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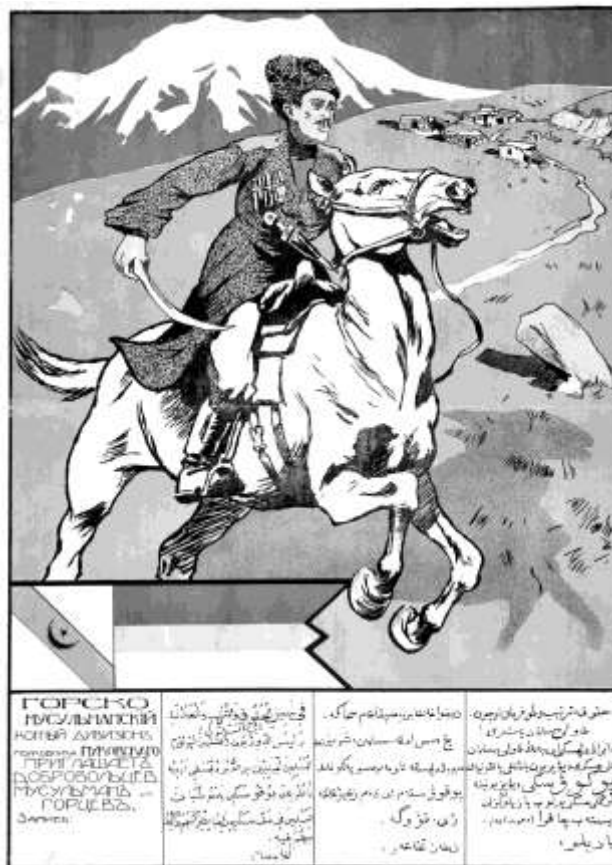
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## Feature

### Russian Revolution: Hope, Tragedy, Myths

By Ekaterina Rogatchevskaia

A hundred years after the Revolution took Russia by storm, it is the right time to re-examine why it happened, how it developed and why its lessons can still shape our vision and understanding of the world we live in now. This article outlines the key themes of the British Library's major new exhibition *Russian Revolution: Hope, Tragedy, Myths*, which runs from 28 April–29 August 2017. The exhibition covers the chronological period from the late nineteenth century until the mid-1920s, and attempts to show the complexity of the Russian Revolution, presenting events as a palette of mixed colours with numerous shades, rather than a black and white chessboard. The Russian Revolution sparked hopes that an ideal social order was achievable, provoked the tragedy of civil war on an unprecedented scale, and produced myths that entered the intellectual and artistic fabric of the modern world.



Recruitment poster for the Mountain-Muslim Cavalry Brigade under Colonel Pukovsky's command (reproduced with the kind permission of the British Library)

For over seventy years after the Bolsheviks took power in Russia, interpretations of the events of the Revolution and its consequences were determined by the political views of the interpreters. From their first days in power the Bolsheviks tried to control the revolutionary narrative, creating a canonical view of selected events. Locking away and destroying primary sources, documents and archives was part of this endeavour. It is not surprising that most of the counter-arguments and views outside the Bolsheviks' control were also formed within the framework set up by the Bolsheviks.

The collapse of the USSR created opportunities for historians to examine a large body of textual, visual and material sources. This helped them to formulate new research questions and compensate for big gaps in our knowledge by writing micro-histories and putting small social or political groups, separate regions and limited time periods into focus.

One of the exhibition's goals is to provide a view of the Revolution through the personal experiences of multiple individuals. The exhibition includes the narratives, views and feelings of people of different social backgrounds, political opinions, professional qualifications and nationalities, with varying degrees of knowledge of the Russian language, culture and politics, as well as foreign observers. The exhibition is designed along a so-called 'red line', with objects complemented by personal stories, such as an extract from Lenin's letter to his mother, written on the way to his Siberian exile, or the memoirs of transport engineer Yurii Lomonosov who played an important part in the abdication of Nicholas II.

Several extracts from people's diaries and memoirs are presented as sound-points. They include Tatiana Naidenova, the 18-year old daughter of a textile factory owner; Edith Harrison, an English resident in Petrograd; Iurii Got'e, director of the Rumiantsev Museum; a 27-year old officer of the Volunteer Army of South Russia; and a provincial schoolboy. Many of these personal stories are eyewitness accounts of the historical events, but they also describe everyday life and emotions for which the Revolution was a backdrop. These extracts are supported visually by a large number of contemporary photographs, film and artists' visualisations of events. The exhibition captures a moment in history, representing a wide diversity of voices – excited and thoughtful, confused and resolute, scared and hopeful, sad and happy, alarmed and astonished.

The first section in the exhibition, *The Tsar and his People*, gives an overview of the Russian Empire on the eve of the Revolution: a sense of its vast territory; its

rigid social structure and national diversity; its autocratic form of rule; its often unsuccessful and belated attempts to introduce economic, social and political reforms; its extreme political activism and the system of secret police. One of the exhibits is Lenin's application for a reader's ticket to the British Museum Library in 1902, using the pseudonym 'Jacob Richter' in order to throw the tsarist police off his track.

