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## **Feature**

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### **Mikhail Andreyevich Savitsky**

By Christine Lindey

The life story of Mikhail Andreyevich Savitsky, People's Artist of Belorussia, sounds like that in a Victorian novel. Peasant lad overcomes innumerable obstacles to become his country's most illustrious artist.

Now aged 86, he is still working. We met in his massive studio at the Art Academy of Belarus. Financed by the Ministry of Culture, this prestigious postgraduate art school is at the pinnacle of Belarusian art education. Savitsky is its head.

Born in 1922, three years after the establishment of the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, to a peasant family in the Vitebsk region, Savitsky grew up on a collective farm. "When I was a child, I wanted to be an artist, but you know it did not happen... My father was ill, so I couldn't go to art college. I had to work to help out. I

had to work in the fields. Peasants could turn their hand to anything: we mended cars, made sickles, etc. I made sickles. I liked that very much, doing it very well. All the ladies wanted my sickles because they were so well made..."

Unlike the preceding generation of peasants who were mostly illiterate, Savitsky received a Soviet education and left school with a certificate. That year the Nazis invaded Belorussia and he joined the Red Army. He was 18.

He fought for the entire Battle of Sevastopol, from where he was taken prisoner and sent to a Nazi work camp. Caught for sabotage, he spent the rest of the war experiencing the horrors of several German concentration camps, including Dachau and Buchenwald.

Emaciated, he emerged to find his country devastated. Belorussia's land and peoples were destroyed on a greater scale than that of any other single country in WWII. Between 25% – 33 % of its population was killed, 200 towns and 9,200 villages were razed to the ground.

Wandering around the ruins of Minsk in 1947, still in his army uniform, Savitsky stumbled across a notice inviting applicants to the newly founded Minsk Art College. To his surprise he passed the entrance exam. Until then, as a child and in the army, he had drawn from photographs. Now he received a rigorous Soviet academic training founded on observational drawing.

He found his voice as an artist at the prestigious postgraduate Surikov Institute in Moscow at a time of massive cultural, political and social change. When he arrived in 1951, the Zhdanovian interpretations

of socialist realism were at their most xenophobic and anti-modernist. When he left in 1957, the Khrushchev thaw had brought a thrilling openness to new ideas. Western artists such as Picasso, Guttuso, Léger and Rivera were now exhibited and published, as were Soviet artists of the 1920s and early 1930s such as Petrov-Vodkin and Deineka whose socialist works had embraced modernism's expressive possibilities without renouncing the accessibility of figuration.

These works inspired Savitsky and others to reinvigorate socialist realism by revoking the insincerity, timidity and literalness with which it had been interpreted in the 1940s and early 1950s. Unlike the 'sweet socialist realism' of ever grinning, apple-cheeked citizens, their works reflected the complex realities of Soviet life and did so in a manner that was of its own century. Termed the 'Severe' style, Savitsky was one of its pioneers.



Savitsky: *Partisan Madonna*, 1967 (SCRSS Library)

In the National Art Museum of Belarus hangs Volkov's painting *Minsk, July 3rd, 1944* (1946 – 53). Painted while Savitsky was a student of Volkov's at Minsk Art College, it is a massive history painting that depicts survivors of the devastated city welcoming its liberation by the Red Army. Its style conforms to the expectations of

Zhdanovian art theory. Technically proficient, it follows the compositional principles of 19<sup>th</sup>-century beaux-arts symmetry, perspective and tonal organisation; the life-size figures are illusionistic but idealised in a manner that evokes the smiling stereotypes of contemporary Soviet mass media.

In the same room hangs *Bread* (1962), one of Savitsky's early works. The contrast could not be greater. The figures are not idealised, the composition is asymmetrical and dominated by rhythmic curves, the edges are delineated by bold lines, the spatial organisation is compressed and the painting is dominated by flat areas of vivid colour. Its visual impact relies on modernism.

His other works of this period often depict the Belorussian peasant life that he knew so well. A boy tends a cow, women harvest flax or grain, yet they are shown working with a serious intensity that implies universal meanings about the importance of nature and of labour, rather than being cheery paeans to bucolic life.

But Savitsky's early adult years were so scarred by the war that much of his work warns of the horrors of fascism. A desire to bear witness has been his driving force. Explaining his determination to pass the entrance exam to the Surikov, despite almost insurmountable odds, he said: "I thought: 'I don't mind how many times I have to take it, five or 10 times, but I *will* do it.' Because I already understood that it was my duty to show what I knew about the war. Not to talk about it, but to *show* it, visually..."

Until the mid-1970s he portrayed the resistance, stoicism and oppression experienced by the peasant communities from which he came. His most famous work, *Partisan Madonna* (1967), belongs to this period. Reminiscent of Petrov-Vodkin's *Petrograd Madonna*, it conveys the resolution to oppose the Nazi invaders of a nursing mother, flanked by peasants and partisans. The high horizon conveys the claustrophobia of occupation, while the powerful visual rhythm created by repeated curves of heads, breast, shoulders, bent

backs and fields of grain being harvested in the background unifies the composition.



Savitsky: *Bread*, 1968 (SCRSS Library)

Works such as *Bread* (1968) do not directly deal with the war, but seem to allude to it. Silhouetted against the paleness of snow, three peasants, all in a row, bear loaves of bread as if in a religious procession; their solemnity reminds us of the importance of the staff of life to a population recently deprived of food.

Only in the 1970s did Savitsky feel able to tell his own horrific story in the *Numbers on the Heart* series (1974 – 79). Asked if he used emotion to get his ideas across, he replied: “Yes, yes, of course... But... you had to choose one particular group of emotions that matched your own feelings... So I had a major task: which group to choose for the concentration camps? How to reveal what fascism was? So, what emotions? I thought and thought and I decided on shock...”

