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## Feature

### **The Red Army's Liberation of Auschwitz: 27 January 1945**

By Michael Jones

The liberation of the concentration and death camps in the last weeks of World War II was a deeply traumatic experience for the Western Allies. The condition of the surviving inmates of Belsen, Dachau and a host of other camps, and the ghastly evidence of mass killing they contained, profoundly shocked British and American soldiers; the publicising of this information caused an outcry against the perpetrators and full realisation of the cruelty of Hitler's regime. These episodes occurred in the last six weeks of the war and have been well documented. But the parallel experience of the Red Army and its discovery of the death camps in Poland – at Majdanek, the remnants of Treblinka and Sobibor, and finally at Auschwitz – have received far less

attention. This took place not over six weeks, but over nine months – and had a terrible impact on Soviet soldiers.



'Forward to the Reichstag' (1945). Plate from *War Years* by artist Vladimir Bogatkin (SCRSS Library)

Such attention is vitally needed. The prevalent image of the Red Army in 1945 is that of a horde of savage avengers, whose offensive into the German heartland was marred by mass rapes, looting and killings, atrocities that the Soviet military authorities made little or no attempt to curb. Such atrocities undeniably happened, particularly in late January and early February 1945, when Russian forces first entered German territory, and they were still occurring as the Red Army fought for the ruins of Berlin at the end of April. What has been lacking is any real understanding of the rage and

suffering that provoked this horrific reaction.

I have chosen to revisit the story of the liberation of Auschwitz on 27 January 1945 because of the widespread misconception that the discovery of this camp had little or no impact on Russian soldiers, already brutalised and dehumanised by the war on the eastern front. In contrast, using the soldiers' own testimonies, I will paint a very different picture – showing the depth of shock and outrage felt by the liberators.

The first death camp uncovered by the Russians was at Majdanek, near Lublin in Poland, which was reached by the Red Army on 23 July 1944. The speed of the Soviet advance prevented the SS destroying the camp's installations of mass killing and it was abandoned largely intact. The troops could scarcely believe their eyes. The cremation ovens were still warm. There were massive piles of clothing and shoes, many of them children's. The bewildered soldiers asked each other: "What has been going on here?"

Konstantin Simonov, the first Soviet war correspondent to visit Majdanek, warned the readers of the army newspaper *Red Star* that his mind still refused to accept the reality of what his eyes and ears took in, and that they were about to uncover something immense, terrifying and incomprehensible. "When we saw what Majdanek contained," said Vasily Yeremenko, a commissar with the Soviet Second Tank Army, "we felt dangerously close to going insane." The horrifying story of the camp would slowly be pieced together. But although mass killing took place at Majdanek, within the Final Solution envisaged by the Nazis in the Holocaust, it was the largest extermination centre at Auschwitz that had the most devastating effect on Red Army soldiers.

By 1945 Auschwitz consisted of a series of camps. The first and oldest was Auschwitz I, created in mid-1940 from old barracks in the suburbs of the Polish town of Oswiecim, and gradually expanded until it could hold between 12,000 and 20,000 prisoners. The second part was Auschwitz II – or Auschwitz-Birkenau. The Nazis began

building this in the autumn of 1941 in Brzezinka, a village 3 kilometres west of Oswiecim. It was the largest camp in the Auschwitz complex and by the summer of 1944 it held more than 90,000 prisoners. Here the Germans built their largest installations of mass murder in occupied Europe – a series of massive gas chambers and crematoria – and exterminated the majority of Jews deported to the camp.

As the Soviet offensive grew closer, the SS had – on 17 January 1945 – evacuated the majority of those held in the camp. Ten days later, as Red Army units approached the complex, some 8,000 remained, most too sick to move. The camp's defenders – and additional German army and SS Police forces – put up a strong resistance. After fierce fighting, at 2pm on 27 January 1945, the Russian soldiers of Captain Anatoly Shapiro's 1085<sup>th</sup> Regiment stood poised to break into Auschwitz I. The clamour of combat ceased, and the troops gathered outside the main gateway. "It had some kind of Nazi slogan on it," said Lieutenant Ivan Martynushkin. The inscription read *Arbeit Macht Frei* (Work Makes You Free). The Soviet troops stopped and gazed at it. "The cynical Nazi greeting above the gates of the main camp will always stand out in my memory," said Colonel Georgy Elisavetsky. "My blood runs cold when I think of it, even now." "When we saw that macabre sign," added Sergeant Genri Koptev, "we had a feeling that something was hideously wrong."

The gates were padlocked. Snow was falling and there was a smell of burning in the air. Inside were rows of barracks – but not a person could be seen. Instinctively, the Red Army soldiers raised their machine guns and shot off the locks.

"I had seen a lot in this war," said Anatoly Shapiro, commander of the 1085<sup>th</sup> Regiment. "I had seen many innocent people killed. I had seen hanged people, I had seen burned people. But I was still unprepared for Auschwitz..."

"We discovered mountains of artificial teeth, spectacles and human hair, and piles of

prisoners' shoes and suitcases. But we had not yet seen the children's barracks. Inside it, there were only two children left. We learnt that all the others had been gassed, or were in the 'hospital' where medical experiments were performed on them... We stared at them aghast. We saw it in their faces – saw that they had been through utter hell. We asked ourselves, what are children doing here? We were caught up in a vast war, involving innumerable armies and millions of men, fighting on fronts that spanned thousands of miles. We had seen so many terrible things as we marched across our Motherland, repelling the Fascist invader. But this was the harshest sight of all."



'Street Fighting, Berlin' (1945). Plate from *War Years* by artist Vladimir Bogatkin (SCRSS Library)

Sergeant Genri Koptev visited the shower room and crematorium to the west of the camp. He was utterly overwhelmed, saying: "I could not comprehend how a human mind could conceive of this."