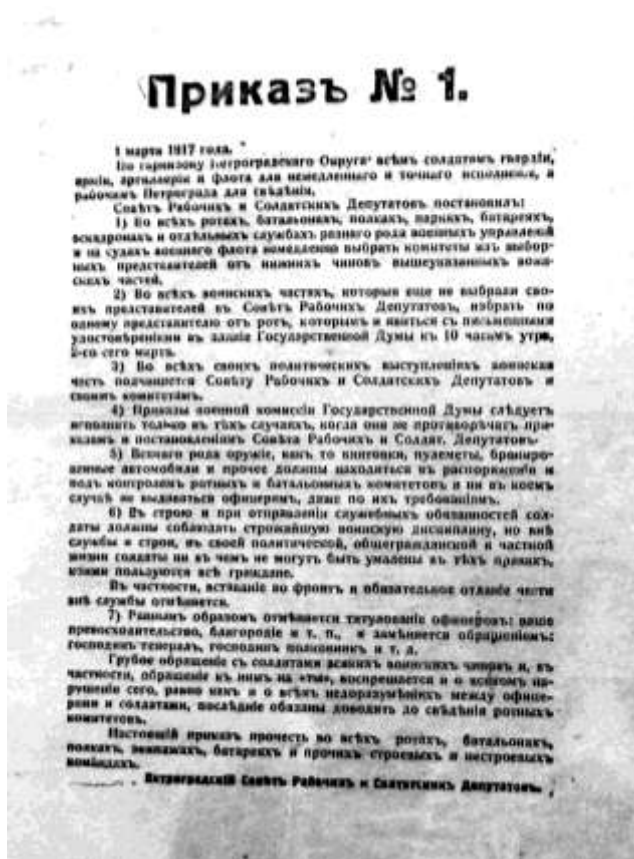


Festive crowd on the Khodynka Field from *Les Solennités du Saint Couronnement* (detail, reproduced with the kind permission of the British Library)

Another exhibit is the luxury souvenir album *Les Solennités du Saint Couronnement* (St Petersburg, 1899), published to commemorate the coronation of Tsar Nicholas II in 1896. The image selected for the exhibition depicts festive crowds on the Khodynka Field in Moscow, where some 500,000 people gathered to celebrate the coronation. However, a stampede occurred when a rumour spread that the supply of free souvenir gifts was running out, and 1,389 people were killed and another 1,300 injured. A so-called 'cup of sorrows' is juxtaposed next to the album: such cheap small enamel cups were included in the

coronation gifts handed out at the Khodynka Field.

The second section is titled *The Weeks when Decades Happened*, as Lenin once described this time. Russia entered the First World War in 1914 but the initial patriotism soon dissolved amid military defeat, huge numbers of casualties and food shortages. Despite strikes and unrest at home, the Tsar decided to take personal control of the army at the front. The way was left open for the February Revolution of 1917, which resulted in Nicholas II's abdication in March. The following period of Provisional Government and Soviets (workers' councils) was highly complex as different factions competed for power. Lenin was able to return from exile and the popularity of the Bolshevik party increased rapidly. In November, the Bolsheviks seized power, instigating government by elected soviets.



Order No 1 of the Petrograd Soviet, 14 (1) March 1917 (detail, reproduced with the kind permission of the British Library)

Documents and historical artefacts on display include the original billboards with the famous *Order No 1*, which transformed

the basis of Russian army discipline by initiating a new era of soldier–officer relations, and a placard issue of *Izvestiia* from 12 March (27 February) 1917 with the headline news and names of the members of the 'Temporary Committee of the State Duma'.

Artworks are also included, for example two lithographs – 'Angels and Airplanes' and the 'Doomed City' – from Natalia Goncharova's series *Mystical Images of War* (1914), with her stark representations of apocalyptic violence and redemption. For many artists and intellectuals, the oppressive political atmosphere in the country that followed the unrest of 1905 was similar to the heavy suffocating air before a thunder storm. Other artworks give us a different perspective on familiar events. Stills from Sergei Eisenstein's classic film *October* (1927), with its iconic version of the 'storming of the Winter Palace', were reproduced in Soviet history books as if they were original photographs. In the exhibition, visitors can compare it with the British artist Edward Barnard Lintott's watercolour *The Attack on the Winter Palace, Petrograd 1917*. Lintott was Secretary to the British Ambassador to Russia during the Revolution. His picture is one of the few versions of the scene made at the time of the events. The gates in his version are not closed, so the entire scene of breaking through the shut gates and symbolically stepping on the iron eagle was invented by Eisenstein.

The third section, *Cursed Days*, derives its title from Ivan Bunin's book about the Russian Revolution, and the story of the Civil War in Russia (1918–22) is one of the most tragic outcomes of the Revolution. The exhibition introduces all opponents of Bolshevik rule – from far-right monarchists to socialists. These opponents established strongholds and took control of various territories. Stressing this, the exhibition tries to show that the so-called 'White movement' was not a unified force and its participants had very different aims and agendas.

The formation of the Red Army and the phenomenon of 'Red Victory' is also examined. The British Library holds a

unique and rare collection of White propaganda posters and ephemera originating from South Russia. To demonstrate that the 'Russian' Civil War affected many nations and countries, one of the exhibits on display is a recruitment poster for the Mountain-Muslim Cavalry Brigade, aimed at Caucasian Muslims (see image reproduced on page 1).



*The Yalta Female Delegate*, wall paper, 1927 (detail, reproduced with the kind permission of the British Library)

The fourth section, *The New World is Born*, runs chronologically in parallel with the Civil War, examining political events after the 1917 Revolution as the Bolsheviks tried to secure power. It focuses on Russians' experience of the Red Terror, the Cheka (secret police), widespread famine and the unprecedented hostility of the new regime towards the Orthodox Church. Artists, writers and intellectuals responded to this period with a sense of celebration and tragedy, hate and warning. Alongside Mayakovsky's posters for ROSTA (the Russian State Telegraph Agency) and Yurii Annenkov's illustrations to Alexander Blok's poem *The Twelve* is a unique 'placard newspaper', or hand-lettered wall paper,

*The Yalta Female Delegate*, created in 1927 by a local women's committee in Yalta. The vogue for placard newspapers emerged in Soviet Russia out of the shortage of print facilities and materials. Wall newspapers were meant to disseminate official and local news, and very soon became a powerful propaganda tool.

