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Feature

VKhUTEMAS: The Revolutionary School of Architectural Teaching

By Dr Matthew Armitt

Lenin, who became the leader of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and the new head of state in Russia, knew that in order to fulfil the communist ideals that he and his party had adopted, Russia had to be transformed into a workers' state, where education would be a paramount tool. As stated by Lenin: "The real education of the masses can never be separated from their independent political, and especially revolutionary, struggle. Only struggle educates the exploited class. Only struggle discloses to it the magnitude of its own power, widens its horizon, enhances its abilities, clarifies its mind, and forges its will."¹

The year 1918 witnessed the reorganization of the entire system of art education in Russia by the new People's Commissariat

for Education (*Narkompros*). Free Governmental Artistic Workshops (*Svobodnye gosudarstvennye khudozhestvennye masterskie – SGKHM*) were set up in several Russian cities, including Moscow and Leningrad, with the participation of a number of leading artists.



Cover of *Architecture: Works of the Architecture Department of VKhUTEMAS*, published Moscow 1927, designed by El Lissitzky (SCRSS Library)

In 1920 two of these were amalgamated into a new school, the Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops (*Vysshie gosudarstvennye khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie masterskie – VKhUTEMAS*) by a state decree signed by Lenin. The first point of the decree stated the aims of VKhUTEMAS quite explicitly as "a specialised educational institution for advanced artistic and technical training, created to produce highly qualified artist-

practitioners for modern industry, as well as instructors and directors of professional and technical education”.²

VKhUTEMAS (1921–26) was a new approach for a new society. It aimed to bring education to the masses and masses to the growing industrial production in Moscow. As the influx of thousands of students from the countryside could not be trained using elitist academic methods, the situation raised fundamental questions about design education. Is there an alternative to the academic model through the influence of art? How can an institution teach something that has not yet been done? And how do you teach to hundreds of students, many of whom are from peasant and diverse backgrounds?

VKhUTEMAS was a center for three major movements in Russian avant-garde art and architecture: Constructivism, Rationalism and Suprematism. Its teachers and students would transform views of art and reality using precise geometry with an emphasis on space, in one of the great revolutions in the history of art. It was a new type of school that set up research ‘laboratories’ or ‘workshops’ to investigate the objective foundations of the artistic fields it was teaching. It also formulated new educational programs, developing a well-structured curriculum and rejecting the *École des Beaux-Arts* model. The mandate for mass education was framed within a larger Soviet project of industrialization, reorganizing all areas of life – from artistic to labor practices – on a scientific basis. The school counted among its ranks Russian avant-garde artists and architects such as Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1956), Varvara Stepanova (1894–1958), Lyubov Popova (1889–1924), El Lissitzky (1890–1941), Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953) and Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935), each of whom played a prominent role through institutionalizing the Russian avant-garde into an institutional curriculum. These teachers and artists were originally members of the Institute of Artistic Culture (*Institut khudozhestvennoy kultury* – INKhUK, 1920–1924). This had been set up by Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944) in order to develop the scientific-objective approach for

visual and spatial arts that played an important role in the influence of teaching at VKhUTEMAS. The school comprised eight art and production departments – Architecture, Painting, Sculpture, Graphics, Textiles, Ceramics, Wood and Metalworking. Within these departments the school established an ‘objective method’ to provide a unified pedagogical approach across different fields – from painting to architecture. It was based on primary ‘elements’ and their ‘properties’, creating a solid formal foundation and allowing for synthetic thinking across all disciplines. The method relied on the newest scientific discoveries and technological achievements, and on the most progressive artistic trends. But the ultimate goal of the objective method was to integrate artistic culture with industrial production – to bring ‘art into life’.

The history of VKhUTEMAS was closely linked with that of the Bauhaus in Germany (1919–1931). The two schools conducted student visits and exhibitions, exchanged ideas through publications and shared foundational values that were disseminated by their key avant-garde protagonists, in particular Kandinsky and El Lissitzky. While both schools aimed for a new unity of art and technology, VKhUTEMAS sought to create the proletarian version of that unity, eventually resulting in an ideological gap. Like the Bauhaus, VKhUTEMAS was an interdisciplinary school that consisted of both art and industrial departments, with a well-developed preliminary course. However, the Bauhaus did not teach architecture for its first eight years and the schools also differed greatly in size due to different educational reforms.

VKhUTEMAS was facilitated by a preliminary curriculum or Core Division (*Osnovnoe otdelenie*) that consisted of four primary courses – Graphics (*graficheskiy*), Color (*tsvetovoy*), Volume (*obemnyi*), and Space (*prostranstvennyi*). While the Core Division was formally established by 1923, similar to the Bauhaus’s Basic Workshops (*Vorkurs*, 1922) designed by Walter Gropius, the VKhUTEMAS courses continued to evolve from the establishment of the school until its closing. The core

curriculum cemented the foundation of VKhUTEMAS's interdisciplinary approach and became the unifying element of the school. The four preliminary courses emerged from the core sections of three VKhUTEMAS departments – Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. All four courses were mandatory for the entire student body, irrespective of their subsequent specialization.

In 1920 the Constructivist artist Rodchenko began teaching the Graphics course where he experimented with articulating the distinct perceptual qualities of elemental forms. The course was designed around a set of compositional constraints and simple sequential operations, using basic geometric figures such as circles, triangles and squares.

The Color course started with breaking down the spectrum of a rainbow and demonstrating how colors could be combined, based on either contrasting or complementary properties. Color was conceived as a primary element and even as a form of energy that did not simply cover up an object but 'constructed' it.