They are, indeed, almost unbearable to look at. Worked in a much more illusionistic manner than his 1960s paintings, they portray the tortures, indignities and cruelties that he witnessed in the concentration camps.

In the late 1980s his history paintings warned of the results of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and his most recent works concentrate on Christian themes.

In our interview it seemed that he considered the *Numbers on the Heart* series to be his most important work. But to western eyes it is his 1960s ‘Severe’ style paintings that shine out. Challenging a facile pandering to the lowest common denominator of taste, they created a vibrantly relevant art from socialist realist theory.

*Christine Lindey’s publications include ‘Art in the Cold War’ (1990) and ‘Keywords of Nineteenth Century Art’ (2006). She currently writes art criticism for the Morning Star and is researching a book about socialist art. Her research in Belarus was funded with a grant from the London College of Communications, University of the Arts, London. She teaches there and at Birkbeck College, University of London.*

## SCRSS News

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### Annual General Meeting

The Society’s AGM took place on Saturday 17 May. The guest speaker was Arthur Matikyan, Russian Embassy Counsellor and representative of Rosintercentre in Moscow, who acknowledged the Society’s long-standing work in promoting positive British-Russian relations.

The previous year had seen a successful second SCRSS Russian Language Seminar in April 2008 and continuing progress in digitising and cataloguing the Photo Library. Members were thanked for their continuing generosity in supporting the day-to-day running of the Society through financial donations and volunteering. However, to enable further improvements to its work, the Society urgently needed to increase revenue from membership, donations, Gift Aid and bequests, and seek additional funding from external sponsors and through special appeals. The Society currently struggled to survive on an annual income of £30,000, half of which went towards the salary of its one full-time member of staff.

Jill Cunningham and Professor James Riordan were elected to the Council. The full Council is now: *Honorary Officers:* 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). *Executive Committee:* John Riley (Chair), Ralph Gibson and Philip Matthews (Vice-Chair), Jean Turner (Hon Secretary), Ralph Gibson (Hon Treasurer), Victoria Nartova, Charles Stewart. *Council:* Wendy Ansley, Jill Cunningham, Barbara Ellis, Natalia Grant-Ross, Andrew Jameson, Christine Lindey, Professor James Riordan, Diana Turner, Albert Williams.

The meeting approved the following increases to the annual membership subscription rates with effect from June 2008: *London & Home Counties:* £25 individual, £30 joint, £15 unwaged. *Other UK:* £15 individual, £17 joint, £10 unwaged. *Affiliations:* £100 commercial, £50 educational / institutional, £35 community / voluntary. *Overseas:* £25 Europe, £30 global. Members with standing orders are requested to revise their contributions accordingly.

The meeting approved that a Council member's offer to donate £1,000 to the SCRSS, if 12 others could be found to match the offer, should allow joint donations of £500 each by two individuals.

## Events

### Friday 12 September 7pm

#### Lecture: Sport and the Oligarchs

By Jim Riordan. Jim is Visiting Professor in Sports Studies at the University of Worcester and author of, among others, *Comrade Jim*, *Soviet Sport*, *The Young Oxford Book of Sports Stories* and *The Match of Death*.

### Friday 26 September 7pm

#### Film: Officers

The film covers the lives of two Red Army officers, spanning half a century. Director V

Rogovoi, Gorky Film Studios, 93 mins, b/w, English sub-titles.

### Saturday 4 October 11am - 4pm

#### Event: Library Open Day and Sale of Surplus Books, Realia and Souvenirs

Talks on the Society and Russia. Refreshments. Free admission – all welcome.

### Friday 10 October 7pm

#### Film: Born Twice

At the height of WWII a hospital ship returning to its base in Archangel is sunk by Nazi planes despite its Red Cross markings. The single survivor, a very young recruit, struggles to return to his unit. Director Arkady Sirenko, 100 mins, colour, English commentary, 1983.

### Friday 24 October 7pm

#### Lecture: The Kamchatka to Chukotka Expedition

By Barbara Forrai. Barbara travels to Russia frequently through her work raising money for Helping Hands, a Siberian charity that looks after street children. Her illustrated talk covers a journey she took on board a small Russian ship to Kamchatka and Chukotka in Siberia.

### Friday 7 November 7pm

#### Lecture: The Soviet Union's Contribution to the Defeat of Japanese Militarism

By Keith Bennett. Keith studied the history and politics of China, Japan and South East Asia at the School for Oriental and African Studies (University of London). He is currently a political and government relations consultant, specialising in China and Korea. He has written and lectured extensively on the politics, history and economics of the Far East.

### Friday 21 November 7pm

#### Film: Cossacks Beyond the Danube

Gulak-Artemovskiy's light-hearted opera, performed by the Ukrainian State Opera and Ballet, is based on the wish of Ukrainian Cossacks in the 18th century to return to their homeland from Turkey. Director V Lapoknysh, Kiev Film Studios, 92 mins, b/w, English sub-titles, 1953.

