.

Alongside the discussion of Soviet intentions in relation to the triple alliance, another debate focused on Soviet relations with Germany in 1939 and the bearing they had on the origins of the Nazi-Soviet pact. The critics of Stalin's decision to abandon the triple alliance and do a deal with Hitler argued that the evidence showed that throughout the negotiations with the British and French the Soviets were striving for an agreement with the Germans. Once again, the evidence from Soviet and Russian archives gave the lie to this interpretation. It was the Germans, desperate to avert the triple alliance, who were doing the wooing, not the Soviets. The Soviets listened to those overtures and played the Germans along, but did not pay them any serious attention until the triple alliance negotiations were collapsing. Stalin's turn to a deal with Hitler did not begin until early August 1939.

Confirming that the Soviets acted in good faith in 1939 and that their concerns and fears were authentic, not just excuses, helps explain the decision to sign the Nazi-Soviet pact – but not to justify it. While the evidence shows that the Soviets were serious about the triple alliance, it is not clear that they pursued their goals within the negotiations as seriously as they might have done.

The triple alliance negotiations began in April 1939 with a Soviet proposal for a mutual assistance pact between Britain, France and the USSR that would guarantee European security against further German aggression. For the Soviets it was crucial that the triple alliance was a military alliance – a coalition capable of fighting and winning a war with Germany. Having made their



Vyacheslav Molotov (SCRSS Photo Library)

position plain, the Soviets adopted a hard line in the subsequent negotiations, seeking to force the British and French to accept their proposals. The Soviets' negotiator was Vyacheslav Molotov, Foreign Commissar, appointed in succession to Maksim Litvinov in May 1939. It is often said that Stalin replaced Litvinov with Molotov because he wanted a pact with Hitler, not a triple alliance with Britain and France. In fact, the opposite was the case. A close associate of Stalin's, Molotov was appointed to force the British and French into the triple alliance on Soviet terms. Molotov proved to be a very tough negotiator and by the end of July Britain and France had conceded all Soviet demands. However, Molotov had done little to allay the main Soviet concern that, even if a triple alliance deal was signed, the British and French might not be willing or able to contribute very much to a war with Germany. The time to tackle this critical issue – in order to avoid any misunderstandings about the Soviet position – was at the very beginning of the negotiations. But talks about the military dimension of the triple alliance did not begin until mid-August. By this time it was evident that the crisis over control of Danzig was

about to break and a German-Polish war was imminent. Suddenly there was no time to resolve the critical issues that concerned the Soviets. Of particular importance was the Red Army's demand that it be free to enter Poland and Rumania on the outbreak of war. Poland and Rumania – two anti-communist states with long-term territorial disputes with the USSR – refused to give the necessary advance consent and the military talks with British and French broke down. The Soviet position was that Poland and Rumania were Britain and France's allies, therefore it was up to the British and French to secure advance consent to the Red Army's right of transit. The inability of the British and French to deliver on this fuelled Soviet suspicions that they were not interested in a serious, war-fighting coalition. That may or may not have been true, but the transit issue was not a question to be left until the last moment.

In August 1939 Stalin faced the unenviable choice between relying on an uncertain alliance with the British and French or making a desperate gamble on a deal with Hitler. That dilemma was, in part, one of his own making. A more active and focused approach to triple alliance negotiations could have clarified some critical issues early on and given time for all concerned to consider the alternatives. Instead, Stalin found himself having to make a rushed choice and opted for neutrality as the safest course of action. Like everyone else, Stalin thought that the Second World War would be a re-run of the First World War and that a prolonged war of attrition on the Western Front would give him scope to take action to safeguard the position of the Soviet state. That assumption proved to be a fundamental miscalculation. Soviet neutrality helped Hitler to triumph over France, as well as Poland, and paved the way for German military hegemony in Europe. The Nazi-Soviet pact paid dividends for Stalin in the short term but only at the cost of substantially strengthening the Soviets' future enemy.

Seventy years later the "What if?" debate about the Nazi-Soviet pact continues. Did or could Stalin have had a better alternative?

Would Hitler have been deterred from war by a triple alliance? Would it have been better to begin the Soviet-German war in 1939 rather than 1941? There is nothing wrong with such speculation, as long as it does not obscure what actually did happen and why.

*Geoffrey Roberts is Professor of History at University College Cork, Ireland. His books include 'The Unholy Alliance: Stalin's Pact with Hitler' (1989), 'The Soviet Union and the Origins of the Second World War' (1995) and 'Stalin's Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939–1953' (2006).*

## **SCRSS News**

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### **SCRSS 85<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**

The Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR (SCR) was founded on 9 July 1924. It changed its name to the Society for Co-operation in Russian & Soviet Studies (SCRSS) in 1992.