The Volume course was formed within the Sculpture department by Anton Lavinsky (1893–1968) and Boris Korolev (1884–1963). The course was initially formed under the influence of Cubism, as both Lavinsky and Korolev were strong advocates. It was an alternative to the age-old practice of sculpture training. Students were asked to produce compositions by exploring the properties and dynamics of a given volume in space, or by articulating a relationship between volume and its weight. The Volume course taught students to deconstruct complex natural and artificial forms using Cubist analysis and basic geometry, with no surface detail to signify a building.

The Space course offered one of the first alternatives to the classical academic atelier and apprenticeship models of architectural training. Space was the first to train a large number of students in the fundamentals of modern architecture. It was developed as a foundational architecture course by Nikolai

Ladovsky (1881–1941), Nikolai Dokuchaev (1891–1944) and Vladimir Krinsky (1890–1971) within the department known as United Left Workshops (*Obedinennye levye masterskie* – OBMAS, 1921–23). This department used Ladovsky's 'psychoanalytic teaching method'. Space was paramount not only for its innovative pedagogy but also as an experimental laboratory for developing a new architectural language. It was based on, in Ladovsky's words, the "economy of psychic energy" and "the fundamental human need to orient in space". In 1921 he proclaimed: "Space, not stone, is the material of architecture."³ The students were given assignment drawings (written instructions) and were asked to translate these into forms through abstract (*otvlechenny*) models in clay, paper, wire and wood. The most innovative pedagogical method was designing directly in model (*maketny*). When starting a model, students were not aware of its final outcome; the result was formed as part of the process of making. Space was the key discipline in architectural-artistic education at VKhUTEMAS.

In 1927 VKhUTEMAS was renamed to the Higher Artistic and Technical Institute (*Vysshii khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskii institut* – VKhUTEIN) in order to signify a re-concentration on the production of things useful to the national economy. Painting was relegated to a minor position in the curriculum and the foundation course, the unifying feature of the multidisciplinary training, was dissolved. The impact of substituting the word 'Institute' for 'Workshops' was to reorient teaching with a more scientific focus, resulting in a number of courses being reduced in length or removed. In particular, the Space course was reduced from two years to one term.

The years 1929–30 marked a shift in the First Five Year plan to prioritizing the tasks of mass industrialization. This eventually led, in 1931, to the school's disintegration into separate specialized institutions, since the existing institution was believed to be 'ineffective' by the Government. VKhUTEMAS / VKhUTEIN was now considered 'formalist' – a disparaging term

in Stalinist Russia. Despite the school's cultural importance as the center of the emergent modern movement, the Soviet state began to view it primarily as an instrument of political manipulation by the West, the repercussions of which cut it off from the history of modern architecture. However, in the 1920s its mass teaching mandate, as well as its aim of institutionalizing the Russian avant-garde into an institutionalized curriculum, made VKhUTEMAS a revolutionary school of architecture. Its history and spirit live on today.

Footnotes

1 *Pravda*, No. 18, 22 January 1925, written in German before 9 (22) January 1917, as quoted in V Lenin, *Lenin Collected Works*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1964, Vol. 23, pp. 236–253. Source: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/jan/09.htm>

2 C Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1983, p. 112

3 SO Khan-Magomedov, *Ratsionalizm (ratsio-arkhitektura) "Formalizm"*, Moscow, Arkhitektura-S, 2007, pp. 140–143

Note

Materials providing more information connected to this article are available by email. Contact the author at Matthew.Armitt@bcu.ac.uk.

Dr Matthew Armitt is a Lecturer at the Birmingham City School of Architecture and Design, and also teaches architecture at the University of Liverpool School of Architecture. His current research covers Soviet Architecture, Theory and Architectural Teaching in the 1920s–30s.

SCRSS News

Latest news by Ralph Gibson, Honorary Secretary, SCRSS

Annual General Meeting

Notice is hereby given that the SCRSS AGM will take place at 11.00 on Saturday

16 May 2020 at the Society's premises. The meeting is open to SCRSS members only. The deadline for motions and nominations of members to the next Council is Friday 20 March 2020. All motions and nominations must be seconded by another SCRSS member. The agenda will be available from early May.

Library News

The general office has been transformed into a new library space housing our politics collection. In addition, new shelving in the 'John Cunningham Room' now hosts our economics and statistics collections. All the new shelving was paid for by donations made in memory of John. Volunteers continue with sorting, cataloguing and class marking. If you're interested in helping, do get in touch, in particular anyone keen on using our label machine to apply the class marks to the spines of the books. The first-Saturday-of-the-month library openings are attracting a growing number of members, library volunteers and researchers. In December, for example, we hosted actors in a new production of *Uncle Vanya* (now running at the Harold Pinter theatre in London). The SCRSS website at www.scrss.org.uk/library.htm now features the first results of the ongoing cataloguing of the Society's books. Over 4,500 books are listed, including material from our art, education, history and theatre collections. The spreadsheet can be downloaded and searched.

Video Appeal

Our friends at Cultural Solidarity Media have put together a short video appeal for the Society that includes footage of the centre as it undergoes our current major reorganisation. See the link on the SCRSS website's home page or go straight to <https://vimeo.com/369324040/04790c324b>. Please bring it to the attention of friends and colleagues. It's vitally important that we raise awareness of the Society's unique collections and its work as we approach our centenary in 2024.



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Film Production

In September 2019 a film production company used our back garden and ground floor while filming a new TV series *Small Axe*, directed by the recently knighted Steve McQueen. Thanks to volunteer Len Weiss for his help.