Shortly after 3pm Lieutenant Vasily Gromadsky's 472<sup>nd</sup> Regiment reached Auschwitz II – Auschwitz-Birkenau. The Germans opened up with artillery, machine

gun and sniper fire, and vicious fighting went on around the perimeter of the camp for over an hour. The Regiment lost its commander and sixty-six of its men, finally calling up tanks to breach the barbed wire fences. The remainder of the defenders abruptly fled. "Battle for Auschwitz," Gromadsky wrote in his diary. "Met with surviving prisoners of this camp. Huge numbers of people were taken to this place, including children. Twelve train wagonloads of children's pushchairs were dispatched from here." A few prisoners led him to one of the crematoria. The blood-red sun was sinking below the horizon and other Soviet soldiers were gathering around him. "My men formed a half-circle," Gromadsky remembered. "Some were sobbing; others stood absolutely silent, rigid with shock."

In the days and weeks that followed, Soviet war correspondents wrote articles on the camp, and more and more soldiers toured its remains. Arkady Friedner, who edited the Ninth Army's newspaper, was one of the first: "I never saw anything so terrible throughout the whole war," he recalled. "It pierced me to the very soul."

Inevitably, Red Army soldiers, who had already seen the horrors of genocide in the Ukraine and Belorussia, felt an all-consuming hatred of the enemy and a strong desire for vengeance. "We believed that the Nazis had sullied humanity itself," Vasily Gromadsky exclaimed. "We vowed to finish the war as quickly as possible and send them all to hell." "There is no punishment horrible enough for these degenerates," Pyotr Nikitin vowed. "We will forget nothing and we will never forgive." "I have seen Auschwitz, I saw everything with my own eyes," Vladimir Brylev wrote to his mother. "This will not happen again... We, soldiers, will take care of it."

The horror of the liberation of Auschwitz forms a grim reminder. We are right to be critical of the brutality of some of the Soviet soldiers, their lootings, killings and rapes on German soil. These actions tarnished the Red Army's triumph. But that criticism has to be tempered with understanding. We did not have to endure what the Soviet Union

endured. We did not suffer what they suffered. And we did not witness the scale of atrocities that their soldiers witnessed. Until we realise this, the wounds of this terrible war will never fully heal.

*Michael Jones is author of 'Total War: From Stalingrad to Berlin' (John Murray, 2011). He is a fellow of the Royal Historical Society and works as a writer, media consultant and presenter. He has written books on the battles of Stalingrad, Leningrad and Moscow.*

## **SCRSS News**

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### **Annual General Meeting**

The SCRSS AGM took place on Saturday 19 May at the recently opened London office of the Russian State Agency Rosstrudnichestvo in Kensington. Following Chair John Riley's opening remarks, Arthur Matikyan, Counsellor of the Embassy of the Russian Federation, welcomed SCRSS members to the centre. The Annual Report was presented by Hon Secretary Jean Turner and the Annual Accounts by Hon Treasurer Ralph Gibson. The following SCRSS members were re-elected to the Council for a further three years: Kate Clark, Ralph Gibson, Andrew Jameson, Philip Matthews and John Riley. The full Council now stands as follows. *Honorary Officers:* President – Professor William Bowring; Vice-Presidents – Robert Chandler, Professor Robert Davies, Stanley Forman, Dr Kate Hudson, Dr Rachel O'Higgins, Robert Wareing. *Committee:* Chair – John Riley; Vice-Chairs – Philip Matthews, Charles Stewart; Hon Treasurer – Ralph Gibson; Hon Secretary – Jean Turner. *EC Members:* Kate Clark, Fiona Wright. *Council Members:* Barbara Ellis, Andrew Jameson, Christine Lindey, Diana Turner.

Members who were unable to attend the AGM may request a copy of the Annual Report. You can receive an electronic

version by email at no cost; for a hard copy please send a large stamped addressed envelope.

### **The Arts of the Russian and Soviet Modernists**

The SCRSS exhibition *The Arts of the Russian and Soviet Modernists* ran from 24 February to 31 March 2012. Using original materials and digital copies from the SCRSS archives, most of them unique, the exhibition demonstrated the contribution made to Modernism by Soviet artists and designers in the early avant-garde period, as well as the influence of Western Modernism on Soviet arts and architecture in the post-war period. It also tied in with the exhibition *Building the Revolution: Soviet Art and Architecture 1915–1935* at the Royal Academy of Arts.



SCRSS exhibition launch (left to right: SCRSS Chairman John Riley; Mayor of Lambeth, Councillor Christiana Valcarcel; Mayor of Southwark, Councillor Lorraine Lauder MBE)

The exhibition was launched at a special event on 23 February, attended by guests from cultural organisations connected with Russia, representatives of local government and key SCRSS members. The event aimed to raise the profile of the Society and attract sponsors. The exhibition was opened by the Mayor of Lambeth, Councillor Christiana Valcarcel, in the presence of the Mayor of Southwark, Councillor Lorraine Lauder MBE, with her consort Gary Magold, and Tatyana Skalkina, Chair of the Russian-

British Association in Moscow. After SCRSS Chairman John Riley welcomed the guests, SCRSS Council member and exhibition curator Christine Lindey introduced the exhibition.

The exhibition was subsequently opened to the wider SCRSS membership and the public from 24 February. Some 200 members and visitors attended, a number of new members were made and contributions received to the Library Appeal. The exhibition was highly successful and raised new interest in the Society, although no immediate major sponsors emerged.

## SCRSS on Facebook

In addition to our website at [www.scrss.org.uk](http://www.scrss.org.uk), sign up to our Facebook group at [www.facebook.com/groups/scrss/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/scrss/).

## Next Events

**Saturday 16 June 11.30am–3.30pm**

### **Film: Central Asian Film Day**

We present two films on DVD from Central Asia – courtesy of the Open Society Institute, Budapest, and the Centre of Central Asian Cinematography.

