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## **Feature**

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### **On the 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Russian Revolution**

By Kate Clarke, former Moscow correspondent of the *Morning Star*

No one questions the fact that the 1917 Russian Revolution was a transcendental event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thousands of books have been written about it, numerous radio and television programmes made, and countless academics have studied it.

But what is its importance and relevance to us, here in Britain, now, 90 years after the event? Has the 1917 October Revolution in fact any relevance to today's world?

American journalist John Reed described the Revolution as 'Ten Days that Shook the World'. As no other event in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the October Revolution did indeed 'shake' the world, for it was the first time that a new class took power in any country. The Bolsheviks – themselves a mixture of

working-class activists and members of the intelligentsia – brought to power a government whose stated aim was to rule on behalf of the workers and peasants. There would be a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' instead of a dictatorship of the ruling class.

There can be many differences of opinion about the extent to which the working class and peasantry really did rule the Soviet Union in the seven decades that followed until the break-up of the USSR and the end of the Communist Party's hegemony there. Some say that it was the *nomenklatura*, rather than the workers, who became the new ruling class. Some claim that the system created was state capitalism, rather than socialism. And others claim that it was a totally undemocratic dictatorship based on fear, the one-party system and total control over the media.

None of these paints an accurate picture of what the system really was like, though there are elements of truth in all these. But few would contest that the world changes brought about by the Revolution were far-reaching and are still felt today. The clamour of Russia's poor and downtrodden then was for 'Land, Peace and Bread!' And what do the poor peoples of the Third World want today? They still want an end to hunger, an end to wars and conflict that drain resources away from social programmes, and they still want land – agrarian reform is one of the first demands of any popular government elected in the developing world today.

The leftward trend in recent elections in Latin America proves that the aims and ideals of the Russian Revolution are still very much alive. Governments are being elected that promise a radical break

with neo-liberalism and the dictates of the unbridled free market, which has seen those countries' natural resources and basic industries, such as water, power, gas and communications, privatised and run for profit rather than as public services.

The governments of Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador are trying out new governmental practices and organisations that to some extent mirror the early 'soviets' – or councils – of the Russian Revolution. The undoubted democracy of those early 'soviets' of people's deputies in the USSR may have been stifled during the years of repression under Stalin. But the idea of grass-roots councils, with mass participation, where ideas and plans are debated and decided upon by vote and which elect representatives to higher bodies, is still valid today and still acts as a model.

For can we in the West really consider that the political system we have is the best, or only, example of democracy? A system where people go to the polls once every four or five years at best, but otherwise have no say in whether they will have a job tomorrow, whether house prices go up or down, whether the National Health Service is privatised or not?

Whatever our view of the seven decades or so of Soviet power, it is undeniable that the country was turned from a backward peasant country into a major industrialised state with a well-educated populace. The USSR was able to muster all its resources to defeat the Nazi army's invasion and rout the enemy all the way back to Berlin. It was capable of sending the first sputnik into space and the first man and woman into orbit around the earth. It brought culture to the people – in the form of touring ballet, opera and theatre companies, cultural palaces, Pioneer palaces, huge numbers of books, magazines and newspapers in over a hundred different languages. No one can deny these achievements.

When I was a correspondent in Moscow, first for *The Morning Star* and later for *The Scotsman*, during Gorbachev's *perestroika* period in the late 1980s, I was amazed at

the extent to which the media were allowed to go on decrying the socialist system and practically everything in Soviet history. Earnest young Soviet journalists would tell me that the people lived better under the tsars, that pre-revolutionary Russia used to export wheat to the West, that Soviet egalitarian society meant equality in poverty – nothing more.

Having studied history and politics since my youth, and having visited and lived in countries where there really was poverty, I was not easily persuaded. But it had become fashionable to find everything wrong with the system that had existed.

Yet in my five years living there I saw much that was positive – in the arts, education, publications, children's clubs and Pioneer camps, full employment, free healthcare, cheap rents and travel, and even, dare I say it, in the way that the national question had been tackled in a country with over 100 nationalities. Anyone who has travelled to Afghanistan cannot help but contrast the situation of women there with that of women in neighbouring Uzbekistan, Tajikistan or Turkmenistan. In those former Soviet republics you could meet highly educated women in positions in parliament and government, as factory directors and school heads. Girls, unveiled and heads uncovered, laughed and walked freely in the streets. When you consider that all Central Asian countries were equally backward in 1917, how can anyone deny that it was the October Revolution that promoted education for the girls and women of that immense region and enabled them to progress quickly into the 20<sup>th</sup> century?