Jean Turner – 90th Birthday

On 9 November 2019 Jean Turner celebrated her 90th birthday. Jean has been Secretary, Hon Secretary and now Hon Treasurer of the Society since 1985. We sang Happy Birthday to Jean at the event on 8 November (see below) and the SCRSS Council organised a separate small celebration, at which letters of congratulation were also presented to Jean from the St Petersburg Association for International Development and the External Relations Committee of the St Petersburg City Government.

Remembering John

The Society hosted a successful event on 8 November 2019 to celebrate the life of John Cunningham and mark the 102nd anniversary of the October Revolution. Members came from far and wide, including four guests from the Brixton Society, and Rachel O'Higgins, one of our Vice-Presidents.

Next Events

Friday 21 February 2020, 19.00

Talk: Jessica Sutcliffe on *Helen Muspratt: Photographing the Soviet Union in 1937*

Saturday 7 March 2020, 11.00–16.00

Event: SCRSS Saturday Library Opening

Saturday 7 March 2020, 14.00

Talk: John Allan on *Allied Aid to Russia via the Persian Gulf 1941–45*

Saturday 4 – Sunday 5 April 2020, 10.00–16.30

Event: SCRSS Advanced Russian Language Seminar

See SCRSS website for fees and booking.

Wednesday 29 April 2020, 18.30

Event: Historical Memory and the Fight Against Fascism

At the MML. Fee: £5-10. Book online.

Saturday 2 May 2020, 11.00–16.00

Event: SCRSS Saturday Library Opening

Saturday 16 May 2020, 11.00–13.00

Event: SCRSS Annual General Meeting

Saturday 16 May 2020, 14.00

Talk: Edward Ochagavia on *My Stalingrad Childhood*

Friday 29 May 2020, 19.00

Talk: Christine Lindey on *Soviet and Western Representations of Workers c1930 to c1970*

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. Up-to-date details are available at www.scrss.org.uk/cinemaevents.htm.

Soviet War Memorial Trust News

Latest news by Ralph Gibson, Honorary Secretary, SWMT

Next Events

Saturday 9 May, 11.00

Event: Victory Day Ceremony, Soviet War Memorial, London

The SWMT is planning a major celebration marking the 75th anniversary of the Allied Victory over Fascism. The Mayor of Southwark, honoured guests, local politicians, diplomats from Russia, other former USSR states and Allied nations, will join veterans and others to lay wreaths at

the Memorial and observe a two-minute silence. Huge interest is expected and the Trust is appealing for donations to cover the costs of mounting such a major event. If you intend to lay a wreath on behalf of an organisation, or would like more information, write to the Hon Secretary as soon as possible at SWMT, 320 Brixton Road, London SW9 6AB or email sovietwarmemorialtrust@gmail.com. To make a donation, use the online link at www.sovietwarmemorialtrust.com or send a cheque to the above address, made payable to SWMT.

The Soviet War Memorial, dedicated to the 27 million Soviet men and women who lost their lives during the fight against fascism in 1941–45, is located in the Geraldine Mary Harmsworth Park, Lambeth Road, Southwark, London SE1. The SCRSS is a founder member of the SWMT.

Report

Coventry and Volgograd Twin Cities

By Carol Brown

In 2019 Coventry and Volgograd (formerly Stalingrad) celebrated seventy-five years of friendship as the first Twin Cities in the modern era.

The two cities were brought together by the women of Coventry who had experienced the Blitz in 1941. In that same year an Anglo Soviet Unity Committee was established in Coventry. In 1943, at the end of the Battle of Stalingrad, over 800 (mainly) women sent a tablecloth, signed and embroidered by them, to the people of Stalingrad as a symbol of wartime solidarity. Each person who signed the cloth donated 6d (2.5p) and this money was used to provide medical aid. In response, 36,000 women in Stalingrad signed an album that was sent to Coventry. In 1944 an official bond of friendship was signed between the two cities.

In 2014, I was co-producer of the 70th anniversary celebration with Yuri Ilynov, Musical Director of the Volgograd Children's Symphony Orchestra, then the only one of its kind in Russia. With the help of the Volgograd Rotary Club, parents of the young musicians and local businesses, the finance was raised to bring the orchestra members to Coventry, by bus, to take part in a number of events, including visiting three schools and performing to 1,076 children. The highlight of the visit was the concert in Coventry Cathedral and at the CBSO Centre in Birmingham, at which 245 young performers and choirs from the three cities played. Small grants from Coventry City Council, the Arts Council and Coventry Rotary Club supported the Coventry programme. In addition, local composers Derek Nisbet and Peter Cann, working together with young schoolchildren, wrote the symphonic poem *Twin Song* to celebrate the links between the two cities. A recording of the world premiere at Coventry Cathedral in April 2014 can be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gRzagAgHkc.

For the 75th anniversary, the Volgograd City Administration and a Volgograd NGO were successful in being awarded a President's Grant that supported young dancers and musicians to come to Coventry and perform at the Albany Theatre, alongside local young dancers and musicians. The concert was again a great success with an appreciative audience from Coventry and the wider West Midlands. The day after the performance the Volgograd party returned home and an anniversary concert was held in Volgograd, including a young singer from Coventry.

However, what sort of future is there for town-twinning? I would suggest that the traditional exchange of civic dignitaries needs to change and is already doing so. Our Twin Cities provide an opportunity to strengthen social and economic ties. For example, I have previously facilitated a Tutor Chef from Coventry's Catering College to go to Volgograd with two students to run masterclasses in British Cookery. These classes were attended by over one hundred local hotel staff, while we

also made links with the Catering College in Volgograd. As part of the 75th anniversary, the Tutor Chef was able to return to Volgograd and work again with students at the local Catering College. We are also hoping to have an exchange from both cities of a small number of catering and tourism students. There are also opportunities to support small cultural enterprises in both cities and I am now exploring possibilities in the area of marathons, music performances and jewellery design.