*11am:* Doors open

*11.30am–1pm:* *You're Not an Orphan.* The story of an Uzbek family who shelter fourteen children, evacuated during World War II, while their own child is at the battlefield. The director is one of the founders of Uzbek national cinematography and the film received an Uzbek SSR State 'Hamza' award and best screenplay prize at the First All-Union Film Festival in Leningrad in 1964. Directed by Shukhrat Abbasov, screenplay by Rakmat Faizi, Uzbekfilm, 1963. English sub-titles, 75 mins, black/white.

*1–2pm:* Break

*2–3.30pm:* *Aksuat.* Aksuat is the village where the film director was born. Despite modern accessories such as mobile phones, life in the village remains traditional. The film looks at the relationship between two brothers – Kanat, a 'New Kazakh' who returns to the village with his pregnant

Russian wife, and Aman, the elder brother who has lived all his life in the village. The film takes place during the transition to post-Soviet Kazakhstan and the fate of the two brothers is a metaphor for the times. The film was awarded a Special Jury prize at the Eurasia-98 International Film Festival. Directed and screenplay by Serik Aprymov, music by Kazbek Spanov, East Cinemas Ltd, NPC, Kazakhstan, 1997. English sub-titles, 78 mins, colour.

*Note: Admission to this event is free (SCRSS members and non-members), but all tickets must be reserved at least one week in advance. Telephone or email the SCRSS to reserve a ticket.*

**Friday 14 September 7pm**

### **Event: A Commemoration of Professor James Riordan (1936–2012)**

An evening dedicated to Professor James Riordan, former Vice-President of the SCRSS, who died earlier this year. The event focuses on James's writings and translations from the Russian. Guests include David Holohan, friend and former colleague of James at the University of Surrey, James's eldest daughter Tanya Riordan and a representative of the Gyngyz Aitmatov Academy. Note: normal admission fees apply. (*See obituary on page 12.*)

**Saturday 10 November 10am–5pm**

### **Event: SCRSS Russian History Seminar**

The seminar is designed for everyone interested in Russian and Soviet history, but is particularly relevant to teachers of A-Level History and university students. Speakers include Professor Geoffrey Roberts, Head of the School of History at University College Cork, who has written widely on Stalin and World War II (*see review of Professor Roberts' latest book on Molotov on page 15*). There will also be talks by specialists on Soviet Art, Film and Children's Literature. The seminar includes the opportunity to view the Society's extensive library and archives. Registration fee: £50, including lunch and refreshments (£40 for SCRSS members). Further information and an application form will follow in due course on the SCRSS website. If you wish to receive an application form and full details as soon

as these are available, please send a stamped addressed envelope to the Society marked 'History Seminar' or email your interest to [ruslibrary@scrss.org.uk](mailto:ruslibrary@scrss.org.uk).

*Events take place at the SCRSS, 320 Brixton Road, London SW9 6AB, unless otherwise stated. Admission fees for films and lectures (unless otherwise stated): £3.00 (SCRSS members), £5.00 (non-members). Admission fees for other events: as indicated.*

## **Soviet Memorial Trust Fund News**

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### **Holocaust Memorial Day 2012**

The Soviet Memorial Trust Fund (SMTF) joined with Southwark Council to mark Holocaust Memorial Day on 27 January. The ceremony began in the packed Cinema of the Imperial War Museum with a programme of music, poetry, testimony and film, and then moved outdoors to the nearby Soviet War Memorial and Southwark Council's Holocaust Memorial Tree. Over 200 participated, including children from local schools.

### **Victory Day 2012**

Over 400 people attended the ceremony at the Soviet War Memorial on 9 May to mark the 67<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Allied Victory over Fascism. The Deputy Mayor of Southwark, Councillor Althea Smith, welcomed the participants, who included diplomatic representatives, veterans associations, British and Russian cultural and community organisations, as well as children from the London Nautical School and the Russian Embassy School.

Minister Counsellor of the Russian Embassy Alexander Kramarenko reflected on the importance of 9 May for Russia: "It is about

life and humanity's true mission on Earth. For it is not as much about Victory, which was granted by God to the people that were on the right side of history, as about its price, the sacrifices that made it possible."

Councillor Anood Al-Samerai delivered a speech on behalf of the Rt Hon Simon Hughes MP, who, like the Russian Ambassador, had been required to attend the State Opening of Parliament. In his address, the MP recalled the wartime alliance and the continuing need to resolve to always work for peace. Visit [www.london-se1.co.uk/news/view/5992](http://www.london-se1.co.uk/news/view/5992) for audio recordings of all the speeches.

The Deputy Lieutenant for Southwark laid the first wreath. It was followed by over fifty more on behalf of Southwark Council; embassies of the CIS countries and the USA in London; a group of Soviet veterans who had travelled from Moscow for 9 May; the Russian Convoy Club and RAF Russia Association, and a number of other veterans groups; the SCRSS and other UK-based cultural and political organisations; and a host of Russian community and educational groups. The wreath-laying was once again brought to a close by children from the Russian Embassy school, with pupil Alena Zhidkova singing the haunting song *Zhuravli* (*The Cranes*) prior to the Last Post being sounded to mark the beginning of a two minute silence. Following the formal ceremony, participants were invited to raise a "Toast to Victory" at a reception in the park laid on by several of the CIS embassies in London.

Later on the same day, Professor Geoffrey Roberts from University College Cork gave a talk inside the Imperial War Museum on Soviet diplomat Vyacheslav Molotov's contribution to Victory (see *book review on page 15*).

### **Hurricanes to Murmansk Wins Award**

Atoll Productions' documentary on the RAF 151 Wing that travelled aboard the first Arctic convoy to Russia in August 1941

received a jury prize at the St Petersburg Documentary Festival. The SMTF has supported the project from its inception and premiered the current version on 9 May 2011. Copies of the DVD are still available (see [www.atollproductions.co.uk](http://www.atollproductions.co.uk)).