The Russian Revolution put workers' power firmly on the world agenda. Without it, it is doubtful whether working people's rights and the idea of social justice would have been taken up in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by the working people of so many countries in the world.

Yet by the 1980s in the Soviet Union the Revolution's achievements were not enough to satisfy the increasing demand for ever-higher standards of living among the

populace. Neither can it be denied that many Soviet people did feel a lack of freedom – to travel, to interact freely with other citizens of other countries, even to dissent.

Now Russia is travelling its own path, and it is yet to be seen to what extent the ideals of the 1917 October Revolution may be incorporated into her future political system. The wholesale rejection of everything in the Soviet past characteristic of the Gorbachev and Yeltsin eras has been replaced by a more sober evaluation of events in their historical context. Many intellectuals, used to generous Soviet-era state subsidies for the creative arts and publishing, long for a return to such state backing – so that not only ventures deemed commercially viable can succeed. Russia's market economy has satisfied the demand for wide choice in food and consumer goods, travel abroad, etc, but has led to unemployment, poverty for pensioners and people on a fixed wage, while healthcare, education and housing are no longer free or low-cost.

What we can say for certain is that just as the 1917 October Revolution shook the rest of the world and influenced other countries' history, so too its influence will continue to be felt for decades to come in Russia and the rest of the former Soviet Union.

*Kate Clarke was Moscow correspondent for the Morning Star from 1985–90 and The Scotsman from 1989–90. She worked as Associate Producer on the BBC2 series 'The Second Russian Revolution' and was Deputy Features Editor of the BBC Russian Service from 1993–96. Kate is now retired and writing her autobiography.*

## **SCRSS News**

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### **SCRSS AGM Report**

The Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the Society took place on 19 May 2007. The following Honorary Officers of the Council

were elected for three years: Professor William Bowring (President); Robert Chandler, Professor Robert Davies, Sir Edward Downes, Stanley Forman, Dr Kate Hudson, Dr Rachel O'Higgins, Robert Wareing MP (Vice-Presidents). The following members of the Council were elected for three years: Wendy Ansley, Barbara Ellis, Christine Lindey, Victoria Nartova, Charles Stewart, Diana Turner, Jean Turner. The full Council is now:

Chairman: John Riley

Vice-Chairmen: Ralph Gibson, Philip Matthews

Hon Treasurer: Ralph Gibson

Hon Secretary: Jean Turner

Executive Committee member: Victoria Nartova

Council Members: Wendy Ansley, Jill Cunningham, Barbara Ellis, Natalia Grant-Ross, Andrew Jameson, Christine Lindey, Charles Stewart, Diana Turner, Albert Williams

The Secretary reported a successful year in terms of joint educational projects with the St Petersburg Association for International Co-operation, St Petersburg State University and the St Petersburg Government's Committee for External Relations. The Russian-language seminar held at the SCRSS in April 2007, led by two lecturers from St Petersburg and attended by 34 participants, had been a great success. The AGM endorsed proposals from the above bodies to repeat this venture in 2008.

Over the past year friendly relations had been established with the new Pushkin House cultural centre in Bloomsbury Square. In April the two organisations co-operated on an exhibition from the Vladimir Nabokov Museum in St Petersburg, brought to London as part of the SCRSS Russian-language seminar.

The Society had received grants from the Pushkin House Trust and the Unity Theatre Trust towards the digitisation of the theatre and photographic archive, and from the Philips Price Memorial Trust to support a number of incoming groups from St Petersburg University. Members had also

contributed generously to the SCRSS New Era Appeal. Without such generous help the Society would be in great financial difficulty. Nonetheless, the year ended with a £9,000 deficit that needed to be overcome by more proactive external fundraising activities.

As part of fundraising plans a new 20-page, colour-illustrated SCRSS brochure was shown to the meeting. It had been produced by the Council to promote the Society's library collections and work. The Society needed to print several thousand copies both as a fundraising tool and for distribution to academic and cultural institutions. Members were asked to suggest possible sources of funding for the initiative.

## Charity Gift Aid Scheme

The Society is keen to increase the number of members contributing to the Charity Gift Aid scheme. This is a very useful source of income for the Society. A Charity Gift Aid form is enclosed with this issue of the Digest: we urge all members who pay UK tax to sign and return the form as soon as possible so that your future donations qualify for gift aid.