More importantly, our Twin Cities continue to communicate with each other in positive ways – unlike the political rhetoric we so often hear!

Carol Brown has been involved informally with the Coventry-Volgograd town-twinning for ten years, works freelance in the cultural sector, has been visiting Russia for twelve years and has worked on a number of projects there with librarians, teachers and musicians. She has also helped the Volgograd Region and City Administration with their links with Coventry.

Feature

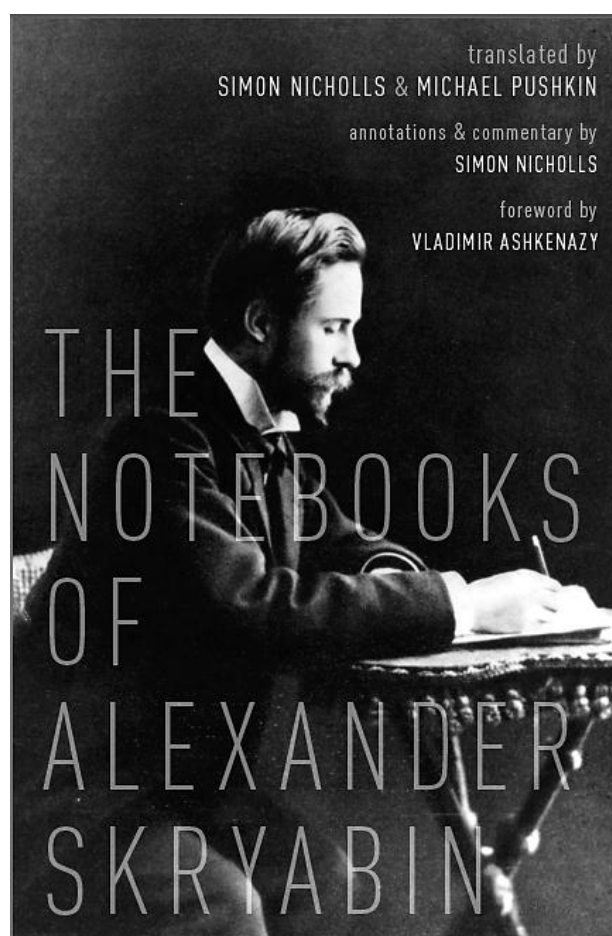
Aspects of a Russian Mystic – Alexander Skryabin

By Simon Nicholls

Alexander Nikolaevich Skryabin (1872–1915) was a composer-pianist in the great tradition that includes Anton Rubinstein, Sergei Rachmaninov and Sergei Prokofiev. In five symphonic works, ten piano sonatas and many smaller pieces he made an unprecedented journey from High Romanticism to a style at the borders of tonality. His musical world was also evoked in his writings which chronicle the development of a highly personal world-view.

With the exception of a few years in the post-war period of the twentieth century

when his late works were attacked as ‘bourgeois’ and ‘elitist’, and a public condemnation in 1931 by Shostakovich (“mysticism, [...] flight from [...] life”), Skryabin has found favour in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, where his music belongs to the pianist’s central repertoire. In the pre-revolutionary era his later music was controversial, but his own fantastically imaginative and delicately coloured playing won many admirers, despite some dissenting voices. The symphonic poem *Prometheus* was performed for the first anniversary of the October Revolution, and Skryabin was on the list of composers to whom monuments might be erected.



Cover of Simon Nicholls' book (courtesy of the author)

When I first visited the Skryabin Museum in Moscow in 2001, a publication I bought there, dating from 1984 or a little later, was headed with a quotation from Osip Mandelshtam’s essay *Skryabin and Christianity*: “In the fateful years of cleansing and struggle we raised up above ourselves Skryabin, whose sun-heart burns above us.”

The adoption by the Museum of Mandelshtam's text expresses poetically the central importance accorded to Skryabin in Soviet Russia; an important cause of this was the advice of Lunacharsky, who regarded the composer, quoting Gorky, as the "stormy petrel of the Revolution".

In the early seventies, when I proposed to an English pianists' organisation that I write a survey of Skryabin's *Etudes* for their publication, the chairman – a prominent pianist of an older generation – objected on the grounds that "there must be something wrong with them or everyone would be playing them". In his biography of Horowitz, Harold Schonberg retails an inaccurate description of the pianist's visit to the Skryabin Museum, alleging that the institution had been run down for years and dubbing it a "Potemkin village". The American biography of Skryabin by Faubion Bowers, still influential despite its unreliability, describes Skryabin's projected *Mystery*, intended as a spiritual rebirth of mankind, as a "holocaust". The irony and scepticism of Leonid Sabaneev, Skryabin's lifetime supporter and later debunker, are adopted and exaggerated by Bowers.

These statements underline a Cold War-based hostility to Skryabin's music and personality in the West, and particularly in the USA. Since the end of the Cold War the position has much improved, particularly owing to the work of the American scholar Richard Taruskin.

What is the truth about Skryabin? The composer's own writings are clearly the touchstone for the understanding of his inner world. On my first visit to the Moscow Conservatoire I was presented with a photocopy of the 1919 publication that contains the writings – then very scarce, this Russian text is now available on the internet and in facsimile – and the conviction grew on me that English-speaking readers should have available a complete, accurate text of this testimony. I speak and read Russian but my profession is music; I asked my colleague Michael Pushkin for help, an Englishman who has been a lecturer in Russian all his professional life. We were

aiming at something clear, free from archaisms unless intentional, as close as possible to the original and trying to match the poetic tone of Skryabin's writing without distorting the meaning. The majority of this material was never intended to be publicly read: Skryabin jotted down ideas and fragments as they occurred to him. We reproduced this incompleteness, including unfinished sentences, grammatical errors and abbreviations.