The SCRSS celebrated its 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary at the Society's premises on Friday 10 July. The event was well supported by members and visitors, and congratulations were received from the Chairman of the Committee for Foreign Relations of the St Petersburg Government; the Board of the St Petersburg Association for International Co-operation; Olga Bramley, Chair of the Russian Speaking Community Council in London; and Philip Matthews, Chair of the Soviet Memorial Trust Fund. Mr Shlykov, Second Secretary of the Embassy of the Russian Federation, also attended the event.

The early history of the SCR was highlighted in a slideshow of photographs and artefacts from the Society's archive, digitised and compiled by John Cunningham. Illustrated talks were given by Jean Turner on the Huntly Carter avant-garde theatre collection and by Ralph Gibson on the history of the Soviet War Memorial in London. John Riley

spoke on the history of Soviet cinema. The evening helped renew appreciation of the SCRSS' illustrious past and interest in its future.

## Next Events

**Friday 25 September 7pm**

**Film: The Bonus**

A team of construction workers refuses to accept its monthly bonus and will only explain its decision to the site's Communist Party Committee. Drama and tension flow from the clash of attitudes towards work. The film is brutally critical in its approach to bureaucracy and corruption. The film stars the celebrated Russian film and stage actor Oleg Yankovsky who died in May 2009. Directed by Sergei Mikaelian, USSR, 1975. 90 mins, colour, English sub-titles.

**Friday 9 October 7pm**

**Lecture: Stravinsky - The Comedian**

By John Riley. The talk will be illustrated with images and sound clips.

**Friday 23 October 7pm**

**Film: Journey through Fire**

A thriller set during the Civil War in the USSR. A group of individuals escape in a horse-drawn carriage from one side to the other. Directed by Samsonov, USSR. 74 mins, b/w, English sub-titles.

**Friday 6 November 7pm**

**Lecture: Experiences of a Moscow Correspondent in the 1980s**

By Kate Clark. Kate was Moscow correspondent for the *Morning Star* from 1985–90 and *The Scotsman* from 1989–90. In this lecture she talks about her life as a correspondent in the Soviet Union during the Gorbachev era.

**Friday 20 November 7pm**

**Film: Cavalier of the Gold Star**

The film is a lively glimpse into the life of a Soviet village after the Second World War. Sergei Bondarchuk gives a memorable performance as the returning war hero who becomes the driving force for the post-war reconstruction of his Cossack village.

Directed by Yuri Raizman, 1950, USSR. 118 mins, b/w, English sub-titles.

**Friday 4 December 7pm**

**Lecture: Russian Folk Tales and Children's Literature**

By Jim Riordan. Jim's lively talk on Russian folk and children's literature will be followed by the SCRSS Christmas party.

## Obituary

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### Sir Edward Downes (1924–2009)

Sir Edward Downes, known to friends as Ted, was a superb conductor both in the concert hall and the opera pit. There is no doubt that he didn't have the fame he deserved because, as he put it, unlike Solti (an admired colleague at Covent Garden) he wasn't "a bastard".

Downes studied piano, violin and singing, and played horn in the most important event in post-war English music – the premiere of Britten's *Peter Grimes* in 1946. But, aiming to become a conductor, he became Herman Scherchen's assistant and *répétiteur*.

He conducted at Covent Garden every year for 52 years, notching up nearly 1,000 performances. He also met and married Joan Weston, a dancer and, later, choreographer and TV producer.

Musically the twin pillars of his life were Verdi and Prokofiev, and he worked tirelessly for both.

In the run-up to the centenary of Verdi's death Downes had the ambitious idea of staging all 28 of his operas at Covent Garden. Sadly, the plan wasn't quite fulfilled and Ted himself regretted that throughout his career he had conducted "only 25". His view of the composer is telling: "I seemed to understand Verdi as a person. He was a peasant. He had one foot in heaven and one on the earth. And this is why he appeals to

all classes of people, from those who know everything about music to those who are hearing it for the first time."

Downes, though he didn't bang on about it very publicly, would describe himself as ... a *socialist*! He felt that great art could speak to anyone and that opportunity to experience it should be equal. (Ted, of course, given an opportunity – and great talent – also worked damned hard). As such, he was happy to be a vice-president of the SCRSS.

He came to Prokofiev through the Bolshoi's 1956 tour with Ulanova in *Romeo and Juliet*. In 1960 he led the Leeds Festival's UK premiere of *War and Peace*, translating and editing it for a one-evening event.

His work for the composer was extensive, so when Prokofiev's son Oleg and widow Lina moved to London, it was natural that Ted should befriend them. He continued his advocacy by completing the abandoned student opera *Madalenna*. A few years later he saw that some manuscripts had come up for auction and, together with Lina, stopped the sale. Upon examining them, he discovered that they included some fragments from the music for Meyerhold's ill-fated *Yevgeny Onegin*, a strange adaptation of Pushkin's novel that included a narrator. By an incredible coincidence Ted was about to record it for the BBC, so he rapidly edited the new pieces into the existing work. He later recorded the whole thing for Chandos Records.

Ted told how the board of Australian Opera (of which he was Music Director) decided that Sydney Opera House should open with *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Suffice to say that he actually led the Australian premiere of *War and Peace*.