## Events

**Friday 7 September 7pm**

**Film: Heart of Russia**

Director Vera Stroyeva. A thrilling account of the early days of the Russian Revolution in Moscow. The film is of considerable historical interest, as most accounts deal with the Revolution in Petrograd. 100 mins, colour, English sub-titles.

**Saturday 22 September 11am – 3pm**

**Event: SCRSS Book and Realia Sale**

Bargains in language, politics, history, literature and art. Free admission. Refreshments.

**Friday 26 October 7pm**

**Lecture: Stalingrad**

By Dr Michael Jones. Dr Jones speaks on his recently published book *Stalingrad: How the Red Army Triumphed*, published in 2007

by Pen and Sword Books (*reviewed in this issue*).

**Friday 9 November 7pm**

**Film: The Vyborg Side**

Directors Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg, 1937. Third part of the acclaimed Maxim Trilogy. The film begins with the storming of the Winter Palace and the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly at the time of the Russian Revolution. Maxim, a Bolshevik revolutionary, is made responsible for the State Bank. 110 mins, black/white, English sub-titles.

**Friday 30 November 7pm**

**Lecture: The Russian Revolution**

Speaker to be confirmed.

## Soviet Memorial Trust Fund News

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### 9 May Ceremony

The annual Victory Day ceremony, also commemorated as Remembrance Day in the former Soviet republics, took place at the Soviet War Memorial in the Geraldine Harmsworth Park on 9 May 2007.

In his opening speech the Chairman, Philip Matthews, condemned the Estonian Government's decision to remove the Soviet war memorial in Tallinn just two weeks before 9 May. He also condemned the action of disinterring the graves of Red Army soldiers. Both these acts were a provocation, he said. In his speech, his Excellency the Russian Ambassador, Mr Fedotov, also warned against trying to rewrite history. A similar line was taken by Robert Wareing, MP, Secretary of the All Party Committee for Russia. Simon Hughes, MP for Southwark and Bermondsey, also spoke and the Mayor of Southwark gave a civic welcome.

The wreath-laying ceremony was a solemn and impressive event, attended by most of

the embassies of the former Soviet Union, along with ex-servicemen's associations, the Royal British Legion, boys and girls from the Russian Embassy School, and other individuals.

The ceremony was followed in the afternoon by a showing of the Cinemaphonia production of Shostakovich's 7<sup>th</sup> (*Leningrad*) *Symphony*, introduced by John Riley, Chairman of the SCRSS.

The organisers of the event are grateful for the continuing support of Southwark Council, the Imperial War Museum and other generous supporters.

## Obituary

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### Jack Gaster

The Society's President, Jack Gaster, died on 12 March 2007 at the age of 99. Many tributes were paid to him in the national and local press, indicating the important all-round contribution he made to many causes during his life. The Society, for which he acted as lawyer for many years, benefited greatly from his wise advice. A Vice-President of the SCRSS since 1985, he became its President in 2002 after the death of John Platts-Mills QC.

At the Society's AGM in May Professor Bowring expressed his honour in becoming President of the Society, following as he did in the footsteps of such prestigious former incumbents as Dennis Pritt QC, John Platts-Mills QC and Jack Gaster. He read out the tribute to Jack Gaster delivered by Liz Davies, Chair of the Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers, of which Jack had been a vice-president.

On display at the meeting were obituaries published in the national press, photographs of Jack at the Society's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration at the Russian Embassy, and a festschrift prepared by friends and family for his 95<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Members made further tributes at the meeting, highlighting Jack Gaster's continuous and generous support for the Society and his part in making the SCRSS an educational charity. A number of proposals were put to the Council for consideration, including a pamphlet on Jack's life, a commemorative plaque and an annual lecture in his memory. Members could also support his family's provision of a bench in his honour in Tavistock Place Peace Garden, London WC1.

Jack's legacy must be a stronger, invigorated Society taking its full place in the academic and cultural world.

## Feature

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### Art and the Russian Revolution

*By Christine Lindey, lecturer in art history and author of 'Art in the Cold War'*

The October Revolution changed art at every level: its education, production, patronage, distribution and reception were all transformed. Fierce debates about the form and function of art in the worker state raised fundamental issues; from these stemmed so rich a flowering of the visual arts that its influence is still alive today.