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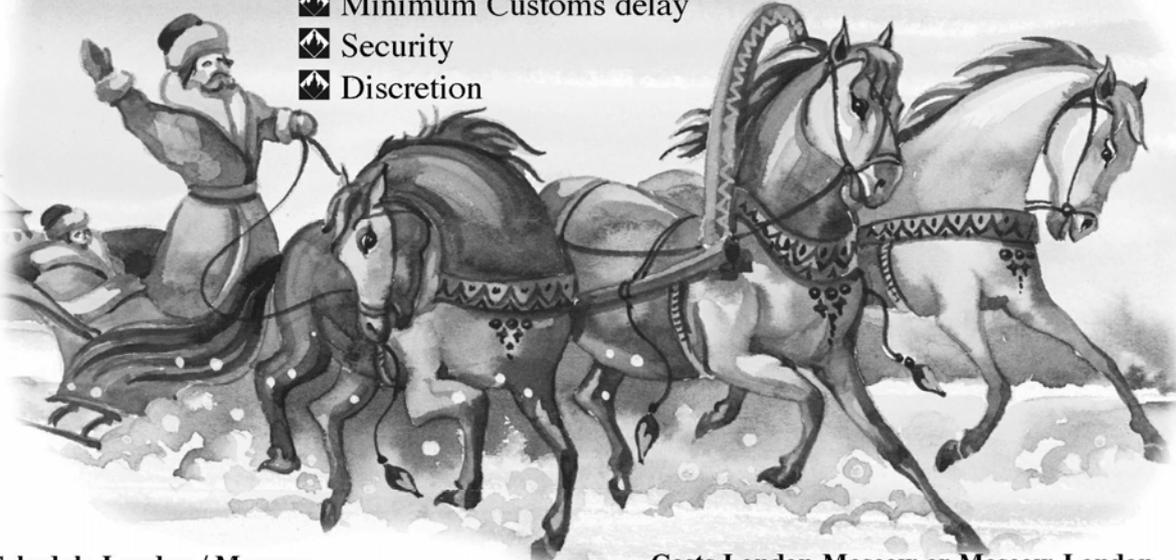
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# Soviet Memorial Trust Fund News

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## Victory Day Ceremony

Bright sunshine greeted over 250 people present at the 9 May Victory Day ceremony at the Soviet War Memorial in London.

Cllr Bob Skelly, the Mayor of Southwark, HE Yury Fedotov, the Russian Ambassador, and Simon Hughes MP (representing Southwark & Bermondsey) were joined by diplomats from the CIS embassies, British war and Arctic Convoy veterans, and representatives of various organisations, including the SCRSS, that support the work of the Soviet Memorial Trust Fund.

Following advance front-page coverage in the Russian-language newspaper *Angliya*, this year the event attracted more than the usual number of people from Russia and other CIS states working or studying in London. Many of these new participants were undoubtedly surprised and pleased that such a Memorial existed in London, and that Victory Day was being marked.

The Act of Remembrance began with short addresses from the Mayor of Southwark, the Russian and Kyrgyz ambassadors, and Simon Hughes MP, which all emphasised the tremendous importance of remembering the millions of men and women from all parts of the former USSR who are honoured by the Memorial. The sea of flowers that covered the Memorial attracted attention long after the event was over.

For the first time, the official ceremony was followed by an informal reception in the park surrounding the Memorial, with refreshments provided by the Russian Embassy. This enabled participants to enjoy some food and drink in the sunshine and to chat with the many veterans present. Later, inside the Imperial War Museum, a large audience in the Cinema watched films from the museum's archives relating to the wartime alliance and the Battle of Moscow.

## Events

**Sunday 9 November 12.30**

### Remembrance Sunday Ceremony

For further details, contact Ralph Gibson, SMTF Hon Secretary, c/o the SCRSS or [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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### Study in Russia

By Dr Roy Bivon

I was a Russian language university lecturer for 30 years and during that time led student groups on language courses to the Soviet Union. After the break-up of the Soviet Union, I set up my own company and have been arranging language courses in Russia for over 10 years.

A lot has changed since I first led a course to the Soviet Union in 1970. As a student in the Soviet Union, you visited as part of an exchange scheme arranged under the Anglo-Soviet Cultural Agreement. Alternatively, you purchased a short language course through an 'approved' tour operator, the main one in London being Progressive Tours. Courses took place at state universities. There was no discussion of the syllabus as all Soviet teachers were trained in how to teach Russian to foreigners and no foreigner could possibly know better!

The courses were organised either by Intourist or the youth travel organisation Sputnik. As group leader, I recall numerous problems with buses not turning up and unsuitable accommodation, among others. Students were not allowed to travel outside the city they were studying in. Occasionally a helpful guide would play the system. One arranged a visit to a Lenin Museum at

Razliv, situated outside Leningrad (as it then was). After the quickest museum visit on record, we were free to wander around the birch woods.

With the break-up of the Soviet Union things changed radically. You could now purchase a language course arranged by a whole host of state and private organisations. In the 1990s many private institutes were set up, often by disillusioned university lecturers, but with very variable standards. Not only was the cost of these courses very cheap at this time, the cost of accommodation was much cheaper than in the UK. It was also possible to get visas very easily: a letter on headed notepaper with the essential impressive stamp was all that was required. Many of the private institutes have long since gone. Some that have survived have a dual role: teaching Russian to foreigners and English to Russians.

I currently arrange language courses for students on their year abroad for the educational charity Russian Language Undergraduate Studies (RLUS) Ltd, as well as through my own company Study in Russia (formerly Essex Russia Services). I use a mixture of state and private organisations.

Many of the state organisations have set up separate institutes with the specific purpose of teaching Russian to foreigners. However, do not be fooled into thinking that a state university will be a guarantee of a quality course. I have had occasion to reject courses from some highly prestigious universities in Russia. Some of them (but by no means all) retain the Soviet attitude that they know how to teach Russian as a foreign language and are not willing to change their courses to meet the needs of the British student.