In 1963 he conducted the UK premiere of Shostakovich's *Katerina Izmailova*. The composer enthused: "I particularly liked the conductor, Edward Downes, who is undoubtedly a splendid musician". He also noted Ted's translation and praised Marie Collier's *Katerina* and the production, describing it as "done very tastefully, in true Russian style."

His commercial recordings include Wagner's early opera *Die Feen* and works by Bernard Stevens, Myaskovsky, Glière, Respighi, Korngold and, of course, Prokofiev and Verdi. Among his best are those with the BBC Philharmonic, probably his favourite orchestra, which he conducted from 1980–91. The National Sound Archive's extensive holdings reflect his passions: classic Italian and Russian operas and modern British works, including pieces by SCRSS alumni Alan Bush (the *Lascaux Symphony*) and Rutland Boughton (his second symphony).

Ted's eyesight had never been great but as it deteriorated, Joan became his eyes. He could no longer learn new scores but continued to conduct from his prodigious memory. At a radio recording of the two versions of Prokofiev's *Fourth Symphony* he was asked to re-do a short section. Ted raised the unused score to within a few inches of his face and, after a moment's orientation, was off.

His failing hearing was a further blow and, when Joan was diagnosed with cancer and given weeks to live, they decided to take matters into their own hands.

*Sir Edward Thomas (Ted) Downes, CBE. Born Birmingham 17 June 1924. Died Zurich 10 July 2009.*

*By John Riley*

## **Soviet Memorial Trust Fund News**

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### **Geraldine Mary Harmsworth Park 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**

The park in which the Soviet War Memorial stands celebrated its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary in July and the SMTF organised an exhibition stand nearby. Geraldine Mary Harmsworth Park was presented to the old London County Council by Viscount Rothermere in memory of his mother. Several generations of the

extended Harmsworth family, including the current Lord Rothermere, toured the park on the day and visited the Memorial and the SMTF display.

## Peter Fearn

It was with sadness that we report the death on 26 August 2009 of Peter Fearn, one of the original SMTF Trustees. Peter was a mainstay of what is now the RAF Russia Association from its inception in 1991.

When the SCRSS started the movement to erect a memorial in London to our Soviet wartime allies, Peter was hugely supportive and became a founding Trustee of the SMTF – a position he held at the time of his death. He made an invaluable contribution to the work of the Trust and was always an enthusiastic contributor to its work. One of the very few surviving veterans of the RAF's presence in Russia during the Second World War, Peter was involved in the very fitting tribute to RAF 151 Wing – the recent film *Hurricanes over Russia* made by Atoll Productions.

## Israeli President

During an August meeting with Russian president Dmitry Medvedev, the Israeli president Shimon Perez made the following comments in connection with the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War: "As for Russia, we have a special attitude toward your nation. We will never forget Russia's input into the victory over Nazism. I think that if it weren't for Russia's participation, it is unlikely that the world would have been able to overcome the Nazi threat. We have not forgotten the horrible price that the Russian people paid for this victory, the unimaginable scope of lives that were sacrificed for it. [...] I would like to emphasise that in Israel Victory Day is not celebrated on May 8, as in most countries, but on May 9, just as in Russia. When we were establishing the date for this holiday, we wanted to thereby show our respect and emphasise solidarity with Russia's victims in this war."

## Next Events

**Sunday, 8 November 12.30pm**  
**Remembrance Sunday**

The next event at the Soviet War Memorial will be the Remembrance Sunday ceremony. For further details about this event, and next year's ceremonies on 27 January and 9 May, please contact the Honorary Secretary, SMTF, c/o 320 Brixton Road, London SW9 6AB. Email: [smtf@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:smtf@hotmail.co.uk).

*The Soviet War Memorial is located in the Geraldine Mary Harmsworth Park, (adjacent to the Imperial War Museum), Lambeth Road, London SE1 6HZ.*

## Feature

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### **Windows on War: TASS Posters in the Special Collections Department of the University of Nottingham**

By Cynthia Marsh

*Windows on War*, an exhibition of Soviet posters, was held at the University of Nottingham from December 2008 – March 2009.

The collection of TASS posters and printed posters from the period 1943–45 was found among the papers of a former professor of English, Vivian de Sola Pinto, bequeathed to the University of Nottingham after his death in 1969. It is uncertain how he came by them, but he was a member of a post-Second World War commission in Europe and may have received them as a gift in recognition of his services. As well as 37 printed posters, there are a large number of TASS posters – 129 in all. As far as we have been able to trace, this represents one of the largest collections outside that of the Russian State Library in Moscow.

The TASS 'windows', as they are called, were produced under the auspices of the Central Telegraph Agency (TASS) to communicate directly with the Russian public in Moscow during the war. 'Windows' derived from earlier posters during the Civil War (1918–21) used for similar purposes and designed to hang in the windows of the Russian Telegraph Agency (ROSTA).