The writings consist of some religious youthful notes, a decided rejection of God in about 1900 (consequent upon a hand injury that threatened Skryabin's playing career), a projected opera libretto, three notebooks, the literary *Poem of Ecstasy* (paralleling the symphonic poem), and the libretto for the *Preliminary Action* that was to prepare people for the final *Mystery*. Skryabin died before he could write down the music for this *Action* – tantalising sketches remain.

In his notebooks, which were secret, Skryabin works on his world-view unmethodically and intuitively. It unfolds thus: the world is the creation of the person observing it. There is no difference between spirit and material: they are different stages of the same thing. By subduing reason, we may arrive at an ecstatic condition. In this condition of self-forgetfulness, we are at one with Universal Consciousness and can say: I am God.

The Universe starts as an undifferentiated unity containing the possibility of everything. By a process of differentiation of this universal potential it blossoms into ever greater complexity; when the highest complexity is achieved, the process is reversed and it collapses into unity. (This view is not far from the 'pulsating universe' theory first developed in 1879, and related also to Hindu beliefs.) The moment of collapse is one of instantaneous and timeless ecstasy – compare Pasternak's poem *Storm, Instantaneous Forever* (*Groza, momental'naia navek*).

By staying (just) within the tonal system but perpetually delaying resolution, Skryabin allows his later music to leave the ground

and hover. All his music of this period deals with aspects of the scenario described above, and prepares for the notional final Mystery.

All this would be forgotten if Skryabin's music were not of the highest quality. The Soviets could accept his striving and belief in a radiant future, and fitted them into the forms of dialectic materialism – the first manned flight in space was accompanied by a broadcast into space of *The Poem of Ecstasy*. Skryabin, by contrast, spoke of the construction of his world-view as “mythopoeia” and assigned “psychological” significance to his music. His world for the modern listener is an internal, symbolic one, and therefore all the more powerful.

Note

The Notebooks of Alexander Skryabin, translated by Simon Nicholls and Michael Pushkin, with annotations by Simon Nicholls and foreword by Vladimir Ashkenazy, is published by Oxford University Press (2018, ISBN: 9780190863661 – Hbk, ISBN: 978019086385 – ebook).

Simon Nicholls is a pianist, teacher and independent researcher. His career has included performing and broadcasting on four continents, and teaching at the Yehudi Menuhin School, the Royal College of Music (London) and Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, of which he is an Honorary Fellow. He has now retired from institutional teaching. From 2001 to 2017 he made many research trips to Moscow, collecting materials and discussing Skryabin with Russian musicians and academics.

Feature

Discovering Shostakovich Since 1991

By Pauline Fairclough

A turning-point in Shostakovich research in the West came with Laurel Fay's biography *Shostakovich: A Life* in 2000. There, Fay broke significant ground in producing a

study rooted in primary source research. And it came along at an ideal time, shortly after the cellist Elizabeth Wilson published her collection of memoirs of people who knew Shostakovich (*Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*, revised edition 2006), and Isaak Glikman published his letters from Shostakovich (*Pis'ma k drugu*), later published in English as *Story of a Friendship*. That coincidence of timing meant that we suddenly had at our disposal not only a reliable factual record of Shostakovich's career, but also, alongside it, a kaleidoscopic picture of how Shostakovich was remembered as a person. Glikman's letters showed Shostakovich as a cherished friend above all: in them, we heard an intimate voice hitherto familiar only to the few within his closest circle. Shostakovich was obsessively private and routinely burned letters written to him; he would of course have been horrified by the publication of Glikman's letters (and even more dismayed by the subsequent publications of his letters to his bosom friend Ivan Sollertinsky, not to mention teenage letters to his mother, friends and old girlfriends). Poor Shostakovich: his fame steamrollered over his desire for privacy. But, as historians, how grateful we are to Glikman and others for agreeing to publish those carefully-preserved memories, for their impact has been transformative.

Those years, the mid-1990s, thus marked a renaissance in Shostakovich research in Russia. The scale of scholarly achievement was astounding. Russian scholars were living through the economic collapse that followed 1991 and many were barely paid for their academic work, but they were determined to start building up a reliable historical record of this beloved cultural icon. In the (nearly) three decades since the Soviet Union's collapse, Shostakovich research in Russia has grown into a full-blown industry, fuelled by the archive and DSCH publishing house run by the composer's widow, Irina Antonovna Shostakovich. Some of the best musicologists in Russia have since that time been engaged in publishing on every conceivable facet of Shostakovich's life and

work. Collections of letters, documents, fragments of abandoned compositions and whole works alike – what used to be a field reliant on censored Soviet-era publications has become now an embarrassment of riches.



Dmitri Shostakovich (SCRSS Photo Library)

But if serious scholarly research has uncovered such revelations as the abandoned opera *Orango* (thanks to the Russian musicologist Olga Digonskaya), Shostakovich's love life has been the biographical gift that keeps on giving. Even just last summer a collection of Shostakovich's old love letters – those to the ballerina Nina Ivanova – went up for auction in Russia; those to Elena Konstantinovskaya surfaced in the 1990s (both collections acquired by private buyers). Yet Shostakovich was unusually lucky in that his old flames have been discreet. Even the composer Galina Ustvolskaya, whose resentment of Shostakovich was as well-known as the fact that he proposed to her twice after his first wife's death, never gave up her love letters (she claimed to have burned them, and maybe she did). My biography briefly describes another relationship concurrent

with Ustvolskaya and Shostakovich's – with the composer Margarita Kuss, who (unlike Ustvolskaya) retained a lifelong affection for Shostakovich but similarly never betrayed the details of their affair. I corresponded with Kuss's nephew after reading his article about her in the *DSCH Journal* and felt I could justify including their relationship as a brief detail, mainly for the sake of showing that during the early 1950s Shostakovich appeared to have not only two (counting Ustvolskaya and the now well-known 'muse' of his *Tenth Symphony*, Elmira Nazirova) but at least *three* female friends to whom he declared his love in the 1950s – before finally marrying the apparently unloved fourth choice: his second wife Margarita Kainova, whom no biographer, not even Shostakovich's Soviet biographer Sofia Khentova (who knew her personally), ever persuaded to speak about her brief marriage.