The good private institutes often employ very few staff on a permanent basis, but have no problem finding excellent teachers, whose main job will be at a local university. Pay at state universities is very low and lecturers are contracted to teach a specific number of hours per week. Most will take on a second or third job to make ends meet

and the private institutes pay slightly more than state universities. If a teacher is not doing a satisfactory job, they will not be employed again by the private institute. As part of my work, I visit all the institutes, talk to the students, discuss any problems and only deal with institutes that are open to suggestions.

Unfortunately, costs have risen since the 1990s. Russia is no longer a cheap place to live. While the courses themselves are still cheaper than similar courses at an EFL college in the UK, accommodation has become much more expensive. Very few institutes have hostels that a British student would be willing to live in, although all will arrange home stay accommodation. Students now complain that costs are the same as in the UK, but standards are lower. This is particularly true of Moscow and St Petersburg.

How should you go about finding a course in Russia? It is always advisable to get a personal recommendation or to use an agent in the UK, as there are still many places whose standards are low. Don't be deceived by a well designed website: Russians are brilliant computer programmers! There are many obvious advantages in going to Moscow or St Petersburg. However, they are more expensive and you will find that most people you meet will speak English. If you go to a provincial town such as Yaroslavl, you will spend less money, speak more Russian, in general find people more helpful and experience a real Russian city.

You should also be aware of Russian visa rules which require an official invitation to obtain a visa. To go on a language course, officially you will need an invitation for a student visa from the institute arranging your course. This takes four – six weeks to produce and you will need the original, which requires paying for courier postage from Russia. Currently, you will also have to produce an HIV test. If your course is no longer than four weeks, some institutes will send you a tourist invitation. This can be faxed or e-mailed to you and can be produced almost instantly. This will not be a

problem, provided that you do not tell the Russian Consulate you are going on a language course when you apply for your visa. Make sure that you know which visa invitation you will be getting and when you can expect to receive it. Once you have your invitation, you can get your visa very quickly by going to the consulate in person or using an agent. If applying for a visa by post, I am always cautious and recommend students to allow four weeks for turnaround, although recent experience is that you will get your visa in about a week. A visa by post currently costs £45; an urgent visa costs £95. The current difficult political situation does not seem to have affected visas.

Through Study in Russia I can arrange one-to-one tuition for individuals or attendance of a group course. For groups, I can arrange special courses and already do this for three university departments. For further information on what I can offer, please visit my website at [www.studyinrussia.co.uk](http://www.studyinrussia.co.uk) or e-mail me on [courses@studyinrussia.co.uk](mailto:courses@studyinrussia.co.uk).

If you are a university student, your university will probably tell you about RLUS. If your level of Russian is equivalent to a student who has completed two years ab initio Russian at university, you can join a RLUS course, even if you are not studying Russian at university. For further information, visit the RLUS website at [www.rlus.co.uk](http://www.rlus.co.uk) or email me on [roy.bivon@rlus.co.uk](mailto:roy.bivon@rlus.co.uk).

For post or telephone enquiries about either RLUS or Study in Russia, contact Roy Bivon, Flint House, Lynn Road, Stoke Ferry, King's Lynn, PE33 9SW, Tel/Fax: 01366 501445, Mobile: 07894 221834.

## **Book Reviews**

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**Leningrad: State of Siege**  
By Michael Jones (John Murray,  
2008, ISBN: 978-0-7195-6922-7,  
Hbk, 324pp £20.00)

“What Leningrad endured, and emerged victorious over, transcended the fighting of the Second World War. The city’s astonishing heroism stands on a grander, more timeless stage.”

Michael Jones is correct in his conclusion – the siege of Leningrad is uncontestable proof that it is possible to survive the unsurvivable. This was impressed upon me by my own research and meetings with survivors of the siege. So I am especially pleased to see the publication of this new book on the subject. Michael Jones’s *Leningrad: State of Siege* reveals how the citizens of Leningrad survived starvation and cold, how they prevailed despite the ferocity of Nazi shelling and the greed and incompetence of their own leaders who stockpiled food while the city starved.

I was already impressed by Jones’s *Stalingrad*, which incorporated moving testimonies of civilians and soldiers on both sides. Jones’s book concentrates on the psychology of the participants in war, which makes his work fascinating to a general reader like myself.



Siege of Leningrad (SCRSS Photo Library)

The opening chapters of *Leningrad: State of Siege* document the frightening unpreparedness of the USSR to defend itself from Nazi attack. Jones emphasises the military incompetence of Voroshilov and what this cost in terms of human life as

Leningrad came under siege. The ruthlessness of Voroshilov's successor, Zhukov, also makes for uncomfortable reading.



Siege of Leningrad (SCRSS Photo Library)

There has been a tendency in the past to portray the siege defenders as united in the face of ruthless aggression and to gloss over the terror that gripped the city during the first winter of 1941 – 42. One of the strengths of Jones's book is its unsparing portrayal of the breakdown of law and order, when some citizens began to turn upon each other. Using newly available archive material, he shows how, by January 1942, the authorities had stopped distributing bread and gangsters were taking over the streets. There are terrible reports of adults and children being killed and eaten by cannibals.

In the face of this horror it is all the more astonishing that so many thousands of Leningraders did preserve their humanity and survive the siege. Using many new eyewitness accounts, Jones shows how citizens defeated the "fascist that exists in all of us" – and thereby overcame the enemy without. The book cites many instances where people literally kept each other alive, from those who gave away their meagre rations to the heroic performance of Shostakovich's *Seventh Symphony*. One story seems to epitomise this generosity of spirit. A starving little girl went into a hospital to dance for wounded soldiers. She began to perform a piece from *Swan Lake*, but was so weak, she kept losing her balance. Gradually the soldiers overcame their apathy and sat up to

applaud her. They shouted encouragement until the girl was able to finish her dance.