The TASS posters themselves are large (the largest are at least 1.5m high and 1m wide), extremely fragile and, therefore, actually undisplayable. It was clear early on that, except for one small item and some of the original printed posters, the *Windows on War* exhibition would have to be digitised.

Crucial to the issues of conservation is the manner in which the TASS posters were made. Due to the war there was limitation on the production of the newspaper and print industries, with much of Russia's resources being directed towards military operations and defence. The posters were seen as a direct contribution to the war effort from the artistic community. More than 1,500 posters were produced from 1941–45 – at approximately 350 per year this suggests that the production of these posters was a daily activity. The targets were multi-purpose: information about current events in the war, morale, propaganda or celebration of victory.

The posters were made by an immense operation in collective work. An original was designed by a practising artist (a number of distinguished artists and artistic collectives were drawn into this work) and words were added – sometimes poetry (and national poets figure here), sometimes doggerel, sometimes narrative, sometimes extracts from speeches and reports.

Then the original was cut into squares and each square made into a stencil by an army of painters and sign-writers. The squares were reassembled into posters and the posters distributed to points of public assembly throughout the city, such as canteens, shop windows, public buildings and institutions, while some were sent to other cities. The larger cities gradually

developed operations of their own. There was probably a pool of up to 600 stencillers working in shifts to produce between 500 and 1,000 items every day.

It is clear from the materials and purpose that the posters were made to be disposable. Unsealed, on poor quality paper using the simple poster paint of the period, possibly for display in the open air on billboards, the posters were envisaged with a very temporary – time and material limited – life span.

In a TASS handmade poster you can see where the joins lie along the edges of the squares and trace the change in colour and brush stroke as the work of the different painters working on the stencils was drawn together. As well as being part of the very nature of the posters themselves, these details take the spectator to the very heart of the creative process. More than that, in this particular case they undermine the very notion of creative work as a highly individually driven process.



TASS poster (reproduced with the permission of the MSS and Special Collections Department at the University of Nottingham)

Another aspect of the posters lies in their combination of different art forms. As suggested earlier, text in different styles and registers is always a component. Frequently, if only in rather primitive ways, there is an interaction between word and the visual image: sometimes ironic; sometimes as a counterpoint; sometimes pathetic, intended to affect the emotions; and sometimes bathetic, designed to diminish the seemingly overwhelming power of the adversary by reducing the serious to the trivial or ridiculous, as in the example opposite relating to Hitler.

These intersections provide the aesthetic and intellectual pleasures of the posters – beyond their primary functions of information and propaganda.

The online version is yet to be completed but there is a growing collection of materials on the posters in the University Special Collections, located on the Kings Meadow Campus at Nottingham University and accessible in the public reading room.

The catalogue of the Collection is available online at [www.nottingham.ac.uk/mss](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/mss). The MSS and Special Collections Department can be emailed at [mss-library@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:mss-library@nottingham.ac.uk).

*Cynthia Marsh, Curator of the 'Windows on War' exhibition, is Professor in the Department of Russian and Slavonic Studies, University of Nottingham.*

## **Book Review**

**A Russian Diary 2010: Russian Children's Books 1920–1935  
Edited by Julian Rothenstein  
(Redstone Press, 2009, ISBN  
9781870003315, 160 pp, spiral  
bound, 245x167mm, £14.95\*)**

Well known for their quirky and original publications, Redstone Press has drawn on

the magical world of Russian children's literature for their 2010 diary. Each week of the year is lavishly illustrated with colourful visuals from some of the most iconic picture books of the early Soviet period. Works by well known collaborators in the form of Samuil Marshak and Vladimir Lebedev (*The Circus* and *Luggage*), Kornei Chukovsky and Vladimir Konashevich (*Mukha Tsokotukha*), and Vladimir Mayakovsky and Lidia Popova (*The Fire Horse*) are placed alongside lesser known gems such as Alexander Deineka's striking depiction in blue and red of an electricity worker climbing a pylon in Uralsky's *Electricity*.

The high quality design and production do full justice to the visuals selected. They reflect the best of a period often described as the 'Golden Age' of Russian children's literature because of the unprecedented excellence of works that combined the talents of the best writers and illustrators of the day. Mel Gooding's introduction, together with a translation by Robert Chandler of Andrei Platonov's folk tale *Wool over the Eyes*, offers a context for what follows. The diary also includes notes pages and an address book section. While some biographical information about the writers and illustrators (and perhaps some translations) would have been a useful addition, this nevertheless does not detract from the impact of sumptuous illustrations conveying a clear sense of the excitement and innovation of the times.

The diary will be of interest not only to Russophiles or art historians, but will also delight anyone who can recall the sense of wonderment and curiosity about the world that they felt as a young child. It will make an ideal Christmas present, but you will surely want to buy one for yourself at the same time!