All these gossipy details are, of course, irresistible to any biographer, and in fact the sheer wealth of personal insight into Shostakovich as young man, as well as elder statesman of Soviet music, has had an inevitable impact on our understanding of him. The Russian musicologist Liudmila Kovnatskaya, to whom an incalculable debt of gratitude is owed for her own research on Shostakovich, as well as her support of other scholars in the field, has publicly defended her decision to reveal the youthful Shostakovich's love of profanity and sexual innuendo in his letters to Vladimir Bogdanov-Berezovsky: let the 'real' voice be heard, above all, and let us better understand this unique figure as a result. The same is true of Shostakovich's letters to Sollertinsky. The voice we hear in those is a different one again – that of a confiding friend sure of sympathy and understanding. With the publication of these letters, the composer's vivid and multifaceted personality becomes a documented reality. It is harder, now, for a writer to step into a perceived void and claim to speak for Shostakovich, as Solomon Volkov did with his 'memoir' *Testimony* in 1979. Though Shostakovich would never have agreed to publish his old correspondence, his family and friends' decision to do so after his death

has, paradoxically, protected him from having his own voice usurped by others.

Where does my own biography fit into this picture? The publisher Reaktion's *Critical Lives* biographies are short studies written by specialists for the general reader. As will be obvious, I had giants' shoulders to stand upon. I couldn't have written it at all without all the ground-breaking work carried out by scholars both inside and outside Russia. Yet so many new discoveries had emerged from Russia since those books were published that I knew readers who could not access Russian-language sources were getting a picture in English that was rapidly dating. And so I tried to weave together all that seemed to me most interesting and important about Shostakovich from those books and from the Russian-language sources published since 1991, together with my own responses to the music, to create what I hope is an original and informative account of his life and works. If readers enjoy my biography, I will be happy, but the real credit lies with the many authors I cite in the Notes, for their meticulous research and insights over the last three decades.

Pauline Fairclough is Professor of Music at the University of Bristol and a well-known authority on Shostakovich and Soviet musical culture. Her book 'Classics for the Masses: Shaping Soviet Musical Identity Under Lenin and Stalin' (2016) was co-winner of the BASEES Women's Forum Book Prize in 2018. Her new biography 'Dmitry Shostakovich' was published by Reaktion Books in August 2019.

Book Reviews

H. G. Wells and All Things Russian
Edited by Galya Diment (Anthem Press,
London / New York, 2019, ISBN: 978-1-
78308-991-8, Hbk, vii-xiv + 238pp, £80.00)

We all know that Herbert Wells (as the Russians call him) visited Russia several times, interviewed Lenin in the Kremlin and wrote *Russia in the Shadows*, published by

Hodder in 1920. Later on, he met Stalin. We also know that he is listed as one of the original supporters of the Society for Cultural Relations (SCR) between the Peoples of the British Commonwealth and the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics, as today's SCRSS was originally called in full. He is also given as a Vice-President of the Society at its foundation. This reviewer had hoped that there would be some details of Wells' activities as a member of the SCR, but a search has proved unfruitful. However, do not dismiss this book as of little interest.

What we have is a series of articles – half by Western, half by Russian-speaking specialists – detailing Wells' relations with, or treatment by, famous Russian writers of the time: Gorky, Zamyatin, Bulgakov, Nabokov, the Strugatsky Brothers. There are also accounts of Soviet biographies of Wells, of how he was portrayed in Soviet films (in his interactions with Lenin), and a collection of memoirs on Wells written by Russians (Amfiteatrov, Radek, Olesha, Kagarlitsky). So, this is almost completely an account of Wells from the Russian side. It is fascinating and revealing to see how visitors to Russia were treated and how they interacted with their fellow writers in those early days (the 1920s) when the great ideal of a new socialist state was being worked out in practice. If I were a right-wing reviewer, this would be the place where I would add a comment such as: “– hopes soon to be dashed...” But such comments are absolutely irrelevant and unjustified. We must deal with the period on its own merits, as of that time, and these were days of hope.

From Galya Diment's introduction, 'The Wells Effect', we see that Wells' many works of speculative fiction (aka 'science fiction') would have been of great interest to the builders of a new society. This is brought out well in the programme on Wells in the Melvyn Bragg series *In Our Time*, available via the BBC Sounds app. It is arguable that Wells' visit to Russia and his interview with Lenin helped with ensuring the acceptance of the genre and made possible the appearance of a wave of Soviet science fiction in the 1920s. As Richard

Stites points out in *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford UP, 1989): “Between 100 and 200 native works of science fiction appeared in all [in the 1920s] in all genres, novels, stories, poems, plays and films.”

Andrew Jameson

Ragged Trousered NGOs: Development Work under Neoliberalism

By Charles Buxton (Routledge, June 2019, ISBN: 978-0-367-13470-9, Pbk, £26.99)

This is Charles Buxton’s personal account of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector and wider civil society over the past forty years. He helpfully defines an NGO as a registered non-profit organisation that works on development projects, often with public funding. A civil society organisation (CSO), he explains, refers to any form of collective association, registered or unregistered, working for its own members or the common good, on a non-profit basis.