The fifth section, *Russia and the World of Fire*, discusses international responses to the Revolution in Russia. It includes accounts by foreign travellers, eyewitnesses and sympathisers, spies, and members of the Comintern, presenting a variety of views on the new Russia. Two items on loan from the SCRSS are exhibited: a letter from November 1924 addressed to members of the newly formed Society for Cultural Relations between the People of the British Commonwealth and the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (S.C.R.), and a leaflet advertising the exhibition *Russia of To-day in Posters and Books*, organised by the S.C.R. in 1925.

The exhibition finishes with an epilogue, *Writing the Revolution*, which looks at how the Revolution came to dominate the Russian artistic scene for many years. Attempts to imagine the scale and understand the meaning and the consequences of this event materialised in fiction, film, visual and performing arts and music. Four Russian-born Nobel Prize laureates in literature – Ivan Bunin (1870–1953), Boris Pasternak (1890–1960), Mikhail Sholokhov (1905–84) and Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008) – reflected on the Revolution in their works, but only Sholokhov's novel *And Quiet Flows the Don* passed Soviet censorship and could be read in the Soviet Union. The works of the three other laureates were officially banned. Until Gorbachev's *perestroika* in the late 1980s, they circulated in *samizdat*.

The Revolution in Russia was a decisive moment for the country and the whole world. After centuries of lagging behind socially and economically, Russia made a huge leap into the unknown territory of large-scale social experiment and utopian quest. The facts, consequences and

lessons of the Russian Revolution still serve as a reference point for debates on public affairs. The Revolution has much to tell us about the relationship between the masses and the elites, the vulnerability of democratic procedures in the face of organised violence, the challenges presented to humanitarian values by civil strife and a large-scale refugee crisis, and the tension between the principle of social justice and the practical impossibility of achieving it. It also remains an important source of creative inspiration in art and literature, both as a violent and radical overturning of the social order but also a whole new way of imagining and depicting the world.

### Footnote

At the time of writing this article the exhibition is still being finalised. For this reason, the exhibition section names cited here may be subject to change.

*Ekaterina Rogatchevskaia is Lead Curator of Central and East European Collections at the British Library, and Lead Curator for the exhibition 'Russian Revolution: Hope, Tragedy, Myths'. She has published articles, presented conference papers on the history of the British Museum Library and its Russian collections, as well as on Anglo-Russian cultural relations, and co-curated the exhibition 'Out of This World: Science Fiction But Not as We Know It (2011, British Library). Among her other research interests are Russian émigré literature, publishing and information studies.*

## SCRSS News

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*Latest news by Ralph Gibson, Honorary Secretary, SCRSS*

### AGM Notice

Notice is hereby given that the Annual General Meeting of the Society for Co-operation in Russian & Soviet Studies will take place at 11.00 on Saturday 20 May

2017 at the Society's premises at 320 Brixton Road, London, SW9 6AB. The AGM is open to SCRSS members only. The deadline for motions for discussion at the AGM and nominations of members for election to the next Council of the Society is Friday 21 April. The SCRSS Council and its Executive Committee are responsible for the running of the Society between AGMs. At 14.00, following a lunch break, SCRSS Council member and art historian Christine Lindey will give an illustrated talk on *Art and the Russian Revolution*. The talk is free to members attending the AGM, otherwise normal entrance fees apply.

## Russian Revolution Centenary

This year the UK will see a vast range of activity related to the Russian Revolution centenary. Katya Rogatchevskaia's talk on the British Library's exhibition *Russian Revolution: Hope, Tragedy, Myths* at the SCRSS on 24 February is just one of these. The Society also continues to participate in the work of the Russian Revolution Centenary Committee, co-founded by the SCRSS and Marx Memorial Library (see the article on page 9). We have also produced a selection of limited-edition mugs to celebrate the Russian Revolution centenary, using colour reproductions of five original posters in the SCRSS collections.

These will be available throughout the year at SCRSS events @ £6.50 each. To keep up to date with centenary-related events, please make sure we have your current email address. Members receive regular e-news bulletins with information about the Society's events, news from other organisations and special offers. Simply email the Society on [ruslibrary@scrss.org.uk](mailto:ruslibrary@scrss.org.uk) with 'Mailing list' in the subject line to ensure you get all the latest information.

## Centenary Membership Drive

One of the SCRSS's ideas to mark this year's centenary is to attempt a net increase of 100 members during the course of 2017.





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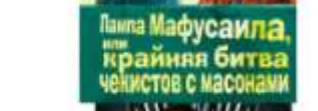
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This would considerably boost our financial base as membership fees and member donations continue to cover almost all of the basic day-to-day running costs of the Society. I would urge every member to think about organisations, colleagues, friends or relations who might be encouraged to affiliate to or join the SCRSS and support its work.

For over ninety years the SCRSS has been helping to bridge the knowledge gap between the USSR / Russia and the UK. Given the current state of relations between the two countries, this work seems more vital than ever. Membership forms are available on the website at [www.scrss.org.uk/membership.htm](http://www.scrss.org.uk/membership.htm), or you can request copies to be sent by post.

## Limited Saturday Openings

As our autumn Saturday openings proved very popular, these will continue on the first Saturday of February, March and April 2017 from 11.00–16.00. The SCRSS building will be open for members to visit without the need for a prior appointment (as continues to be the case for weekdays). The Loan Library and General Reference Library will be available to use, while the ground floor space will be open to view our current displays / exhibitions and buy our Russian Revolution centenary mugs, as well as a range of donated Soviet / Russian souvenirs and de-acquired books. Please note that we accept cash or cheques only. As Honorary Secretary, I would be delighted to welcome you to the premises, particularly if you have not previously had the chance to view, and use, the extensive library that your membership fee allows you to access.