*\*Redstone Press has kindly agreed to offer the diary to SCRSS members at a special price of £12.95 inc. VAT and postage. Please contact Julian Rothenstein by email on [julian@redstonepress.co.uk](mailto:julian@redstonepress.co.uk), mentioning that you are an SCRSS member.*

*By Jill Cunningham*

## Feature

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### Diaghilev in England: The Continuing Influence

By Charlotte Kasner

2009 is the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first performance of the Ballets Russes outside Russia and has been celebrated by several performances of the favourites that remain in the dance repertoire.



Design by Leon Bakst for the costume of a shepherd boy in the ballet *Narcisse*, 1911 (SCRSS Library)

Diaghilev was a product of the cultured upper classes in Russia but – unlike many of his contemporaries – one who looked both inwards to Russia and outwards through St Petersburg's 'window on the West'. By the time that the Ballets Russes travelled to Paris in 1909, he had collated and curated a major exhibition on Russian art – travelling all over the Tsarist empire to obtain paintings that hung forgotten in rural backwaters, had toured abroad with opera, and held and been dismissed from his post under the director of the Imperial Theatres.

He had some accomplishment as a pianist and a singer but it was his ability to recognise, cultivate and promote others' talent – singers, dancers, designers, painters and musicians – that was to provide a lasting legacy.

His dancers, performing in the Ballets Russes and on their own, did much to revive the popularity of ballet and raise its status from the slightly seedy reputation that it had garnered in Britain and France. They were the height of fashion amongst the rich and famous but also sparked interest beyond small social circles, especially when expediency forced Diaghilev to take dates outside of opera houses.

In Britain the Ballets Russes performed hundreds of times in opera houses, music halls, provincial theatres and in private entertainments. London society, not least the Bloomsbury Group, made Diaghilev fashionable. Ottoline Morrell, in particular, was noted (and ridiculed) for her adoption of the neo-Eastern exotic dress made popular by Bakst and *Scheherazade*. For a while the circle of designers and painters gathered around Diaghilev influenced colours in drawing rooms and salons across London.

But there are other connections between Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and this country. The legendary Tamara Karsavina, remembered not least for her partnership with Nijinsky, married an Englishman and settled in London, where her gracious, modest manner and impeccable technique continued to inform her teaching until shortly before her death.

It is often forgotten that, starved of Russian dancers by the Civil War and other events that followed the Revolution, Diaghilev frequently turned to English dancers as the mainstay of his company. Many of the English dancers stayed with the Ballets Russes for the majority of its existence while the bigger Russian 'names' undertook their own tours. Lydia Sokolova (Hilda Munnings) was one of the few dancers who stayed with the company throughout, although her knowledge and gifts were, tragically, largely ignored after her retirement from dancing.



Tamara Karsavina, Ballets Russes, Paris Season 1909–11 (SCRSS Photo Library)

An important, though less tangible, aspect of the Diaghilev legacy is the major, lasting influence that he and his dancers have on our artistic community today. As an ephemeral art that is notoriously difficult to commit to paper, dance has relied heavily and at times exclusively on the passing down from artist to artist of knowledge, steps and style. While this at times results in Chinese whispers and blatant distortions, we can still stretch an arm into the past of Diaghilev's world.

Diaghilev's infamous benevolent dictatorship can probably never be recreated. It is impossible in the current artistic and financial climate for one person to wield so much influence over so many aspects of a company and its productions, while funding for productions can no longer be confined to a small circle of wealthy private supporters. The conditions under which his company – not least the dancers – struggled have to an extent been banished in much of the ballet world, at least as long as trade union protection and contracts are upheld. The relationship between dancers, management

and designers has also changed, perhaps irrevocably.

Diaghilev was not in the least afraid of change, had no desire for work to be preserved in aspic and was constantly looking for novelty. So it is perhaps fitting to look at the flesh and blood legacy left by his ability to assemble some of the finest creative people.

Up until the 1960s there can hardly have been a dancer that could not claim a direct link to the great maestro Enrico Cecchetti. I myself was taught in the 1990s by the late Laura Wilson who learned her work dancing with the Ballets Russes in their London appearances in the 1920s. Diaghilev persuaded Cecchetti to leave his post in the Imperial Theatres to teach his beloved Anna Pavlova during an early tour. While initially Diaghilev needed a lure for Pavlova, he soon realised the importance of the once great dancer and now great maestro in assisting with company cohesion, technique and discipline.



Poster by Jean Cocteau for the Ballets Russes, Paris Season, 1911 (SCRSS Library)

Cecchetti and his wife subsequently settled in London to teach, and had studios in Maiden Lane, Covent Garden and, later, Shaftesbury Avenue. It was here that the dancers Patrick Kay (Anton Dolin) and Alicia Markova were to take class in the days before founding the London Festival Ballet (now English National Ballet). Fonteyn, Ashton, Tudor and, of course, Rambert owed much of their training and ballet knowledge to Cecchetti. So did the founding of Ballet Rambert (now the Rambert Dance Company) which created much of the base for pre- and post-war balletomania and the touring structures that persist today. Much of Rambert's thunder was stolen by Ninette de Valois (herself a Diaghilev dancer) and what was to become the Royal Ballet, which from the early days attracted the lion's share of the limited resources. But it was Rambert and the Cecchetti legacy that resulted in the discovery of great dancers and choreographers who sowed the seeds of their now iconic productions and performances at the tiny Mercury Theatre in Notting Hill in the 1920s and 1930s.