The author relates how his “active interest in the country that accomplished the 1917 October Revolution” led him to study Russian at university, where he first became involved in community action. Thereafter, he moved to political activism and community organisation in the East End of London. From 1996 to 2001 he was regional programme manager for Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) for the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Then in 2001 he joined the International NGO Training and Research Centre (INTRAC), a UK civil society charity, as programme manager for Central Asia. He has been based in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, since that time.

Of particular interest to readers of the *SCRSS Digest* will be the author’s work in Russia and the former Soviet Union. His accounts of programmes aimed at addressing economic recession experienced in the former Soviet republics in the 1990s, the years of ‘transition’, make interesting reading. This is not just for the

description of the recession, but also for his ease of comparison with the initiatives he undertook on social programmes in the 1980s in the East End of London.

Fast forwarding to his role at INTRAC, the author gives an example of its work at the height of the crisis in the Ukraine during the ‘Euro-Maidan’ protests. At this time, it was supporting activists to influence government at provincial and city level. He interestingly comments that a subsequent assessment of that work revealed that the CSOs involved fell into two camps according to international orientation – EU or Russian Federation - with INTRAC programme NGOs falling into the former.

President Yanukovich was violently overthrown. The author notes the foreseeable consequences of his overthrow, achieved with “wide support from extreme right-wing and nationalist forces”. These consequences included the waves of refugees from the ensuing civil war and the retrograde diversion of NGO activity from civil society to humanitarian programmes. A further consequence was that Russia sought to reduce foreign influence through NGO activity in Russia.

The book is written for an academic audience, for which it has a helpful structure, with questions, further reading and notes at the end of each chapter. It is equally accessible for the general audience with a readable style and on subjects of continuing topical interest.

Charles Stewart

Dmitry Shostakovich

By Pauline Fairclough (Reaktion Books, 2019, ISBN: 9781789141276, Pbk, 192pp, £11.99)

Pauline Fairclough’s publication, *Dmitry Shostakovich*, is a reassessment of the composer in question. Biographical in nature, it explores Shostakovich’s life, while relating this and the surrounding culture to his major works. “There is no shortage of books about Dmitry Shostakovich”, states Fairclough; her text is prompted by the need

for a more holistic and astute perspective now that the tendency to portray Shostakovich as either victim or dissident has lost validity. Taking account of new source material, Fairclough aims to provide a portrait of both man and composer that is accurate, up to date and informed, yet accessible for a wider readership.

Fairclough injects from the outset a much-needed positivity into the debate surrounding the composer's personality and intentions. She declines discussion of the 'Shostakovich Wars' while teasing out a portrayal devoid of bias and propaganda. Acknowledging the complexities and paradoxes in play, she states (p. 11): "I [wanted to] challenge the idea, still commonly held, that Shostakovich's music is depressing, and that he himself was a broken man at the end of his life."

Within her 170-page biography, structured chronologically, with a 6-page introduction and a 4-page postlude, Fairclough discusses the need to look into Shostakovich's face and to accept that the composer was no more of a hero than any of the countless others living under the Communist regime; some of whom demonstrated more resistance while living with less privilege and status. Some aspects are inevitably presented in less detail, possibly through a lack of information and / or reliable source material, though possibly also due to Fairclough's own attempt to remain objective: the text's neutral stance and detached writing style is clearly a conscious choice. What also stands out is the book's readability, although that is not to say it is simplistic: it is detailed and informative, yet aimed as much at the more general reader as at the specialist academic.

Alongside the biographical content and discussion of key works, Fairclough provides a much-needed common-sense approach to a number of issues little discussed. These include the tendency to regard Shostakovich's music as anachronistic, and more importantly, the disservice done to his creative and compositional abilities if we fail to

acknowledge the artistry that lies beyond his works' semantic import. Fairclough discusses how the suggestion that his compositional outlook, career and legacy were compromised by the fear of reprisals is as insulting as it is untrue, maintaining that his natural style and, indeed, humour remained in force. Underlying all is Fairclough's willingness to confront old arguments, particularly those born out of Western prejudice. She also discusses the ultimate taboo: acknowledging Shostakovich's negative character traits – a bold move, especially when much of her intention has been to inject positivity into the unfortunate image of the composer that has prevailed. In summary, Fairclough has touched upon at least some of the complexities with which Shostakovich scholarship must now come to terms – and to do so while remaining sympathetic, even when presenting a less frail but ultimately more fallible portrait of her subject, is an achievement.

Tara Wilson

Stalin and the Fate of Europe: The Postwar Struggle for Sovereignty
By Norman M Naimark (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, October 2019, ISBN: 9780674238770, Hbk, 361pp, £23.95)

This new book is thoroughly researched, original and compulsively readable. I found it very hard to put down in two days of reading.

It also presents a new view of Stalin between 1945 and his death on 5 March 1953. Naimark confirms (p. 9) that Stalin oversaw Soviet policy-making after the war, and was a micro-manager, hard-working, focused, capable of absorbing vast amounts of information, and in his writings smart and knowledgeable. And more flexible and pragmatic than hitherto assumed.

But this was the same period in which the USSR, until May 1948 supporting the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine so as to end the British Mandate and British influence in the Middle East, became a radical antagonist of Israel in 1949 and

1950. This was accompanied by official anti-Zionism, 'anti-cosmopolitanism' and anti-Semitism. Already in January 1948 the Moscow-based Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee was banned, many of its members were arrested, and the famous Yiddish actor Solomon Mikhoels was murdered by the NKVD. By 1952, shortly before his death, Stalin's anti-Semitic paranoia boiled over into the 'Doctors' Plot'.