## Next Events

**11 November 2012 12.30pm**

**Event: Remembrance Sunday Ceremony**

Further details will be sent out on the SMTF mailing list in due course and included on the Events page of the SCRSS website. If you would like to be placed on the mailing list, please send your details to the Hon Secretary, SMTF, c/o 320 Brixton Road, London SW9 6AB or email [smtf@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:smtf@hotmail.co.uk).

*The Soviet War Memorial is located in Geraldine Mary Harmsworth Park, adjacent to the Imperial War Museum, Lambeth Road, London SE1 6HZ. For more information about the memorial, visit [www.scrss.org.uk/sovietmemorial.htm](http://www.scrss.org.uk/sovietmemorial.htm).*

## Feature

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### Ivor Montagu and the Film Society

By John Riley

In 1925 the Hon Ivor Goldsmid Samuel Montagu – aristocrat-communist, vole expert, table tennis pioneer, filmmaker and critic – and the actor Hugh Miller devised the Film Society to present “pictures of a high class character” that were “in some degree interesting and [...] represent work which has been done, or is being done experimentally in various parts of the world”. Members subscribed to eight monthly Sunday afternoon performances each year and, as a private club, the Film Society could show films that had not been passed by the British Board of Film Censorship (BBFC).



Ivor Montagu, 1964 (SCRSS Archive)

Council members included Iris Barry (*Daily Mail* and *Spectator* film critic, who later founded the Museum of Modern Art’s film department) and impresario Sidney (later Baron) Bernstein, while future film directors Thorold Dickinson and Anthony Asquith played significant roles. Montagu’s brief spell on the Council ended when he became vice-chairman of the “avowedly political” Workers’ Film Federation.

Subscribers included many famous members of artistic, bohemian, and left-wing London – indeed, early press reports sometimes concentrated on that at the expense of the films! Supporters included many associated with the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR (SCR): the Woolfs, the Webbs, George Bernard Shaw, JM Keynes and HG Wells, who caused some consternation by insisting that the legal paperwork referred to him as a “man of letters”. Young filmmakers also attended, including Alfred Hitchcock and Michael Powell, along with matinée idol Ivor Novello.

The Film Society operated until April 1939. In its 108 performances it showed more than 500 films from all over the world, including recent dramas, scientific documentaries, perplexing avant-garde works and classic comedies. Many have gone on to be

recognised as classics. There were also accompanying events: a film school and lectures from figures such as the great Soviet director Vsevolod Pudovkin.

Unsurprisingly, members were keen to see the exciting new films from the Soviet Union by directors including Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Vertov, Kozintsev and Trauberg, and others. Montagu, who would later translate some of Pudovkin's writings, was responsible for arranging things but the early years were frustrating. The sci-fi film *Aelita* was announced for the fourth performance in January 1926 but clearly there was a problem as Ernst Lubitsch's comedy *The Marriage Circle* was shown instead.

On one occasion Montagu's Soviet contact disappeared, at which point he learned that the man had worked for a private company, rather than representing the Soviet state. His dealings with the Soviet authorities were equally frustrating. They seemed to see Montagu as an automatic conduit to get their propaganda films into Britain. However, he knew that even as a cinema club the Society could not appear too partisan and he begged them to leaven their political offerings with uncontroversial entertainment films.

Back home others disagreed and felt that the Society should concentrate on propaganda. Most vocal was Huntly Carter, who denounced the "aesthetes" and "intellectuals" who concentrated on the films' artistic worth at the expense of their political content. However, this was an unrealistic aim and Montagu's pragmatism was the only way forward since the Society could have suffered all kinds of backlash, had it been too provocative.

And so there was a mixture of films, starting in 1927 with a flurry of Tolstoyiana: extracts from Iakov Protozanov's ten year-old adaptation *Father Sergius*, the five year-old *Polikushka* and the brief 1908 documentary *The Life of Count Tolstoy*. The literary theme continued with a 1923 adaptation of Gogol's *Taras Bulba*.

At last, in October 1928 they showed their first 'Revolutionary' film – Pudovkin's *The Mother*, following it up in February 1929 with *The End of St Petersburg*. For this they had a musical coup: Ernest Grimshaw conducted an orchestra playing music he had developed "in collaboration with Mr Edmund Meisel". Meisel had written the music for Eisenstein's films and was seen as one of the great film score composers of the time.

By now the Society was getting into its stride but its next Soviet film was among the most controversial of any that it showed, though not for political reasons. Abram Room's *Bed and Sofa* has several titles but the story of a ménage à trois was shocking, whatever it was called.

Finally, in November 1929 the Society showed one of the prizes it had long aimed for: Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin* which had been banned by the BBFC (and would remain so until 1958!). To give an idea of the diversity of this performance, it began with an American avant-garde version of *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Showing the Society's nose for talent, it continued with *Drifters*, a highly regarded documentary by the young John Grierson, who would go on to become the father of the genre in Britain and to start the National Film Board of Canada. Next came another innovation: the Society's first sound film, for which they chose *The Barn Dance*, starring Mickey Mouse. Finally, it was *Potemkin* itself, with Meisel conducting the orchestra in his own score.

Film Society shows were nothing if not eclectic. Kozintsev and Trauberg's story of the Paris Commune, *New Babylon* (although inevitably shown in the only available, heavily censored version), was accompanied by Georges Melies' famous comedy-fantasy-sci-fi from 1902, *A Trip to the Moon*. Soon afterwards there was another censored film: *The Heir to Jenghiz Khan*, better known today as *Storm over Asia*. Clearly the footage showing British troops intervening in Mongolia (a policy that was still officially denied) had to be cut!



Such editing was often done by Montagu himself and might be self-censorship or simply a decision (sometimes without the agreement of the filmmaker) that a film would go over better with some parts removed. One of his biggest jobs was making Pudovkin's *The Mechanics of the Brain* showable. This documentary about Pavlov is heavily reliant on diagrams and captions, all of which Montagu had to render into English.