The Revolution was partly the work of artists. Some had worked towards social and / or political change ever since Russian artists took up the role of social critic in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1870s the Wanderers opposed the Academy's stress on history painting by their depictions of social injustice in contemporary life.

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century a sophisticated and well-informed avant-garde was in touch with Paris and Munich, the epicentres of innovatory art. It embraced modernism and debated how to transform and modernise tsarist Russia. Some, like Goncharova and Larionov, adopted the vivid colour and formal simplifications of 'primitive' Russian

peasant art and icons, rather than those of African art favoured by the German Expressionists and French Cubists. By 1913 Malevich had rejected representation as antiquated, arguing that his revolutionary abstraction equated to modern times.

October 1917 brought radical political and cultural change: art was no longer for the bourgeois and aristocrat, but for the people. The art market was abolished and museums nationalised; the workers' state became art's patron. Initially, most avant-garde artists welcomed the Revolution because Lenin's idea of a political avant-garde as an agent for social change legitimised their own calls for radical action to combat conservative attitudes to art and society.

For Marxists like Tatlin, here was an opportunity to make real and meaningful change. He recalled: "To Accept (sic) or not accept the October Revolution. There was no such question for me. I organically merged into active creative, social and pedagogical life." Others, like Kandinsky, were not sympathetic to Bolshevik politics, but welcomed the artistic freedom that it brought, while aesthetically and / or politically conservative artists feared the loss of private patrons and of critical status.

Contrary to Western propaganda, no artist was sent to the salt mines: Lenin and Lunacharsky (Commissar of Enlightenment 1917–29) pursued a pluralist arts policy. Nevertheless, for the first time in the history of art it was mostly the avant-garde that was appointed to positions of power. Despite the material hardships and shortages of War Communism (1917–22), it launched into a dynamic transformation of art and its institutions.

Tatlin headed up IZO, the visual arts section of Lunacharsky's commissariat. Recognising Kandinsky's international status as an innovator, IZO gave him the important role of re-organising art education and museums. Together with the younger Rodchenko, he founded 22 provincial museums and acquired the important collections of contemporary avant-garde art (including his own works) that now grace

museums in Russia and the ex-Soviet republics. Tatlin, Malevich, Kandinsky, Chagall, Popova, Stepanova, Rodchenko, Lissitzky and others taught at the newly created VKhUTEMAS, SVOMAS and other art schools where they pioneered innovative teaching methods that were to influence the Bauhaus.

The debates about the role of art and artists raged on. Malevich and his UNOVIS group argued that the researches of innovative artists would act as prototypes for practical application in architecture and design. Others took a less social view: Chagall continued his poetic depictions of his personal response to life, while Kandinsky pursued his investigations into the communication of heightened spiritual states of mind via colour, line and form.

Viewing such work as bourgeois self-indulgence, the politically engaged left heeded Mayakovsky's dictum: "The streets are our brushes, the squares our brushes." They created 'agit-prop' (agitation and propaganda), using their talents to decorate propaganda trains and boats, Rosta street posters, and public pageants and events. For example, in 1920 Altman and others involved 2,000 members of the Petrograd proletariat in the re-enactment of the storming of the Winter Palace. This included decorating buildings with gigantic abstract banners and panels, and using factory sirens and arc lights.

Some Marxists led by Tatlin and Rodchenko called for the abolition of the art object, which they saw as an exchangeable commodity belonging to the bourgeois past. Artists must leave their ivory towers and construct the new socialist state alongside other workers, putting art at the service of the Revolution. They became known as the Constructivists and put the experiments conducted at VKhUTEMAS, etc, to practical use by designing posters, books, ceramics and theatre sets for the masses. Under the slogan 'Art into Production' artists were to go into the factories to create modernist, mass-produced designs: the new social order demanded new materials and new forms. For example, Popova and Stepanova

designed textiles printed with the abstracted motifs of modernity: the zigzag of electricity, the whirl of aeroplane propellers, the power of trains and tractors. Popova, who had begun her life as a painter, is reputed to have said: "No artistic success has given me such satisfaction as the sight of a peasant or a worker buying a length of material designed by me."

Meanwhile, artists such as Petrov-Vodkin and Deineka argued that modernism was inaccessible to the masses. This was indeed often true. Abstract street decorations were said to frighten the horses. No less committed to the Revolution, they argued for a representational art that would carry revolutionary messages. Seen as reactionary by the modernists, they were the forerunners of Socialist Realism. The dilemma of creating innovatory art that is also accessible to the masses has yet to be resolved.