This book is more than a history, it is a documentation of the triumph of the human spirit. Among the photographs included in the book is a self-portrait drawn during the length of one night by a starving young artist. Elena Martilla knew that if she put her pencil down and fell asleep, she would not wake again. "She summoned all her remaining strength and painted this self-portrait. The portrait itself is one of stony determination. Martilla looks more like a 50 year old woman than the teenager she was. In the morning Martilla said in joyous affirmation: 'I did not die. I will not die. I will live.'"

And so they did. A profoundly moving book and a welcome addition to siege literature.

*By Caroline Walton*

*Caroline Walton is the author of 'The Voice of Leningrad' (Garrett County Press, ISBN: 1-891053-82-5), a novel based on the testimony of siege survivors.*

### **Comrade Jim: The Spy Who Played for Spartak**

**By Jim Riordan (Fourth Estate, 2008, ISBN: 978-0-00-725114-8, Hbk, 223pp, £14.99)**

Jim Riordan's autobiography tells of a charmed life. Born in 1936 into an Irish working-class family in Portsmouth, his parents split up before he was three. He developed a close relationship with his mother, his guide and mentor. He remembers being taken, aged eight, to Fratton Park to watch Portsmouth play and seeing Moscow Dinamo when they came to Britain in 1945. These two events were to influence his future life.

As a child, he experienced war at first hand, Portsmouth docks being regularly bombed. Like thousands of other children, the 1944 Education Act gave him an opportunity to break out of the treadmill of working-class life and pass the scholarship to grammar

school. Here he was able to develop his budding football talents.

On finishing school, he had to make a decision as to whether to get a 'proper job' or go on to university. The dilemma was solved by his being drafted into the RAF for national service. His facility with languages led to his being sent to the Joint Services School for Linguists in Bodmin, where he was taught Russian and then sent to Berlin to carry out intelligence work, recording Soviet pilots' communications. Thus he became the 'spy' of the book's title.

He managed to keep up his football in Bodmin and with a scratch team in the British Army on the Rhine. He also developed a love of Russian literature that eventually led him, like his fellow 'spies', Alan Bennett, DM Thomas, Michael Frayn and Dennis Potter, to become a writer.

After national service he took a Russian degree at Birmingham University under Professor Bob Davies, our Society's vice-president.

His rebellious nature, the Cold War and the injustices of the British class system made him a communist. This resulted in another twist of fortune. He was selected to go to the prestigious Higher Party School in Moscow in 1961, where leading Party cadres from all over the world were sent to be educated in Marxist philosophy, economics and the history of the USSR.

From here on Jim Riordan's reminiscences resemble a John Le Carré novel. Married to a left-wing nurse from Picardy who accompanied him to Moscow, they lived a privileged existence, shut off from everyday Soviet life. When their first child was born, they moved into a flat. The Soviet authorities even gave his mother VIP treatment and her own flat on her first visit abroad to see her son. After being taken everywhere in a limousine, she asked: "Who *is* this Lenin?"

He doesn't beat about the bush when describing his British group's kicking against the discipline at the school. He admits to escaping for relaxation to the British

Consular Club where he could play cricket and football not only with the diplomatic corps but also with the famous spies Burgess and Maclean.

His schooling finished, the Riordans opted to remain in Moscow. Jim worked as a translator at Progress Publishers, alongside several other SCR members – Hilda Perham, Dennis Ogden and Bob Dalgleish.

Khrushchev's thaw gave him the opportunity that made him famous. Preparing for his PhD on Soviet sport, he gained access to the archives of the State Institute of Physical Culture. On learning that he had played for the BAOR team in Germany, he was asked at short notice by the Spartak chief coach, Nikita Simonyan, to practise with the team and was suddenly pushed into a game under his Russianised name. He only played one other game, as far as I can make out, and was judged by Igor Netto, team captain, as "fair in the air but slow on the ground". But at least he had worn the Spartak No 5 shirt twice – a first for any foreigner.

It was in these circles that Jim Riordan learned of and met victims of the purges of the 1930s and '40s. He was forced to change his idealistic view of Soviet socialism and, returning to Britain, tried to convince his fellow communists of the horrors of that period, but his criticisms were ignored. He had also upset the Soviet authorities and found it difficult to obtain a visa to return to Russia. He subsequently did, first as a tour guide and eventually as an Olympic attaché and researcher.

Football and Russian have been the twin roots of Professor Riordan's academic success and his book explains how it all came about.

Read it, but try to overlook that ghastly publisher's trick of using Cyrillic letters to substitute for English ones in the chapter headings!

*By Jean Turner*

**Francis Klingender 1907 – 1955: A Marxist Art Historian Out of Time**  
**By Grant Pooke (Gill Vista Marx Press, Marx Memorial, 2008, ISBN: 978-0955723902, Pbk, 316pp)**

Born of British parents, Francis Klingender grew up in the German industrial town of Goslar. In 1927 the family returned to England where Klingender studied economics and sociology at the London School of Economics, while also supporting himself and his parents. There his lifelong commitment to Marxism matured. He became an active member of the Communist Party and made an influential contribution to the cultural life of the British labour movement from the 1930s until his untimely death aged 48.

His Marxist interpretations of art history continued to fire imaginations and open minds long after this. In the early 1970s, when art history was still dominated by the patrician, connoisseur tradition, it was thrilling to discover books such as his *Hogarth and English Caricature* and *Art and the Industrial Revolution* that discussed art in relation to its socio-political context.