Although some of Soviet cinema's highpoints were silent films, after 1930 there were also sound films. Some members were rather sniffy about sound cinema, feeling that it would destroy the art of film. However, the Society embraced the development, while continuing to show silent films. This led to the Society's most notorious performance: Dziga Vertov's industrialisation documentary *Enthusiasm* (1931). The director came over and, after a rehearsal to check the sound, professed himself satisfied. However, during the performance Vertov broke into the projection booth and started to wrestle the controls, trying to ratchet the volume up to ear-splitting levels!

March 1934 brought another grand event, the highpoint of all the Society's presentations of silent films: Eisenstein's *October*, with Ernest Irving conducting Edmund Meisel's score. However, it was the last such major event: the last five years were mainly devoted to sound films, including the hugely popular Civil War drama-biopic *Chapayev* and Vertov's *Three Songs of Lenin* (with the inter-titles translated by Auden).

November 1938 saw a showing of Romm's *Lenin in October*, for which the programme expressed "thanks to the Society for Cultural Relations between the Peoples of the British Commonwealth and the USSR for having made it available to the Society." Presumably there was some labyrinthine arrangement.

The Film Society – driven largely by Montagu – introduced a huge range of films that otherwise would have remained unseen

in Britain for many years. It proved the seed of a network of film societies and, ultimately, of the British Film Institute, fundamentally changing the country's view of cinema.

*John Riley is a film historian, lecturer and writer, as well as SCRSS Chair. His books include 'Dmitri Shostakovich: a Life in Film' (IB Tauris). He has written a chapter on the Film Society for 'The Sounds of the Silents', to be published by OUP in 2013, and on music in Stalin films for 'Contemplating Shostakovich' (Ashgate, 2012).*

## Reports

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### Researching the History of the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR

By Dr Emily Lygo

In the Russian section of Exeter University Library I found impressive holdings of accounts of Russia, especially those dating from the 1920s and 1930s. Almost all of these books are eyewitness accounts of visits to the new and developing Soviet Union, and constitute a fascinating genre. I started to become interested in British perceptions of the USSR.

My initial research led me quickly to the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR (SCR) and with funding from the British Academy I am now researching the history of the Society. My research is divided into two periods, 1924–45 and 1945–91. The former relies mainly on archives held at the SCRSS, but this material is complemented by archives held at the People's History Museum, Manchester, and also in the State Archive of the Russian Federation, Moscow. For the later period, I am conducting interviews with SCRSS members, gathering fascinating material about the organisation's history and its significance for members.

In recent years there has been some scholarship concerning the SCR, but this is

limited and needs expansion. Russian archives have yielded information about the relationship of VOKS (the Soviet Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries) to the SCR, showing importantly that VOKS found it could not control the Society, even though at times it endeavoured to do so. As yet, however, there has not been any substantial study of the significance of the SCR for British cultural history.

In my research I examine the origins of the SCR: its founding and early members and its relationship with VOKS; its operations, which is to say its activities, finances, relationships with other organisations; external perceptions of the Society; and its portrayal of Soviet culture in Britain.

Among the founding and early members of the SCR the prominence of women, particularly suffragists and feminists, is striking and underlines that early Soviet innovations in gender equality were important for British women. Alongside British women whose biographies are known, such as Margaret Llewellyn Davies and Ruth Fry, there is Varvara Polovtsev, a Russian biologist and Spinoza expert who acted as Soviet representative for the Red Cross, the Cooperative movement and for VOKS. I'm still working on discovering more about her links to London intellectuals and information about how she came to be part of the SCR's founding executive committee.

The activities of the SCR are well documented in its annual reports, as are external perceptions in the press cuttings books kept throughout the earlier period: putting all the pieces of the jigsaw together enables us to understand how the Society appealed to some members of the British public. And, finally, publications, lectures and exhibitions reveal how Soviet culture was portrayed by the Society.

This research is funded up to the end of June next year. If you would be willing to be interviewed or have materials you could make available to me for this research, I would be very grateful to hear from you – see contact details below.

## Contact Details

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## Scotland-Russia Forum: An Independent Voice for Russian Culture in Scotland

By Jenny Carr, Chairperson,  
Scotland-Russia Forum

The Scotland-Russia Forum was founded in 2003 on the initiative of former members of the Edinburgh branch of the Britain-Russia Society, which had closed down the previous year. The Forum was to be an independent organisation, based in Edinburgh, and its aim was and is to promote understanding of Russia and the other countries of the former USSR.

For the first five years we ran the Forum from home, hired halls for talks, accommodated speakers in members' homes to save money and gradually built up membership. Funding was and is mainly membership subscriptions. In this period we held about ten meetings a year, mainly talks on a range of cultural and political topics. We also ran two well attended business conferences. Right from the beginning we sent out email bulletins telling members about our events and other Russia-related events in Scotland, and also soon established our newsletter.

We realised that we would reach far more people than the 400 or so attending meetings annually if we had our own premises, open to the public. Our search for funding for this proved surprisingly easy – a

trick we have been unable to replicate – when the brewer Scottish & Newcastle, part owner of Russia’s Baltika Breweries, offered funding for small premises for three years. “And if you’re successful, we can help you more.” Unfortunately, no sooner had we found premises than S&N were taken over and no longer exist, our hopes of further funding disappearing with them.

The new premises were opened in 2008 as the Scotland-Russia Institute. Since then we have been running a fully fledged (in our eyes) Russian culture centre – open five days a week and offering regular talks, a year-round exhibition programme, language classes, a lending library, a small shop, occasional theatre performances, business events and even English-language assistants for Russian universities. We are also busy lobbying for the teaching of Russian – supporting Glasgow University’s campaign for Slavonic Studies, campaigning for reinstatement of Scottish school exams in Russian, running taster classes and, soon, Russian clubs in schools.