## **Book & DVD Reviews**

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### **Moscow: A Cultural and Literary History**

**By Caroline Brooke (Signal Books Ltd, [www.signalbooks.co.uk](http://www.signalbooks.co.uk), 2006, ISBN 1-904955-22-3, Pbk, 268pp, £12.00)**

Anyone who noted the coverage of this summer's opening of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel near the Kremlin (basic rooms from \$1000 dollars a night!) will have seen just how rapidly Moscow has changed in the last 10–15 years. Caroline Brooke's guide shows how the latest bout of 'transformation' fits in with the pattern of centuries of development in Russia's capital city. Focusing on the cultural figures who made Moscow their home, it is an excellent alternative guide to the city for those who want more than simply the opening times of museums and galleries. The author – a teacher, writer and historian – is clearly fascinated by the city and displays a real devotion to the place and its people. There are numerous mini-

biographies for writers, artists and composers, indicating the buildings and places most associated with them, as well as more general descriptions for key locations such as the Kremlin. The book shows how deeply the city has embraced the arts in all its forms and, despite many obstacles and diversions, continues to do so in the new century.

*By Ralph Gibson*

### **Rossiya i Britaniya XVI–XIX Veka By SR Dolgova and TA Lapteva, Editor-in-Chief: Tatiana I Skalkina (Drevlekhranilishche, Moscow, 2007)**

The Russian State Archives of Historical Acts are located in a building on Bolshaya Pirogovskaya Street in Moscow. A huge multi-tiered depot contains more than three million files, mostly unique collections of national culture and official written documents from the 11<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Among these are the records of the Russian Ambassadorial Department, founded in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This was the century when diplomatic and trade relations were established between the Kievan princes and English monarchs. This beautifully presented and illustrated publication, written in Russian and English, contains reproductions of documents from the archive covering those relations from the 16<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The book records the contribution made to Russian technology, agriculture, medicine and crafts by English and Scottish specialists contracted to the tsars. Irish, Scottish and English officers trained and fought with the Russian forces throughout the 17<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries and their contracts and commendations, together with messages between the tsars and British monarchs concerning their secondments, are illustrated. Of particular interest is the fact that Queen Elizabeth I negotiated with Ivan the Terrible to grant him asylum in England "in case he would be forced to leave Russia". Shades of the British monarchy and Nicholas II!

This book is a treasure, containing much previously unknown information about British-Russian relations. The Board of the Russian-British Association and the authors are to be congratulated on its production. A copy is available to view in the SCRSS reference library.

*By Jean Turner*

## **Stalingrad: How the Red Army Triumphed**

**By Michael K Jones (Pen and Sword Books Limited, 2007, ISBN: 9781844155439, Hbk, 270pp, £19.99)**

There have been more than 60 books about Stalingrad published in this country. There may be some who ask, why another? There are two good reasons: the Battle of Stalingrad halted the Nazis in their eastward sweep; it also gave the Red Army and the Russian people, as well as all the Allies, a massive psychological uplift. It showed that the hitherto invincible Wehrmacht could be defeated. If one battle could be said to have changed the course of the war, it was Stalingrad.

Michael Jones is a professional military historian with a special interest in the psychology of battle; hence the sub-title of this book – how the Red Army triumphed. It triumphed through inspired leadership by the commander of the 62<sup>nd</sup> Army, General Chuikov (later, incidentally, deputy commander of the Warsaw Pact forces). But beyond leadership there was the simplest, yet also hardest, of all qualities – courage. Jones quotes the words of a veteran: “We knew, we didn’t have to be told: your comrade’s life is more important than your own.”

Although Jones follows the course and phases of the battle in due order, what gives his book its particular interest is its concentration on such aspects as morale and motivation. What kept the ordinary soldiers fighting when, for example, the Germans were sometimes within 200 yards of the Volga? It wasn’t the often told story – dismissed by Jones as a myth – that NKVD

battalions were behind the front line ready to fire on their own soldiers who fled or even retreated. There were such battalions, but they fought in the city, on the front line – so far as there was one. “How did you hold out?” a veteran survivor of the battle was asked. “I don’t know,” he said, “it was beyond the understanding of any of us.”