## Membership Renewal

While we attempt to attract new members, it is very important that we retain our existing ones. If you have a green membership renewal form enclosed with this *SCRSS Digest*, please do respond as soon as possible. To save on postage costs, renewals due now and up to the first half of

the year have been included. But don't wait to renew – send your cheque today, or request the SCRSS bank details and transfer the money directly! Getting membership fees in promptly greatly assists our ability to plan for the future.

## Next Events

**Saturday 4 February, 11.00-16.00**

### **SCRSS Saturday Opening for Members**

The Loan Library and General Reference Library will be open. Russian Revolution centenary mugs will be on sale, as well as de-acquired books and a selection of donated Soviet / Russian souvenirs. The ground floor will be open to view our current exhibitions and displays.

**Friday 24 February, 19.00**

### **Lecture: Katya Rogatchevskaia on the British Library's Exhibition *Russian Revolution: Hope, Tragedy, Myths***

Katya Rogatchevskaia, Lead Curator of the British Library's major new exhibition on the Russian Revolution, opening in April 2017, discusses the exhibition themes and gives interesting insights into the project from the curatorial perspective. See the article on page 1 for more information about the exhibition.

**Saturday 4 March, 11.00-16.00**

### **SCRSS Saturday Opening for Members**

Details as for 4 February above.

**Friday 24 March, 19.00**

### **Film: *The End of St Petersburg***

Directed by Vsevolod Pudovkin (1893-1953). This silent film, one of Pudovkin's most famous works, was one of several films commissioned by the Soviet Government to celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Russian Revolution. It covers the period 1913–17, explaining why and how the Bolsheviks came to power in October 1917, but views events through the struggle of ordinary people. Mezhrabpom, USSR, 1927, 87 mins, black/white, silent film. *Please note: admission to this event is free (SCRSS members and non-members). We welcome donations on the night to support our work.*

**Saturday 1 April, 11.00-16.00**  
**SCRSS Saturday Opening for Members**  
Details as for 4 February above.

**Saturday 8 – Sunday 9 April 2017, 10.00–16.20 daily**

**Course: 9th SCRSS Russian Language Seminar**

Organised by the SCRSS in association with the St Petersburg Association for International Co-operation, the seminar offers a stimulating lecture programme in Russian, aimed at teachers, translators and interpreters of Russian, final-year undergraduates and graduates of Russian. Two parallel streams are led by speakers direct from St Petersburg, Russia. *Russian and linguistics:* Tatiana Piotrovskaya (Senior Lecturer, Department of English Philology and Language Culture Studies, Faculty of Philology, St Petersburg State University). *Russian literary and cultural scene:* Vadim Levental (writer, literary critic, book editor and political commentator). There are four lectures per day: choose from one of two options per session, moving from one stream to another throughout the day as you wish. Each lecture session lasts 70 minutes, including time for discussion. *'Early bird' rate (pay by Friday 10 February 2017):* £115 SCRSS members, £130 non-members. *Standard rate (pay by Friday 24 March 2017):* £130 SCRSS members, £150 non-members. The full lecture programme, application form and terms & conditions are available on the SCRSS website at [www.scrss.org.uk/russianseminar.htm](http://www.scrss.org.uk/russianseminar.htm). Only 32 places available.

**Saturday 20 May, 11.00–13.00**

**Event: SCRSS AGM**

Open to SCRSS members only. See AGM Notice on page 5.

**Saturday 20 May, 14.00**

**Illustrated Lecture: Christine Lindey on *Art and the Russian Revolution***

Christine Lindey explores how artists put avant-garde art at the service of the 1917 Russian Revolution. Kandinsky and Malevich challenged Tsarist aesthetic, political and social norms to create a modernist art for the new age. Tatlin, Popova and Rodchenko designed

innovatory textiles, ceramics and furniture for workers and peasants. Artists spread socialist ideas through films, portable theatre and literacy campaigns on decorated boats and trains, as well as through posters and mass re-enactments of revolutionary events. Christine Lindey is an art historian and lecturer. Her areas of expertise are nineteenth and twentieth century art, with a special interest in Soviet and Socialist art. She is currently finishing a book on British socially committed art in the 1940s–50s, due for publication in 2017. *Please note: The talk is free to SCRSS members attending the AGM, otherwise normal entrance fees apply.*

*Events take place at the SCRSS, 320 Brixton Road, London SW9 6AB, unless otherwise stated. Admission fees: films and lectures £3.00 (SCRSS members), £5.00 (non-members); other events as indicated. Full details for all events are available on the SCRSS website at [www.scrss.org.uk/cinemaevents.htm](http://www.scrss.org.uk/cinemaevents.htm). Please note: dogs are not permitted on SCRSS premises, with the exception of guide dogs.*

## **Soviet Memorial Trust Fund News**

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*Latest news by Ralph Gibson, Honorary Secretary, SMTF*

### **Remembrance Day 2016**

Remembrance Sunday was marked, as usual, at the Soviet War Memorial with an Act of Remembrance. Wreaths were laid by the Mayor of Southwark, local MP Neil Coyle, Minister-Counsellor Alexander Kramarenko from the Russian Embassy, diplomats from other CIS countries, World War II veterans and a range of organisations, including the SCRSS.