As a result of all this activity full membership is now well over 300, 800 people receive regular email bulletins (with another 200 getting business information only) and some 3,000 people annually visit the Institute – to see exhibitions, attend events, or just for information. Far more contact us by email and telephone, a few on Facebook and Twitter, and website visitors now number around 6,000 a month.

Our 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2013 is a good time to take stock. How successful have we been in promoting understanding and raising awareness of Russia? What should we do next and, more prosaically, what can we afford to do?

The Forum has grown so fast that even increasing numbers of volunteer helpers and a paid assistant one day a week (thanks to a generous member) cannot cope with the programme we have set ourselves since 2008. Ideally we would pay for staff but have no time (and little expertise) to fundraise to make that a reality, so finance and manpower may dictate a restructuring.

The only certainty is that there is plenty still to do, so we will use our resources to make the best impact we can.

Web: [www.scotlandrussiaforum.org](http://www.scotlandrussiaforum.org)

## Rossotrudnichestvo in London

By Ralph Gibson

In March, Russia took a big step towards its goal of an official Russian cultural centre in London with the opening of the Rossotrudnichestvo office on Kensington High Street, London, not far from the Russian Embassy.

The official opening was attended by representatives of the SCRSS who heard HRH Prince Michael of Kent, the Russian Ambassador, HE Alexander Yakovenko, Presidential cultural envoy Mikhail Shvydkoy and Deputy Head of Rossotrudnichestvo Alexander Chesnokov all welcome the initiative as a positive development in the promotion of knowledge in the UK about Russia (see a short video of the opening ceremony on the Russian Embassy website at [www.rusemb.org.uk/video/92](http://www.rusemb.org.uk/video/92)). The new centre will provide a venue for a wide range of cultural events and intends to offer free language lessons.

As Patron of the Institute of Linguists, Prince Michael was saddened by the diminishing opportunities for learning Russian at schools and colleges in Britain, and described the new centre as an important step in promoting Russian language study.

The Ambassador took the opportunity to present a commemorative medal *For Merit in Space Exploration* to Britain’s first cosmonaut, Helen Sharman, following on from last year’s extensive range of events connected with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Yuri Gagarin’s orbit of the earth.

The centre offers a multifunctional meeting and exhibition space, a library, a classroom for language learning and a video-conference suite. The head of the London office, Arthur Matikyan, and his staff hope to welcome a wide variety of groups at the

centre, offering a range of Russia-related events and activities. The SCRSS held its 2012 AGM there and is one of the partners listed on the UK website.

Rossotrudnichestvo (Russian Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation) was established in 2008, now has offices in over seventy countries and plays an increasing role in promoting Russian cultural and scientific contacts, language study and fulfilling special government projects. It works with a number of non-governmental organisations such as the Russian Association of International Co-operation, and the SCRSS's long-standing partner in Russia, the St Petersburg Association for International Co-operation. A wealth of information in Russian is available on the agency's website at [www.rs.gov.ru](http://www.rs.gov.ru).

### Contact Details

Rossotrudnichestvo  
First Floor, 37 Kensington High Street (entrance in Kensington Court), London W8 5ED  
Telephone: 020-7937-3355  
Web: <http://gbr.rs.gov.ru/en/node/390> (Russian and English)

## Russian Teachers' Group

By Fiona Wright, Chair of Russian Teachers' Group, UK

The Russian Teachers' Group (RTG) held its 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference at Latymer School, North London, on 17 March 2012. Seventy-five delegates heard interesting presentations on, among others: the new Russian teaching materials *Vnimanie* and *Marsh* by Marta Tomaszewski; *Games for Russian Lessons* by John Langran; *Trips and Exchanges* by Sally George and Katya Solovyova; *Getting Your Students Speaking Russian* by Katya Solovyova; *New Materials for Advanced Level Students* by Elizaveta Langley on behalf of Zlatoust Publishers; and *Verbs of Motion* by Natalia Tronenko. We finished with a fascinating talk *From Leningrad to St Petersburg: A City in Transition* by Catriona Kelly, Professor of

Russian, Oxford University. The conference included an exhibition of teaching materials with stands from European Schoolbooks Ltd, Ruslan Ltd and Zlatoust Ltd. The AGM of the RTG took place at the conference and the Committee reported on its meetings.

The new RTG website at [www.thertg.co.uk](http://www.thertg.co.uk) was unveiled at the conference. The site is open access and, once registered (free to RTG members), you will have access to a library of Russian teaching materials and other information. To register, please contact webmaster Joe Burrows on [thertguk@gmail.com](mailto:thertguk@gmail.com).

The RTG's next IT day will be on 23 June 2012 from 12.30–4pm at James Allen Girls' School, Dulwich, London. The course will cover making materials for interactive whiteboards and projectors for the Russian classroom. Visit the RTG website for details of how to apply. The course costs £20 and can be paid online.

The RTG continues to go from strength to strength and has members from all sectors of Russian teaching: Saturday schools, state schools, private schools, further and higher education, private tutors and language teaching companies. Please register with us if you are involved in teaching Russian!

## Obituaries

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### James Riordan (1936–2012)

James William Riordan was born on 10 October 1936 in Portsmouth to working-class parents. Portsmouth always felt like home to Jim and he loved living there until his final days in his flat with a view of the sea. Jim's mother initially had to bring him up on her own from the age of about two, but she later remarried. Hence, his origins were humble and had he not passed his 11+ exam and got a place in his local grammar school, he would have received only a basic education. It was at grammar school that Jim discovered the joy of reading which he

passionately wanted to pass on to young people. His almost missionary zeal for inculcating a love of the written word was reinforced while he studied and worked in Moscow in the late 1950s to early 1960s as a translator for Progress Publishers. When he retired from his full-time academic duties, he devoted his endeavours to writing novels for young people and reading from them in public libraries: he could hold a whole room full of fidgety children spellbound with his mellifluous tones and kind, avuncular character. He was also a devoted grandfather and he thought the world of his family.