We have a wealth of written and visual material on which to draw for biography, memoir and technical detail, although Diaghilev repelled authorised attempts to film the company. But it is today's dancers and artists that are the real living legacy. The human connections and artistry are a lasting reminder of the extraordinary Diaghilev decades – and for that we are greatly fortunate.

*Charlotte Kasner trained as an actor, musician and dancer (Cecchetti method) and was a professional performer for 25 years. She gained an MA in Ballet Studies from the University of Roehampton in 2005.*

## **From the Russian Press**

### **Is Russian Folk Song Dead?**

The death of Lyudmila Zykina, the 'queen of Russian folk song', and its low-key coverage

in the Russian media prompted *Argumenty i Fakty Online* to reflect on the state of Russian folk music today ('Nasha pesnya speta?', No. 32, 5.8.09, [www.aif.ru](http://www.aif.ru)).

Asked for her opinion, the singer Nadezhda Babkina declared the situation serious: radio and television were dominated by formulaic music and rarely played folk music. Zykina's voice had not been heard for some 15–20 years before she died. No one was interested in folk traditions any longer, least of all the younger generation who were embarrassed by the very phrase 'Russian folk song'. Yet if society lost touch with its roots, it was in danger of losing its soul. Babkina's ensemble, *Russkaya Pesnya*, was the only one of its kind left in the country. A few state Russian choirs survived, but they were impoverished and could not afford to put on concerts or make recordings. She strongly believed that the Ministry of Culture should fund choirs and launch a serious nationwide programme to protect, develop and promote Russian folk art. At present she got no support for the folk song festivals she organised and the government was more interested in theatre and film.

However, Vavara Dobrovol'skaya, head of the research department at the State Republican Centre for Russian Folklore, rejected claims that Russian village life, along with its folk traditions, had died out. It had survived, adapting to current conditions. The folk song tradition was alive and well, even if local fairy tales and fables were no longer heard.

For psychologist Dmitri Voyedilov old folk songs and folk costume were a link in the spiritual chain connecting people with their past. Russian folk choral works were characterised by their smooth rhythm, slowness and emotion – all associated with the right side of the brain responsible for feeling and spirituality. Altogether, this produced a particular world view and set of traditional values.

Finally, on a lighter note, *Argumenty i Fakty Online* cited scientific research that proved that singing in a choir was good for you:

singers were more balanced and satisfied with life, while their life expectancy increased significantly.

## **Nizhny Novgorod Zoo's New Attraction**

*Izvestiya* reported on the new children's farm at the Limpopo Zoo in Nizhny Novgorod ('Rebyatam o zveryatakh', 10.6.09, [www.izvestiya.ru](http://www.izvestiya.ru)). A relatively new concept for Russia, the Russian Village section in the zoo gave children the chance to handle and feed farm animals and poultry. The zoo's director Vladimir Gerasichkin emphasised the educational benefits of children's farms in helping raise ecological awareness among children brought up towns and cities.

Rabbits were the most popular animals on the children's farm. Their enclosure was next to the entrance and, with only low fencing around the area, even the smallest child could climb over to run after, stroke and hold the baby rabbits. A member of the zoo's security staff stayed in the enclosure to limit the number of children at one time and ensure they did not squeeze the rabbits too tightly.

There were also piglets which were only let out in sunny weather. Two sheep had recently arrived but were resting before being put on view. The goats and donkeys were also firm favourites and were happy to be fed by visitors.

Children were taught how to feed the animals safely, holding bread in the palm of their hands to avoid being bitten. All animal feed had to be bought at the zoo so that it could be quality checked. Zoo staff monitored how much feed had been sold and adjusted the animal rations accordingly.

## **Understanding the Alcohol Problem in Russia**

Alcoholism remains a major social problem in Russia and *Argumenty i Fakty Online*

outlined the facts and figures ('Kak otvadit' Rossiyu ot butylki?', No. 29, 15.7.09, [www.aif.ru](http://www.aif.ru)).

According to statistics published by the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation, male life expectancy in Russia was lower than in comparatively poorer countries such as Bangladesh, Mauritania and Honduras. Only 42% of men in their 20s had a chance of surviving to 60 years. Russia had the worst record internationally for road accidents and more than 60% of road deaths were alcohol related. In comparison with the Soviet period, the age at which young people started drinking had fallen from 17 to 14 years, while a third of teenagers drank alcohol every day. The number of retail outlets selling alcohol per 100,000 citizens was 7–10 times higher in Russia than in Scandinavia. Whereas Sweden had one retail outlet per 4,500 people, the figure for Moscow's suburbs was one per 400 people.