Only 10% of the officers and a mere 3% of the soldiers were Communist Party members. But every man – and there were women too – instinctively knew that if the Germans crossed the Volga, Russia could be lost. Stalin knew, hence his celebrated order 227: “Not a step back.”

Michael Jones’ book is riveting and sometimes moving. After all, more Russians died there than were lost by both the British and American armies in the war. He tells the story of an elderly survivor who arrived at the Stalingrad museum, carrying his battered suitcase, to ask for advice where he could stay. “I have come back,” he said, “because this is where I want to die, and be buried. You see, I have an affection for Stalingrad.”

*By Chris Barlow*

## **War, Wine and Valour: Five Years Fighting the Nazis and Celebrating the Sixty Years of Peace their Destruction has Brought**

**By Douglas M Baker (published by the author, 2005, ISBN: 1-901754-00-6, £25.00)**

This is a remarkable book and repays the effort of working through its disappointing editing and proofreading. For I am bound to warn the reader, there will be times when you will be infuriated at the muddles generated by the lack of attention to detail.

Nevertheless, the detail – with all its imperfections – is eye-opening. A young man of just 17 years, with careful disguise of his true age, is mobilised into a South African version of the Territorial Army. By his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday he is in action against the Italians and their African allies in Abyssinia

and Somaliland. He considers that this series of engagements may be the “last of the gentleman’s wars”. As his unit embarks for Egypt in June 1941, Douglas and his comrades think that things may be more or less the same. With conspicuous lack of political correctness, the author notes that they expect “lots of heat and fuzzy wuzzies and quick walkovers with weapons always better than the enemy’s”.

How wrong they are. The desert war is violent, torrid and depressing in its series of reverses. Douglas mentions the brief lull when the Germans invade Russia and the desert war is briefly sidelined. All too soon, with German guns and bombs reaching Moscow, there is fear that the Russians will soon be easily defeated. The eventual triumph at Stalingrad is the beginning of the German defeat, underwritten by the Allied victory at El Alamein. It is in this battle that Douglas is first seriously wounded. His war then moves to Italy and the advance on Rome and beyond. Here, by now a hardened veteran of 21, he is again severely wounded.

As before, he persists with requests to leave his convalescent bed and rejoin his comrades-in-arms. But eventually, after many colourful escapades in between the horrors of close combat, he is sent home to South Africa. He is discharged from the army just a month before the end of the war in Europe – a war he has seen through almost from beginning to end.

The book does take some effort to work through, but its 500-odd pages, which include many illustrations and maps, tell a story that does full justice to the role and lot of the ordinary soldier in war. Tedium, crazy antics, gruesome encounters, laughter and agony. And, as Douglas notes, no pension at the end of it all. Stick with it and salute the kind of man that Douglas portrays.

The book is available to buy from Dr Douglas Baker, ‘Little Elephant’, High Road, Essendon, Hertfordshire.

*By Philip Wilkinson*

## **Soviet Propaganda (Odeon Entertainment, two DVD sets, £17.99)**

These clips of Soviet animated propaganda films dating from 1924–79 were recently recovered from Russia’s television vaults. They contain interviews with Soviet animators who are proud of their work but also contributions Professor Igor Kokarev of the Russian State Film School who criticises the powerful propaganda role of these films in blinding people to reality. He appears to believe that only Soviet people suffered cradle-to-grave propaganda. He does not understand that people in capitalist countries were also subjected to media and film images that influenced their view of society and the world.

The first set, *American Imperialism and Fascist Barbarians*, tackles racism. *Black and White* (1933) uses a poem written by Mayakovsky during his visit to Cuba in 1922 to portray the treatment of black workers by their white masters. Paul Robeson provides the music backing.

A popular Marshak poem, *Mr Twister* (1963), is made into a children’s cartoon. A wealthy US family visits a Leningrad hotel, sees a black guest and immediately checks out, only to be refused rooms at other hotels as the concierges contact each other by telephone.

The anti-US theme is continued in two Ivanov-Vano films: *Someone Else’s Voice* (1949) attacks jazz as alien to Russian culture, while *Ave Maria* (1972) is against America aggression in Vietnam, using religious symbols of suffering women and children. A stunning depiction of New York by V Tarasov, *The Shooting Range* (1979), is based on his study of US magazines and cartoons.

The rest of this set covers the invasion of the USSR and the anti-fascist fight, depicting heroic resistance by young pioneers and children.