The outcome of exhibitions that Klingender organised for the Left, these books made you realise that art is not a rarified activity created for the purely aesthetic delight of an elite, but that its creation and reception are inseparably intertwined with the specific social and political world from which it springs.

Moreover, Klingender integrated into art history the hitherto largely ignored or patronised working-class experience. *Art and the Industrial Revolution* spoke with respect of the people who dug the coal, fed the furnaces and tempered the steel, enabling the engineers and architects to build the bridges and factories that created the wealth and the miseries of the age. He made the then radical step of discussing 'low art' works, such as T Allom's engravings of women and children working in cotton mills, alongside high art paintings, such as Turner's.

Full marks, then, to Grant Pooke for writing Klingender's biography. Pooke pays meticulous attention to detail in establishing the facts and the contexts of Klingender's professional life. Extensive research, much of it from primary sources in archives, provides well documented evidence. Each statement is exhaustively referenced with exemplary scholarly transparency about the author's sources.

Unfortunately, this conscientious research does not transmute into a convincing portrayal of Klingender as a person, nor of the reasons for the enthusiasm generated by his work. The book reads like a diligent doctoral thesis, rather than an accessible biography.

We find ourselves drowning in detail. For example, the 30 pages of chapter two have 238 footnotes. Each statement is so carefully substantiated that this becomes exhausting, while speculation is couched in distractingly over-cautious language. Minor points are meticulously debated, while the overall argument remains elusive.

Klingender's personal life, apart from the circumstances of his childhood, is virtually ignored. We learn of his struggle with asthma when far into the book, while only in footnotes in the penultimate chapter do we learn that "his private life had always been rather difficult and tumultuous" and that he was married three times.

Cultural historians may argue that their subjects' personal life should remain a private matter, yet this dimension is surely useful in a biography as a means of conveying its subject's character and the circumstances in which his work was created.

Much of the evidence stems from Klingender's MI5 files, kept by agents largely hostile to Soviet communism. Pooke often quotes from these without critical commentary. His ideological stance is not stated, but the book's overall tone is close to the New Left's dismissive view of Soviet communism.

The Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR (SCR) and the Artists International Association (AIA), both of which Klingender was an active member, are portrayed predominantly in terms of their being 'front' organizations for the Comintern. There is little sense of the sincere belief in Marxism nor of the curiosity in Soviet culture, or of the pleasure taken in it, by members of these organisations such as Klingender. We are left feeling that these intelligent, well informed people were dupes of an evil empire.

However, the book does place a wealth of well researched and fascinating information in the public realm. For this, future scholars will be grateful. The book will also serve to remind people of Klingender's existence and may thus lead some to rediscover his own pioneering work.

*By Christine Lindey*

## **Reports**

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### **New Russian Teachers Group**

On 11 April about 60 teachers of Russian from across England met in Holborn, London, to discuss setting up a new Russian Teachers Group. Fiona Wright organised the initiative, assisted by John Langran of Ruslan.

It was decided at the meeting to start a new grassroots organisation, a little like the old ATR (Association of Teachers of Russian). This would support all teachers of Russian, including school teachers from private, state and specialist language schools, adult education teachers, those involved in private lessons and companies, further education and those involved in teaching in the Russian Saturday schools for the Russian diaspora. All these different sectors of education were represented at the meeting.

A number of interesting talks were also given, including John Langran on language

games, Tanya Filosoova from St Andrews University on teaching business Russian and Elkhan Azimov from the Pushkin Institute, Moscow, on the use of the internet in Russian teaching.

The following Saturday a similar meeting was held at St Andrews University in Scotland for Scottish teachers. Scottish teachers of Russian under the auspices of the Scottish Russian Forum have decided to affiliate to the new organisation and send a representative to our meetings, as we would like the new organisation to represent all teachers of Russian in the UK.

The first committee meeting of the new group (provisionally called the Russian Teachers Group) met on 5 July in St Albans. It was decided to hold an annual day for all teachers of Russian in early March 2009 at James Allens Girls School in Dulwich, London, with a similar day in Scotland in May. The committee of 12 teachers will meet every term to plan this and other events and to help members. It is also planned to set up a website to share information and materials and to answer questions.

For further information, please email Fiona Wright on [Fiona\\_Wright@btinternet.com](mailto:Fiona_Wright@btinternet.com).

*By Fiona Wright*

### **Teaching Russian Language and Culture in the UK**

Martin Hope, director of the British Council in Moscow, convened a workshop on the teaching of Russian language and culture in the UK at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, London, on 17 April. Participants included representatives from schools, universities, DCSF, examination boards, Academia Rossica, the Yeltsin Foundation and the Pushkin Institute, among others. The agenda was to bring together key stakeholders in the promotion of Russian language and culture; to evaluate the current state of play; and to produce a strategy and action plan for enhancing appreciation of Russian language

and culture in the UK at all levels. The meeting went well and the discussion has continued through email and personal contacts of those involved. Martin Hope and Nick Brown of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust have now produced the second draft of a report *Recommendations for Russian in the UK*, dated 23 June 2008. If you would like to know more about this, please contact Andrew Jameson on a.jameson2@dsl.pipex.com.

*By Andrew Jameson*

## **From the Russian Press**

### **Russians Not Welcome Abroad**

*Komsomol'skaya Pravda* reported on recent Dutch research that had caused an online furore in Russia ('Zapadnoyevropeitsy khotyat otdikhat' bez russkikh', 19.7.08, www.kp.ru). A survey of hundreds of Dutch tourists had revealed that they disliked Russians more than any other nationality – some 40% of replies criticised Russians abroad. It was now common in the Dutch tourist business to see advertisements for 'tours without Russians'.