In his address, Mr Kramarenko referred to the events of a century ago: "Today we



remember those who fought and died in two world wars for their country. We say: 'Let's not forget!' What does it mean today, 100 years after World War I was unleashed? In the first place, it means drawing lessons from history in order not to repeat it. We, in Russia, are proud that we were on the same side with Britain in those two wars. Indeed, we were on the side of history. But it is equally clear today that in 1914 European society was on the threshold of radical change, among other things in response to the contradictions of that stage of globalisation, although the word wasn't coined then. For fear of losing control, the elites blundered into war as a policy by default. Alexander Kerensky, head of Russia's Provisional Government, seeing off the troops leaving for the front in the summer of 1917, talked about the need to continue the war effort as imperative of the then interdependence. Four months later our liberal elite was swept away by the tide of history. Now European societies are at another critical juncture. There is an acute need to resolve contradictions, including the negative consequences of globalisation, accumulated over the past 40 years." The full text of his address, and photos of the ceremony, can be found on the Russian Embassy website at <http://rusemb.org.uk/photogal/605>.

## Next Events

**Tuesday 9 May 2017, 11.00**

**Event: Victory Day 2017**

This year's ceremony at the Soviet War Memorial marks the 72<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the Allied Victory over fascism in World War II. The Act of Remembrance commences at 11.00. Individuals and organisations are welcome to register their interest by emailing the SMTF Honorary Secretary on [smtf@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:smtf@hotmail.co.uk). Further details to follow on the SCRSS website.

*The Soviet War Memorial is located in Geraldine Mary Harmsworth Park which surrounds the Imperial War Museum in London. The Memorial was unveiled in 1999 on the initiative of the SCRSS and the Society has been supporting the work of the*

*SMTF since its foundation. The SMTF organises three main ceremonies at the Memorial each year to mark Holocaust Memorial Day (27 January), Victory Day (9 May) and Remembrance Sunday (November).*

## Russian Revolution Centenary 1917–2017

### 2017: A Centenary Like No Other

By Ralph Gibson, Co-Chair of the RRCC



**ОРУЖИЕМ МЫ ДОБИЛИ ВРАГА  
ТРУДОМ МЫ ДОБУДЕМ ХЛЕБ  
ВСЕ ЗА РАБОТУ, ТОВАРИЩИ!**

*We finished off the enemy with weapons, we'll get bread through our labour, all to work comrades!*  
(SCRSS Library)

It is already clear that the centenary of the 1917 Russian Revolution has captured the interest and imagination of a vast range of organisations and institutions across the UK. And the momentum is only likely to

increase as the year progresses towards the key date – 7 November (25 October according to the Julian calendar used in Russia at that time, hence the ‘Great October Socialist Revolution’).

The Russian Revolution Centenary Committee (RRCC) continues to draw in individuals and organisations planning to mark this epoch-changing event, as well as working on its own major one-day celebration on 4 November 2017 at Congress House in central London.

At its press launch in 2016, the RRCC welcomed Cuban Ambassador HE Teresita Vicente, who spoke about the Revolution’s decisive role in the evolution of ideas and movements that led to the creation of a socialist Cuba. Moreover, the Ambassador noted the vital role played by the USSR in the continued existence of a Socialist Cuba in the face of massive opposition from the United States and the forces of capitalism. She was in no doubt about the positive impact of the Revolution across the Caribbean and Latin America.

Though they may not interpret the results of the Revolution in such positive terms, its significance can be seen in the attention the centenary will receive at some of the UK’s major London-based institutions. The Royal Academy begins the year with *Revolution: Russian Art 1917–1932* (11 February–17 April). The newly relocated Design Museum follows with *Imagine Moscow* (15 March–3 June). The British Library’s contribution *Russian Revolution: Hope, Tragedy, Myths* is on display from 28 April to 29 August, and the Tate Modern finishes off with *Red Star Over Russia* (8 November 2017–18 February 2018). A series of major arts events in Wales, involving the Welsh National Opera and the National Museum of Wales, has also been announced.

The RRCC is focusing its efforts on facilitating the exchange of ideas, information and support amongst smaller, less well-resourced organisations. The committee aims not only to mark the anniversary, but also to inform debate about the Russian Revolution’s continued

relevance to politics and society today. The RRCC was co-founded by the Society for Co-operation in Russian and Soviet Studies (SCRSS) and the Marx Memorial Library and Workers’ School (MML), and brings together a broad-based coalition of labour movement, heritage and cultural organisations, including the *Morning Star*.



**СМЕРТЬ МИРОВОМУ  
ИМПЕРИАЛИЗМУ**

*Death to world imperialism* (SCRSS Library)

MML is working on a touring exhibition that explores the context of the Revolution in the First World War and its impact on the UK. The SCRSS is planning a seminar that will draw together historians and academics from Russia and the UK, and will also be putting on an exhibition drawn from its extensive archives and collections. Other ideas emerging are the possibility of re-creating the Choir of the Communist Club, rehearsed readings of early Soviet plays, performances of early Soviet chamber or orchestral music, and screenings of classics of the early Soviet cinema.

Keep in touch with developments, and see a growing amount of useful background information, at [www.1917.org.uk](http://www.1917.org.uk). The

RRCC invites interested organisations to get in touch via email to secretary@1917.org.uk or write to the RRCC, c/o Marx Memorial Library, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London, EC1R 0DU.

*This article first appeared in the Morning Star's 'Russian Revolution Centenary Supplement 1917-2017' published 31 December 2016 / 1 January 2017.*

## Building the Culture of Socialist Society

By Andrew Rothstein

*This is an abridged reprint of an article from the Anglo-Soviet Journal (ASJ), Volume 47, Nos 2/3, Autumn / Winter 1987 (70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Russian Revolution Special Issue), pp2–8. The ASJ was the published by the Society between 1940 and 1992.*

### Tsarist Russia

The state of culture in the Russian Empire was recorded for all time, seventy years ago, by authoritative writers concerned to interest foreign investors and politicians in this country.

The well-known firm of Eyre and Spottiswoode published the *Russian Year Book* (1913) with the duly acknowledged help of the Tsarist Ministry of Finance. It reported that “education in Russia is very imperfectly developed. On an average, out of every 1,000 only 211, or 21 per cent, can read and write”, while the percentage fell to 12.4 in the Caucasus and 5.3 in Central Asia (page 83).