This is especially relevant to the chapter on Poland, where Gomulka's resistance to forced collectivisation, and accommodation to the Catholic Church and Polish nationalism, was accompanied by his overt blaming of Polish problems on "the Jews" (p. 219) and his later expulsion of 15,000 Jews from the PZPR (Polish United Workers' Party) in 1968, as well as the forced emigration of 10–12,000 Jews from Poland.

The book is organised by Naimark into seven case studies, each taking a separate chapter. 1) The Soviet occupation of the Danish island of Bornholm in 1945; 2) Albania and the Yugoslavs, 1944–48, ending in Enver Hoxha's dictatorship in Albania, the expulsion of Yugoslavia from the Cominform in June 1948, and Stalin's unsuccessful order to the NKVD to eliminate Tito in 1952; 3) Zhdanov and Finland, 1944–48, reconciliation despite the participation of Finnish forces in the encirclement of Leningrad; 4) the Italian elections of 1948; 5) the Berlin Blockade 1948–49, which ended Stalin's hope for a unified neutral Germany; 6) Poland, the struggle between Gomulka and Stalin; and 7) the Austrian settlement 1945–49. There is no chapter on Czechoslovakia, though the Communist coup d'état of February 1948 helped to cement the Cold War; nor on Greece. Naimark emphasises Stalin's "almost incomprehensible unwillingness to help the Greek partisans or support an insurrection in Italy, when in both cases success for communism-backed actions might well have been on the cards" (p. 270). Naimark puts this down to Stalin's desire for good relations with the US and Britain: "...he was ready to deal and he did."

Indeed, Stalin's goals in Europe were geostrategic in the narrowest sense of the term. He was uninterested in Europe's colonies or even in China, and still less in proletarian revolution. His policies were not informed by Marxism, much less Leninism, but by the strategic interests of the USSR. Under Stalin the Russian Empire reached its greatest extent; that is why Stalin is now rehabilitated in Putin's Russia.

Bill Bowring

**The Women's Revolution: Russia 1905–1917
By Judy Cox (Counterfire, 2019, ISBN:
978-1-907899-06-5, Pbk, £5.00)**

Judy Cox examines how Marxist women were closely involved in both Russian Revolutions in the twentieth century.

The 1905 Revolution was based on demands for an end to tsarist autocracy, for an elected Duma and for civil rights. Many women – Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries – were involved in the bloody struggle. Mostly educated, these women rejected previous nihilist tactics and fought not only against tsarist oppression but for feminist demands for freedom from patriarchal oppression and for full admission to the state educational system. The outcome was a short-lived Duma, but the working-class struggle against employers and landlords continued, with revolutionary women active in educating the masses into literacy and Marxism.

The February Revolution of 1917, which overthrew the monarchy, was initiated by working-class women suffering from the consequences of the First World War. Fifteen million men were conscripted to fight the Tsar's war, 1.8 million had been killed, 4 million wounded and 3 million were prisoners of war. This had two effects: many more women were drawn into industrial production, particularly in Petrograd, and production in agriculture was reduced due to the loss of peasant men to the front. Newly admitted to factories, the women joined the fight for better pay and conditions, helping to form trade unions. On the streets, they rioted against food shortages, rising food

prices and taxes that affected the poor. They also demanded an end to the disastrous war, under the slogan 'Peace and Bread'.

The Provisional Government, installed under Alexander Kerensky after the abdication of Nicholas II, carried out some reforms but then decided to continue the war. This eventually led to the October Revolution of 1917, which established a Soviet government led by the Bolsheviks.

Unfortunately, history has given credit to only a few of the leading women. However, Judy Cox describes the strong and principled women all over Russia who supported Lenin's policy to change the role of women in society, who fought in the Civil War and headed up many Soviets.

She discloses that Lenin's three sisters, his mother and mother-in-law were also active politically, supporting Lenin when he was banished into exile, publishing his works, working in the underground and giving him material support.

Nadezhda Krupskaya is usually portrayed just as Lenin's wife. However, she was an active revolutionary all her life, was imprisoned and exiled. It was while in exile in 1899 that she wrote *Rabotnitsa* (The Woman Worker), recently translated into English by Dr Michael Costello and published by Manifesto Press (2017). This was the first work written by a Marxist on the situation of women in Russia and describes in detail the class and patriarchal oppression of working women. Her conclusions, recommending an 8-hour working day, a 44-hour week, maternity leave and state welfare for the family, are as relevant today as when she wrote the pamphlet.

The well-known Bolshevik female leaders Alexandra Kollontai and Elena Stasova were elected to the Petrograd Central Committee. Inessa Armand, a stalwart supporter of Lenin and the Bolsheviks throughout her short life, was Director of the Women's Section of the Soviet Central Committee (*Zhenotdel*) and organised the

first Congress of Working Women in 1918. Konkordia Samoilova was the founder editor of *Pravda*. Olga Kameneva, sister of Trotsky, was in charge of the Theatre Division of *Narkompros* (the People's Commissariat for Education), until she fell out with Lunacharsky. Her most important role was as Chair of the Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS), set up in 1925.

Judy Cox's book details many other Bolshevik women leaders in different areas of Soviet society. Their work contributed to the 1918 Constitution, the most advanced in the world at that time, which legalised women's right to vote, homosexuality, equality of the sexes, civil marriage and divorce, equal pay for equal work, 16 weeks' maternity pay, and the provision of communal laundries, bakeries and day nurseries to enable women to be freed from domestic work to take their full part in production.

There are lessons for us all in this inspiring book.

Jean Turner

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