In spite of its anti-drinking rhetoric the state was doing little to provide medical help to alcoholics. The Soviet system of enforced treatment of alcoholics had been abolished and only a few of its network of detoxification centres continued to function in major cities. However, it was still possible for alcoholics to get free treatment for their addiction if they made an appointment with a drug clinic. If the drug clinic diagnosed alcoholism, they would be referred to a specialist hospital for free treatment but immediately placed on the medical register. While registration guaranteed medical supervision, even after discharge from hospital, it could also mean alcoholics losing their driving licence and any chance of a decent job, therefore most drug clinics stood idle. Alternatively, Alcoholics Anonymous and many other religious and charitable organisations offered free counselling.

One of the reasons for alcohol abuse in Russia was the cheap price of vodka. Alexandra Ochirova, a member of the Public Chamber's Commission on Social and Demographic Politics, believed that the state should raise the price of vodka to make it less accessible. While this might reduce

income from taxes, it would have other positive effects on the economy, including fewer deaths among the able-bodied population, fewer drink-drive accidents and alcohol-related murders, as well as a reduction in the number of sick children born to alcoholic parents.

Officially some 40,000 Russians died from alcoholic poisoning every year. However, as relatives did their best to prevent alcoholic poisoning being cited as the cause of death on death certificates, these statistics were inaccurate. The real figure was likely to be nearer 400,000.

## Smoking Ban for the Army

*Izvestiya* reported on a new anti-smoking programme for the army launched by the Russian Ministry of Defence and specialists from the League for the Health of Nations, a Russian non-governmental organisation ('*Armii prikasano: "Opravit'sya, ne kurit!"*', 5.8.09, [www.izvestiya.ru](http://www.izvestiya.ru)).

Some 70% of conscripts today were smokers. By 2020 the programme envisaged 90–95% of soldiers and officers would have stopped smoking. As a first step the bulk purchase of cigarettes for soldiers had been halted and replaced by confectionary. By 2012 the Ministry of Defence would bring in a full smoking ban in all buildings belonging to the military, from bases to educational, medical, sports and cultural centres. The programme involved help from anti-smoking specialists (but not medical support as *Izvestiya* pointed out) and the adoption of formal measures to prevent service personnel taking up smoking and to reduce the impact of passive smoking.

## How Russians View Their Neighbours

*Kommersant'* reviewed the results of a recent opinion poll carried out by the Levada Centre on Russians' attitudes to the USA, European Union, Georgia and Ukraine ('*Rossiyanе vyrazili nedobrososedskoye*

*otnoshenie*', No. 146, 12.8.09, [www.kommersant.ru](http://www.kommersant.ru)). The figures showed that Russians felt better about the USA now than about neighbouring Ukraine and Georgia: 47% of respondents rated their attitude to the USA positive, compared to 44% for Ukraine and 25% for Georgia. These statistics showed a significant decrease over the past eight years: the comparative figures for 2001 had been 59% (USA), 71% (Ukraine) and 47% (Georgia). The European Union fared better with 61% of respondents rating their attitude positive (compared to 72% in 2003).

Attitudes to the USA had always fluctuated, in particular in response to military conflicts. The bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 had had a major negative impact on attitudes, as had the intervention in Iraq and, most recently, the war in South Ossetia in August–September 2008. Today Russians were ambiguous: they saw the USA as Russia's primary potential enemy but also as a partner and progressive power.

The deputy director of the Levada Centre attributed negative attitudes towards Georgia and Ukraine to Russia's foreign policy. The anti-Georgian propaganda machine was in full flow, but relations had been bad since the Orange Revolution, an event portrayed negatively by the Russian media. Attitudes to Ukraine could be linked to the Ukrainian presidential elections and gas conflicts. However, a separate opinion poll had indicated that while Russians might feel negatively about the Ukrainian authorities, they were positive about the Ukrainian people themselves. Interestingly, the attitude of Ukrainians towards Russia and the Russian authorities was much more positive.

## Death of Soviet Anthem Author, Sergei Mikhalkov

*RIA Novosti* news agency reported the death of the legendary Soviet children's writer and poet Sergei Mikhalkov (English news service, 27.8.09). Father of film directors Nikita Mikhalkov and Andrei Konchalovsky, Mikhalkov wrote the lyrics to

the Soviet and current Russian national anthems. He died in hospital in Moscow on 27 August 2009, aged 96.

Mikhalkov became popular in the 1930s, especially as the author of children's poetry about the giant Uncle Styopa. In 1943, at the height of the Second World War, Stalin commissioned a new national anthem, with the lyrics to be written by Mikhalkov. The poet worked on the lyrics together with war correspondent Ureklyan, they were set to music by Alexander Alexandrov and the anthem was performed for the first time in January 1944. Subsequently, in the 1970s, Mikhalkov altered the lyrics, which mentioned Stalin's name. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the anthem was briefly abolished by President Boris Yeltsin but restored under President Vladimir Putin. A new version of Russia's national anthem was officially adopted in 2001 after Mikhalkov was chosen once again to write new lyrics to Alexandrov's music.