Baedeker's *Russia* (1914) wrote: “In 1861 serfdom was abolished, but its demoralising effects have by no means disappeared, since practically nothing is done for the elevation of the peasant... The lower classes live in unspeakable poverty and destitution” (page liv).

In 1914 Harold Williams, a Liberal journalist who knew Russia well, wrote in his *Russia*

*of the Russians* that drunkenness was “prevalent”, and that “not in England, France or Germany is it possible to hear in the public streets such an astonishing variety of bad language” (page 140). The workers “live poorly, at the best in dark tiny flats in the back yards of big houses, or in tumble-down wooden houses on the outskirts of the city; at the worst in ‘corners’, paying for the corner of a room from a rouble and a half to two roubles a month, and living on herring, black bread and tea” (page 420).

A committed friend of Tsardom, the traveller and writer Stephen Graham [noted in his] *Changing Russia* in 1915 [that] “in the medieval state of the Russian civilisation and of the religious life of the peasantry, [...] it is possible to see something of what we ourselves were like in the far past” (page 3). However, in a country “where the workmen take but a shilling and eighteen pence a day and are content with any conditions” (page 9), [...] there was a great rush of British capital thither.”

Next year, as though to illustrate his point, *The Times* published its *Book of Russia* (March 1916), with the express aim of helping “those who are interested in Russia from the commercial point of view” to see “how we may help our ally to develop her vast natural resources” (pages v, ix). It dwelt specially on the situation of the peasants. “Before the war the Russian peasant passed an existence of privation of everything except vodka. His body was roughly clad. Bare necessities, reduced to a minimum, supported life. His soul was steeped in ignorance. Vodka obtainable in unlimited quantities supplied his only distraction” (page 220). About the workmen the book was silent. But in general it emphasised: “In Russia poverty and ignorance are widespread, and it is the women of the lower classes who feel most keenly the effects of the social and economic backwardness of the country” (page 241).

In the light of these testimonies, Lenin's opinions of the tasks facing Russia after the October Revolution acquire a poignant meaning. In his pamphlet on the introduction

of the food tax (April 1921), Lenin pointed to the vast areas in northern, eastern, south-eastern and southern Russia, around its more developed central regions – areas big enough to hold dozens of large civilised states. “And over all these areas there reigns patriarchalism, semi-savagery and real savagery. And what about the peasant backwoods of the rest of Russia, where scores of versts of country track, or rather of trackless country, lie between the villages and the railways, i.e. material connection with culture, with capitalism, with large-scale industry, with a big city? [...]

He returned, not for the first time, to the subject in his last days. “What an enormous amount of work confronts us today in order to achieve anything like a real cultural level on the basis of our proletarian gains... We must bear in mind the semi-Asiatic condition of lack of culture from which we have not yet emerged, and from which we shall be unable to extricate ourselves with serious effort.” But such an effort was quite possible [...for] “in no other country is State power in the hands of the working class, which in the main fully appreciates its shortcomings, I will not say in culture, but in literacy” (*Pages from a Diary*, January 1923). [...]

## Liquidate Illiteracy

[...] Thousands of schools were opened in the very first years after 1917. Ill-equipped at first with paper, books, even pencils, nevertheless in the midst of the Civil War they grew to 10 million pupils by the end of 1920. The club with its reading room and library (there were nearly 34,000 reading rooms in the villages) was almost from the first, as recollections of factory life show, the accepted symbol that the people had assumed the privileges of the old ruling classes. The classics of Russian and foreign literature – from Pushkin to Tolstoy, from Shakespeare to Dickens – printed on the very cheapest paper, which was all the Soviet economy could afford, poured out in a great flood, at purely nominal prices, into the clubs and schools. Ancient monuments and historic palaces, museums and art galleries, were at once placed under State

protection, and much propaganda effort was devoted to encourage the mass of the people to visit them.

Above all, from 1918 onwards such aims were accompanied by a giant campaign to ‘liquidate illiteracy’, with the declared aim that all citizens from 8 to 50 should learn to read and write in their native language; if not, then in Russian. Every available person was drawn into this work, from famous scientists and writers to schoolchildren in the higher forms. By the end of 1920, three million had been taught to read and write. By the end of 1927, the number had risen to eight million; in 1935 it was 31 million, and by 1940 fifty million. The USSR entered the war in 1941 as a literate nation, unlike that of 1914. There was naturally a parallel expansion of school education, abolishing from the very first the segregation of secondary education from the mass of ordinary schools. Compulsory 4-year education was introduced as from 1930, 7-year schooling in the countryside between 1933 and 1940, and compulsory 10-year education in the towns on the eve of the Nazi attack in 1941.

A parallel network of vocational training, combined with general education, was developed in the twenties, coping with the important task of taking out of the streets the hundreds of thousands of orphans of the Civil War and the following years of epidemics and hunger, the ‘besprizorniki’. The great majority were thereby rescued to be valuable, and in many cases outstanding, citizens. [...]

## Feature

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### Russian Prisons: From GULAG to FSIN

By Bill Bowring

On 8 December 2016 President Putin met his Council for Civil Society and Human Rights, which includes several leading

Russian human rights activists and prison reformers. Some of them have been active in the independent prison Public Monitoring Commission (ONK), created in 2008 during Mr Medvedev's presidency. The ONK, inspired by the British system of Prison Visitors, has rights to visit all places of detention, interview prisoners and report on conditions. The transcript of the meeting is published on the President of Russia website (<http://en.kremlin.ru/>).