James Riordan (courtesy of David Holohan)

Another chance event changed Jim's life after grammar school – he was selected to study Russian as part of his National Service in 1954. Having gained A-Levels in French, German and Latin (as well as Economics), the tutors in the Joint Services Language School clearly thought he could tackle Russian, which he did, of course, with great accomplishment. This opened up the opportunity for him to enrol for a degree in Russian at Birmingham University. It was there that he began to take an interest in politics: he joined a student Marxist discussion group and became a member of the Communist Party. He gained his PhD at Birmingham also. While studying at the

Higher Party School in Moscow, he met Soviet 'celebrities' such as Yuri Gagarin, frequently finding himself sitting only a place or two away from Khrushchev and many others. He once ended up next to the world's first woman in space, Valentina Tereshkova, who said to him (I can hear Jim's great belly laugh now as he told me the story): "Call me Valya and get me another vodka!" Suddenly the 'oik' from Portsmouth was rubbing shoulders with the good and the great in Moscow, as Jim would say. It was an existence way beyond his wildest dreams. During his final illness he remained cheerful, saying he'd lived two lives in one.

One of the most endearing sides to Jim's character was that he wore his erudition lightly and never forgot his humble origins, despite his considerable achievements – his highly acclaimed academic works on Soviet sport, youth culture and sexuality, on contemporary literature and repressed authors, and his beautiful translations from Russian into English (to name but a few), for which he was quite rightly promoted to professor back in the 1980s. He possessed a great generosity of spirit in helping and encouraging others, freely giving of his time, talents, and wealth of experience and knowledge. He died peacefully, surrounded by his family, on 11 February 2012.

#### *Dr David Holohan*

Professor James Riordan was a member of the SCR / SCRSS Council from 1971–99 and SCRSS Vice-President from 2010–12. For eleven years, from 1983–94, he was also the Director of the Society's Easter Russian Language Seminar which he regularly opened with a speech in Russian to the twenty-five teachers from Russia, while apologising for his English accent.

He was inaugurated as Emeritus Professor of Russian at the University of Surrey in March 1991. His inaugural speech, which he repeated at an SCRSS event to mark the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Russian Revolution at the Bijou Cinema in London on 6 November 1992, was a perceptive analysis of the crossroads at which the USSR stood

at that time and the possible future of a capitalist-oriented Commonwealth of Independent States.

He saw the collision of two revolutions: the 'revolution from above' to impose *perestroika*, *glasnost* and conversion to a market economy, and 'the revolution from below' i.e. that of strong nationalist movements. He saw that the gravest political dilemma was that Gorbachev had loosened the old controls, which had offered the population the basic needs of life and a rule of law, but replaced it with nothing.

He recognised that the Russian Revolution and the Soviet state had made a considerable impact on the twentieth century and feared the import of some of the worst features of capitalism into its structure. He also recognised the importance of the Soviet Union's post-World War II establishment as a major power in the world, confronting *Pax Americana* with *Pax Sovietica* to maintain international order.

He hoped that the West would not take advantage of the collapse of the old communist order but extend a helping hand to a great country and offer it constructive assistance.

This sums up Jim Riordan's attitude to what, in a few months, became the disintegration of the Soviet Union into separate states and the adoption of a capitalist market economy.

He believed in social-justice and global planning to overcome the spectre of ecological catastrophe and hated obscene contrasts of wealth and poverty in the modern world. He remained an idealist and turned his attention to what mattered most to him: children, folk culture, literature, sport and especially football. Over the years he has given the Society entertaining lectures on these subjects and always remained a lover of the Russian language and the diverse people of the former Soviet Union.

We will miss his contribution to the life of our Society.

*Jean Turner*

## Russell Porter (1948–2012)

The SCRSS is sad to announce the death of Russell Porter on 27 April 2012. Over the past few years Russell worked closely with the SCRSS on a number of initiatives relating to Belarus and became a member of the SCRSS two years ago.

Russell contributed a number of excellent and informative articles on Belarus to the *SCRSS Information Digest*, as well as speaking at the SCRSS on several occasions, including the *Brest Fortress* exhibition and last autumn's screening of *The Brest Fortress* (directed by Alexander Kott, Russia, 2010). Russell's passion for Belarus, his indefatigable energy, knowledge and good humour were always a welcome breath of fresh air.

His loss is not only a tragedy to his family, but also to all those who worked with him at the Brest Museum in Belarus, at Maldon in Essex where he was a Councillor and had established a Brest City–Maldon town twinning, and in all the towns in the UK where he single-handedly transported the wonderful *Brest Fortress* exhibition.

His family has suggested that donations be made to Friends of the Belarusian Children's Hospice (UK) in his memory. Either contact the organisation direct (see [www.friends-bch.org.uk](http://www.friends-bch.org.uk)) or, if preferred, send cheques made payable to 'Friends of the Belarusian Children's Hospice (UK)' to the SCRSS, who will forward to Russell's wife Stanny (please mark envelopes 'Russell Porter').

We have sent the Society's deepest sympathy to his family.