In 2003 Mikhalkov was decorated with an Order for Service to the Fatherland by President Putin, in recognition of his contribution to Russian culture. In the Soviet era Mikhalkov received many major awards, including the prestigious Stalin prize.

*Summarised and translated by Diana Turner*

## **Listings**

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### **Russian Language**

#### **Russian Language Evening Classes**

School of Slavonic & East European Studies, UCL, 16 Taviton Street, London WC1H 0BW, Tel: 020 7679 8738, Email: eveningcourses@ssees.ucl.ac.uk, Web: www.ssees.ucl.ac.uk/eveningcourses.

Contact: Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa (SSEES Evening Course Co-ordinator)

Evening courses in Russian, as well as other Slavonic and East European

languages, at beginners, intermediate and advanced levels. Reading, writing, listening and speaking are taught, with particular emphasis on oral communication. Courses present the language as it is spoken today in everyday situations, covering basic survival skills for beginners through to fluent discussions on contemporary issues for more advanced students. Class materials include course books, newspapers, audio and visual resources. Small class sizes allow the maximum involvement of all participants.

#### **Russian Language Evening Classes**

Civil Service Recreation Centre, 1 Chadwick Street, London SW1P 2EP. Email: charles0207@yahoo.co.uk

After-work Russian language classes at four levels taught by established native Russian tutor. Email for further details.

### **Student Exchanges**

#### **Exchange with Elektrostal, Moscow Region**

15–17 year old students of English in a school in Elektrostal, Moscow Region, are looking for exchanges with British students of the same age. Their teachers suggest exchange groups of up to eight students with two adults in attendance. They would like home stays, including separate rooms for students, half board and excursions. Elektrostal is located 50km away from Moscow (approximately 45 minutes by train). If you are interested, please contact Svetlana Timofeyeva by email on Svetacustoms@yandex.ru or by mobile telephone on +79261711978.

### **Theatre**

#### **Royal Shakespeare Company**

The Courtyard Theatre, Stratford-on-Avon, Warks, Box Office: 0844 800 1110, Web: www.rsc.org.uk/revolutions

21 August – 1 October: *Revolutions: A Celebration of Theatre in Russia and the former Soviet Union*. The Revolutions

Season is an investigation into the dramatic life of the countries that make up the former Soviet Union. Two productions are in repertoire:

*The Drunks*: A new RSC commission by Mikhail and Vyacheslav Durnenkov, directed by Anthony Neilson. A provincial town is in search of a hero. A shell-shocked soldier downs vodka on his return from the front line in Chechnya. As Ilya arrives home he stumbles into the epicentre of an extraordinary power struggle that threatens to tear the town apart. This darkly comic and free-wheeling epic gets to the heart of small town politics and what it means to please all of the people all of the time.

*The Grain Store*: A new RSC commission by Natalya Vorozhbit, one of Ukraine's most important emerging writers. Ukraine 1929. As Stalin launches the first of his Five Year Plans, a close-knit rural community stands unwittingly in the path of his drive to create a thriving socialist Soviet Union. The outcome is catastrophic. What begins for the people of the village as an amusingly alien political concept rapidly becomes an unstoppable force for change. Robbed first of their land, then their religion and independence, the whole country soon becomes engulfed by a tragedy that will scar a nation for generations.

The Revolutions Season is accompanied by a series of play readings of new work by five Russian playwrights, translated by poet Sasha Dugdale and curated by Elyse Dodgson, Associate Director (International) at the Royal Court Theatre:

*Ahasversus* by Vassily Sigarev  
Saturday 19 September, 11am. Cost: £5.  
A drunken homecoming party spins out of control with heartbreaking consequences.

*How I Ate a Dog* by Evgeny Grishkovets  
Saturday 19 September, 5.30pm. Cost: £5.  
A buoyant monologue about life in the Russian Navy and the best way to cook a dog.

*Pacific Island* by Alexander Arkhipov  
Sunday 20 September, 3pm. Cost: £5.

A remote garrison in the Pacific Ocean begins to put on a play. Behind the scenes a love story develops which has horrific consequences. An RSC Commission.

*July* by Ivan Vyrpaev  
Sunday 20 September, 6pm. Cost: £5.  
A disturbing and poetic journey into the mind of a psychopathic killer by one of Russia's leading playwrights.

*Beyond the Track* by Yaroslava Pulinovich  
Sunday 20 September, 8pm. Cost: £5.  
In this beautiful and cinematic epic, a family tragedy forces five year old Alina to live near a disused railway line with her Aunt Irma. A Royal Court Theatre Commission.

All play readings take place at the Attic Theatre, Cox's Yard, Stratford-on-Avon. Call the Box Office for details on 0844 800 1114.

A number of associated special exhibitions also take place at The Courtyard Theatre, Stratford-on-Avon, and the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham. See RSC website for details.

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