One of the members of the Council, the veteran human rights defender Ludmila Alekseeva (founder of the Moscow Helsinki Group), raised the issue of controversial recent elections to the new fourth composition of the ONK by the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation. President Putin replied that he agreed with her on every point. She was followed by the journalist and former ONK member Elena Masyuk who made a forceful presentation about the fate of the ONK, and the attempted legal proceedings by her and others to overturn the Civic Chamber's decision. She had written that the Civic Chamber was replacing all experts on the penitentiary system and human rights activists with unknowns from the penitentiary system itself, as well as former criminals. President Putin also agreed with her. She was followed by Andrei Babushkin who, together with the former Duma Deputy Valery Borshchov, had helped to create the system of ONKs, and by Igor Kalyapin, founder of the highly successful Committee Against Torture.

On 3 January 2017 President Putin published a list of orders (*porucheni*) arising from the meeting of 8 December. One of these ordered the General Prosecutor of the Russian Federation Yuri Chaika to check the compliance of the Federal Penitentiary Service (FSIN) with public control of guarantees for human rights in prisons. His report must be submitted by 1 September. He also ordered the Civic Chamber, together with the Council for Civil Society and Human Rights and the Federal Ombudsman for Human Rights, to analyse the effectiveness of the mechanism for

appointing members of the ONK by the end of March.

What is the background to this? In part, it is the legacy of the GULAG (Chief Directorate of Camps), the USSR's system of correctional labour camps whose population reached 100,000 in the 1920s, and in which it is estimated that 14 million people spent time between 1929 and 1953. The Russian Federation still has a prison population of more than 633,000, the third highest in the world after the USA with 2,217,947 and China with 1,649,804. In terms of its incarceration rate (the number of prisoners per 100,000 of population), Russia is now eighth in the world, having previously held the highest ranking: its rate is 439, compared with the USA's 693, and 145 in England and Wales (the highest in Western Europe).

Indeed, Russia has experienced a dramatic fall in prison numbers – from more than 1,000,000 in 2000 (a rate of 729). Russia's membership of the Council of Europe since 1996 has been one of the main drivers of reform. A condition of membership was transfer of the penitentiary system from the Ministry of the Interior (police and internal armed forces) to the Ministry of Justice, and Russia complied. In 2002 a new Criminal Procedural Code came into force (I was one of the Council of Europe experts working with senior Russian officials on the drafts), requiring judges rather than prosecutors to rule on bail or custody pre-trial. And there is a post-Soviet Criminal Code that has been amended many times. However, most prison officers are former servicemen and the service is highly militarised.

Convicted persons serve their sentences in 717 Correctional Colonies (IK), with compulsory paid work (much less well paid, relatively, than in the USSR). In many cases these are former GULAG camp establishments, in remote parts of Russia. Nearly eight per cent of prisoners are women, and 0.2 per cent are juveniles (under 18 years). The age of criminal responsibility in Russia is 14 years. According to a report published in January 2017, ten per cent of prisoners have HIV



and four per cent drug-resistant tuberculosis. Narcotic abuse is rife in Russian prisons. Russia is presently suffering from what is described by officials as an HIV and AIDs epidemic. A major contributor to this crisis is the number of addicts and infected persons released from prison.

Russia's greatest problem is the system of 217 pre-trial detention prisons called Investigative Isolators (SIZOs), which account for 17 per cent of prisoners. The most famous and notorious are SIZO No 1 (Matrosskaya Tishina), dating from the 1940s and where Mikhail Khodorkovsky was held during his trials, and SIZO No 2 (Butyrka), dating from the eighteenth century. I have visited both. SIZOs, which are obliged to accept every person sent to them by the courts, suffer from chronic and extreme overcrowding.

Since the case of *Kalashnikov v Russia* in 2002, the European Court of Human Rights had by 2012 ruled against Russia more than eighty times for violations of the right, under Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, not to be subjected by reason of overcrowding to inhuman and degrading treatment. Cells with fifteen beds were at times holding forty-five prisoners, who were obliged to sleep in shifts, with an open toilet in the corner (horrifying conditions described in 1994 by Professor Nigel Rodley, then UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, as comparable only to Dante's circles of hell or Hieronymus Bosch's depiction of the sufferings of the damned). In 2012 the Strasbourg Court issued a 'pilot judgment' in *Ananyev v Russia*, ordering Russia to submit an Action Plan for reform of the SIZOs within six months. Russia submitted a Plan in time, but implementation is hampered by shortage of funds and corruption. The head of FSIN from 2009 to 2012, Colonel-General Aleksandr Reimer, was arrested in March 2015 and charged with embezzlement from FSIN on a grand scale. He is still in custody awaiting trial. He was appointed by Mr Medvedev, following the scandal of the death of the anti-corruption lawyer Sergei Magnitsky in

custody in November 2009. FSIN is now led by a former intelligence officer.

The latest scandal concerning Russian prisons is the case of 34-year-old activist Ildar Dadin. In December 2015, he became the first person to be convicted of a new offence of 'repeated demonstrating' and sentenced to three years' imprisonment, reduced on appeal to two and a half years. Amnesty International has recognised him as a 'Prisoner of Conscience'. He complained of serious torture while in an IK in Karelia and was transferred elsewhere – for a long period his lawyers and ONK members were unable to find out where he was being held. He is now in an IK in Altai. This case has been widely reported.

However, on 8 January 2017, an article in the daily newspaper *Vedomosti* compared the responses to a survey on the Russian penitentiary system from 2000 and 2016. In 2000, 82 per cent of respondents said that they knew about problems in the penitentiary system, while 18 per cent did not know. By the end of 2016, 68 per cent said they knew nothing, while 32 per cent knew. This is due not only to the dramatic fall in the number of prisoners, but also to the fact that – with very few exceptions – the mass media in Russia are state-controlled, with news of prison conditions 'filtered'.