As part of the survey, hotel managers and staff had been asked to compare the behaviour of Dutch and Russian tourists. They had complained that Russians were aggressive, noisy, often drunk and rarely left the confines of their hotels to mix with the local population. There were also communication problems with Russians who did not know the local language, exacerbated by the difference in sign language between Russians and western tourists.

The survey also highlighted hostile attitudes to Russian women in holiday resorts – particularly from Dutch wives – due to their flirtatious behaviour and revealing clothes.

However, this negative attitude to Russian tourists was not restricted to the Dutch. In the Maldives some hotels had stopped

accepting bookings from Russia, while in Egypt one hotel had sent its Russian guests to another restaurant for meals – at the request of its West European guests.

### **Women in the Russian Navy**

*Izvestiya* reported that 18 naval colleges in Russia were now accepting women for the first time – on Ministry of Defence orders ('Zhenshchina na korable – beda dlya protivnika', 10.7.08, www.izvestiya.ru). Many male colleagues were hostile, considering women in the Navy "unlucky", "unnecessary" or odd, given that the size of the Navy was being reduced. However, a supporter of the policy pointed out that female entrants were usually better qualified than their male counterparts, while it was also quite normal to have women in the Navy in other countries – in the UK, a quarter of the Royal Navy were women.

Competition was high for the limited number of places available in each college – in one college there were 147 applicants for 20 places. There was also a rigorous selection process: entrants had to pass a medical board, have good grades in Russian and mathematics, and pass examinations in physics and PE. Physical strength was important – entrants had to be able to run a kilometre in four minutes and do 30 push-ups. In addition, they had to undergo professional and psychological tests to determine their suitability for the Navy. Nonetheless, some entrants did drop out during training, often due to the harsh regime and dress restrictions.

The women most likely to stay the course were those from naval backgrounds who had a more pragmatic view of the roles they might fulfil. Most would ultimately work at headquarters, rather than on board, while many were being trained as psychologists. However, many new entrants had romantic notions of the Navy, citing a desire to travel and the lure of gold epaulettes.

Naval uniform for women was similar to that in the army – with skirts. Make-up could be worn, but skin piercing was restricted with lip and tongue piercing categorically forbidden.

## Russia's Continuing Low Birth Rate

*Argumenty i Fakty Online* examined the country's current 'demographic stagnation' ('Seks v bol'shom gorode', No 29, 16.7.08, [www.aif.ru](http://www.aif.ru)). Hopes that the demographic situation would improve over the next few years now seemed futile. The sexual revolution in Russia had not resulted in a strengthening of the family or an increase in the birth rate. In fact, recent social research had highlighted that Russians were losing their traditional domestic skills of cooking, sewing and DIY.

In addition, the Russian National Office of Statistics had recorded a decrease in the workforce of 1.3 million over the preceding six months, leading some to talk of a threat to national security. Plugging the gap with immigrant labour posed other dangers – the erosion of national identity and culture, and the withering of the Russian Orthodox tradition. It could also lead to social conflicts, such as those witnessed in Paris last year, when immigrants preferred to settle permanently in Russia with their families, rather than return home.

Although the Russian Government had increased child benefit, a key problem was the lack of affordable housing for ordinary Russians. The construction of affordable housing was at a standstill, while the term itself was a joke, given current house prices. Russians' reproductive behaviour mirrored those across the rest of Europe where there was a direct relationship between the well-being of families, the quality of housing and the number of children. At current salary levels in Russia, people understood very well that a second child would condemn the family to hardship and a third child to poverty.

### Yevgeny Yevtushenko at 75

Despite reaching the venerable age of 75 on 18 July, the poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko remained as active as ever (*Moskovsky Komsomolets*, 'Letayushiy Yev-geni', 17.7.08, [www.mk.ru](http://www.mk.ru)). Currently touring

Russia with the rock opera *White Snow Falling*, based on his poems, he spent much of his time flying to Oklahoma to read lectures at the university, travelling to Europe and taking part in poetry festivals at home. Yevtushenko confessed that this hectic programme kept him feeling young – poetry readings invigorated him. He continued to play to full houses and was delighted at the number of young people who attended, alongside members of the older generation. He felt re-energised by his audience's enthusiasm and belief in poetry at these events. Unfortunately, these were not the sort of faces shown on television, where vulgar, tasteless pop music predominated, poisoning the minds of young people so that they could no longer read Pasternak or Mandel'shtam. He mourned the loss of poets and writers who had been close friends, including Bulat Okudzhava, Robert Rozhdestvensky, Vladimir Sokolov and Yury Kazakov. There were many writers today in Russia, but no great ones. Writers today wanted fame immediately, without effort. However, in his youth he had spent four years working his way through Dahl's dictionaries of Russian language, exploring the rhythm of each word.

*Articles summarised and translated by Diana Turner*

## Listings

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### Art

#### Victoria & Albert Museum

Cromwell Road, London SW7 2RL, Tel: 020 7942 2000, [www.vam.ac.uk](http://www.vam.ac.uk)  
25 September 2008 – 11 January 2009: *Cold War Modern – Design 1945–1970*. The Cold War era was one of high tensions and exceptional creativity, which touched every aspect of life, from everyday goods to the highest arenas of human achievement in science and culture. From the space race to the arms race, the technology of the period had a profound effect upon everything from the arts of protest to the design of the home.

Concentrating on the highly volatile years from 1945 to 1975, the exhibition will examine the key themes of the period, including the task of reconstruction in Europe after the war and the rise of consumerism. The strong influence of the Cold War upon popular culture will be shown through graphics, fashion, film and product design.