*Jean Turner*

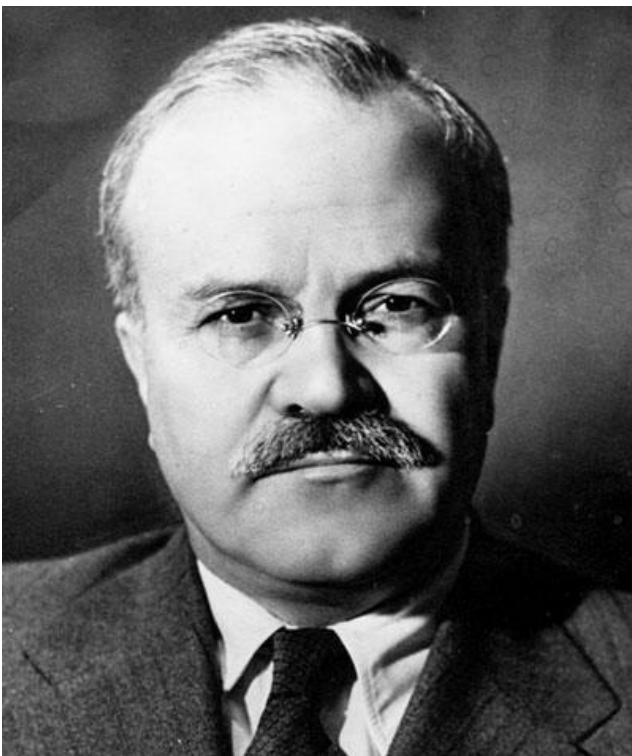
Note: See the following articles by Russell Porter (PDF versions available on the SCRSS website at [www.scrss.org.uk/publications.htm](http://www.scrss.org.uk/publications.htm)): 'Brest Fortress in Belarus' (*SCRSS Information Digest*, page 15, Autumn 2010); 'The Partisan War in Belarus 1941–44' (*SCRSS Information Digest*, page 9, Summer 2011).

## Book Reviews

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**Molotov: Stalin's Cold Warrior**  
By Geoffrey Roberts (Shapers of International History Series, Potomac Books, 2012, ISBN: 978-1-57488-945-1, 230pp, £24.00)

The series title – and the book – makes it clear that Vyacheslav Molotov (1890–1986) deserves his place as an important figure in the history of international relations. Professor Geoffrey Roberts (University College Cork) invites us to reassess the man often simply dismissed as Stalin's willing accomplice. For much of the period between 1939 and 1956 he occupied the position of Soviet foreign minister. These were years of conflict, crises and emergencies on a scale never before seen. Though “any claim to greatness as an international statesman is [...] questionable”, the author believes “Molotov's effectiveness as a diplomat seems incontestable”.



Vyacheslav Molotov (SCRSS Photo Library)

The book is relatively short but offers an excellent opportunity to revisit the crucial periods in his very long life: the negotiation

prior to the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in August 1939; his vital diplomatic role during the Second World War; and the Cold War years when he experienced many shifts in fortune prior to his eventual retirement in 1963.

Molotov's role in negotiating the Nazi-Soviet Pact begins with his becoming people's commissar for foreign affairs in May 1939. The author argues strongly that he was not given the job so that the Pact could happen (a common interpretation), but that Molotov pursued the Anglo-Soviet-French alliance with even more vigour than his predecessor Maxim Litvinov. “The most likely explanation is that Molotov's appointment was connected to Litvinov's failure to make any headway in the negotiations.” Molotov's efforts to forge the triple alliance also proved unsuccessful – and their progress and the eventual Pact are outlined in the book.

The Grand Alliance between the USSR, USA and Britain, which defeated the two most powerful military machines in the history of mankind, relied very heavily on the personal interactions between the senior figures involved from each country. Molotov's role in pushing Soviet interests during the course of the war, his visits to London and Washington, and his critical involvement in all the conferences and meetings are well covered.

After 1945, the author is clear that it is Molotov who should be credited as the true “architect of detente”, as he embraced “the possibility of a pan-European system of collective security as a radical resolution of the Cold War”. His attempts to pursue this course were ultimately defeated by Khrushchev and others. But “the post-Stalin detente Molotov worked so hard to achieve laid the groundwork for stabilising the Cold War confrontation in Europe in the mid-1970s”. And “when detente resumed under Gorbachev, one of its central tenets was the need for a common security system in Europe”.

This volume builds on the author's previous works on the history of the Soviet Union, Stalin and the Second World War – each

providing fresh, insightful perspectives on key phases of Soviet history. His next book, due later this year, will address another pivotal figure from the Second World War – Marshal Georgy Zhukov.

*Ralph Gibson*

Note: Professor Roberts will be one of the speakers at the SCRSS Russian History Seminar on Saturday 10 November (see page 5 for details).

## Listings

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### Events

#### Sutton Russian Circle

Friends Meeting House, 10 Cedar Road, Sutton, Surrey (5 minutes walk from Sutton Railway Station)

Friday 15 June 6.30pm for 7pm: *Empress Maria Feodorovna – Surviving Russian Autocracy and the Russian Revolution*. Illustrated lecture by Bob Dommett, followed by Russian Summer Party.

### Film

#### Sheffield Doc/Fest

Web: <http://sheffdocfest.com/>  
13–17 June 2012

Sheffield Doc/Fest celebrates the art and business of documentary. The festival programme includes 120 films from around the world and 300 speakers from the digital and documentary sector. It includes a number of Russian documentaries and screens four of Soviet director Dziga Vertov's films.

### Food and Drink

#### Teremok

Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre, London, SE1 6TB  
Food and drink from Russia and the republics of the former Soviet Union.

## Music

### Buxton Festival

Tel: 0845-12-72190, Email: [Info@buxtonfestival.co.uk](mailto:Info@buxtonfestival.co.uk),  
Web: [www.buxtonfestival.co.uk](http://www.buxtonfestival.co.uk)

9, 12, 20, 24 July 7.15pm and 17 July 4pm: *Buxton Festival Production Double Bill – The Maiden in the Tower* (opera in one act by Jean Sibelius) and *Kashchei the Immortal* (autumn fairy tale in one act by Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov). The Northern Chamber Orchestra and Festival Chorus are conducted by Stuart Stratford. Director: Stephen Lawless; Designer: Russell Craig; Lighting Designer: John Bishop. Sung in English; 2 hours 15 minutes. Tickets: £10–£58.

## Russian Language

### Russian Summer School at Lancashire College

Lancashire Adult Learning, Lancashire College, Southport Road, Chorley, Lancashire, PR7 1NB, Tel: 01257-276719, Web: [www.lancashirecollege.com](http://www.lancashirecollege.com)  
The summer school runs 22–27 July.

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