The second set, *Capitalist Sharks and Communism's Shining Future*, contains the first Soviet animation films: *Interplanetary Revolution* (1924); Dziga Vertov's *Soviet Toys* (1924), attacking wealthy NEP men; *China in Flames* (1925), the first Soviet full-length animated film; and *We Outsmart Them* (1927) on the capitalist sabotage of the fledgling USSR.

*Time Forward* (1977) by Tarasov, based on a poem by Mayakovsky, looks askance at the NEP; *Victorious Destination* (1939) applauds the first and second Five Year Plans; while *Proud Little Ship* (1966) is a pioneer-built model ship Aurora that sails around the world in the name of Soviet friendship. *Plus Electrification* (1972) is a joyful cartoon of the arrival of electricity in Soviet towns and villages. Two short films complete this set: *Kino-Pravda* by Vertov (1924), on Lenin's death, and *Join the Collective Farm* (1925).

Each of the two DVD sets includes a booklet describing the animations, but gives inaccurate information on playing time and contents. Nonetheless, what is there is exciting and the producers deserve credit for preserving this valuable material for future generations. The DVDs give a taste of the varied output of these talented Soviet animators, but leaves one wishing for more.

*By Jean Turner*

## From the Russian Press

### **Death of Boris Yeltsin (1931–2007)**

Boris Yeltsin, the first president of the Russian Federation, died in March 2007 and was given a state funeral in Moscow. The Russian press responded with many articles, obituaries and editorials on the former president and his political legacy.

*Izvestiya* published President Putin's address to the Russian nation ('Ushyol Boris Yel'tsin', 23.4.07, [www.izvestiya.ru](http://www.izvestiya.ru)). In it he said that Yeltsin's name would go down in

history as the man who had brought about the birth of a new, democratic and free Russia in which power really did belong to the people. His strength had lain in the mass support he had been able to attract for his ideas and aspirations. It was Yeltsin who had pushed through a new Constitution that placed the highest value on human rights. This had made it possible for people to express their views freely, freely elect their political representatives, and realise their creative and business potential. President Putin described Yeltsin as a courageous and sincere man, a leader who had been open and honest and had taken full responsibility for his actions.

*Izvestiya's* own editorial concluded that Yeltsin was a man who had made mistakes, but whom it was impossible not to respect (*ibid.*).

*Izvestiya* also reprinted one of Yeltsin's last interviews ('Presidentu nuzhny um, karakter i chelovechnost', 24.4.07, [www.izvestiya.ru](http://www.izvestiya.ru)). Yeltsin had been in bullish mood as he reflected on his legacy. He had inherited an impoverished country from Gorbachev – one with no gold reserve, money, food or goods, and with delays in paying salaries. He had done what had to be done and established democracy, free speech and freedom of travel. If mistakes had been made, it was through lack of experience in running a democratic state. Improvements in living standards and salaries had not come as quickly as he had hoped, but overall he did not believe he had made any strategic mistakes. If he had not taken a hard line, the communists would have seized power again and he had not been prepared to allow a return to the old regime.

*Nezavisimaya Gazeta* observed that while Yeltsin might not have given Russia real freedom and democracy, he had given them a lasting *taste* for these ('O Borise Nikolayeviche Yelt'sine', 24.4.07, [www.ng.ru](http://www.ng.ru)). He had destroyed two key institutions of Soviet power – the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the KGB – earning the hatred of the *nomenklatura* and the love of the people. He had been

personally courageous in defence of democracy, putting his life on the line during the 1991 coup. And he had given people freedom of speech, although this had also given his political opponents the opportunity to vilify him in the press and convince the public that his regime was corrupt.

Finally, a *Moskovskaya Pravda* correspondent claimed that Yeltsin was neither a super-strategist nor a towering economic thinker ('Lichnost' epokhi peremen: O tom, kto ushyol, poproshchavshis", 25.4.07, www.mospravda.ru). All the decisions he had made – whether right or wrong – had been reached intuitively. In 1991, 1996 and 1999 he had grasped that he could not destroy the old system and its shadowy leaders completely. Instead, he had ensured that democracy and justice – two words so alien to the Russian authorities – had become rooted in the public consciousness.

## Removal of Soviet War Memorial in Estonia

There was an outcry in the Russian press over the dismantling of the Soviet war memorial in Tallinn a few days before 9 May.