Art and design during this period played a central role in representing, and sometimes challenging, the dominant political and social ideas of the age. The exhibition will showcase remarkable works by internationally renowned artists and designers alongside the forgotten figures of the Cold War era, including rarely seen objects from Eastern Bloc countries.

Works by Alberto Giacometti, Pablo Picasso and Asger Jorn will demonstrate the strong links between the fine and applied arts of the period, charting their influence on ceramics, textiles, metalwork and print. Architecture and design will include the influential works of the Eames, the Smithsons, Le Corbusier and Buckminster Fuller, as well as major urban projects such as Berlin. The strong relationship between design and film, as evidenced in the work of Stanley Kubrick and Ken Adam, will also be examined. Admission fee.

## Courses

### **Birkbeck College, University of London**

Faculty of Lifelong Learning, Contact: John Lugo, Tel: 020 7679 1008, Email: j.lugo@bbk.ac.uk

14 October 2008 – 24 January 2009: *Art and the Cold War*.

The course is taught by Christine Lindey, author of *Art in the Cold War*. Identified with the political struggle between communism and capitalism, the Cold War was also a period of a fierce cultural contest in which art had a huge part to play. Learn more about the arts in the divided world post-1945 and revise the myth of totalitarian art in

Eastern Europe, as well as that of western modernism's political neutrality.

The course includes study days on four Saturdays; seminars on two Tuesday evenings; visits to *Cold War Modern* at the Victoria & Albert Museum and to Tate Modern. The course counts towards Birkbeck's *Certificate of Higher Education in History of Art*. Students may enrol either for the whole course or, separately, for any number of the study days. Contact John Lugo for further details.

## Dance

### **Sadler's Wells**

Rosebery Avenue, London EC1R 4TN, Tel: 0844 871 0090 (Box Office), [www.sadlerswells.com](http://www.sadlerswells.com)

#### *The Mariinsky (Kirov) Ballet:*

13–14 October 7.30pm: Forsythe Programme – *Steptext, Approximate Sonata, The Vertiginous Thrill of Exactitude, In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated*. Tickets £10–£49.

15–16 October 7.30pm: Ratmansky / Balanchine Programme – *Pierrot Lunaire, Apollo, The Prodigal Son*. Tickets £10–£49.

#### *The Mariinsky (Kirov) Opera:*

17–18 October 7.30pm: Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*. Artistic Director: Valery Gergiev. Tickets £10–£70.

## Events

### **Edinburgh Fringe 2008**

Edinburgh, Tel: 0131 226 0000, [www.edfringe.com](http://www.edfringe.com)

For venues and ticket prices, see the website.

#### *Children's Shows:*

*Russian Play*, performed by Koleso. 13–25 August. A delightful session of Russian fun for children. Wonderful Russian traditional music from St Petersburg group Koleso combined with wild Russian games,

dressing up and sheer jollity that will have you smiling for days.

*Dance:*

*Gospel of Anton*, performed by Derevo Theatre. 1–25 August excluding 12, 19 August. Return of the award-winning Russian physical theatre company. Sex, religion, politics and violence are things that Derevo's work has always avoided. These taboos are now abolished!

*Exhibitions:*

*Old Russian Icons*. 6–30 August. This selling exhibition of religious paintings from Russia explores their meaning, their symbolism and history.

*Treasures of Deserted Villages*, 11–21 August. In the era of virtual worlds, we forget about the real one. Discover it, taste it – the treasures of deserted villages, sounds of nature. Be a creator of your own world – craft shows, masterclasses, soft acoustic music.

*Music:*

*Beating of the Russian Heart*, performed by Koleso. 13–25 August. Songs to melt you to tears. Songs to catch your soul. Songs to make you stamp your feet with joy! Sung in thrilling traditional harmonies by a stunning all-female cast.

*Russian Evening*, performed by the Scottish Sinfonia, conductor Neil Mantle. 24 August. Stravinsky - *The Firebird Suite*. Rachmaninoff - *Piano Concerto No 4 in G* (soloist Alasdair Beatson). Shostakovich - *Symphony No 12: The Year 1917*.

*Valery Ponomarev Quintet*, 11–17 August. Jazz.

*Theatre:*

*Hutsul's Year*, performed by Kolomiya Theatre. 1–12, 14–25 August. Cinderella-esque fable from Ukrainian ethnic mountain community about a widower, his daughter, her fiancé and the shrewish stepmother

poisoning their lives. An allegory on the futility of wickedness performed with charming realism reflecting expressive and ritualistic Hutsul customs.

*InvAsian Festival: The Self-Murder*, performed by SSSR Production. 3–25 August. Russia is the world's leader in suicides among young people. This outstanding piece tackles the subject head on. The shocking, controversial truth, as developed and portrayed in English by a brilliant young Russian company, is compelling.

*Uncle Vanya*, performed by This Bridge Theatre. 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16 August. Chekhov's tragicomedy revisited by a fresh young American company.

*Wheels of Life*, performed by Sharmanka Kinetic Theatre. 1–21 August. Wooden marionettes and scrap metal dance to music and light. Early and new works by one of the great underground artists of communist Russia.

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**Printed and published by:**  
**SCRSS, 320 Brixton Road, London SW9 6AB**  
**Tel: 020 7274 2282, Fax: 020 7274 3230**  
**Email: [ruslibrary@scrss.org.uk](mailto:ruslibrary@scrss.org.uk)**  
**Website: [www.scrss.org.uk](http://www.scrss.org.uk)**  
**Registered Charity No 1104012**  
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