That is why the future of the ONK is so controversial and at the top of the list of President Putin's recent orders.

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*His latest book is 'Law, Rights and Ideology in Russia: Landmarks in the Destiny of a Great Power' (Routledge, 2013).*

*Bill Bowring is also President of the SCRSS.*

## Reviews

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### **Moscow: A Traveller's Reader**

**Edited by Laurence Kelly  
(Robinson, 2016, ISBN:  
9781472137142, Pbk, 352pp, £9.99)**

SCRSS Cat No: 2437

This book is an anthology of excerpts from European travellers' writings about Moscow from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. They are grouped around different parts of the city and its historic buildings.

The city's history is told through excerpts from historical documents: diaries, travelogues, poems, even Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. They include records of Peter the Great's bloody reprisals after the revolt of the Streltsy in 1698; a visit to the city's brothels by medical students in the 1890s (from Chekhov); Kutuzov's abandoning Moscow to Napoleon in 1812, and Napoleon's ignominious retreat from the burning city; Pushkin's railing against the mindlessness of 1830 society; the flowering of literary greatness in the nineteenth century and of the Moscow Art Theatre on the eve of the twentieth; and the dazzling profusion of jewels in the Treasury of the Kremlin.

This is a book that may appeal to those who have spent time in Moscow or who already know something of its history. Some might like to read it before a trip. Others might like to use it for research or as a reference guide.

The book is usefully indexed with an interesting introduction. The excerpts are all bite sized, covering a page or two, enabling readers to dip in and out of the book to match their interests or their own sightseeing programme when in Moscow. In addition, the excerpts are free standing, without commentary, leaving the original writers to speak directly to you over the centuries. For the traveller, this opens up the opportunity of reading a centuries-old description of a building or area of the city,

then seeing it with their own eyes, stepping back into history.

*Charles Stewart*

### **Tolstoy, Rasputin, Others, and Me: The Best of Teffi**

**By Teffi (tr. and ed. by Robert Chandler, Rose France, Anne Marie Jackson, New York Review Books, 2016, ISBN: 978-1-59017-996-3, Pbk, 220pp, \$14.95, list of historical figures, detailed notes on the texts)**

SCRSS Cat No: 2422

### **Memories: From Moscow to the Black Sea**

**By Teffi (tr. and ed. by Robert Chandler & Elizabeth Chandler, Anne Marie Jackson, Irina Steinberg, New York Review Books, 2016, ISBN: 978-1-59017-951-2, Pbk, 267pp, \$16.95, foreword by Edythe Haber, detailed notes on the texts)**

SCRSS Cat No: 2423

In this year of the centenary of the Russian revolutions we see the re-discovery of a writer and observer of Russian life who, firstly, took part fully in that *belle époque* of Russian culture immediately before 1917, and, secondly, experienced its shocking loss as the two revolutions destroyed the old world and then cruelly struggled to produce a new one. The two books under review neatly describe the first and the second of these two events.

*Tolstoy, Rasputin, Others, and Me* describes the world before the revolutions, where middle-class values still held and society was stable, although in a precarious state. In this new collection of Teffi's best autobiographical non-fiction writings we range from portraits of Rasputin and Lenin, to profiles of cultural figures, to moving domestic scenes – mostly never before published in English. Everything is here: politics, society, art and literature, love and

family life. And all is told in Teffi's multifaceted style: amusing, sincerely moving, ironic and always honest, pervaded by an intensely felt understanding of humanity's simultaneous tragedy and absurdity – and always infectiously readable. Teffi continues where Chekhov left off, but without the latter's clinical detachment.

Teffi's independent spirit meant that she was always a free thinker, but critical, and she had shown sympathy with the 1905 revolution. Events after October 1917 were a different matter. In 1918 she left Russia, officially on a reading tour to Ukraine, and never returned. Her real reasons for leaving are not fully known, but just before her departure, an actor reading Teffi's stories was arrested and warned against earning "her bread through slander of the people's government".

In 2017 we do not need telling what it is like to be a refugee. It is the state of knowing nothing – not how long the journey will last, nor what its final destination may be, nor how one will recognise it when it is reached. Following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, more than a million Russian citizens were plunged into this state for months or years at a time.

In *Memories* we experience the desperation of her flight as she experienced it, without afterthoughts or sermonising. If one is Teffi, one does not pretend to know what she did not know at the time. The brief stories of her journey through Russia, from its western border to the southern one, contain almost no generalisation. She succeeds in conveying the sense of claustrophobia and disorientation that are the refugee condition. Yet, with a delicate touch, she cannot help laughing at the absurd things that happened. Her ship, the *Shilka*, was running out of food. A nearby cargo boat was loaded with food supplies but refused to share. "At this," Teffi writes, "the *Shilka* grew indignant. She opened hostilities, dispatching two lifeboats with machine guns (!).

"They managed to seize some provisions, but the offended steamship complained to a

nearby French ship, the *Jean Barthes*. The French ship then bellowed menacingly at the *Shilka*, 'Brigands! Bolsheviks! Explain yourselves! This instant, or else...'

"With dignity and feeling, the *Shilka* replied that she had hungry women and children on board, and that the French had always been renowned for their chivalry.

"The *Jean Barthes* calmed down and immediately dispatched a lifeboat carrying chocolate, flour and condensed milk."

Following her emigration, Teffi settled in Paris in 1919, where she became a leading figure in the émigré literary scene. Now that her genius has been rediscovered by a new generation of readers, she once again enjoys huge acclaim in Russia and across the world.

**Note:** the UK editions of these works are published by Pushkin Press in London, as is Teffi's short-story collection *Subtly Worded*.

*Andrew Jameson*

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