A correspondent in the army newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda* claimed that the Estonian Government's action was an attempt to rewrite history by those defeated in WWII but now back in power ('Pochemu u nas problemy s Estoniyei', 8.5.07, www.redstar.ru). He also attributed to the same cause plans in Hungary and Poland to remove their own WWII army memorials. He accused the European Union of condoning these actions, but reserved particular criticism for the Russian Government for its failure to register a strong enough protest. He suggested that the Russian Government consider a new law under which countries supporting fascist ideology would be subject to sanctions.

Another correspondent in the same newspaper gave a different view of Europe's response ('V korichnevom virazhe, ili o

chom zabyli tallinskiye grobokopateli', 11.5.07, www.redstar.ru). He asserted that not all countries in the European Union had been happy with Estonia's action. Among other protests, the Simon Wiesenthal Centre had called the dismantling of the memorial an insult to the memory of the victims of fascism. There had also been concern in Europe over the erection of a statue in Pärnu dedicated to 'the Estonian men who fought against Bolshevism and for the restoration of an independent Estonia in 1940–1945'. Outraged public opinion had forced the removal of the statue to a private museum. However, the correspondent was particularly critical of the Russian Parliament's weak response to Estonia's plans, branding a parliamentary delegation's visit to Tallinn as a missed opportunity to put Russia's case effectively.

*Argumenty i Fakty* also condemned the Estonian Government's action as an insult to the memory of the soldiers who had died fighting fascism ('Korroziya pamyati, ili pochemu ne vse pamyatniki my sokhranili', Vyp. 18 [1383], 2.5.07, <http://gazeta.aif.ru>). However, it took a different angle, considering the preservation of war memorials on Russian soil. Two key issues were site ownership and urban development.

Many memorials had been erected on land now owned by private businesses. If the businesses went bankrupt, ownership was passed back to the local authorities. Yet the local authorities had little money to maintain the memorials.

Urban development was also a potential threat. Some cities, such as Ekaterinburg, had ensured that road development was sensitive to existing memorial sites. In others, such as Stavropol and Pervoural'sk, commercial site development had resulted in the dismantling and removal of memorials to other sites, sometimes without consultation with veterans' groups. In some cases the originals had been replaced by smaller copies.

*Articles selected, summarised and translated by Diana Turner*

# Listings

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## Events

### Russian ACT 2007

Russian ACT 2007 will be opened by a giant cinema event at the end of September in Trafalgar Square, followed by a festival of Russian cinema, art, theatre and music through to December.

The events include a retrospective of artist Oleg Kulik; an exhibition of Alexander Rodchenko photography at the Hayward Gallery in November; *Elizaveta Bam*, a play by Daniil Kharms at the British Library; Russian jazz and folk fusion groups at the Pulse Festival in October, the South Bank Centre in November and the Roundhouse in December. There will also be talks by the major performers and artists at Pushkin House, 5A Bloomsbury Square throughout the period.

The festival is sponsored by the Russian Federal Agency for Culture and Cinematography. For further details email [svermuyten@markoff.ru](mailto:svermuyten@markoff.ru) or visit [www.russianact.co.uk](http://www.russianact.co.uk) or [www.markoff.ru](http://www.markoff.ru).

## Exhibitions

### John Rylands Library

Deansgate, Manchester, Tel: 0161 306 0555

Until 11 August: *The Silk Road and the Search for the Secrets of Silk*. From the British Library.

## Film

### SCRSS

320 Brixton Road, London SW9, Tel: 020 7274 2282, [www.scrss.org.uk](http://www.scrss.org.uk)

7 September 7pm: *Heart of Russia* (dir. Vera Stroyeva) [see page 4 for details].

9 November 7pm: *The Vyborg Side* (dir. Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg, 1937) [see page 4 for details].

## Lectures

### SCRSS

320 Brixton Road, London SW9, Tel: 020 7274 2282, [www.scrss.org.uk](http://www.scrss.org.uk)

26 October 7pm: *Stalingrad* by Dr Michael Jones. [see page 4 for details].

## Music

### Chisinau National Philharmonic Orchestra and Chorus

Croydon Fairfield Halls, Tel 020 8688 9291 (Box Office)

17 October 7.30pm: Performance of Bizet's *Carmen*. For details of further Ellen Kent productions, telephone 01634 819141 or visit [www.ellenkent.com](http://www.ellenkent.com).

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